



# The Raven's Folly

by

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## Chapter One

If the raven flies in the time of night,  
Be sure and be aware,  
Something is not right.

To the lucky majority who did not live there, it was known as the East End, the Whitechapel district of London. For those who were born, lived and died there it was 'The City of Evil Night'.

One of the thousands who squeezed into those few city blocks was a young woman named Jilly. Like her mother and grandmother, she had no idea who her father was. He was just one of many bitter men, taking lonely comfort on the cold streets. Deserted by her mother at nine, survival came as it had for her hapless female ancestors, in prostitution.

It was a steaming hot and humid Sunday night. Jilly was preparing herself for the night of struggling for pennies in very dangerous ways.

"Look at her, tarding herself up like she was somethin' special. Next thing we will have to call her 'your Highness!'" one of the two whores Jilly shared her small room with laughed as Jilly tied up her hair in new pink ribbons.

"Now you be quiet, Mad Mary!" Rosie laughed and teased, "Jill's has got her fob on for tonight!"

"Ah...you are just jealous because you ain't got regulars!" Jilly sneered.

"Jesus, Jilly, no one would ever pay two times to screw Mad Mary. Come on, sweetie, I will walk down with you. I'll see what I can pick up at the Bells."

"Why'd you stay here, Jilly?" Rosie asked as they made their way down the narrow stairs and out onto the filthy, cobbled street. "I know you got a stash of money someplace! Why don't you take it and get out of this shitting hole?"

"How'd you know I have a stash?"

"Lord Sakes! You make more than all of us put together, you don't drink and hardly eat a potato...you must have a pile by now!"

"Well, that ain't none of your matter, Rosie!" Jilly answered with a touch of anger, and then softened her voice. "We were born here and we will die here. You know that! Anyway, what would I do any other place but whoring? I'll stay where I am planted till the Lord takes me," Jilly kissed her friend's cheek and walked away. Rosie never saw her again.

She met her regular, a fellow who called himself Mr. Stone, at the long forgotten 'Friars Cemetery', where the borders of Whitechapel touched London proper. He was better than most to her. He was clean, kind, fast and generous. She went out of her way to please him.

She hurried that Sunday night, so as not to be late, ignoring the rabble who hurled demands and insults at her as she passed. Through the broken gate and across the overgrown lawn, she tried not to step on any graves as she made her way to the tangled mess behind a crypt where 'Mr. Stone' would be waiting for her.

Little moonlight made it into that place and she had to feel her way around to the back of the crypt. "Mr. Stone, you here?" she called out quietly. There was no reply. She stopped, small fingers of fear stirred up her spine. "Oh, don't be silly!" she chided herself and forced a further step forward only to trip and fall on her face.

"Hell!" she exclaimed. Pulling herself to a squat, she ran her hands over the ground until she came to what had caused her to trip. She first felt an arm, then shoulder, then the warm wet mess that had been the neck of Mr. Stone.

Jilly had no time to realize what she had found or to flee. She heard the monster fly down from the treetop and grunt as he landed behind her. He pulled her into his powerful arms. Pushing one hand across her mouth and lifting her body to his flat, pug-like face, he smelt her belly and knew she was disease free. With Jilly tightly in his claws, he flew off into the night sky. She cried for help, but any who heard her thought little of it. Her misery was just another sound in the City of Evil Night.

She was now the property of the abomination known as 'One Wing'. He had ruled the tunnels and natural grottos that intertwined deep beneath the southeastern British countryside for a thousand years. Unable to leave his lair, he spent his existence in the pursuit of creating a perfect child and heir. This child would be without his monstrous body and many physical defects. He would have a perfect human body and the soulless, evil mind of Satan. A child One Wing could control who would walk the earth in the place of his father.

During the weeks that followed Jilly was drugged, hooded and manacled to a bed. So clouded were her thoughts, she had no real knowledge of the silent, huge body that abused her nightly.

One morning she woke to find the hood gone and her mind clear. For the first time she saw the prison that held her. A hundred distant candles did very little to push back the blackness of the large damp cave. Bars that circled the bed, reached far up to the stone roof overhead. But for the constant drip of water there were no other sounds. Her calls for help and attention went unanswered.

From that morning on, the drugging and the abuse stopped. Every morning when she woke there was fresh food and water on a table by the bed and a clean, porcelain pot on the floor. She never saw or heard anyone, human or otherwise. Fear and loneliness were her only companions.

In time, she began to sense he was watching her. Occasionally she spotted silver eyes peering at her through the darkness. She cried, begged and threatened but he never said a word. He watched her for months, as though she was a pet in a cage. He was waiting for his child.

The waters broke and the pains came. For two days, Jilly fought to bring her child to birth. Exhausted and broken with pain she called out to the watching, silver eyes, "Help me! If I die, so will the babe...please help me?"

Slowly One Wing stood from his seat, entered her cell, and for the first time she saw him for what he really was. She screamed once and fainted. He laid her flat on

her back, hooked one deadly sharp claw into her vagina and ripped her body open with a smooth quick moment. He pulled her flesh aside reached in and brought out his son. Jilly was dead and Emile Soskice was born.

\* \* \* \*

Elizabeth never forgot the first time she saw Owen Tabor. It was very early on a bright summer morning when the Delacourt family coach pulled to a halt in front of the Tabor Hall Manor House. Various Tabor family members and hurried servants met the guests. Through the joyous mayhem, a tall, dark young man captured Elizabeth's attention. He stood back from the rest of the noisy gathering, leaning with his shoulders and one foot against the wall; giving the strong impression of restless boredom.

Owen was 23 and all too aware of the affect he had on the females he met. Elizabeth was terribly shy and rather chubby. She had beautiful, shining copper red hair and a very pretty face. Owen decided she would be worth the effort. He charmed and romanced Elizabeth. She responded with weak and gentle resistance to his hot, demanding kisses and searching hands. During those wonderfully enchanted summer evenings she fell completely and endlessly in love with him. For Owen she was a sweet, happy memory that faded as quickly as the summer flowers.

Six years passed before Elizabeth again traveled up the winding estate roads that led to the Tabor family home. What a world of difference had developed in that time! Gone was her father's silver and black carriage and elegant horses. Now she rode in on a gypsy caravan of five painted wagons that also served as her home. She no longer wore London's finest fashions. Closets of wonderful things no longer existed and all that she owned would fit into a single box. Her clothes then were plain, simple, threadbare and most often dirty.

Once she had been an honored guest, now she was there to entertain and her status less than that of a house servant. Elizabeth would have been filled with shame had she not been so certain that Owen would not recognize her. Far behind her and long gone was her sweet virgin beauty. Aware now of the harsh reality of young romance she was certain that he would scarcely remember those brief wonderful days so long ago when he stole her heart.

It was on that warm June night, in the year of 1890, that one gypsy named Jack Soskice was murdered and the 'curse' placed like a bolt of lightning on the Tabor family. All who admit to memories of that night agree that the surprise birthday festivities for Lord Wilmot Tabor had been, until that moment, a great success.

Local villagers, tenants, servants and most of the Tabor family mingled, enjoyed and celebrated the relief of springtime and the passing of another year for the old man. The gypsy travelers entertained the gathered crowd. They sang, danced and played magic tricks to the delight of all.

Now it had fallen into late evening and most of the women and their children had gone home and to bed. The males that remained from the house, the land and the village were for the most well drunk and rowdy. It was not until this point of the evening when the reclusive Laird joined the celebrations. Accompanied by his sons, his dog and wrapped in a blanket Wilmot Tabor rolled his wheelchair out and into the party.

Mama and Emile Soskice, leaders of this gypsy clan were hard taskmasters.

Each of the family had to hold up their end of the necessary duties. This was nonetheless true for Elizabeth, their daughter-in-law and mother of their grandson. Even though so much had changed for Elizabeth these last years, including the blooming of great beauty, she had lost none of her shyness or natural reserve. It was to her beauty that the Soskice family turned to for most of their rewards at such an event as this. They had taught her the gypsy dance in a way that would tantalize and excite a crowd of drunken males to part with their money. To ward off the young woman's shyness Mama Soskice plied her with a potent mixture of homemade wine and special herbs.

That night, as was their custom for such events, Mama stripped Elizabeth and painted her skin with a golden paint that would make her shimmer as she danced in the firelight. Then she dressed the young woman in thin layers of silk and cotton. There were long slits on either side of the skirt and delicate laces tied up the bosom of the almost transparent shift. Mama took a handful of colorful ribbons and fastened them to the dress in such a way that Elizabeth could easily pull them off and toss them into the crowd. She brushed Elizabeth's long, auburn hair and let it hang down her back in thick, wild curls. She wore bells on her wrists and ankles and carried a tambourine that was also decorated with ribbon streamers.

Throughout the course of the day, Elizabeth spotted Owen several times in the gathering crowds. Her first sight of him was from behind. He was tall, head and shoulders above the other men. She moved quickly through the throng to see his face, hoping that the actual sight of the man would dampen the passion that still burned in her soul. That was not so! Once again, just the very sight of him took her breath away. Older, more rugged with great whiskers and thick beard he was even more a man to her eyes. She caught him looking her way more than once but there seemed no change in his manner and certainly no recognition. Relieved as she was that he would not see her downfall she was also angry that this man who had taken her heart, or that she had been so foolish to hand it over eagerly, had no memories of her.

As night fell, Mama Soskice fed her the adulterated wine. As it loosened her mood, it also enhanced her anger. She was still beautiful and she knew that all too well. She had also been lovely when he had betrayed her. Had he found other females even lovelier than her, she doubted it! She had half a mind then to tell him just what she thought of men such as he, but that was the wine thinking and the other half of her mind held her in check.

When the time was right and the crowd anxious for more entertainment, Mama brought Elizabeth out. The small gypsy band of musicians began to play. Twirling, spinning and slapping her tambourine she danced round and round the large blazing fire. With every turn, she showed more leg. She allowed the lightly tied bodice laces to slide open. Her lovely, full breasts pushed against the thin fabric of her dress. The men roared their enjoyment and encouraged her on.

The music stopped and Elizabeth passed through the crowd, holding out the tambourine. For each coin dropped, she would endure slaps, groping and insults with a wanton smile, her mind reeling from the effects of the drink. Mama was very pleased with the money Elizabeth was bringing back that night. She had never seen the young woman more enticing and alive.

Before the third and final dance, Mama Soskice poured more liquor down

Elizabeth's throat. She slipped off the lace underwear and opened the buttons of the skirt so that only one thin tie held it in place. She removed the laces that held the bodice in place and for the most part Elizabeth was naked.

Elizabeth's mind raced with thoughts of heartache, anger and revenge. During both of the dances, she searched the crowd for Owen but he was not there. A small voice of reason warned her that she was drunk and that his absence was a good thing. Whatever she might do that night would only cause her much embarrassment and leave her

mortified the next day. All such thoughts silenced for good when her husband, Jack Soksice appeared in the small circle of wagons and spoke with his wife.

"Well done!" Jack smiled when he saw the pile of coins his mother was busy counting. "But you are not done yet!" He rubbed his greedy hands together. "Lord Tabor has finally joined us and all his sons are in the front of the crowd waiting for you. Do not let them down!"

Elizabeth laughed as several thoughts raced though her clouded mind. He wants to see a beautiful woman dance. He needs titillation from a gypsy stranger, does he? I will give him that and more! Reason begged to be heard but it was a weak voice, pride and drink overruled. She had waited six long years to impress Owen Tabor with her mature beauty and she would not ignore this opportunity.

The crowd of rowdy onlookers cheered as she stepped up to the fire. The gypsy band began to play. She danced with wanton abandon, letting the bodice fall to expose a breast whenever possible. She spun in wider circles, lifting her skirts to free her naked legs. She spotted Owen almost immediately. He leered at her, as did all the other men, clapping and cheering her onwards.

There were a few seconds in this piece when the band would be silent and she would assume a very provocative pose until it started again. Elizabeth planned it so that she stood in front of Owen at that point. She stepped up to within a few inches of the man, her heart pounding in her chest, her mind spinning. She looked him up and down, slid the flimsy skirt over to expose one leg. She pulled back the sides of the bodice of her chemise and very briefly showed him her breasts.

She thoroughly enjoyed the look of surprise she saw in his eyes. She threw back her head and laughed loudly. Emboldened by his reaction and without any of her usual reserve she curled her finger for him to bring his head down closer to her. This he did after a quick smile in the direction of the old man in the wheelchair next to him. She stood on her toes and whispered into his ear. The music started again.

"What?" Owen called after her. "I did not hear what you said!" She was dancing again, spinning, skipping closer and closer to the huge fire.

She was supremely pleased with herself and so she did not notice right away as the band stopped playing. The stunned silence that surrounds a sudden horror began at one side of the crowded courtyard and as smooth as a sharp knife it moved one person at a time, through the throng. Elizabeth teetered to a standstill. The young man staggered forward as the crowd parted to let him pass, some gasping in horror as they saw the back of him.

"Jack? What is wrong?" the dancer asked as he approached her.

Mama Soksice screamed and ran forward from the wagons.

The dying man fell onto his face at the feet of his wife, the handle of a large

dagger in his back. Blood from his mortal wound pooled quickly around Elizabeth's naked feet. Still screaming the old woman fell to her knees and took up the head of her dead son. On his face was the shocked look of sudden death.

The crowd of revelers was jarred into silent sobriety. Dread and danger filled the air with a heavy weight.

"Murder!" Mama Soskice wailed. She saw the blood on her hands and beat her chest in an agony of grief. "Emile! Emile! They have killed our boy!" she called out for her husband.

From the shadows came forward an old man of singularly disturbing appearance. So deformed and ugly was he that he wore a veil and a long black cape as a shield. The veil used to hide the back and side of his head where disease ate the flesh almost down to the skull. The cape hid a withered, blackened arm and clawed hand. He leaned heavily on a thick stick as the crowd parted to let him by.

A baby began to cry and the dog at the foot of the Laird started to growl. A tight semi circle of Tabor sons and armed men formed around the family head.

"Elizabeth!" the old man yelled at her to wake her from her shocked stupor. "Take the old woman away and see to your baby!" Then finally aware and without a single word or hesitation she pulled the grieving mother away into the darkness. Emile Soskice looked down at the body of his child.

"Who has murdered my son?" he called out in remarkably clear English. He bent forward and pulled the knife from the body. "Who has claim to this dagger?"

Only the crackling fire answered the gypsy. He called out in a louder voice and took a step closer the Tabor family. "Who has the bravery to answer me? Who is the murderer amongst you?" Soskice held the dagger in front of him and the gold of the Tabor emblem glittered in the firelight. Blood dripped from the blade.

"As you know, Soskice, I am the head of this family," the one in the chair answered defiantly as two of his sons took a step between him and the irate gypsy.

"These men who surround you, are they your sons?" Soskice asked.

"Some are and you know that, old man!"

"Then you are well blessed. There lies my only son, dead on your land by the hand of one of yours and it is up to you to insure justice for me!" With his one eye, the gypsy studied the group of men closely, looking each man in the face. "Which of you cannot account for your dagger?" he demanded.

"We are civilized men and do not have need to arm ourselves at all times. Any man here could have used that dagger. Have you proof that this deed was done by one of my sons?" Wilmot responded with equal force and not a sign of remorse or shock in his tone. "No! I thought not! Then I fear that there is very little I can do in this matter!" he pulled a purse from his jacket pocket and tossed it at the feet of Soskice. "There is more gold in there than your son would have brought you in his lifetime. Take that and your family and leave my land! You have no business here in the first place."

No one noticed as new faces joined the crowd. These men were armed and moved forward to surround the gypsies. So focused were all gathered on the terrible scene before them that they did not notice the young beautiful dancer, with her baby held close to her chest, disappear from the courtyard, across the lawn, down the hillside and into the black valley below.



Seconds passed before the decrepit gypsy picked up the purse. Leaning on his stick, he moved a few steps back to the body of his son. He pulled the string with his teeth and dropped the coins into the puddle of blood. Then with great deliberateness and difficulty picked up each of the blood soaked coins and walked back to face the Tabor men.

"I return your blood money!" now his voice cracked with rage. He threw the coins at Wilmot. They landed, some on him and the rest at his feet. "For the last time, I warn you and demand of you Tabor, that I will see justice done for my Jack!"

Wilmot laughed loud. "You threaten me? With what do you do that? Be careful Soskice! I have an army of men who watch for my word."

"Then give it! Because I am sure that word is the only one they would honor!" Soskice yelled.

The man in the chair raised his right arm and the small army he spoke of fell two men onto each gypsy and held them fast. "Remove them and this mess from my land!"

One man on each side of Soskice pulled him back but with unusual strength he shook them away for long enough to raise his stick in the direction of the family head. "Then be this curse on your head, Wilmot Tabor. And wear it like a shroud, for I will never rest in any grave until I have seen you and all of your sons dead!"

Wilmot Tabor stood from his chair and stepped forward pushing one son aside until he stood within inches of the gypsy. "Remove that curse, Soskice or the shroud you speak of will be yours to share with the rest of your God forsaken family!" He pulled the veil from the old man's head. His face rotting with disease was exposed. An empty eye socket ringed with an infection of putrid flesh reached back to the skull bone. "Now, Soskice, I give you one last warning! Remove that curse or be damned!"

In response, Soskice spat and soiled the front of his enemy.

"Then it is on your head from this moment on!" Wilmot turned in a wide circle to face the silent crowd. "And be witnesses all who are present. I gave this man a fair chance for life and freedom but he rejects that offer. Take this one to the old tower and chain him firmly to the wall."

The old tower that Wilmot spoke of was all that remained of the first Tabor castle that was long since abandoned and now just a lonely sentinel sitting high on the Kent cliffs looking out over the English Channel.

"Then take the rest of this mob, every man, woman and child and put them into the dungeons. There they will rot until this inhuman nightmare removes this curse! Throw that body into the sea. See to this, Owen!" Wilmot ordered his oldest and most trusted son. Some men threw dirt to drown the fire and all except for the gypsies returned the way they had come and back to their homes.

Elizabeth left the distraught Mama with her daughters. With all this distraction, she knew she had to take the chance for freedom and went quickly inside the wagon of the elder Soskice. She took a purse from under the old couple's mattress and did not need to look inside to know it contained a great deal of money. She tied it as firmly as possible to the sparse remains of her bodice. She took another of Emile Soskice's black capes and threw it around her shoulders, buttoning it all the way down.

This done and sure no one was looking in her direction, she went quickly and

quietly to the wagon that she shared with her now dead husband. She took a large, sturdy covered basket from a shelf and layered the bottom of it with two warm blankets and baby clothes. Into the inside pockets of the cape she stuffed as many linen diapers as she could. She took a loaf of bread and chunk of goat cheese, wrapped them in a rag and placed this package under the blankets and clothes. She slipped her feet into her worn shoes. Her five-month-old son, Richard, stopped crying when he saw his mother and sucked his chubby fingers hungrily.

"Come along, my darling!" Elizabeth whispered. She laid him into a small hammock and hung it over her shoulder. "I know you are hungry but we have no time for that now. God, please be with me!" She tried to clear her severely clouded mind, crossed herself, fled from the wagon and headed across the lawn and down the slippery hillside.

The moon was bright and the clouds only patchy so for the time being she was able to clearly see her way. She reached the roadway that brought the Soskice family onto the Estate earlier that day. From there she had seen what appeared to be an abandoned church and it was to that building that she headed now.

She saw a deep ditch that ran along the opposite side of the road. She tried to jump across but fell directly into the springtime muck and came up muddied and very wet. Cursing like an old sailor that had become her style since being with the Soskice family she frantically checked her child. He was frightened and getting frustrated with hunger but the baby was fine. She gathered the spilled contents of her basket but missed, in the shadows, the paper package containing the bread and cheese.

That done, she continued on her way. Behind her, back up the hill she could hear the raised voices of angry men. There was no sound of anyone coming in her direction. It would take her only a few more minutes to reach the church where she might hide for a while, feed her child and wait for the alcohol to wear off.

By the time that she reached the church, the moon slipped behind clouds. It was so dark she had to feel her way around the walls to find the front doors. The first was locked or stuck but the second opened with a rusted squeal that echoed far too loudly out into the quiet valley. Not wanting to make even more noise, she left the door open and went inside. Thick dust and grime lined the narrow, colored windows. Even darker in there than the outside she had to continue to use her hands in order to find her way past the scattered pews to what had once been the altar. Rubbish cluttered the aisle. It was a chore not to trip again.

Now that she had slowed down Richard could feel the change in his mother's movements and began to complain and flail around looking for her breast. At the base of the altar she pulled a blanket from the basket and fell onto it just as her legs began to give out. Her mind was spinning as she pulled Richard to her and gave him a nipple. She could see a faint image of a cross in silhouette on the wall above and she prayed for guidance and help in the dangerous hours that lay ahead.

The Tabor men dragged Soskice across the courtyard and down into the disused tunnels that led to the tower that was to be his prison. Though the days of the Tabor gang of thieves and smugglers was long since over most of the men were still very familiar

with the dangerous tunnels. They made their up the worn and slippery spiral staircase to the tower top. They dumped Soskice on the cold stone floor and locked the chained cuffs around his neck and legs. He could sit or lie down but not stand.

The small circular room at the top of the turret was no more than a man's length across. A long ago cannon ball had destroyed a full third of the wall and left a large gaping hole that faced out on to the channel.

"Since you have little else to do, gypsy, I would think about the poor sods who sat here before you! You won't be the only one to die here!" the one who seemed to be the leader of the group exclaimed as he kicked aside some rubbish left behind by a long ago prisoner. "You'd best do as Lord Tabor says!"

The gypsy sat silent and motionless.

Another of the men, wearing a red bandana around his head leaned closer to him in the dim light of their lantern. "Hell on earth, old man, when did the devil take that bite out of your face? I have never seen the like of it! Are you sure that you are not dead already?" he laughed loud at his own joke.

"Come along, O'Connor!" the leader of the three insisted. "Or would you rather stay and visit for a while?" he asked as he threw the stinking veil back over the dreadful sight. "Christ, even the devil doesn't want to see that!" Soskice glared as the men firmly bolted and barred the door. He made firm mental images of their faces.

Dragging the heavy chains, he shifted his position as much as possible so that he was closer to the broken wall where he could see the bright and full moon. He raised his right hand. Under the cracked and dried blood of his son was a tattooed symbol of a circled cross. He spat onto this and held it up towards the moon. He threw back his head and opened his mouth wider than any man should be able to do. A low rumble began in his

belly and gained strength as it moved up his throat. He stretched out his long blackened tongue and let out the screech of a raven loud into the night sky. This he did two more times and fell back onto the cold and wet stones of his prison.

The raven landed on the broken wall, turning her head this way and that at the scene before her. The old gypsy's hand lay on the stones beside him and the bird rubbed her beak across it several times. She knew the smell of the blood all too well!

"Ah, my wandering raven! You have come to me, finally. You were gone too far. Perhaps I give you too much freedom. Shift!" he touched the shinning black feathers.

The bird raised her wings until they touched at their tips. Downwards from the tips, the feathers began to fade and in their place, gentle female fingers formed then hands and slim white arms. Feathers faded from the chest and body as the shape shifting bird grew larger. Broad slender shoulders and firm large breasts formed. Ivory skin melted away the feathers across the abdomen and own two long and strong legs. She was a naked human female, complete in every way.

"What is it, Papa?" the lovely shape shifter asked. "What has brought us to this terrible place?" Her face was delicate and beautiful, her long hair, black and shinning in the moon light. She moved her head in the manner of the bird she had just been. Her bright silver eyes searched the face of the old man who had created her. She took his hand in hers and brought it to her face. "This is Soskice blood! Tell me what happened?"

"A murderer by the name of Tabor has brought me to this and that is the blood of my Jack. They have murdered him!"

"Jack is dead?" she demanded searching his face for a sign that she had heard wrong.

The old man nodded. "And the rest of the family is locked up in their bloody dungeons. I have cursed the lot of them. The fools that they are have locked me here until I remove the curse!" He laughed in a way that said he was not inclined to do that.

Tears began to fall down the lovely cheeks. "Jack is dead?" she asked again, hardly daring to believe it possible. "But I can smell his blood on you and feel your pain so it must be so!"

Emile put his one good arm around her and she curled into a ball and lay crying beside him. He smoothed her hair, ran his arm down the curve of her spine and the mound of her hips. This he did until she stopped crying. When finally she sat up again he spoke. "Now, you must not grieve for too long. You will listen to me carefully as you will have your work cut out for you!"

She nodded and listened very closely, her huge eyes shining with anticipation. When he was done he lowered his head, pulled down his veil and this was a signal for her to leave. She raised her arms, touched her fingertips and the transformation began again. With a leap from the broken stones, she spread her wings wide and soared into the night sky.

Owen Tabor was thirty years old and very much in the prime of his life. He had a powerful, lean and strong body. His features were even and more than handsome almost leaning to feminine beauty so he tried his best to keep them hidden under heavy beard and full mustaches. His hair was jet black, worn long and rarely brushed. He was, in manner, a rough countryman rather than the often-spoiled soft gentlemen that were his counterparts. He had no interest in style, manners or any of the finer things his position in life could have given him.

In type of man, most regarded him with respect for his honesty and the large kindnesses of his heart. He had a ready and hearty laugh and a dry, sarcastic wit. Those who had reason to, feared his quick temper and resented his controlling manner.

In contrast to his rough ways and large size was his artistic talent. From the days he first could hold a pencil, it was apparent he had a remarkable gift. As he grew to manhood, his paintings drew the attention of the most prestigious galleries. Very soon, his landscapes and portraits hung in parlors and drawing rooms the length of the country.

Much to the surprise and disappointment of many hopeful young women, when Owen was twenty four he met and very quickly afterwards married Nora Fitzpatrick. They loved passionately and happily for three years. She died in his arms not too long after their child was born. A day later, the child joined her mother. For a long while, Owen was a stricken and broken man. He turned away from his art and lost his misery in the false cure of whiskey.

Eventually Owen slipped back into active life again. He had channeled his pain into energy and the powerful need to control all things and people around him. Now that his father had weakened with age, Owen stepped in and took an early start as Lord of the Manor. The small army of Tabor men had long since shifted their loyalty to Owen as they saw the way the wind was blowing.

That night he had only partially seen to his father's wishes. He made sure that the monstrous old man sat chained in the old tower and the family locked in the Tabor Hall cellar jails but they did not throw the body of the murdered gypsy into the channel. Owen ordered that they place Jack Soskice in the ground just outside the Tabor Cemetery.

The rest of that evening, Owen spent trying to calm his father who was beside himself with rage and the fear that came with his strong superstitious beliefs. Finally, the old man was so drunk that he could no longer stay awake so Owen had him placed into his bed. After seeing that all was secure at the Tabor Hall he crossed the lawns to his house and faced a few hours of restless sleep.

It was just before dawn he gave up the bed and dressed. He loved that time of day the best, when the sun began its rise and all was bathed in the silent morning mist. It was only then that he felt free of the painful memories of the loss of his wife and child. The lonely shroud of grief that had been his mantle for so long slightly lifted in the early morning quiet.

He returned to the courtyard that was the place of the tragedy of the night before. At the center of the cobbled floor, amongst the remains of the night's partiers was the dark and still wet puddle of blood. Lapping hungry at its edges was Wilmot's tired, old dog, Belle.

"Christ's sake!" Owen pulled the dog away from the blood by her collar. "Idiot dog, doesn't anybody feed you?" She snarled and bared her teeth but cowered and backed away when Owen raised his hand.

A movement on the wall above caught his eye. A large raven called loudly, breaking the silence. Belle saw the bird and then strangely for her usual aggressive manner she yelped and ran in fear for the back of Tabor Hall. Owen picked up a stone and threw it hard at the noisy raven. Instead of flying away when the stone hit very nearby, the bird stayed still never breaking its glare at Owen. He was looking for another stone when a familiar footfall came towards him through the mist.

"There you are Owen!" James Whitehall said to Owen as he approached and was close enough to see through the haze. Neither man noticed as the bird left its perch and flew closer, landing nearby. "It is a thick blanket we have this morning, isn't it?" James was the Tabor estate manager. The two men were fast friends even though there was a great many years between them. "I thought I might find you up and about."

"I've not got the body full of liquor to sleep off as the others have!" Owen referred to his father and three half brothers.

"Poor sod!" James said as looked down at the blood stained flagstones. "That stain will stay; a constant reminder, I suppose. Do you have any idea who killed him?"

"I was standing with Father at the moment but I have no doubt it was Edward. He grows more insane with every passing day. I am tired of waiting for the old man to take a stand on him. It may well be long past the time for me to take matters into my own hands."

James nodded. "Rumor is that he fought with that gypsy earlier in the day. A number of people saw it. No doubt there were just as many that saw the murder, but not a man will speak of it!"

"You can be sure my pathetic brother will speak with me on this matter before this day is out. I have had more than enough of him."

"It appears as though we have misplaced one member of the Soskice family." James said as they crossed back towards the manor house.

"What?"

"That old woman, the one they call Mama Soskice has been screaming for her grandson. They have told the guards that the dead gypsy's wife and son are not with them." James explained. "From what I can gather she was the lovely creature who danced for us last night."

"Run off, did she? Then I would say that is so much the better for the both of them"

"Then you do not want me to send out a search for her?"

"No, not at all! Let her be. The last thing we need is yet another gypsy to add to our problems. Let us just hope she got far and away. If my father does not forget about this foolishness and come to his senses soon I will do what should be done and let the lot of them go." Owen answered and caught a quick look in his companion's eyes. "James, you don't mean to tell me that you put any stock in this curse nonsense?"

"In all truthfulness, Owen, I have seen more than I can logically account for. I have told you that before," James answered as he scratched his thick white beard and straightened his always-present wide brimmed, black leather hat.

The younger man shook his head as he turned to walk away. "I have only my own eyes to go by and I have not seen anything unusual. I very much doubt that a few raving words from a mad man will affect the lives of my family or me. In the mean time, before witches strike us down in our sleep have the gypsy wagons pulled out of site behind the stables and have their horses and dogs seen to. I am going to take Majesty for a run."

Owen began most days running his beautiful black stallion around the perimeters of the Estate. When he would meet up with a tenant farmer, he would stop and talk, that way keeping informed with the local affairs and showing concern in their lives and families. With the powerful animal under him, Owen headed off to the southwest and the steep cliff sides. He pushed his horse hard. The ride helped to take his mind off the troubling events of the night before and the growing rage he felt for his demented brother, Edward.

He circled around and came up to the road where Elizabeth had crossed the night before. High above, the raven followed him all the way. On the roadside near the muddy ditch, he saw the package of bread and cheese where it landed when Elizabeth fell. It was a puzzle but he thought little more of it and left it on the ground for the wildlife to eat.

He traveled a little further down the road to where a make shift bridge had been placed and crossed to the other side and the flat field that led to the old church. The mist had risen to the treetops and it appeared as though the day would be clear and warm. They moved across the field and to the front of the building. Owen was surprised to see the door of the church open. He looked back at the food he had left on the ground and a thought occurred to him.

Elizabeth's heavy, drug induced sleep had lasted far longer than she had planned. It would have been far wiser for her to leave the property before daylight. When she woke, it was with a start at a familiar, distant sound. She could not place it until she heard it again. Then she sat up and was fully awake. There was no mistaking the

heavy footfall of a horse on gravel stones. She pulled herself and the baby back under the pews. The startled baby cried once and then again but much louder before she could do anything to quiet him.

Owen dismounted and stood silently to the side of the open doorway as he heard the baby cry. He took out his pistol and stepped silently into the shadows inside the church.

"You may as well show yourself! I heard your baby cry!" he said firmly. Some moments passed before he spoke again, this time much louder. "I will not leave, come out where I can see you!"

More time passed and then he saw the silhouette of Elizabeth as she stood up. "What do you want?" she asked with defiance.

Owen moved out from the shadows and down the aisle towards her. "What do I want? You are the one who is trespassing, not me! Step into the light so that I can see you."

Elizabeth took a step to the left and into the sunlight that floated through the dirty church windows. She still wore the seductive dancers' costume of the night before. Dried mud caked on her skin and in her hair.

"Sweet Jesus, what has happened to you? Do you always look like that?" he could not help but smile.

"If you must insult me could you at least tell me who you are?" she demanded in as haughty a tone as she could muster. She would pretend she did not know him and get away quickly. She felt dreadful, her stomach turned with hunger and fear.

"You prefer introductions before insults, how genteel for a gypsy! I am Owen Tabor. You are of the Soskice family, no doubt. The seductive dancer with a message!"

"I am not a gypsy! My name is Elizabeth and this infant is my son, Richard," she bent slowly, gathering the blankets and the baby back into her basket.

Watchful for a weapon, Owen stepped closer. "Then if you are not a Soskice do you have a second name?"

"Of course I have a second name but I need not share it with you. Now please move aside and let me pass!"

He stood his ground and made a very effective block between her and the doorway. "Do you not want to know what has happened to the rest of your family?" he asked with sarcasm.

"They are not my family and my only care is that I not run into them again."

"I thought you were the grieving widow."

"That murdered man was my husband, yes, but I feel no sadness on his death; just a very grateful awareness of one more chance for freedom. That is if you are planning on letting us pass!"

"You need not worry about any of them, Mrs. Soskice. My father has had the lot of them thrown into his jails. It will be some time before any of them see the light of day again!"

She looked at him dumbfounded. "Why did he do that?"

"That decrepit old fool laid some ridiculous curse and my father is just addled enough to believe in the mutterings. So as it is now, they will remain here until that old man removes the curse or I can bring my father back to his senses."

"If Emile Soskice has placed a curse on your kin then you would best be warned to take it very seriously!" Beyond Owen, she could see the light of day and longed for the warmth of the sun. She could not stop her teeth from chattering.

"If that is what you believe, Elizabeth, perhaps you are not that far removed from the Soskice family."

"For over three years I have been held captive by those retched people. In that time I have learned far more about such matters than you could have ever learned in your entire lifetime in your fancy manor halls. At least I have warned you and that is all I can do. Now if my child and I are not to be thrown into your dungeon as well perhaps you will remove your bulk from my way!"

He lowered his pistol and stepped back, motioning with his hand for her to pass. He followed her closely from the dim and stale church into the sunlight. She placed the basket and the baby on the ground, brushed as much of the dried mud off her skin, and clothes as possible. Owen could see very clearly through a great deal of the silk of her outfit and he did not attempt to hide his interest. She took up the heavy velvet cape, wrapped it around her body, and looked down her nose at him.

"Do you have any water so that I can at least wash my face?"

"I think that would be a very good idea!" he pulled a water pouch from his saddle and handed it to her.

"Thank you." She pulled off the topper and took a long drink, then poured some water into her hands and rubbed it on her face and through her curly, matted hair. She wiped her face with the inside of the cape. All the while, she tried to ignore the faint and dizzy feeling that was growing stronger. She had hoped that the fresh air and sun light might help her feel better but she only felt worse. She could feel the blood begin to drain from her face. These were the all too familiar after effects of mama Soskice's drug potion.

Owen was pleasantly surprised to see the fairness of her skin and the prettiness of her face. Her features were well formed and delicate, her eyes a dark, chocolate brown and her lips red and full.

"You are much lovelier without the muck and ridiculous gold paint, my dear!" he smiled at her.

"Thank you, I am sure! Now if you do not mind I shall take my baby and leave your land."

"Do you have even the slightest idea of where you are going? A gypsy woman alone might not be too safe."

"I have told you that I am not a gypsy! Are you a slow learner?" she demanded angrily.

"Am I slow learner? Maybe so." He laughed. "Then tell me just who you are so I can be certain that you do not belong with the rest of the Soskice family?" he sat down on the grass and gave the appearance that neither of them was going to go anywhere until he had some answers.

"Well, if you insist! I am the only child of my father and my mother. Mother died when I was a baby. My father was a poor blacksmith and a low-minded individual with many vices. One is gambling. I was given to Emile and Jack as form of debt payment and I was forced into marriage with Jack" She stopped and wondered if he believed her, then decided that she really did not care. "It is that simple. If you do not



believe me....it is not a concern to me!"

"You are very well spoken for a low born." Owen looked up at her, squinting in the morning light.

She sighed and ignored what she could not explain. "I've tried to escape many times. This time I have a good chance if you are not in my way." she answered with as much dignity as she could find. She was feeling more and more dreadful.

"I see! What are your plans? You do not appear all that strong."

"I will walk to the nearest town where I will find proper lodgings, a bath, and food and purchase some clothes."

"You are at least a full day's walk to the nearest town. You had best be wary not to run into any of my brothers. You will find that they are not half the gentleman I am." She intrigued him and he was not oblivious to her physical distress.

"Is that so?" Elizabeth could no longer trust her legs. She sat on the grass and began to rummage through her basket. "Then they must be a fearsome lot indeed. Thank you for the warning and I shall be very sure to avoid them!" She knew she needed to eat something but was unhappy to find that the package of bread and cheese was no longer with her. With every passing second, she felt worse.

"If you are looking for some bread and cheese it is back there on the ground, most likely where you dropped it when you wallowed in the mud."

"Shit!" She whispered the curse. "Well then, I shall have to do without for the time being. I have been through worse." She bundled her child into the basket, tucking him carefully into place with the blankets. She tried to pull herself to her feet but did not succeed. Her face turned a ghastly white. She fell forward onto the long grass. He heard the sound of her forehead as it hit a rock.

"Bloody Hell!" Owen exclaimed as he went to her and turned her over. A large bump the size of an egg with an ugly raw gash grew quickly in the center of her forehead. "Why do you women always have to faint? Wake up!" he called firmly in her ear. When he got no reaction, he took the pouch of water and splashed it on her face. She sputtered and coughed, opened her eyes and tried to sit up.

"What happened?" She moaned as she lay back onto the grass once again. Blood trickled from the wound and into her eyes.

"When was the last time you ate?" He took a handkerchief from his pocket and held it to the wound.

"I do not remember. I guess it was yesterday morning. The old witch drugs me to make me dance. I am usually sick afterwards but never this bad," she tried to pull his hand away from her head but he held it firmly. Tears of frustration filled in her eyes. Richard began to whine. He was hungry and his basket bed too small.

"Your baby is complaining. You had best delay your long walk for a while. You will not get too far as you are. I will bring you back to my home. You can rest and eat."

"No!" she said with as force as she could muster. "I would rather die here than be jailed with the Soskice's." All of her former arrogance was gone and she to cry. "I have not done anything to you, please do not do this!"

"Be quiet." Owen gently shook her shoulders. "Listen! I am not going to imprison or hurt you. You have a serious wound on your head. You could not possibly get more than a few feet before you would likely faint again."

"I have to leave now. I will not go back to that place!" She pushed him aside and got to her feet.

"Only a stubborn female would ...." He did not finish before Elizabeth fainted once again. This time he was able to catch her. "Right, I have had enough of this foolishness!" Owen stood and picked her slight figure up and threw her over his shoulder. He took the basket, fastened it securely to his saddle and carefully rode the short distance to his home.

Wilmot Tabor had Hock House built when his first wife, Margaret, refused to live in the manor home. Tall hollyhocks and lilac bushes framed all around the white walls. Surrounded by lush and lovely gardens the house was a jewel of color and texture.

Margaret's talent for beauty, comfort and color was evident in every lovely room. A specific flower was the inspiration of each room. Lace, brocade, satin and heavy tapestries created warmth and texture on the walls, floor and windows. Margaret died young. The house kept as it was and in perfect order to honor her memory. Wilmot gave Owen and Nora the house as a wedding present. The young bride cherished the beautiful house and left it very much as Margaret had planned.

Owen was only six years old when his mother died. Wilmot had him brought from Hock House to Tabor Hall and he seemed rather a lost little soul in the huge, cold house. He gravitated to the warmth of the kitchen fires, the delicious smells, occasional treat and friendly head cook, Hanna. Over the years, she took on more and more a motherly role in his life. He brought her as cook and housekeeper when he took possession of his mother's house.

Owen carried Elizabeth and her baby into the kitchen of Hock House. He laid the still unconscious woman on the tabletop, placed the baby in his basket on a nearby counter.

"Owen! What have you done?" Hanna asked with surprise and concern. Blood from the wound had covered her face and dripped down her hair as he carried her.

"Just please fetch the smelling salts!" he frowned at Hanna. To Daisy, the housemaid he added, "The baby smells worse than the barn! You'd best clean and change him."

"Oh my!" Hanna fished around in a box containing various bandages and lotions and found a small bottle. Owen took it from her and pulled the cork. He ran it under the Elizabeth's nose. She jerked awake, coughing from the strong fumes.

"Stay still, my dear!" Hanna held her down with a firm hand. "If you sit or stand you will begin to bleed again."

Owen stood by as Hanna and Daisy cleaned and redressed the baby and wiped the blood from Elizabeth's ashen face. Elizabeth watched them all warily but said nothing. She was deadly pale and dazed.

"That is a nasty wound, Owen." Hanna said. With the blood and mud cleaned away from the young woman's face, they could see a deep v-shaped gash and egg sized lump. "Where did you get her from?"

Owen smiled slightly and looked at Hanna from the corner of his eye. "What an odd way you have with words, Hanna! I found her hiding in the old church. She was with the Soskice family. Apparently, she must have run off during the night."

"Where is my baby?" Elizabeth moaned. Hanna still held her shoulder down firmly to the table.

"Here he is, Ma'am," Daisy said. "I am changing his nappies. He's hungry, I think."

"I will put her on my bed and when he is ready bring him in to her!" Owen said as he carefully took Elizabeth in his arms, keeping her head level.

"Perhaps we should send for a doctor," Hanna suggested as she followed him down the hallway towards what had once been the Great Room and was now Owen's bedroom.

"No! No doctors, Hanna, you know how I feel about that," he answered as he placed Elizabeth onto his large bed. "All she needs is to rest and eat some decent food."

"Please, may I have my baby?" Elizabeth asked, looking around the large room with confusion.

"Here he is, love!" Hanna said gently as Daisy rushed in with him.

They placed the baby on the bed and helped Elizabeth roll onto her side. Hanna opened the bodice laces. The purse she had stolen from Emile fell onto the floor and Owen picked it up.

"Owen, please look away!" Hanna looked at him with anger.

"I have seen a fair share of breasts, Hanna, hers will no doubt be little different!" he shook his head and turned away.

"Buffoon!" he heard Elizabeth mutter as she pulled her baby onto her.

"You see, she is getting better already." Owen opened the purse. He counted the bills and raised his eyebrows as he saw that there was three hundred pounds in the purse. He put the purse in his jacket pocket. He nodded to the two servants and then at the door.

"I think a warm meal in an hour would be a good idea, Hanna."

Hanna covered the mother and child with a blanket and Daisy followed her out of the room. "Of course. A thick beef stew might just do the trick!" Hanna said as she closed the door behind them.

"Excuse me for saying this, Miss Hanna!" Daisy started when they were back in the kitchen and out of Owen's hearing. "But wouldn't it be for the best to send for the doctor? That is an awful lump she has on her head."

Hanna sighed and sat down heavily at the table. She motioned for Daisy to sit as well and she poured them each tea. "Of course she should be seen by a Doctor, but there is no reasoning with Owen on that matter. He has sworn off doctors!"

"Is that because Mrs. Owen Tabor died so young?"

"Yes and that was so very sad. They were such a happy pair. It was a joy thing just to be around them. Mr. Owen was still painting then and so talented too! Mrs. Tabor would pose for him day in and day out. Those beautiful portraits of her that hang in his room now are the ones he did then."

"She was a looker, weren't she?"

"Yes and a kind heart, as well! We were all so thrilled when she came up with child. Owen had her seen to by only the best London doctors and they swore to him that she was well," she paused for a moment, sipped her tea and wiped a lonely tear from her eye. "The baby was born, a girl, they named her Alexis. Mother took sick very quickly almost as soon as the babe was here. She died before any doctors could get here. And then child died in the following days!"

Daisy shook her head sadly.

"The poor man was devastated. It was as if all life left him, as well. He would sit in the dark for hours; he would drink too much and have the most terrible tantrums. Anyway, as far as doctors go, Owen swore he'd never have another doctor in the house again."

"Mrs. Tabor died in the room upstairs?"

Hanna nodded.

"Is that why he sleeps in the Great Room now?"

"I suppose it must be. It is not my place to ask him. Nor is it any of your business!" Hanna answered sternly. For a few moments more they sipped the tea and listening to the heavy silence of the house that had seen so much happiness and pain in such a short time.

"Then it is at least a blessing about our Mavis Willard, isn't it?"

Hanna nodded. "And she does much more with her herbs and concoctions than any doctor I ever knew of! Perhaps Mr. Tabor will send for her. He has done that before when need be!"

Owen sat silently in the dark shadows across from his bed and watched the scene before him. Daylight streamed from the slightly parted window drapes and lay in a golden strip across the floor and over the bed. Elizabeth lay with her back to him and the only sound was the slight sucking made by the baby. He wondered about the money she had with her and how she could have obtained such a large amount. There was always the possibility that she was a prostitute but then Soskice would have kept all the money she made and he doubted very much that this haughty and stubborn woman was a prostitute. He made up his mind to learn all he could about her.

After a while he quietly left the room and locked the door behind him. He gave the key to Hanna along with strict instructions that she must keep a close watch on Elizabeth and under no circumstances let her leave the house.

Ivy O'Connor, the adult daughter of James, was busy digging in the vegetable garden of her father's cottage when Owen rode up a while later.

"Is James inside, Ivy?" he asked the very pregnant woman and helped her struggle to her feet.

"He is just finishing up his lunch by now, I should think!" She smiled and pushed a curl of blond hair from her pretty face.

"When are you going to drop that load, Ivy?" He winked at her as she disappeared inside the cottage.

"Not too long now, I hope, Owen!" she laughed and called back at him.

James looked up from his sausages as Owen took a chair across from him and poured himself some of the very strong beer that James took pride in making. "I have found the wayward gypsy!" he announced stuffing his mouth with fresh baked bread.

"The heck you say! What have you done with her?"

"I have not done anything with her, except to help her. She is in my bed, recovering."

James stopped chewing, raised his eyebrows and laughed. "Good Lord, Owen! That was quick work!"

"Nothing of the kind, James. You are a dirty minded old fart, aren't you?" Owen chided but laughed as well. "And since everyone seems to think I might have done something to her rest assured I did not. I found her hiding in the old church right

after I left you this morning. Arrogant female acted as though I was the problem. I tried to reason with her and give her a small amount of advice but the silly cow fainted, smashing her head on a rock as she hit the ground. I did only the right thing and brought Elizabeth back to my home where she is now being properly cared for which is probably far more than she is used to!"

"Elizabeth, is it?"

Owen rolled his eyes. "Apparently she does not take to well to 'Mrs. Soskice'. Fetch Mrs. Willard. I am sure that she will tell us one way or the other when she will recover her strength."

"You seem interested in this female. Is it just the usual?"

"Not in the way you are thinking. She is far from well enough to travel on her own, so while she is here I will find out just who she is. She is most certainly not the child of a poor London blacksmith, as she claims."

"As you say!" James knew better that to press the matter further. "I have been ordered to move up to the main house for the time being. Your father is having his valet moved out of his room and I am to stay there until this matter with the curse is over." The older man did not look at all pleased with this.

"So now you are nursemaid and armed guard!"

"It would seem so! Well, at the very least it will leave Ivy and O'Connor alone in the cottage for a while. That may be a good thing!"

They stood and headed for the doorway. James watched for a while as Owen headed back to his father's house.

The Raven had followed, watched and listened and now it was time for her to return to her master. She flew back to the foot of the tower where Emile lay chained and waiting for his revenge. Her sharp eyes scanned the slippery rocks of the cliff side. She spotted a movement and was quickly in the air again. She dove down the cliff, attacked and had her victim. A large rodent lay lifeless in her claws.

Soskice was asleep on the cold stone floor when she landed beside him. He had not touched the bread and water left for him that morning. She dropped her offering near his head. He smelled the dead rat. His face twitched and he woke.

He sat up and smiled, as was his way, with only half of his rotting face. He waited as the bird tore the animal to pieces. With the exception of the tail and the fur, he ate it all with great relish. The raven watched him eat with careful attention as a mother feeds her young and when he was done, she made her magical transformation to human form.

"You have always taken good care of this old man, my lovely bird!" he said as he wiped the blood from his face with the back of his hand. "You are my eyes and ears. So what have you learned for me this morning?"

"I have learned a great deal, Papa! I heard two of them talking, at the place where Jack's blood spilled. It is the Tabor named Edward who murdered your son!" she said with her wide smile.

"Then it is Edward Tabor who must be the first of them to die!" he spat with hatred as he spoke. Emile was, among many things, a superb actor.

She nodded in agreement. "But that is not all! Elizabeth is not with the family.

She escaped and is now with a Tabor. When he found her, he did not take her to the place

where the family is but to another house." When the raven spoke of Elizabeth the loathing she felt for her was burning and clear.

"And the baby? Where is my grandson?" Emile asked, now with real surprise and distress.

"He is with her! I think, Papa that we may have lost them for good!"

"If that is what you think then you are not as wise I had hoped." He narrowed the intense glare from his one eye and frightened her with the venom in his voice. She recoiled, pushing her bare skin up against the wall. He moved towards her but the chains held him fast, the neck cuff digging into his flesh. He growled in frustration.

"I am sorry, Papa! I will get your grandson for you! Please tell me what you want me to do?"

"Then be quiet with what you think and listen as I tell you what you must do in these next few hours. As Satan is my guide not one Tabor will live longer than me!"

She listened for a long time. When she transformed once again into the raven she knew with clarity just what Soskice wanted. She would do completely as he asked, without question or conscience.

Owen had hardly set foot in the front door when Olivia, the wife of his eldest brother, Edmond, immediately set upon him.

"Owen! Where have you been? I have been looking for you everywhere," she took him firmly by the arm and led him towards his father's study.

"Well, it would seem that you have found me. What is it you need?" he asked with a weary sigh as he sat and crossed his long legs in front of him.

"I think you should already be very aware of that." Edmond answered. His eyes were red rimmed from lack of sleep. With such a demanding, noisy and high-strung wife, he often gave that impression.

"Talented as I am, I am not a mind reader."

"Owen, I hardly think that this is the time for your strange sense of humor." Olivia rebuked him.

"Be quiet, Olivia!" Edmond ordered. "And sit down or I will send you from the room!"

"This is all becoming rather boring. I do have a lot on my plate for today," Henry, another brother, two years younger than Edmond, complained. "I have to get back to Dover."

"I think we should be quiet and listen to Owen," Olivia said with a sulk. "He is the only one father-in-law will listen to!"

"Olivia!" Edmond pointed to the doorway but she just turned away and ignored him.

Owen shook his head slowly at the all too familiar scene. "If you want my attention much longer I do hope that at least one of you will remember what the point is and get to it!"

"We have a serious problem, Owen and something must be done. We have decided that you have the power to sway Father so it is all up to you. You must speak with him right away!"

"Yes, Edmond, I intend to handle this issue of Edward as soon as I see Father." Owen reached to a nearby table and poured himself a brandy.

"Edward? What does he have to do with this trouble?" Henry asked.

"Everything, I should think," Owen said angrily. He had little patience for the confusion of this group.

"We are referring to that dreadful gypsy family Wilmot has locked away and that curse they have placed on us...." Olivia started. Her husband once again cut her words short.

"This is no longer the 'dark ages', Owen! We cannot go about locking people up for no reason, even if they are only gypsies. I have decided that if you let them go they will most likely be all too pleased to remove the curse. So you must see to that right away!"

"I see! I have made a mistake. I thought we were adults discussing our murdering little brother, Edward and what to do about him," Owen said, his anger held back at every word.

"But I do not see what Edward has to do with any of this! What could he possibly know about curses and why should we be concerned and worry about him?" Henry asked with genuine surprise.

Owen stood. "I think that you should be very concerned about the fact that you may live in the same home as an insane murderer! Or do you all feel it is right that he kill a man for no reason."

"You have no proof that man was murdered by Edward," Henry stood to face Owen. "Edward may have his problems but he is not a murderer. There is no doubt that man was murdered by one of his own. They are known for that kind of thing!"

"Yes, Owen, we hear about them all the time. Those gypsies are of much lower classes and always killing each other or likewise terrible things. It is in their very nature!" Olivia stood beside Henry and agreed with him shaking her curly brown hair.

"Is that what you all believe? What would you think if I said I knew better? That I know without a doubt that Edward murdered the man?"

"What proof do you have?" Edmond asked.

"All of you stay right here!" Owen ordered, looking at each of them before leaving the room. He went directly to Edward's bedroom where he was sure the young man was still sleeping. Owen kicked the locked door hard twice, breaking it from the hinges. He crossed the room to the heavy drapes and pushed them open.

"What the Hell?" Edward could not say more before Owen had him by the hair and pulled him from his bed. He still wore the blood stained clothes from the night before.

"I have had enough of you!" Owen yelled as he threw Edward across his bed. He hit the floor with a resounding thud. He scrambled to his feet and tried to make a dash for the door. Owen caught him, twisting his arm up behind his back.

"Owen, stop! What is the matter with you?" Edward squealed in pain.

"Would that be the blood of Jack Soskice you wear on your clothes?" Owen tightened his grip and spat the words in his ears.

"We had a fight, Owen! It was self-defense!"

"How does one stab a man in the back in the course of self defense? Move!" Owen ordered, pushing Edward along to hallway.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You are going to tell your brothers just exactly what you did!" Owen answered as they moved down the stairs towards the study.

"No! I will not! You cannot make me!"

With his head very close to his ear Owen whispered harshly. "You will! And another thing you can be sure of, brother; no wealth or powerful father will keep the hangman's noose off your neck should I decide that it be there."

"You would never go against Father in that way."

"You think not? Every man has his limits!"

By the time that Owen appeared pushing the frantic Edward ahead of him, Wilmot had joined the others.

"Here is your innocent Edward, still wearing the blood that is the proof of his crime!" He pushed Edward over the desktop. Olivia gasped at the sight of the bloodstained shirt.

"Owen, what is the meaning of this?" Wilmot demanded with anger. Edward began to back away slowly in the direction of the doorway. Owen stepped back as well, closed the door and stood in front of it.

"Perhaps you can tell me, Father what is the meaning of murder? Is a man any less dead because he is a gypsy? Is this child of a Lord any less a murderer?"

Edward backed into a corner and slid to the floor. He put his hands over his face and gave the appearance of crying like a child. He made great gulping sounds as though struggling for breath. Owen reached for his head and pulled it back knocking his hands away as he did this. "Do any of you see tears? No! And think with all the trouble this creature has created have you ever seen him shed a single tear?"

"Edward, look at me! Did you kill that gypsy?" Wilmot glared at his youngest son.

"I swear it was in self defense, Father! You have to believe me!" Edward wailed. His eyes were wild with fear.

Wilmot was quiet for a moment in thought. "With his back to you how was he a threat? What kind of self defense requires a man to stab another in the back?" he finally asked.

"An interesting question." Owen agreed. "What is your answer, Edward?"

"Be quiet, Owen!" Wilmot rolled his chair closer to Edward. "So it was you who brought this curse down on us!"

Edward stood then, anger and arrogance overtook his feeble acting abilities. "Yes, I did and what is the loss of another fucking gypsy? It makes no difference to any of us and if you all are fool enough to believe in the power of a curse then the more fools are you!"

Wilmot, red with rage, pulled himself slowly to his feet and faced Edward who could do nothing but stand his place with his back in the corner. The old man slapped his son's face so hard his head snapped backward and hit the wall. "Edward, you will not mock me!" Wilmot bellowed. "You have no idea what you have done and the danger we are all now in!"

Edmond went to his father's side. "Come back to your chair, Father! Think of your heart!"

Wilmot pushed him away. "Take Olivia away from here. This is no place for a



woman, Edmond,” he turned to Owen. “I want Edward locked in the attic storage rooms until I have decided what to do with him. Maybe I should just turn him over to Soscice!”

“No!” Edward squealed and took his chance for freedom. In the very second he saw the door open, he pushed Edmond aside and ran from the room. Owen went to go after him. Wilmot called him back.

“Leave him be, Owen! He has no other refuge. He has no money or friends!” Through the window, Owen saw Edward running across the lawns and into the hilly, wooded area behind the house. “He will be easy enough to find later, in the meantime I must decide what to do with him.”

They waited in stunned silence for Edmond to return. Owen paced the floor keeping his eye on the area where Edward had disappeared. He vowed to himself that he would get his hands on him once again before the day was over.

Henry who had said very little through the whole time spoke after taking a long swallow from a silver flask he always carried. “I think Father has the right idea. We should just hand Edward over to bloody Emile Soscice and let him take his revenge and then be free of the lot of them. We have all known for years that the sod would end up in his grave early so why not use it to our advantage?”

“Are you out of your mind? We can’t do that!” Edmond turned on Henry.

“Be quiet, all of you! I am master here and I will make the decisions. I have the right to do as I please on my own land!” Wilmot said what he firmly believed. “And I have the right to demand respect and obedience from my sons. I will deal with Edward in my own time and the gypsies will stay put until I feel otherwise. They will not move until they remove the curse.”

Henry sighed with bored disdain. “No one will give a pig’s ass what happened to a few tattered gypsies, so what does any of this matter? Now if all will excuse me I have things of importance to attend to! May I leave, Father?” He gave the old man a mock bow.

“Go Henry! You are as useless as Edward, anyway!”

Henry shrugged and left the room.

Edmond looked at Owen. “We can hold them here for a while longer Owen! They will be well housed, fed and unharmed. It will not take too many cold nights in that tower before Soscice comes to his senses!”

“So, Edmond, you also believe in this curse?” Owen asked incredulously.

“No, of course not. You know that I feel as you do about such foolishness. However, Father is right. He is still in charge here.”

“Right! I have had enough of all this. It would seem that my opinion is of little value to you so I will have nothing more to do with this matter.”

Owen left them to ponder the possibilities of the supernatural and walked a longer way back to his home so that the extra moments would help him to calm down. The warmth of the morning sunlight was gone, heavy clouds had moved into place. A thick fog was coming inwards from the cliffs.

Hanna sat on the garden swing amidst the blaze of spring flowers. She was reading and looked up as Owen came towards her. He took the seat and sat with his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands.

“There a fog closing in on us,” he sighed. “My greatest fear is that I will one

day be like them, Hanna!"

"I assume by 'them' you mean your father and brothers?" she asked closing her book and removing her spectacles. Her white fluffy hair resisted the hairpins as always and seemed to float around her head like a halo.

He nodded. "They are all lunatics! They tremble about the foolish words of a mad man and have care little about the fact that an insane murderer lives amongst them!"

"Well, I doubt very much that you are in any way like them, my dear! You are very much your mother's son in look, manner and thought."

"Lord! I hope so! How are our house guests?" he asked and nodded to the window just above them where he had left Elizabeth and her child.

"I last looked in on them a half an hour ago and they were still sleeping. Poor dears have hardly moved. I have a hearty beef soup on the stove waiting for them. Should I wake her now?"

"I have told James to fetch Mrs. Willard to look at her. They should be here soon. You wait for them and I will go in and wake her." Owen said as he stood from the swing.

"Alright, but please be nice, dear." She looked at him with meaning as she handed him the key to the ballroom doors.

"I am always nice, Hanna, you should know that!" He winked at her and disappeared inside his home.

Elizabeth was sitting on the bed, feeding her baby when he entered the room. She quickly pulled the blanket up to cover them. The wound was no longer bleeding. A huge black eye and the bruise of it spread down to her cheek.

"How are feeling?"

"Not very well. My head aches, I am dizzy and very hungry!" she answered and tried to smile but it hurt too much and she winced.

"Hanna will bring you some food very soon. I have sent for a woman who is knowledgeable in matters of health to look at you," he stepped back and sat in his favorite chair. They were quiet for some minutes.

"When I leave here, at some point today, will you give me my purse?" she asked suddenly. He was surprised that she has seen him pick it up when it fell from her bodice earlier.

"Of course you will have it! I took it for safe keeping." He took the leather pouch from his jacket pocket and held it up for her to see but did not place it in her extended hand. "You will get it when you leave but I doubt very much that will be today. You have a serious wound."

"I am well enough to travel," she said stubbornly. "Now, please give me my money, it is all I have in the world."

"It is safe with me, Elizabeth. I have no use for your fifty pounds." He lied to see her reaction.

"Just be aware that I will have that money before I leave!"

It was obvious that she had no idea just how much money was in the purse.

After another quiet moment, she placed the baby onto the bed beside her and sighed. "I can see that you are trying to be kind to us, Mr. Tabor. In my panic to get away from the Soskice clan, I may have been rude. Therefore, I must apologize. I can assure you that if we had met under other circumstances you would have found me much

more charming.”

“I have no doubt in that whatsoever. I have been accused of being rather bossy and a buffoon,” he paused and smiled, “and sometimes both are true. I do not mean to offend. I simply speak my mind. And if I must use your first name, you have to use mine.”

They heard the voices of James, Hanna and Mrs. Willard coming from the hallway. “Ah, here is our healer now!” He opened the door. “Our young guest seems to be feeling better,” he smiled at Mrs. Willard who bustled in with medicine bag in hand. She went to the windows along side of the bed and pushed back the curtains.

“Now we can see what we are about,” Mrs. Willard said as she turned to Elizabeth. “Oh dear child, what has happened to you?”

“I think we will have that soup now, Hanna. I am famished!” Owen said as he, James and Hanna left the room. “Prepare the trolley table and when Mrs. Willard is finished James and I will eat in there with Elizabeth.”

The men waited outside the door and in not too long Mrs. Willard joined them.

“That is terrible knot on her head. She is going to have one hell of a bloody headache, at the very least. One has to be very careful with head injuries. I told her that she would have to stay off her feet for at least a few days.”

“What did she say to that?” Owen asked.

“She was none too pleased! She seems to be in a rush to get away from those gypsies. Cannot say that I blame her! I have left her with some powders to ward off the pain and make her sleep. I did not tell her that they would make her sleepy though as she might not take them,” Mavis paused and frowned. “Not to mention the poor lady is very much in need of a bath! But not before tomorrow. The hot water would make her wound bleed again and the pain that much worse!”

“I had better take you back home, Mavis, while we can still see our way,” James offered. “That fog is moving in quickly.”

“Oh no, Mr. Whitehall. Do not trouble yourself. I will be fine. My old mare is half-blind, anyway. She smells her way home.”

Before she was gone Owen expressed the need for her not to mention his houseguest to anyone else. She smiled at him, put one finger alongside her nose, winked and was gone.

“Good woman, that one is!” Owen said. “Takes orders and doesn’t ask questions!”

James laughed. “I wonder if the late Mr. Willard would have agreed with that! A submissive female would bore you to tears in no time. Give me a woman with a mind of her own any day.”

Hanna made an appearance pushing a large trolley of food. “Lunch for Miss Elizabeth!” she smiled proudly. “Hot beef stew, sliced cheese, fresh eggs and bread.”

“And as in your usual style, my dear, more than enough for three hungry people!” Owen said as he pushed open the doors to his bedchamber.

“But, I don’t think....!”

“Then you should not waste your time.” Owen cut her off took the trolley from her and directed James to follow him.

Elizabeth was startled to see James. “My friend, and the estate manager, James Whitehall this is Elizabeth, widow of the dead gypsy. We are using first names since

our guest will not give me a second name to call her. She does not like her married name."

James nodded and paid a rare respect by removing his hat. He looked at her swollen face and bruised face. "That is a painful looking thing. I don't suppose I should ask you how you are feeling."

Owen pushed the trolley to the bedside and pulled two chairs placing them at the other side of the meal.

"I am feeling dreadful!" she said stiffly holding the bedcovers up to her neck. Owen noticed one of Mrs. Willard pain relief powder sacs open and empty and he knew that Elizabeth would very soon be feeling a lot better and asleep. "And I need some clothes!"

"Then I suggest that you join us in eating some of this lovely food!" Owen smiled as he handed her a bowl full of steaming stew. "I will find you something to wear later." For a while, they ate in silence.

Edward Tabor was youngest of the three sons Wilmot had had with his second wife, Isabelle. Spoiled by his mother and neglected by his father, Edmond was at best times a very frustrated young man. Without reason he could lay hand to his father had despised him right from birth. The best Wilmot could ever do for the child was ignore him.

His attempts to gain attention from his father always failed and filled him with more misery and left him mean spirited and selfish. The only person he had ever had to account to was Owen who would step in where their father failed with his sharp temper and heavy hand. Even that did nothing to pull the boy from his destructive ways. Isabelle died and without his mother to protect him Edward grew to more and more loath and fear his older brother. Unable as he was to accept any responsibility for his outrageous deeds he found comfort in stealing from his father's whiskey cellar.

After running from Tabor Hall, Edward hid in the woods that ran up the steep hills behind the main house. He removed the bloodied shirt and buried it in the soft earth. In time his thirst overcame his fear and he decided to make his way back into the house.

He crossed the open area from the trees to a secluded side door. Staying in back passages and servants' stairs, he was soon in his bedroom. Hurriedly he pulled on his boots, a clean shirt and jacket. He took a stolen bottle of Wilmot's liquor from under his bed and shoved it into a pocket.

He made his way up to the attic and to a short set of stairs that led to a door and the widow's walk. He had often hidden there, away from Owen and the world he hated.

He stepped out onto the narrow walkway and pushed the bolt lock into place. He took off his jacket and using it as a pillow he made himself comfortable. He opened the golden bottle and took a long drink. He lay back, closed his eyes and waited for the familiar warmth to spread through his body and dull his mind.

Had he been interested in the view he might have enjoyed the sight of the vast Tabor holdings spread out before him. He would have seen the rolling hills of the tenant farmers and their house's to the north. Southward the wooded valley that ran on to the estate entrance and Hollyhock House. To the east were the gardens, manicured lawns and terraces that gradually lowered to the valley, where the old church sat lonely

and neglected. Beyond that and high on the cliffs he would have seen the tower prison of Emile that stood like a dark shadow against the blue sky and distant waters. Above him he could have seen the large raven that circled around for a time and then landed on the railing just a few feet behind him.

The raven knew Edward by intuition and the smell of Soskice blood. She watched him for some time until he fell into an alcohol-induced stupor. She landed down next to him and she pecked at his leg to see if he would wake. When he did not she knew it was time for her to prepare herself for the kill.

The bird flew down to the area behind the stables where they had placed the Soskice family wagons. She landed on the opened window ledge of the largest wagon. After a quick look around to make sure that she was unobserved, she dropped inside. A large butcher knife lay in the dry sink. Taking the handle firmly in her powerful talons she left the wagon and flew back to the place where the unsuspecting Edward lay sleeping.

Thrilled and more than ready for a kill she dropped the heavy knife and landed over it. She raised her wings wide and upwards so the tips touched and as the feathers melted and the human took their place. With the knife hidden, she moved next to Edward. She pushed her waist length black hair out of the way and licked her lips. She lifted Edward's head and shook it roughly. He opened his eyes and tried to focus on the lovely, naked woman before him.

"Good Lord, who are you?" he asked in surprise.

"My name is Raven, Edward Tabor!" she smiled and looked at him through her lashes. "I have been sent to bring you regards," she moved closer and leaned over him.

"Well, well!" He smiled as his senses began to clear somewhat but not enough for him to see the impossible manner of this situation. "And what lovely regards they are," he placed a hand on her breasts and pulled on it to bring her closer to him. "Who is it that I must thank for this pleasant event?"

Her eyes shown like silver beacons and her mouth twisted into a fierce growl as she answered, "Emile Soskice!" He had little chance to react before he saw the knife come down on him. She pushed it into his chest and up to the hilt. He gasped with shock and pain and had just enough time to see her laugh in the second before he died.

"Fly!" the raven whispered with excited delight as she pulled the knife from his body. "You are free; now you can fly!" she took his head in her hands and looked closely into his eyes. "Can you hear me? Do you see that now you are free?" she sat on his chest and waited for the event that she knew from experience would always happen. A misty light

began to appear from the top of the dead man's skull. It swayed slightly and then as it grew stronger and thicker it began to spiral and move upwards.

This fascinated the raven as it always did when she made a human kill. She watched with awe as the spiral completed into a beautiful, golden blue vortex. She would not let this one get past her. She straddled the vortex with her arms and legs and hung on tightly. Together with the spiral, her black hair flowing behind her they moved up, invisible to the human eye, into the sky.

"You see, now you can fly! What a wonderful gift I have given you!" she smiled as the vision of Edward's frightened and confused face appeared in the center of the spinning vortex. She knew he could see her and fixed her bright eyes onto his

holding them steady. "You are free, Edward; stay with me! You will fly forever!" She must keep him from looking into the light that would be waiting for him. "Do not look away from me! Do not look away!" this she repeated as she held his eyes firm and the Earth disappeared and the black velvet universe enveloped them.

The silver glow of her eyes held him but only briefly. The majestic pull of the Other Side was always stronger. She could feel her effect on him weakening. Edward moved his eyes first to the spinning circles around him and then upwards.

"No, Edward! Don't look up!" she screamed at him but it was too late. Edward looked beyond her and deep into the Heavens. His face filled with a glorious light. She saw him smile and knew that he was lost to her.

From the distance and moving in quickly, she heard the powerful sound of his huge wings. She did not know just what he was but he came every time she traveled with her victims. She hated and feared him.

Its large human body was only a black shape and was indistinct in details. His extended wings were at least the length of three men from tip to tip. The point of each black feather was a golden sword. The effect as he moved through the eternal night sky was the approach of greatness and wonder. The raven closed her eyes and hid her face in her arm as he moved down on her. A resounding slap of his powerful wing and the raven fell away from the soul of Edward Tabor. The night heavens paled and daylight surrounded her. The evil, tormented soul was back into the human body she hated.

"No!" she cried, "no, please! I do not want to be here! Please, can I be free too?" Large tears rolled down her cheeks and onto the body of Edward where she still sat. As each tear hit they burned the flesh as though they were boiling oil. She detested the human shape she had to become at the whim of Emile Soskice.

These tears fell for a few moments but she was never able to hold any emotion for long and so she set back to work; her task was not completed. Unaware of human physical limitations she had speed and strength that would have been unusual for a man. It took very little effort for her to remove the head from the body. She pushed the knife down into the torso.

The smell of the flesh and blood excited her animal instincts. She licked the blood from her fingers. She held the head up and kissed it on the lips. "You have killed Jack, so now I have killed you and you are free!"

She pulled the body up and hung it over the railing, picked up his legs and pushed it over. It landed sprawled on some yew trees directly below.

Now all her sadness was over and she was supremely pleased with herself. She stood and spun in circles as she raised her hands together overhead. When the process was complete, the bird called loudly and flapped her wings. She took the head, lifted off and took her prize in the direction of the distant tower.

## Chapter Two

Soskice knew when his shifter was coming to him. Unusual for his manner he waited eagerly for her to arrive. She landed on the broken tower wall and dropped her prize. It rolled across the stone floor. He picked it up by the hair, a grin spread across his rotting face.

"So this is the murderer of our dear Jack! You have done well." He spun the head to look at the face. The surprise and horror Edward felt in the second before his death was plain to see. "I can see that he understood well as he took his last breath. That is good."

The raven flapped her wings and called out with pride.

"Take it and drop it into the dark waters. Perhaps for the fish to enjoy or it will wash up on the shore for some unhappy child to find! Then come back and lie with this old man for a while. I am hungry for more than food." The gypsy laughed as he watched the bird disappear over the cold waters.

Elizabeth sipped the broth from the stew and watched her companions from over the rim of the bowl. As ill as she felt physically, she was even more miserable over what she saw as her obscene behavior the night before. She knew, all too well, what these men must think of her. Her only saving grace was the obvious fact that Owen did not remember her from that summer so long ago. She decided that all she could do at the time was to continue to pretend they had never met and that the night before had not happened. She would try to establish some dignity.

"I am afraid that I shall have to stay just a little while longer, Owen. I hope my son and I will not be too much trouble to your household."

"I have never found it a problem to have a woman in my bed!" Owen took a quick look from the man next to him. "Forgive me, I am being flippant. You and your child are welcome to stay for as long as necessary."

"Thank you, Owen. I am sure you must have another bed for me?"

"The upper rooms are not in use. We will work it out later."

"Please, whatever opinions you have of gypsy females remember that I am not one of them!"

"That much is obvious." Owen shrugged.

"When you are better, will you return London? Your accent does sound very London like," James asked to change the subject.

"Does it? Well, yes, I suppose it would," she nodded, "that is where my home is."

"Back to your father? I hope not!" Owen put in quickly. He leaned his chair back on two legs and crossed his arms over his broad chest.

"No," she paused. "I will go to my brothers' house. We will be more than welcome there."

"I may be mistaken but did you not earlier today tell me that you were an only

child?"

"I... well, he is much older than I am and was gone from home when I was born. So it is as though I was an only child," she stuttered, her face red.

"Was your brother as lucky as you were?" Owen asked after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"I am sorry but I do not understand?"

"Was your brother, as the son of a poor East End blacksmith as well educated, well fed and well spoken as you?"

"As I am a forced guest in your house I must ask you to respect my privacy. There is little else I can do right now but try to ignore your rudeness."

"Is it rude to be curious? If it is, I do apologize. You appear to be a woman alone in the world and it is my inclination to help. I can help better if you give me the truth of your situation and leave your foolish pride and lies behind."

"I am not lying! Perhaps it would be best if my son and I were to leave your home right away!" she moved quickly, threw back the covers, tried to get to her feet and fell forward onto James.

Just at that moment, Hanna joined them. "Oh my! What is going on here?" she demanded angrily taking Elizabeth from the startled and embarrassed James and leading her back into the bed.

"Elizabeth was about to leave," Owen answered flatly.

"Of course, she isn't going to leave! There you go my dear, back into the bed and you pay no attention to them. I am going to wash your lovely hair for you and find you a comfortable nightshirt," she turned back and looked sternly at Owen and James, "these men are going to leave you be!" She stood with her hands on her hips and stayed her ground until Owen and James were across the hall in the study.

"If you wish to make headway with that lady I suggest that you try and be a trifle more subtle. You were rather obnoxious, Owen. Are you deliberately trying to alienate the female?"

"Headway, as you put it, is only that I would like the truth. Is that so wrong?" Owen asked with impatience. He felt frustrated with most of the day's events and the lack of sleep the night before. Reaching for his cigarettes, he felt the purse that had fallen from Elizabeth's clothes. He took it out, turning it over in his hands.

"Perhaps the truth of Mrs. Soskice is not your business. What is that?"

"Her purse! There is over three hundred pounds in it but when I spoke to her about it, I mentioned that she had only fifty pounds. She showed no surprise. She had no idea how much money was in it."

"Most likely she stole it before she ran away. She would have had time in the commotion between Wilmot and Soskice. It could have belonged to her husband."

"That is what I thought."

"Well, I have a great deal of work to do. I have the books to see to, they are a mess. Then I suppose I will be with Wilmot." James stood and left Hock House.

For a few hours, Owen slept on the uncomfortable study lounge. It was late afternoon when he woke. A thick blanket of fog had turned the day to an early night. He had a quick word with Hanna, took a lantern, a sack and headed out to the Soskice wagons. He would search them and, if luck was with him, learn a little more about his unhappy house quest. Then he would have a look for Edward. With the heavy fog, it



was unlikely he would still be hiding in the woods.

The first wagon Owen came to was the biggest and most ornate, garishly painted with bright colors. Above the door, carved into the wooden frame was the name Emile Soskice. He stepped inside and placed the lantern on a table that ran the left wall of the wagon. The air inside had the musky odor that accompanies old people and worn things. Shelves filled with jars and boxes, all labeled in a foreign language lined the walls. Cooking utensils and wooden serving dishes hung on pegs. On the bed were several items, keys, a small sharp knife and a loaded handgun. These, he guessed, were what the guards had taken off Emile before they took him to the tower.

Fitting perfectly under the table was a chest of drawers. Owen searched each drawer. They contained various items of clothing, some cheap jewelry, objects that looked to be some kind of charms. He found nothing of particular interest to the matters at hand.

Four ribbons with bells tied on them lay on the floor. They were the ones that Elizabeth had worn on her wrists and ankles during her dance. He knew that she had been in that wagon before she ran off.

As he bent to retrieve the ribbons, he noticed a slight rise in the floorboards. Two of the wooden slats did not fit exactly with those around it and they seemed to be a different color. He pulled the boards free. Just below the false floor, he found a long, sturdy metal box.

He took the keys from the bed and tried each one until finally the padlock fell open. Inside, held in molded velvet forms were six large silver daggers. He took one out and held it closer to his lamp. It was a finely made, perfectly balanced and very deadly thing.

The razor sharp blade was at least ten inches long. The handles were a large intricate carvings of a raven entwined with the letter 'S'.

He held one knife by the handle and flicked it across the wagon. It slid effortlessly into the hard wooden wall. Owen smiled and whistled. These were certainly worth keeping. He replaced the knife in the box and placed it in his sack. Who knows, he thought, they might come in handy one day!

The second wagon appeared to be used to storage purposes. There were toys, blankets, bedrolls and tents. Large pots and pans, fishing equipment, tents, rifles, chairs and several sharp axes were mixed and scattered about. Hung on the walls were whips and a length of strong chain with leather cuffs at either end. Looking closely at the cuffs he saw that they appeared stained with something that might be blood. Owen took nothing from the wagon.

The next two wagons were much like Emile's and most likely the homes of more of his clan. He found nothing of interest.

The fifth and final wagon was of the most importance to Owen. Carved above the door, as the lead wagon, was the name of the owner, Jack Soskice. Inside this wagon was very different from that of Emile's wagon. Here and there were touches of a female nature. Lacy silk shawls covered the two small windows as curtains. Colorful satin pillows lay along the long side of the bed. Several penciled landscapes hung on the walls. They were simple in style but showed a talented hand and signed with the name Elizabeth.

Owen pulled a large flat box out from under the bed. It held small blankets,

baby clothes and a few baby toys. He placed the toys and clothes in the sack.

Along the length of the wall was a sturdy chest of nine drawers. He went through eight of them and found nothing that caught his eye, just simple clothing and provocative pieces of costume that were no doubt designed for Elizabeth and her erotic dance.

The bottom drawer did catch his attention. On top, neatly folded was what he knew the women referred to as a ball gown. He pulled it out and held it up. It was black velvet with a white silk bodice covered in a fine beaded black lace. Under it was a matching jacket. It would have been tight fitting. The dress was a fine piece of detailed and expensive work.

He carefully folded it and placed it into his sack. There were equally fine pieces of female under garments. Owen could not resist the urge to look at them and smile. He had seen a fair bit of Elizabeth's body as she danced around the fire and he thought how he would like to see her wear these as well. He shook his head slightly, dropped them back into the drawer. "I should really try not to add to her misery," he muttered.

As an afterthought, he pulled the drawer completely out and lifted the lantern to look at the floor under the chest. He raised his brows in surprise and pulled out a large envelope. It held what appeared to be a wedding license. It was all in the language he had seen in the other wagons. The first signature on the bottom lines was Lady Elizabeth Delacourt and underneath the signature of Jack Soskice was the same fine handwriting, Mrs. Elizabeth Soskice.

"Well, I will be jiggered!" he exclaimed. From her speech style and manners, he had guessed that she was not who she pretended to be but he was more than surprised to learn that she was the daughter of a Lord.

He had met John Delacourt several times over the years. From what he could remember, his father and Elizabeth's father had been business partners. Delacourt was rather pompous, a fat and disgusting drunk; foul in manner and speech. If he was not mistaken there had been a scandal a few years before when the Delacourt daughter went missing and no doubt she was the female now resting in his house. He was not certain yet what he would do with his knowledge but he did know that he was not going to let her wander off in to countryside unprotected.

After leaving the wagon, he had taken only a few steps when he heard the first dreadful cry of alarm coming from the direction of Tabor Manor. He stopped and listened carefully, unsure of what it was that he heard. Perhaps it had been the wail of a dog but when he heard it again, he knew it to be a female scream. This time the sound was closer and most certainly came from the direction of the Tabor kitchen. He ran to the back doorsteps and pushed the sack underneath them.

Once in the kitchen he found a collection of startled and confused looking servants. The head cook was bending over the prostrate figure of a maid.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, looking around for the reason of the mayhem.

Cook looked back over her shoulder. "I am sure I don't know, sir! I cannot make any sense from her!"

From further in the house came another yell but this time it was the sound of a male voice. Owen pushed passed the small group of upset servants and through the swinging doors that separated the kitchen from the rest of the house. Down the hallway, outside the parlor he saw the household butler. The man had one hand capped tightly

over his mouth as though trying to keep something terrible inside.

"For God's sake, Hastings, what is the matter?" Owen asked but did not wait for an answer as he hurried into the parlor.

The first thing that Owen saw was James with his pistol in hand. Then the open double windows that stood just above the yew trees outside. Hanging half way inside from these windows was the headless human corpse. The stiffening arms flung out as though beckoning help and the gapping red wound glaring in the lamp light. Wisps of gray fog rolled over the top of the terrible scene.

"Fucking hell!" Owen exclaimed as he stopped beside the terrible thing.

"Who is it? Can you tell?" James asked with his voice sticking in his throat.

Owen pulled his lamp the length of the body and then took the right hand and turned it over. A gold and ruby ring in the fashion of a snake was on the third finger. "Edward! That is his ring. Help me pull it inside!"

They each took an arm and it fell with a ghastly thud to the floor. Owen closed the windows. A red smudge lay along the outside of the glass. He looked back at his friend with questioning look.

"Bloody damned if I know!" James read the look. "I was sitting at the desk, working on the books. The maid came in to close the outside shutters. She opened the windows and this fell in, knocking her off her feet. She ran off screaming, poor little bitch!"

"What is going on out here?" Owen heard the sound of his father's powerful voice coming along the hallway towards the parlor. "Get back to your duties!" he bellowed at his servants. They scattered like leaves in a fall breeze.

Wilmot wheeled his chair into the parlor. A settee obscured the ghastly scene on the floor. "Can't a man expect some quiet in his own home? Is that too much to ask? Owen, why does James have his pistol drawn? What have you done?"

Owen sighed and mumbled, "Why the Hell does everyone ask me that?" he motioned for his father to come closer into the room where he would be able to see the horrible sight on the floor. The old man did not move right away. Now he could sense death and smell the blood. Owen took the chair handles and pushed it directly in front of Edward's remains.

"Edward!" Owen said dropping heavily into a chair. "Or what is left of him!"

Wilmot did not move or speak. He sat frozen in shock. The usual red of his ruddy complexion drained to ashen gray. James walked to the doorway and closed it. He went to the drinks cabinet, poured three large brandies, handed one to Wilmot and then to Owen and drank his in one gulp.

"Where is his head?" Wilmot asked after a further moment of stunned silence.

"God knows!" Owen answered with growing impatience. "Out on the tree where his body was or perhaps it fell to the ground. Christ!"

"How did the body end up on top of the trees in the first place?" James asked, pouring himself another glass. He like all the rest of the family and Estate people had little regard for the dead boy, nevertheless his hands shook and he was repulsed.

"He was on the widow's walk," Wilmot responded in a voice weak and distant. He had not taken his eyes off Edward's body. "He used to hide there when he was in trouble. I guess he was still going there."

Something that Owen and James had not seen caught Wilmot's eye. He leaned

forward in his chair and reaching into the wound with his bare hand, pulled out the murder weapon. It came out with a terrible sucking sound. With a shaking hand he held it up for the others to see as he studied it. Even covered in gore the carved S in the wooden handle stood out clearly.

James took his handkerchief from his pocket wrapped it around the deadly weapon as he took it from the old man. He placed it by the body on the floor.

"So what do you say now, Owen! It is less than twenty four hours since that damned gypsy cursed us and already one of us is dead! Do you still mock my beliefs?" Wilmot's voice grew with shocked emotion in every word.

"What I say is what I see, Father. Edward is dead. He was murdered, that is all we know for sure. He earned more enemies in his short life than any old man I have known. Any number of people could have wanted him dead and followed him to the widow's walk." Owen met his father with equal anger.

"And the weapon with the 'S' so boldly carved tells you nothing?"

"I am not a policeman; we shall have to let them answer these questions!"

"I will not have the police on my property! That is out of the question!" Wilmot yelled.

The door opened and an irritated looking Edmond came in the room. "What....?" he stopped as he saw the remains of his brother. "Good Lord!" He looked from one man to the other.

"Edward!" James spoke when the other men did not.

Edmond did as Owen had done and lifted the right hand of the corpse.

"It's him," Owen said. "There is no doubt about it."

"You see, Edmond; the curse is upon us!" Wilmot turned his chair and his back on Owen to face Edmond. "Where is Henry? We must band together."

"He left for Dover this afternoon and won't be back for several days," Edmond answered as he looked around the area of the body. "But where did this happen? Not here, there is no blood and my God, where is the head?" Edmond was like the others, dumbfounded and shaken to the core.

"Father says he used to hide on the widow's walk. If that was the murder place and the body thrown over, it would have landed easily on the bushes. It will be up to the police to find evidence to that! As to the head, Lord knows! On the lawn, no doubt," Owen answered with sarcasm.

"I have already told you Owen, no police! I will not hear of it!" Wilmot slammed his fist in the arm of his chair.

"I believe your father is tired." James nodded at Owen in the direction of Wilmot's bedroom. "There is nothing to be gained staying in here any longer."

Edmond took a large shawl from the back of a chair and covered the body. Owen wheeled the chair out into the hallway and locked the door behind him. He handed the key to James and said, "I do not want anyone in there before the police come. And I shall send for them the moment the fog lifts," he added in the direction of his father.

"Owen, you will not disobey me!" Wilmot demanded as James wheeled him down the hallway and into his bedroom.

"One would think from the way you act that you are already master of this house!" Edmond pulled Owen back by the sleeve of his jacket and Owen roughly shook

him off.

"I am! Or would you rather place your fate in the hands of that weak old man?"

"You should watch your words!" Edmond exclaimed, his face bright red with anger. "Father is still very much master here."

"We are no longer in the middle ages, Edmond," Owen turned back on him with equal force. "It is far past the time for you and Father to realize that."

James came out quickly from Wilmot's bedroom closing the door. "What earthly good does arguing do?" he demanded. "Edmond, you know that Owen is right; we have had two murders on this land in the last day. We have no choice but to inform the police," he said to the brothers and standing between them. Many times, he had intervened with these two headstrong men.

Edmond nodded slowly, turned and headed for the stairs. "Nonetheless, you should show Father some modicum of respect, Owen."

"Edmond! What is happening?" Olivia called from the top of the stairs.

"Go and see to your wife!" Owen said, controlling his tone. "For God's sake don't let her come down here."

"We are all shocked and overtired," James said as Edmond disappeared up the stairs. "Go home Owen and get some rest." He handed him his pistol. "Take this with you. I have another. For all we know the murderer is still around."

Owen took the gun and shoved it in his belt. "Will you be alright with the old man?"

James shrugged and went back into the bedroom.

Wilmot was on his bed propped up on pillows, lighting his pipe with shaking hands. "James! Sit and speak with me for a while!" he said, not noticing that James had already reclined in a nearby chair. "How long have you worked here now? Must be thirty years!"

"Just on thirty four years."

"Would you say that I have been a well enough father?"

"I say well enough with Owen and Edmond but much less so with Henry and Edward," James answered with his usual honesty.

"I can see that," Wilmot nodded pulling hard on his pipe. "Henry is a nasty little prig of a man. I would never trust him for a moment. As for Edward, I admit that I hated him from the moment he was born. I have no reasons that I can think of. Tell me your thoughts and speak plainly, I have no time for much else!"

"Perhaps he was away from the Estate too much. When he was home, you chose to ignore him completely. The child ran free like a wild animal most of the time. The things I saw lead me to believe that he was born near to insane. Good Lord, he was only a small boy when I caught him dropping lit matches down onto the horses from the loft above.

You were told about that when the stable burned down and we lost six of our best horses!"

"And I beat the boy within an inch of his life for that. What more could I have done?"

"That is hard to say! As time went by he only became worse. I doubt that even a daily beating would have done anything to change him."

Wilmot nodded his head slowly. "And now Owen sees me as weak and scared.

Is that what you see as well?"

"Yes, I do, Wilmot. Ever since you had to take to that chair you have wallowed in self pity and become a whiner."

Wilmot's jaw dropped at the harsh words. He had asked for honesty and James was a man who spoke his mind.

"For Christ sakes, Wilmot!" James continued with more emotion. "You were once a man to be feared. In your young days the Tabor smugglers gang was the most powerful on this coast, right or wrong you made a vast fortune and not a single finger of the long arm of the law ever touched you."

"Yes, of course, times have changed and now the Tabor businesses are all aboveboard but you are still a man, are you not? How many enemies have you vanquished with your own hand and now words from a gypsy madman and you panic!"

Wilmot shook his head. "You do not understand the power that a man like Soskice has. I have had previous dealings with the man. He is not....well, normal. What would you have me do?"

"Fight him as you would have done but for this chair! Take this battle into your hands and deal with it," after a moment of silence, James shook his head and stood. "Dinner will be ready."

"My son is dead, murdered, James. How do you expect me to eat?"

"Not too well, but starving will not help things. I will see to it that you have a tray. Then I suggest you get some rest. You had better be prepared for dealing with the police when they come tomorrow!" James left Wilmot's bedroom.

"Shit!" Wilmot muttered under his breath. "Why is that man always right?"

Hanna built fires in both of the Great Room hearths to take down the dampness and chill. She and Daisy washed Elizabeth's hair, sponged her body and dressed her in a clean nightgown. They bathed the baby and dressed him in new diapers.

On Elizabeth's request, they moved her from Owen's bed to a lounge and closer to the fires. They placed the baby in his basket on the floor beside her. Hanna insisted that she eat, brought her a plate of ham sandwiches and would not take no for an answer. Daisy poured warm, sweet tea and stirred in another of Mavis's headache powders. It was not until Elizabeth fell asleep that Hanna and Daisy finally left the Hock House guests.

It was near to eight that evening when Richard's hungry cry woke Elizabeth. She fed and changed him and they settled back on the chaise to wait for Owen's return. How ironic it was, she thought, of all the people in the world it was Owen Tabor who held her safety and freedom in his hands.

It had been hours since Owen and James had left. She began to worry that Lord Tabor had learned of her presence and that at any time he would send guards to fetch her. If not for her weakness and the fog that locked them in place, she would have made another try to leave.

Owen was pleased to enter his home unobserved by Hanna or her talkative Daisy. He was in no mood to speak of Edward's murder. Gossip traveled from Tabor Manor to Hock House in lightning speed, so they would all know by morning's light anyway. He secured the outside doors. For the first time he was glad for the ornate iron bars on every window in the house. He took the dagger box from the sac of purloined Soskice

objects, locked it in his study desk, hid the sack in the cellar and then headed for his bedroom.

Elizabeth sat up at the sound of heavy male footfall on the long hallway. "Thank God it is you!" she said as Owen stepped into the room. "Why have you been away so long?"

"Missed me, did you?" he asked with a smile. He still carried the large lantern that he had brought with him when he left earlier and he placed it on a table near by the chaise. She sat huddled under the blanket. The light from the lamp and the fire glimmered on her long auburn hair. The wounded side of her face was in shadow and she was unaware that the strap of the over large nightgown had slipped down one shoulder, exposing her smooth, pale skin.

"I was frightened being on my own and that is all," she said looking up at him. She had forgotten how tall he was, how broad his chest and shoulders were and just how wonderfully handsome he was. "Your father could show up here at any time."

"You need not worry too much about my father coming here. Last night was the first time he has left his home in at least two years. I doubt he could make the walk here if he wanted to." He sat down on his bedside, pulled off his boots and watched her closely as he spoke. "One of my brothers has been murdered. James and I found his body just now."

"Oh Lord, I am so sorry!" she spoke after a moment of silence.

"Thank you, Elizabeth. It is terrible but not really a surprise. Edward was a miserable sod. In his eighteen years, he made many enemies. Just a few weeks back we had yet another father of a village girl demanding justice of Edward for his pregnant daughter."

"Do you know if it was Edward who killed Jack?"

Owen nodded. "He admitted that much a few hours ago."

"Then it was Emile! It is the curse. Have no doubt about it."

"You keep the curse, my dear. I prefer clean, clear reason."

"How can you have clean, clear reason with such a closed mind? Have you always been such a difficult skeptic?"

He stood, walked to the chaise, gently pushed her legs up and sat down beside her. "Was I always such a skeptic? Actually, no, for the first twenty six years of my life, I lived as my mother and the ever-protective Hanna wanted, as a Catholic. I had all the beliefs that went along with Catholicism. I had a deep faith in a well-meaning and loving God. I am much wiser now."

"No, you were wiser then, Owen. Foolhardy skepticism will not help you now. Turning to God might!"

"Foolhardy?" he shook his head. "Do you want to know the truth as it came to me?"

"If you want to tell me."

"When I was twenty four I married. Her name was Nora Fitzpatrick. Nora was a bright light in this dark world and I loved her completely." He narrowed his eyes and locked them into hers. "There was no kinder, more loving person than my wife. I was blessed when she came into my life and if there is such a thing a curse it fell onto me when she died."

"How did she die?" Elizabeth whispered. A new pain burned in her belly, the

frustration and humiliation of jealousy.

"She gave me a baby, a beautiful daughter. A few hours later, she and the baby were dead. There was no reason that anyone knew. So tell me, Elizabeth, where was this God then? If He truly exists and took my lady and child from me, then he is by far the worst enemy I will ever know."

"I suppose we just do not see all that is planned. There is a reason for everything, Owen, a reason and a purpose."

"Really? Then tell me what were the reasons and the purpose for your maltreatment at the hands of the Soskice men? What did you learn? Are you a better, happier woman? No, I do not think so!" He stretched one arm out along the backrest of the chaise so that his fingers were only inches from her bare shoulder. "There are no answers for us because none exist. All I know now is that I will do all I can to protect you and I hope you will trust me." In the silence that followed these reassuring words, his mind wandered back to her dance the night before and the delicious manner she had posed before him. "But that is enough of this impossible conversation. Tell me what it was that you said when you whispered in my ear during your interesting dance. I did not hear you," he asked his voice husky and low.

"You heard me!" she answered quickly. She noticed the slipped strap, tucked it back into place and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

"Sadly, I did not. That is why I have to ask now, my dear." He took a lock of her hair in his fingers.

"I was drunk and it was all just a part of my act. Nothing more." Still mortified by her behavior the night before, she could not believe he was so crude as to bring it up again.

"Then you are more than a fine actress! I remember the light in your eyes and it was all so very real."

"Well, at least you remember something!" she said with sarcasm.

He looked puzzled. "Should I remember more?"

"No, of course not!"

"Then you will not remind me?" he spoke so softly Elizabeth could barely hear him but there was no mistaking the fire in his eyes. He dropped the lock of hair and ran his fingers gently down her neck.

She shuddered, pulled back and lowered her head. "Please, I am so tired!"

He nodded, slipped his fingers to her swollen cheek. "So tired, so damaged and so very beautiful! What a shame and waste. Emile Soskice has a great deal to answer for," he stood taking a pillow and blanket from his bed. "I will sleep in my study."

"No, please stay in here. Soskice has.... well, long arms; if he finds out Richard and I are here, I will not be safe."

"Every Soskice is locked away. There is no possible way into this house."

"I wish that was true. I have never known locked doors to stop Emile Soskice," she lay down and curled under her blanket. She looked so small and scared; almost childlike he could not help but soften his tone.

"Did you have any dinner?"

"Yes, thank you. I am not hungry. I am just so very sleepy. Please, you didn't say. Will you stay in here all night?"

"I will stay," he sighed. "I promise you, Elizabeth; while you are with me you



and your child are safe.” He removed his shirt and stretched out on his bed. “What an odd turn of events!” he thought as he quickly fell asleep.

Wilmot woke with a start after just a few hours sleep. He was breathless and confused after a most dreadful dream in which he had stood alone amongst the smoldering ruins of his home. All around him, his land was bleak and desolate. Over his head in the gray troubled skies, a huge raven flew in ever decreasing circles all the while calling in a strange, human like voice.

“Damn those dreams!” he mumbled, sat up and tried to clear his head. He lit his bedside lamp and slowly lowered his feet to the floor. The room was icy cold. Back in his hated wheelchair, he wrapped himself in a robe and covered his weakened legs with a blanket.

He wheeled to the large window and pulled back the thick drapes. The fog obscured the usual view. Normally he would have seen north to the home farms, down over the lush family gardens and then straight ahead to the high cliffs and the black tower that held his enemy. He missed the grandeur of the apartment on the top floor that had been his for most of his life. Now the illness that had taken so much from him left him in a small room at the side of his house.

He closed the curtains sat in the dark and thought of his glory days, the times of quick action, expensive whiskey and cheap whores. The memories made him smile but the smile faded quickly as he remembered just how lonely he was.

He was almost thirty before he thought of marriage and began his search for a suitable wife. As everything else he did, he quickly found Margaret Morgan. She was tall, slim, dark and lovely and Wilmot was well pleased with the marriage. The arranged marriage did not sit well with his bride. Wilmot nodded as he recalled what a pleasant task it had been to bring her in line.

Wilmot's father and grandfathers had amassed their vast fortune in the heydays of smuggling and thieving from the wrecked ships along the English and French coastline. With their small army of loyal men, the Tabor Gang was to become amongst the most fearsome band of thieves and thugs in the country. They built caves running the length from the rocky shoreline to the main house and other safe houses and not a ship was safe from their plundering ways. The Tabor money vaults were strong as were the connections that protected them from the selective arm of justice. Without thought or mercy, many died under the hands of Wilmot and his men.

So many memories flooded his mind. Memories of when he was young, healthy, so virile and afraid of no man. Fear was only in fleeting moments while in action against a seen enemy. The fear and the enemy easily vanquished with sword and force.

Now the Tabor business was the legitimate growing and selling of hops. Owen had long since been in charge and would hold no stock in the old ways. Wilmot damned the illness, weakness and long years that forced him into this chair.

This new enemy came with a very different weapon, black magic! He had cause and reason to believe it was more powerful than he had ever known. His own association with the dark arts was lifelong but even with that he had no idea how to be free of a curse that had already cost him one son. For the first time in his life, he had to accept the help of others and that thought was abhorrent to him.

How correct James had been. He was wallowing in fear and pity and that would

only aid Soskice. It came to him then of the one person who could match the old devil at his game. It could be that she had no reason to help him and he knew all too well those reasons; but she was all he had and he would make her see his way. With new strength and excitement, he loudly rang the bell that would summons James to his bedside.

James woke and was in Wilmot's room, dressed only in his long johns' and holding his pistol before he was hardly awake.

"Good Lord, James! Why are you in such a state?" Wilmot asked with genuine surprise.

"What is it? What is wrong?" James demanded searching in the dim light for any sign of danger.

"Put your pistol away, sit down and listen to me. I have a plan."

"Jesus, Wilmot! I thought you were being attacked!" James dropped heavily into a chair. "Why aren't you sleeping? It is not even four in the am."

"Is it? Hell, the night does tend to go on forever, doesn't it?"

"Yes and sometimes it ends rather too quickly!"

"You were right before. I am not going to sit here and wait to be murdered. Do you remember Abbey Pritchard?"

James remembered her all too well. For many years, she had been Wilmot's mistress. Abbey was a small female with bright yellow hair and a pretty face. She had a reputation for wildness and a deep mystic ability. She wore only black and told all who would listen their past and their future. Their affair ended quickly when Isabelle caught them together in her bed.

To appease his abandoned mistress Wilmot bought her a country roadside tavern and brothel that she easily accepted. None of them had heard or seen anything of her for fifteen years.

"Of course! A whore now, I believe?" James asked.

"Yes, I have no doubt that she is a talented whore. This time I need only her magical abilities, James. If anyone can help me end this curse or indeed perhaps turn it back on that devil, it is she," Wilmot said with excitement.

"What makes you think that she will be willing to help you? Have you kept up contact with her?"

"That woman will do anything if the price is right and I will always have more than enough money to interest her! So go and dress and have my coach prepared!"

"Damned if I will! It is still the middle of the night! I will finish my sleep and then after breakfast we will leave, if the fog has cleared, not a moment before," James stood and pointed at the bell on Wilmot's night table. "Do not ring that thing again unless it is a matter of life and death!"

"As usual James, you reach above yourself! However, it is true; a good sleep makes a clear mind. We shall sleep a few more hours and then be off." Wilmot pulled himself back into his bed.

Back in the valet's bed James did not relax easily. As an Estate Manager, he was in his element. As nanny and bodyguard for Wilmot Tabor, he was not comfortable.

It was just after dawn when Owen woke. He had heard the baby fuss a few

times during the night. Then mother and child seemed to be sleeping soundly so he decided to leave them be for a while longer. The most important matter that morning was to get the police up to the estate. That done he was going to get rid of the Soskice clan.

As quietly as possible, he dressed and strapped his shoulder holster into place. He made sure his pistol was loaded and placed it in the holster. He pushed James's pistol into his belt. He took a large ring of keys from his desk and silently left the room.

He found Hanna sitting at the kitchen worktable. "Oh my, Owen! We have just heard the terrible news about Mr. Edward. I am so sorry!" Tears rolled down her chubby cheeks.

His first instinct was to tell her not to cry, that Edward was better off at rest. With a rare second thought, he held his tongue. "A wasted life from the start! But no man should die like that." He sat at the table and poured a cup of fresh, strong coffee. Daisy was also crying. She sat by a bucket of water, dropping chunks of potatoes into it.

"Will there be police?" Hanna asked.

"Yes, of course. Whoever this murderer is he is a madman and must be caught."

"Dear oh dear! Two murders in a few hours! What will we do?" Hanna said sadly.

"What we will do, Hanna, is keep this house locked at all times. I will get Inspector Caruthers up as soon as possible. This is police business."

"Now, as to my houseguest, she is still sleeping and I would rather you let her be for the time being. I spoke to her last night and she did seem somewhat better, although still rather confused. When she is well enough I will see her to where it is she wants to go to but for now she could use a bath so you want to prepare some hot water for her."

Hanna nodded and sniffed her reply.

James knocked firmly on the back door. "Early for you to be up and about James," Owen said as he opened the door. "I hope no one else has had his head lopped off!"

"Owen!" exclaimed Hanna angrily. "The terrible things you say!"

"As far as I know we are still all in one piece," James tried not to smile and further anger the woman. He nodded towards the back door and Owen followed him outside.

"I've got Wilmot outside waiting in his coach," James said as he lit a cigarette

"Off to fetch the police, I hope!" Owen asked hopefully.

"No. We are going to see Abbey Pritchard!"

"What the Hell for? We haven't seen hide or hair of her for years."

"What do you remember about her?"

"Not too much, other than the fact that she was too pretty and too sly for the old man to resist. Don't tell me he wants a whore at his age?"

"Not for the usual. He thinks she may be able to dig into her bag of magic tricks and put an end to 'the curse'. You will remember how she liked to portray herself as some sort of witch."

"But that was all just a part of her game. Surely he knows that?"

"Apparently not and now I have to take him on this fool's errand to her bloody brothel!"

"Well, better you than me."

"I am sure you will spend your day more wisely," James said with sarcasm.

"We need the police and I've no faith in the local dicks. I was going to send a telegram to Inspector Caruthers in Dover, but you can stop by and see him on your way to visit our dear Miss Pritchard. That way your time will not be a total waste. But leave Father in the coach while you speak with him or he will think we are all insane."

"You have had dealings with him before?"

"Yes, that was a while back after one of Edward's troubles. Tell him that I wish him to come at once and of course to bring the morgue wagon."

James nodded and stood. "I had better get back to Wilmot. He is raring to go."

"I will walk with you. I have found out who my lovely guest is. Other than the widow of Jack Soskice, that is!"

"Really, did she tell you?"

"Like as Hell! No, I found out when I searched the wagons last night. She is the honorable Lady Elizabeth Delacourt; or was before her marriage. God only knows how she ever came to be married to a gypsy."

"Delacourt! Good Lord, she certainly blossomed from when we last saw her."

Owen looked at James with a blank face.

"You don't remember her?" James asked. "I know you had females everywhere but I should think you would remember the difficulty that one caused you."

"Haven't a clue! Remind me?"

"It was some time ago. Lord Delacourt was here with his wife and daughter, Elizabeth. Simple and shy she was, but pretty, none the less, and it was no time before the poor thing was madly in love and you doing your level best or worst to take advantage of her."

"Not the rather fat one with all that curly red hair? And her mother made such a fuss before they left!"

"That is the one."

"So that is what she meant with the remark about my memory? I thought she seemed somewhat familiar but I did totally forget about her. No wonder she was angry with me," Owen rubbed his beard. He turned looking back at the windows of his bedroom. "How in God's name did she get from the Delacourt mansion to a rotten gypsy wagon?"

"Ask her."

"I intend to."

James rubbed his forehead and frowned. "If she has been so long locked up by the Soskice clan she may not know what has happened to her family in the meantime."

"Did something happen?"

"Yes. You would as well if you ever paid any attention to Olivia's constant gossip. Delacourt is in prison and his wife is dead. I think that Elizabeth may not have a home to go to unless there are other relatives."

"Bloody Hell, James, that is going to be a setback for her!"

"You had better tell her, Owen and soon. Here," James handed Owen the key to the parlor. "You will need this."

They reached the carriage where Wilmot waited anxiously for James.

"Well then, Father, what are you up to?" Owen asked at the coach window.

"I am going to see Abbey Pritchard!"

"You are going to a whore house?" Owen could not resist teasing the old man.

"Owen! If you please, this is not a time for jest. Have you forgotten that your own brother lays a murdered mess in my house? There is a serious problem here and as it seems that I must handle it on my own."

"Your father believes that Abbey and her bag of magic tricks can help turn around this curse," James offered as though they had not spoken of it. "And so he has decided that I should take him to see her."

"And much luck with that, Father. I have told James to send Inspector Caruthers and his men up. I hope that you are not going to make a fuss about it all!"

"You may waste all the time you want with the police; it is of no difference to me. I will be far too busy saving all our lives. You handle things your way and I will do my way. Come along, James," Wilmot called. "We should have long since been on the way!"

"I am going to take my time." James said under his breath to Owen. "We won't get to Prichard's until late today so do not expect us back until this late evening or even tomorrow morning. That will give you free reign with the police. I have men looking for the missing head."

Owen watched as James climbed into the carriage and sat across from the elderly laird. The driver cracked his whip over the horses and clattered off down the driveway. From the corner of his eye, he saw as a large raven lifted from a window ledge. It swooped down at Owen with a great flutter of wings and loud call.

"Bloody ravens!" Owen cursed as the bird flew off into the distance. "Maybe time to order a hunt on them."

He turned, crossed the back lawns of his house and headed towards the Tabor courtyard. Tom O'Conner was sitting on the steps, smoking a cigarette. "Tom. Have the wagons and horses hitched. And round up their bloody dogs."

"Gypsies leaving?" O'Connor asked with surprise.

"Yes. Saddle your own horse. I want you to escort them off the Estate."

"Your father won't much like that much. That thing in the tower?"

"That one might be staying a while longer. The rest go now!"

Tom nodded and set off to see to his orders.

Owen prepared Majesty and headed for James's cottage. "She's not?" Owen asked in surprise when Mrs. Willard came to answer his knock.

"No, not yet! But very soon, Mr. Tabor," she smiled and stood aside to let him in. "I am keeping my eye on things so not to worry. But a word with you please before you leave here today?"

"Yes, of course." He smiled slightly and he moved into the front room where he found Ivy looking unhappy, pale and tired. Her huge middle section propped up on pillows.

"Are you alright, Ivy?"

"No! Owen, I am not. I am bored beyond belief, uncomfortable and completely sure this will be my only child." She tried to manage a weak smile.

He sat down beside her. "It is as bad as all that?"

"Yes, it is!"

"Have you heard about Edward?"

"Now what has he done?"

Owen took her hand. "Edward was murdered late yesterday. We found his body last night and I have sent James for the police!"

"Oh no!" Ivy was stunned.

"Now my father is more than certain we shall all die under this bloody curse."

"Well, I cannot say that I blame him, Owen!"

"Shit, Ivy, you aren't going to tell me that you believe in this foolishness too? I would never have thought that of you!"

"Well, I don't believe in it, not really but Edward has been murdered. Father said it was he who killed the gypsy."

"You know as well as I that Edward had more enemies than we could count. Any one of them might have decided to do this and hope the blame would fall on the curse. It was nothing more than luck of timing for the murderer. That is clear to me!"

"That does make sense. Where did it happen and how?"

"I think he was on the widow's walkway. Apparently, he would go there to hide in times of trouble. Someone must have known about that or followed him up there. He was stabbed, beheaded and his body thrown over the side. It landed on the yew trees."

"Poor Edward!" she said, slowly shaking her head. "Owen, promise me you will be careful!"

He nodded, lifted his coat and showed her his holster. "I will have this friend with me at all times for the next while. I just saw O'Connor. Is he treating you right, for once?"

"Well enough," she sighed and patted her belly. "But you must not worry about me, Owen. I.... we will be fine. You just stay safe for us!"

"Absolutely, my dear! I have to speak with Mrs. Willard and then be off." He kissed her gently on the head and joined the older woman as she finished cleaning dishes in the kitchen.

"Ivy looks like Hell!" he said quietly to Mrs. Willard.

"My! I do hope that you did not tell her that?" she asked and pulled a jar from the folds in her skirt.

"Of course not! I might not be standing if I did!"

"I am wondering how your guest is doing?"

"I spoke with her last night and she seemed fairly better."

"Give this salve to her and tell her to place it on her wound. It will help the healing and perhaps prevent a scar. It smells terrible but does the trick!"

"Thank you," Owen said as he pocketed the bottle.

"And perhaps Hanna will rub some on the poor child's back. It may be too late for those scars but it will help with the newer ones."

"What is wrong with her back?"

"You will not have seen that, of course! Lord in his Heaven, Mr. Tabor! I have never seen the likes of it. The poor dear has been whipped and terribly so!"

"Whipped?"

"Great awful scars she has. All across her back and shoulders. Some have healed, some very new and still somewhat raw. The healed ones are so deep I have no idea how she survived. And that is not all, on her buttocks and thighs, burn marks, as

though from a cigar or some such thing.”

“Bloody Hell!”

“She has been through Hell, indeed!” Mrs. Willard said quietly and sadly as Owen went to the cottage doorway.

Ivy watched as Owen mounted his horse and moved from the roadway across the fields in the direction of the old tower. She said a silent prayer for his safety and for Owen to forgive her for all the secrets she was keeping from him.

The gypsy sat leaning against the wall. His head hung down in an impossible manner. He was covered with the black veil. There was no trace of breathing or movement, so still he seemed dead. He was in fact in deep trance, his evil dark soul no longer in his body and he was very much alive.

It had been a few years since he had created his latest shape shifter. Over the decades, he had had many, always female and always ravens. She was an invaluable tool, very loyal and ready for every demand. Now from his prison she was his world, his eyes and his hands. Soskice was not distressed at his present position. He had waited for these days for a very long time. He would prove this time to all that he was master of his craft of evil arts and could not be defeated.

When the raven landed by him that morning, she dropped the dead rabbit she had brought for his breakfast and transformed to human. Gently she lifted the veil but could sense that he was not there. She was not surprised but lonely and more than a little jealous that he could so easily leave her behind. She curled into a ball beside him to wait for his return.

Eventually she felt his body stiffen slightly then relax as he returned. She lifted the veil again and pouted as he looked up at her.

“Hello, my pet!” he said but she did not answer and moved slightly away from him. “There is no point in sulking, it will not have any effect on me and by now you should know that. I would bring you with me if I could but it is not possible. One Wing will not see the lowly shifters,” he laughed and pulled her roughly back beside him.

“I am a changeling, not a shape shifter!” she continued their long running argument. “There is a difference.”

“As you say but do not rise too far above yourself, raven. Keep your place at the bottom of this world: I am warning you!” he paused with a menacing silence until she backed down and lowered her head. “Now tell me, have you learned anything new? Did they find their headless son?”

She smiled her wide, narrow smile; the corners of her mouth turned up ever so slightly. “It fell on the trees and was not there this morning, so they must have.” She quickly forgot her unhappiness in her excitement to please Papa.

“Tell me about my grandson! Have you learned anything more about him?”

“He is with his mother and they are still at the house of the tall one. She could leave at any time, Papa. As soon as she feels better, she will be off. I am sure of that,” she was more hopeful than worried.

“I have taken care of that, raven. The poor widow’s health is soon to take a turn for the worse. She will not be leaving Tabor land, you can be sure of that!” He briefly laughed a strange and crackling sound. “I need that child, at all costs. You are to kill anyone who gets in our way. And remember this, if you lose that child that will be the end of you!”

"All you think about is that baby," she sulked again but quickly changed her tone. "I have more important news than that for you!"

"Well then, I am all ears, tell me!"

"The old one, the father has decided to fight you."

The gypsy smiled. "With sword or gun?"

"No. He is going to fight you on your ground, those were the words I heard spoken and he has gone this morning to see Abbey Pritchard to have her help him."

"Abbey? The fuck you say!" Now Soskice roared with laughter, drooling with spittle before he stopped. "He has more surprises in store for him, doesn't he? He chooses her to help him! How lucky for us!"

"But she hates you; she will do what she can to help them, won't she?"

"Certainly she hates me and that is how I want it. With that hatred, she also has a very healthy fear. You must go and see her and tell her just how she can be in my good graces. It will take Tabor several hours from here to her establishment by carriage. You will fly fast and strong and be there far before him. I will tell you just what to say to her. I do believe my little bird that this little game of ours is going to be great fun, indeed!"

Elizabeth woke that morning with the gentle prodding of Daisy. "Please, Ma'am. It is after nine and Hanna thought you should eat. I've brought you a lovely, thick porridge!"

For a brief moment, Elizabeth had no idea where she was. She looked around in the gloom of the heavily draped, large room as her memory came back to her.

"After nine?" Elizabeth asked looking down at her still sleeping baby. "He woke a few times last night so we did not have much rest. Now he will want to sleep all day." She sat up slowly and was relieved that she had no dizziness. The pain that had wracked her head the day before was then little more than a dull ache.

"Are you feeling better?" Daisy asked. She placed the tray of breakfast on Elizabeth's lap.

"Much better," Elizabeth answered with a smile. "And I am hungry as well, so that is all a good sign I would say." She looked at her face in the silver milk pot. Her right eye was terribly swollen and very black. Mavis's bandage covered the gash on her forehead. "God, I look like dog dung!" she sighed and pushed her hair back somewhat into place. Then with a look around, she asked, "Where is Mr. Tabor? Do you know? He promised me he would stay in here all the night?"

Daisy blushed and stuttered for a moment. "He did, I suppose, I do not know just where he slept. He left here a few hours ago."

Elizabeth did not care enough to explain. "Daisy, I have to leave here as soon as possible. My child and I are in more danger with every passing moment. It is essential that I get away while the Soskice family remains imprisoned. Will you and Hanna help me in this? I need proper clothes and a horse. I can pay for it all!"

"But Mr. Tabor plans to help you. He said so just this morning."

"I am not sure that I completely trust him. Please speak to Hanna for me?"

Daisy nodded. "Such a lovely baby! May I sit and look at him for a moment if I do not wake him?"

"Yes, of course." Elizabeth studied the girl as she poured some milk into her tea



and stirred the hot cereal. She would be no more than fifteen or sixteen and the same age that she had been when she first met Owen Tabor. She was sweetly pretty with very white skin, a sprinkling of freckles, bright blue eyes and glossy thick and curly black hair. Had she been a part of British society she would have been a true beauty; but her as a simple country maid no one would notice her.

"Why it is that Mr. Tabor uses this room as his bedchamber? This is a big house, isn't it?"

"Six bedrooms upstairs but Mr. Tabor had them all closed. Hanna says he never went back up there again after his lady wife died in their bedroom."

"That is a shame." She wondered if the red in her face showed the ridiculous jealousy she was feeling.

"Now poor Mrs. Tabor ain't nothing but a ghost. I have seen with my own eyes! She creeps and slides about in this room. A pretty room, it is, but I would not want to be in here on me own! Only Mr. Tabor says it is not so and gets right angry if I speak of it. Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Well, I do now, after all the terrible things I have seen these last few terrible years. If Nora Tabor is still here," Elizabeth looked nervously around her, "it is so sad that she would be left behind in a place not dead or alive! It is not fair!" She turned back to the young girl and was very surprised to see large tears rolling down her pretty cheeks. "Oh my, Daisy, what is wrong?"

Daisy sniffed, using her apron to wipe her face. "It is just that we had very sad news from the Manor this morning. Poor Mr. Edward is dead, murdered yesterday."

"Mr. Tabor told me last night."

"It is just so sad! Everybody was so mean to him, too. They always said he was a troubler but to me he was always so nice."

"How was he killed, do you know?"

Daisy's already pale face went even paler. "I hate to say it, but they cut off his head. Poor Mr. Edward! Rose, one of the maids in the Manor, found his body last night. Now they are looking for his head all over the grounds," she got to her feet and pulled herself together. "I have to go now. Hanna will be angry if I stay away too long."

"Tell me, what does the rest of the household think of this murder? Does anyone here believe that the curse is behind it?" Elizabeth knew all too clearly, what was happening. Torn then with the need to get away from the Tabor Estate she also felt she had to try at least to make Owen see the mortal danger he was in.

"Some do, ma'am. But we'd best not speak about it while Mr. Owen is about!"

Her breasts were full and aching. When she was finished eating she woke the baby and fed him. Soon Hanna and Daisy came in pulling a large tub of hot water. There were clean towels and bars of fragrant soap. They placed the tub before the hearth and a fire was set. Hanna brought in decorative screen from the dining room. She pulled it in place around the tub for privacy.

"I will tell Mr. Tabor that you are bathing should he come back to the house, but one has to make sure! I have a key to these doors so I will lock them. When you are done, the bell pull will bring me quickly," Hanna said when it seemed that she had all to her liking. "I am afraid that Mr. Owen can be a bit of a rascal when it comes to the ladies but that can be said of most men, I guess. Just between you and me, dear. I

think he has an eye for you.”

“Well then I am afraid he will be disappointed. My only desire is to get as far away from here as possible and the sooner the better,” Elizabeth said firmly. “I would love to

have more light in here, it is so gloomy. Could we open those drapes?” She pointed to the heavy, dark drapes that covered what appeared to be a large window that ran the long wall in between the two fireplaces.

“Oh no, we never open those curtains!” Hanna looked startled and went to the window at the far end of the room. She pushed those drapes back as far as they would go. The lighted area went little past the end of Owen's bed. The bathtub and the chaise where Elizabeth had slept were still in the dim shadows of the large room.

“You don't open those curtains? Why not?”

“Much too drafty!” Hanna smiled and shrugged. “I am sure that is the reason why this room is always so chilly.”

Elizabeth ran her fingers through the bath water. “I heard about Edward Tabor; I am so sorry for the family.”

“It is too terrible to believe. We have hardly taken it in yet!” Hanna spoke softly. “If I am not being too bold may I ask you a question?” she stood over the mother and child wringing her hands nervously. “I am worried for the rest of the family. Will you tell me about...?”

“You want to ask me about the curse.”

“I was not sure if you knew about it, my dear, and I do not want to upset you after all you being such a recent widow and being hurt and all!”

“I am not a widow in the terms you think, Hanna.”

“But I thought that the dead gypsy was your husband?”

“He was but only on paper, not in my heart or in the eyes of the Lord.” She stood looking firmly into the older woman's face. “I was not born a gypsy, Hanna and I am not one now. With every fiber of my being I hate and fear those dreadful people.”

“I am well educated and not prone to hysterics but I have seen things these last few dreadful years with the Soskice family that have shaken me to my soul and these ‘things’ always start and end with Emile Soskice.”

“Curses are his strong suit. I have seen him place many and even though it goes against everything that I believe in, I have never seen a single case when his curses were not effective, whether or not the victim believes in their power. As you can see, the effect of this miserable man has already started. If you care for Owen Tabor, as I feel you do, then please be advised that he is in danger for his life. That is more so if he does not take the matter to heart.”

“He does not!” Hanna said sadly. “Please, will you help us?”

“But what can I do? I am a great risk every minute I stay here. If any other members of the Tabor family find out I am here they will put me with the rest of the Soskice family, then my baby and I will be lost. I plan to ask Owen to bring us to the nearest train station today.”

“None but the few of us know that you are here, my dear. We have been told to keep it a secret and that is what we will do.”

Elizabeth sat back on the chaise. Her head was throbbing once again. “But even if I did stay what could I do? I have no power to fight the black magic of Emile

and I have already warned Owen. He would not hear me!”

“Will you at least try and speak with him once again before you go?”

“I will do my best, Hanna but to what good it might do I cannot say! Please tell Mr. Tabor that I want to see him.”

Hanna hung her head and left, locking the double doors behind her.

Elizabeth looked at her lovely son as he examined his hands and pulled his blanket in his mouth. How innocent and helpless he was. She thought of how it was her greatest responsibility to see to it he was safe. She had no responsibility towards Owen. Quite the opposite, in fact! All those years ago, he had cared little for her and broken her heart. Why should she now risk her one chance for freedom to help him?

Well, she decided, there was little she could do at that time but have her long desired bath. She went to the window Hanna had not wanted exposed and peeked through a small crack. On the other side of the window was a row of lilac bushes in full bloom and they obscured any view into the room so she pushed the curtains as far back as they would go. To her amazement, the top third of the domed window was the most beautiful stained glass work she had ever seen. “Why in heavens’ name would anyone want to keep that beautiful window covered?” she muttered as she stepped back to get a better look.

The brightly colored glass was a representation of the Madonna and Child in a wonderful garden of yellow, red and blue flowers. The morning light streamed through the delightful glass sending lovely rainbows across the room and dancing over the shining hard wood floor. The scene was wonderfully magical.

Owen rode to the base of the prison tower. He would give Soskice a last chance to remove the curse. If he did, he would leave that day with his family. For the sake of peace with his father, Soskice would have to remove the curse with a witness watching. If he did not agree to these conditions then he would die where he sat as far as Owen was concerned.

The safest and the easiest way into the tower were through the web of tunnels that ran from the Manor House to the rocky shoreline but Owen avoided them almost at all costs. He hated the confined, dark spaces.

Since so much of the original Tabor Castle had long since crumbled and fallen down the cliffs, now the only outside doorway into the tower was precariously near the drop off. Owen carefully climbed the jagged, broken rocks until he was close enough to unlock the door and pull himself inside. He stood for a moment looking down as the waves crashed onto the shore sixty feet below.

Most who knew the Tabors believed that it was from this place that his mother, Margaret, had committed suicide over two decades before. Her body washed away and never found. Owen was one of the very few people who knew the truth.

To the left was a rusted door that led down to the tunnels. Before him, a dozen or so narrow steps that twisted up to the broken turret. He moved carefully and quietly upwards. Near to the doorway, just as he was reaching for the ring of old keys he heard the sound of a female laugh. He listened for a time further but heard nothing else. He pulled out his pistol, unlocked and pushed open the door and stepped inside the turret room.

First, he saw only the gypsy sitting stiffly upright with his legs folded in front of

him and the black veil draped over him. He made no movement nor said a word although he was most certainly aware of Owen's presence. The bright sunlight that streamed in through the broken wall created a dark shadow underneath and off to the side. Owen's quick eye caught a very slight movement in that shadow. He raised his pistol, pulled back the hammer and aimed for the shadow.

"Come out or I will shoot anyway!" he called out, not moving his eyes from the target.

Still the old man sat unmoving and silent. The rank and putrid air about them charged with tension. "Move!" Owen ordered with anger.

The raven hopped out of the shadow and onto the broken wall. She looked at Owen, moving her head from side to side to get a better look at him. She had seen him before in the courtyard when he had thrown a rock at her. Again when she had followed him with Elizabeth and Richard and that morning when she had listened to him and James speaking. She sensed that he was far different from the other Tabor men in manner and mind. She was interested in him but that thought quickly vanished as Owen fired into the air over her head and she flew off in a flutter of wings and called out in fear and anger.

"I am Owen Tabor, oldest son of this land," he spoke firmly to Emile. The female laugh, he decided must have come from Emile. After a further silence, the old man finally lifted his head to look carefully at Owen with his one good eye.

"So you say," he replied with his raspy voice and broken smile.

"I am going to release the rest of your family in the next hour and I give you one chance to leave with them. Remove that curse in front of a witness and you can leave as you came, a free man. But be aware you had better not set foot on this land again!"

As an answer, Emile spat at Owen's feet. "You waste your time. That curse is well deserved and stays. Prepare for your death!"

Owen leveled his gun at the old man's head and fired, purposely hitting the wall just above Soskice's head. The bullet sent down a spray of small rocks and dirt. "We shall see which of us will die, old man! From where I stand you are far closer to the grave than I am."

## Chapter Three

Elizabeth brought Richard to the floor and the delightful color display. He cooed with delight. She traced his fingers around the flickering shapes and laughed as he reached into the air to catch the crystal lights.

"Just wait until we are at your Grandmother's home in London, my sweet. I will show you such wonderful things. I promise you that you will never have to sleep in a basket or wear rags again." She had to struggle to keep back the tears.

Jack had told her about the scandal and imprisonment of her father but she had no idea that her much loved mother was dead. Through all the long nightmares with the gypsies, the dream of her bringing her son to her Mother gave her strength and courage.

After they played for awhile, she placed Richard on a pillow beside the bath so that she could watch him and he could see the flames dancing in the hearth. She dropped the borrowed nightgown to the floor and slipped into the warm, fragrant water. Such luxury she had not known for so long. It seemed to her then as she thoroughly washed and lay back to relax, that a lifetime had passed in the three years as captive in the Soskice Clan.

She could not help but think of that terrible night when she first met the devil and his son. The story that she had told Owen was very close to the truth. She did not blame him for not believing her as she could hardly believe it yourself. It was no lie that her father was a mean brute of a man. Delacourt was a debaucher of women and children, wife beater and a Satan worshiper. She had known none of this while so young and innocent. He was her 'dear Daddy' and though he was very rarely home she cherished every minute that he could find for her.

It was in the spring of her seventeenth year when her nightmare began and a year since that summer on the Tabor Estate when she had fallen so painfully in love with Owen. One evening during the family meal, Delacourt had announced that it was far past the time for him to find her a suitable husband. It seemed that he had been very busy doing just that. True to his nature, the only value in the groom necessary was his ability to advance his own needs. With her mother's help Elizabeth objected but he would not hear them. Her father could not care less that she had already found the man she wanted.

Delacourt took his daughter to a 'special dress fitting'. Her mother had no input into the design of the dress. It was a tight fitting and far too sophisticated for her young years. It pushed and exaggerated her still growing breasts and squeezed her waist until she could barely breathe.

It came to the night where she would meet her future husband. Her mother, whom she needed so dearly at that time, was nowhere in sight. Delacourt had sent her away to keep her from interfering with this most important time. A woman that Elizabeth did not know came to the Delacourt home. She prepared her with an abundance of jewelry and makeup and styled her hair high on her head. She dusted a

fine silver, scented powder on Elizabeth's long neck and slim white shoulders.

"So tell me, pretty Elizabeth," the unpleasant assistant asked as she studied her handy work. "Are you a virgin?"

Terrified, Elizabeth blushed and did not answer.

"Well, your father says you are and you had better be. Believe me they will know if you are not."

"Please, tell me?" Elizabeth finally managed a whisper. "What is going to happen? Where am I going?"

"Where are you going? Well, if you are the unlucky chosen one, you are going to Hell, my dear."

It was that evening when she and several other young women, with fathers of wealth and power, found themselves paraded before the two Soskice men. All attired in similar outlandish manner and accompanied only by male relatives. Not a mother was present and that was no wonder. Those that knew what was going on most certainly did not have the courage or opportunity to do anything about it.

Delacourt cleared a debt that night, not a debt of money but one of unspeakable evil. The father of the one chosen to be the wife of the Soskice son would be elevated in that dark world. He would have a place of honor and forever welcomed to an exclusive club of men whose evil tastes and addictions not so well met at any other place. The unfortunate Elizabeth was the chosen one. Drugged and hooded, they took her away from her satisfied father. When she woke that next morning she was miles away from her home and married to a man she did not know.

As she felt her body relaxing in the soothing bath, she decided she must not think of those things. I must only think of the happier times that lie ahead. With this in mind, she was unaware of the negative, angry energy that was waking so near to her and her child.

Behind the tub, where the sunlit colors played in a large circle on the smooth floor, a space somewhere between reality and time opened and a sleeping spirit began to stir. The shade of Nora Tabor rested in that place between life and death where everything had become nothing. Her every thought just memory and her senses frozen in bitter loneliness. Now she existed only in her own mind. She longed for her lover to come and dance with her in that spot as he had done on their wedding night. Whenever the colors came as they did then, she would wake.

A hand emerged through the floor; it was thin, glowing white and transparent. Then the other hand came forward feeling the warmth of the sun and the bright colors. She pulled her body upwards easily and smoothly as though rising from water. She wore the white silk and lace gown she had worn for her wedding and her burial. Her hair wrapped tightly around her head in a braid and held in place with silver ribbons. She stretched out the length of her body along the floor, reveling in the energy the lights gave her after so long in her black and frozen world. She kept the side of her face against the floor and her eyes closed. She knew that if she opened her eyes, she would only see things that made no sense, things that meant her strange, lonely world was wrong and that she was no longer home.

Very slowly she arched her back, rose up until she felt her feet on the floor. She spread her arms and began to twirl and spin. In her mind, she was once again in her

husband's arms swearing eternally to love him and never leave his side.

Now completely awake and free from her timeless world of memory, the spirit began to sense the compelling heat of the baby's strong aura. She stopped dancing, frowned and lowered back to the floor. In a snake like motion, she slithered to the source of the comforting heat. She stopped sharply at the pillow where Richard had fallen sleep. She lifted her head, opened her eyes and studied the baby closely. The child's wonderful innocence radiated out to her in a comforting blanket of purest white and blue. She longed to hold him, cherish him and nourish him.

Rising off the floor, she floated and swayed slightly. She extended her arms as though to pick up the baby but they passed through him. Again, she tried and moaned with anger and frustration as the world she so desperately wanted continued to reject her. The icy cold that surrounded her grew stronger with her anger. The baby woke and he began to whimper.

His tiny cry woke Elizabeth from the nightmares of her past and the daydreams of her brighter future. She looked over the side of the high backed tub. The air and the bath had cooled dramatically. She shuddered and pulled herself from the water. She did not see the spirit but it was very much aware of her. Once she was out of the water the power and heat that was Elizabeth's life force, the glowing beauty of her aura, reached out in hot waves that pushed the spirit from the baby. The ghost that had been Nora Tabor saw the naked and lovely body of this woman and felt the raw power of her sexual energy. She pulled back away from the woman and her child, her face a mask of jealousy and pain.

Still completely unaware of the wraith that screamed in fury at her Elizabeth wrapped herself in a large towel and picked up the crying bay. Why is it so damned cold in here? Perhaps it was a draft from the window. She pulled the curtains closed and as the rainbow display faded so did the ghost. She placed some more wood into the fire just as Hanna and Daisy came in to remove the tub and tidy up.

"Here you are. I have brought you a clean night shirt," Hanna said and handed the gown to Elizabeth.

"Why is it so cold in here?" Daisy said as looked nervously around.

"Well, I am afraid that I opened those drapes," Elizabeth pointed to the window in between the two fireplaces. "I suppose I let in a draft." As busy as she was drying herself she did not see the startled looks that passed over the faces of her companions.

"You must never open those drapes, ever! You do not want to wake ...."

"Never mind that rambling, Daisy!" Hanna interrupted her sharply. "Just go about your business."

Daisy fussed and made her way out of the room.

"I hope that I have not done anything wrong," Elizabeth said with surprise at the sudden anger of the usually placid Hanna.

"No! Not at all!" Hanna forced a stiff smile. "But just the same please do keep those drapes closed."

Elizabeth shrugged and pulled on the clean shift. She looked around the Great Room. "What an incredibly lovely room this is! I have never seen the like of it," she turned in a circle looking at the fine frescoes and gilded gold wall panels. "Is all the rest of this house as beautiful as this?"

"Oh yes, isn't it lovely? And every room is as wonderful as this one."

"Hanna, I must see Mr. Tabor as soon as possible. Do you have any idea when he will return?"

"Not too sure, Mrs. Soskice. He had a few important matters to see to about the murder of his poor brother."

"Please! Do not call me that name!" She snapped, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "The sound of the name is abhorrent to me."

"I'm sorry. I did not mean to offend."

"Just call me Elizabeth," she looked into the kind, wise eyes and saw a caring she had not seen for a long time. "I want to show you something, Hanna. Then perhaps you will understand and help me." She turned her back to the older woman, pulled her hair to the front and lowered her nightgown to her waist.

Hanna gasped. She lifted the gown back into place and gently turned Elizabeth to face her. "They did that to you? Those gypsies?"

Elizabeth nodded and fought back tears of fear and shame. "Yes," she spoke so quietly Hanna could barely hear her. "I was a virgin when my father gave me to Emile Soskice. They have held me captive for over three years. Every time Jack came to me, it was a rape. Every escape attempt failed. If they catch me, again I am sure they will kill me. My mother lives in London; she is rich and has many powerful friends. If I can get back to her, my son and I will be safe. Perhaps I can just send her a telegram. Then she will send someone for me. Will you please help me?" Now the tears fell.

Hanna put her arm around her and led her to the bed.

"Oh my poor, sweet child," Hanna pushed Elizabeth's hair back off her shoulders, pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and handed it over. "Of course I will help you. Owen as well, I know he comes off as rough at times. Truly, he has a kind heart. You can trust him, Elizabeth and know that you are safe now. The gypsies are locked away, the family in the Manor cells and the old man chained in the abandoned tower," Hanna stood

and pointed a quarter mile across the property, the hillside and up the cliff to the dark tower.

"Chains and locks are not defense against Emile Soskice." Elizabeth sniffed and wiped her face. "If they were he would have hung long ago. You may think me mad, Hanna but I do not care. That man, Soskice....well, he is not human. I do not know what he is but he is not one of God's children. He loves to lay a curse, that bastard and as God is my witness, every curse he utters comes to be. If you care about Owen Tabor and I feel that you do, he has to know he is in mortal danger."

"Then you must tell him all you know."

"I tried but he will not listen. He is a hard headed skeptic, isn't he?"

"He says he is but I know better. That is only his foolish pride and heartache," Hanna stopped speaking briefly and glanced to the area of the wooden floor that held the spirit of Nora Tabor. "Like any man I have ever known, Elizabeth, he needs insistence. Make him listen to you."

"I am so tired!" Elizabeth moaned slightly. "My head hurts again."

"Then you lay down." Hanna helped Elizabeth to lie down, pulled the covers over her and brought Richard to the bed. "You sleep now and build your strength. As soon as Owen returns, I will see to it that he speaks with you. As I think of it, a telegram is a



very good idea.”

Owen's great grandfather had built the oldest sections of Tabor Manor when he and his family abandoned the Tabor Castle. Underneath it along with root cellars and storage areas, he built a prison area.

A sleepy looking guard stood smartly up when he saw Owen approaching. “Sir!” he said. “The gypsies have been fed and their horses watered!” He motioned to the caravans. “Are they leaving?”

“Yes, these are but that thing in the tower stays put!” Owen answered as the guard opened the door for him. He stepped into the dank and dark stair well. “Good Lord, what a smell! Leave this door open and let some air in!” Owen descended the slippery narrow steps that led to a small room at the bottom. There sat another guard at a table. A lantern glowed bleakly and the man looked bored and miserable.

“Good morning, Mr. Tabor,” he stood at the sight of Owen, “dreadful place down here, that it is!”

Owen nodded as he looked through the small window in the doorway that led to the actual cells. “They will be leaving in very short order. So you will be out of here soon enough.”

“That is very good news! There are things down here that aren't Holy if you ask me.”

“Let's have a chat with that motley crew.” Owen took a lantern and they stepped into the jail room.

The space was smaller than Owen had remembered and lit by a few small barred, dirty windows. Three cells lined either side of the walls. There were three adult males and a boy in one cell. Two adult women, Mamma Soskice and a girl of about seven watched from the other side. There were cots, blankets and various dishes scattered about here and there.

The little girl took a step forward and said, “Hello, Mister!” one of the females pulled her back quickly.

Owen had not said a word before one of the men stepped up to the bars and in a voice filled with anger and frustration called out, “You have no right to keep us here!” He was equal in height and weight to Owen and obviously ready for a fight.

“Your name is?” Owen held up the lantern to have a better look at the man.

“Hobson, Tomas Hobson! And you are?”

“Owen Tabor. Well, Tom Hobson you are correct. My father had no right to place the lot of you down here. I have decided that, with the exception of Emile Soskice you will be released and escorted off the Estate.”

“You may have him and God protect you from him!” One of the females spoke when no one else did. “But my mother wants her grandson! What has happened to him and his mother?”

“I have no idea who you are talking about.”

“My sister-in-law and her baby. We have not seen her and we want the baby,” she insisted and the old woman began to wail and moan.

“Be quiet, both of you!” Tomas yelled across the room. The younger female moved back into the shadows and Mama Soskice muffled her cries with her hands.

“If you have family members missing then I am afraid I can be of no help to you.

You and your remaining family will leave my land and never set foot here again, is that understood?"

"Understood, Tabor! I have no interest in Soskice or Elizabeth. She has tried to escape from her father-in-law and husband before. I hope for her sake and the child that this time she has made it to safety." Hobson had greatly calmed down.

"Unlock the doors," Owen said to the guard as he moved back up the stairs. He watched as the Soskice Clan filed outside. They squinted from the bright light and mumbled to each other as they divided into groups and filed into the wagons. Tomas Hobson took his place at the reigns of the Soskice wagon and looked as though they were about to leave when a thought occurred to him. He jumped down from his seat and walked over to Owen.

"You have been fair with us, Tabor. So I feel I must warn you!"

"If you refer to the curse, then you waste your time. I have no belief in such things!" Owen said.

"You will, in short order then, I fear."

"I very much doubt that, Mr. Hobson."

"You may have Emile locked in chains but I tell you that it is his shape shifter that is real danger to you and your family, sir, so beware!" He nodded his peaked hat and turned back to his wagon. "Fair well!" he said and the caravan pulled away, followed closely behind by Tom O'Connor.

"Shape shifter!" Owen mumbled as he watched the small parade move down the road. "Am I the only sane person around here?"

It was mid morning when James and Wilmot reached the center of the city of Dover. James left Wilmot in the care of the driver to wait for his return from the police. The old man finally seemed resigned to having the police on his property but only gave up the fight grudgingly. In the Arnold Street Police Headquarters James slapped his hand loudly on the front desk to wake the dozing police officer.

"Yes, sir?" the startled man asked as he retrieved his cap from where it had landed on the floor.

"I wish to see Inspector Robert Caruthers."

"I am afraid that he is ...."

"Just tell him that James Whitehall from the Tabor Estate is here to see him on an urgent matter. That is all you need to do!" James snapped at him. He was not at all happy about this day's adventures and it showed.

The young man had never heard of either the man or the estate but decided to listen to the small voice that warned him and disappeared through a doorway to deliver the message. James was quickly in the office of Inspector Caruthers.

"Well, Mr. Whitehall. Tell me how I can help you," the burly, impeccably dressed Inspector said as they shook hands. He was a contradiction in appearances. This man was nearly as round as he was tall. He had a very large head with a circle of thick, white hair around the circle of it. His tiny black eyes peered out through thick spectacles and he had more the look of a priest than the experienced police officer that he was. "Nothing wrong with the Tabors, I hope?" he asked as the men sat down on either side of a neat and busy desk.

"I am afraid so, Inspector. Edward Tabor has been murdered," James answered

in his matter of fact manner.

"The Hell you say! Good Lord! Fill me in on the details!"

Without mentioning that the gypsies stayed captive on the Tabor land, James recalled the strange and deadly events of the last two nights. Caruthers, his men and the morgue wagon were to leave for the Tabor estate quickly. James returned to Wilmot and they continued on their way to Abbey Pritchard.

Owen was thirsty and hungry. He found Hanna busy as usual in his kitchen. Hanna prepared a porridge bowl, slices of fresh baked buns and slabs of butter for him. He poured strong tea laced it with whiskey.

"James will send the police here with the morgue wagon for Edward. I've got rid of those dammed gypsies!" he said to her with his mouth full. "Except for that thing in the tower. He can rot where he sits and let my father do as he pleases with him, for all I care!"

"Do you think the police will come here, I mean to this house, too?" she asked nervously rubbing her floured hands together.

"Most likely, Hanna."

"Elizabeth was with that family. What if they think she is the murderer?"

"First of all, she can have no knowledge of Edward's murder. She was ill in my bed all day yesterday. All she needs to do is tell the police the truth. This is my house and I am entitled to have any guests I like. My father will just have to live with that."

"She is rightly frightened, Owen. She's been held by the Soskice family for three years and very badly abused." Hanna sat across from him, looking sternly as she spoke. "She showed me the scars and told me a great deal."

"Mavis told me about the scars." Owen had stopped eating, meeting Hanna's steady look.

"Elizabeth is certain that they will try and capture her again. She says she has family in London and that she will be safe there. I promised that I would help her get there and I told her that she could trust you."

"And she can trust me, Hanna. Why do you make it seem as though there might be some question in that? As soon as Mavis tells me that Elizabeth is well enough to travel I will personally take to her relatives or wherever she wants to go."

"Good. Now tell me where did you sleep last night?"

"Why?" he asked raising an eyebrow and holding back a smile.

"I do not want to have this conversation with you again, but your dear mother would wish it of me. You know that the things you do are wrong." Her face was bright red with embarrassment.

"What things are they?" Now he was smiling broadly. When she did not answer right away but looked miserable, he leaned over and placed his hand on hers. "I am sorry, my old dear! You do so hold on to the illusion that I am the spoiler of all things virginal! I slept in my bed because she asked me to stay. She slept on the lounge."

"You should not pursue her that way, Owen! Your mother was a true Catholic and saw to it that you were baptized ...."

"I am not a Catholic, Hanna, you know that! I have no religion because there is no such thing as God."

She hung her head and held onto the silver crucifix she always wore. "I am

sorry but you are wrong.”

“That may be so but that is the way of it for me. Now, you do not worry about my lusts and I will not worry about your forever empty bed.” He wiped the back of his sleeve across his face. “I have no intention of adding to Elizabeth’s miseries.”

Hanna sighed, stood and went back to her worktable. “You act this way because you are bored. You are always out and about sticking your nose into other people’s business. A thirty-year-old man should have a wife and many babies to keep him tired. You need a good woman, Owen Tabor.”

“I have many good women and I do not need a wife. I have all the females I need, whenever and however I need them. I ‘stick my nose into other peoples businesses’ because they need my guidance.”

“And you must go back to you artwork. It is a sin to ignore the gift God gave you.” Hanna had begun to cry. Owen stood and put his arms around her.

“Oh, come now, Hanna! I am fine, truly fine. I may marry again one day but it will be very difficult to find a woman to match Nora.”

Hanna sniffed and patted his cheek. “I only want you to be happy, Owen.”

“I know that but I am happy in my own way.”

“Elizabeth wants to speak with you. I told her you would see her as soon as possible. The bath seems to have made her sleepy. She and the baby are sleeping right now.”

“Had a bath, did she?” He smiled and winked at the old woman he knew so well, feeling slightly sorry for his anger a few moments before.

“You will be disappointed and only insult her further if you don’t stop that. I do not think she is ‘that’ sort of female!”

“That is where we are different. You see ‘that sort of female’ to be someone who lives against the laws of your God. I see a woman like that as someone who lives in reality and embraces the pleasures of her womanhood. She is proud, strong, gives and gets in return. Is that so very wrong?”

“Maybe you are too much like your father after all!” She looked at the young man she loved like a son with sad resignation.

“That is not a compliment but maybe true none the less. I am going back to the hall. Keep the doors to the Great Room locked and do not let anyone in there for any reason. I should be back in an hour or two.”

Owen found several men still searching the grounds and gardens around his father's house for the missing head. He motioned for them to gather around him.

“We’ve no luck yet, sir!” Wiggs said to him.

“Then it is safe to assume it is not out here. Has anyone checked the widow's walk?”

“No, I don’t think so.” The man and his counterparts looked up in the direction of the roof.

“Whitehall has gone for the police. I expect everyone to cooperate with them completely. Pass that on to others. It is important!” Owen turned from them and walked into the house.

There was not a sound or sight of any person in the usually very active building. He went to the butlers’ pantry, took a very large and sharp axe, and headed up the back staircase to the attic rooms.

As he thought it might be, he found the door to the widow's walk locked from the outside. Several hard swings with the axe shattered the wood around the lock. He pulled the door open and he stepped outside. On the floor in a large puddle was a massive amount of dried blood. A trail led up to and over the white painted railing. There was no doubt this was the place of Edward's dreadful end.

What puzzled Owen was how the murderer got off the widow's walk. No one could have climbed down the steep roof without a rope. However, there was no sign of a rope. Along with that, a slight shake of the railing and Owen could tell that it would be very unlikely to hold the weight of a person climbing down. There was no sign of the missing head there either. It could be that the murderer had taken the head as a trophy. That put an even darker shadow on the nightmare scenario.

He walked the length of the walkway. At the far end, it was a straight drop down for four stories to the summer patio below. Olivia sat on one of the stone benches. She was already dressed in mourning for a man she had never shown a moment's respect to.

Owen had never liked Olivia. Born in a wealthy London family she was a snob of the highest order and had never adjusted to life in the country as Edmond's wife. She spent a great deal of time and money with London society and had a reputation for being a gossip and a little too friendly for a married woman. There was nothing more to learn from the widow's walk so he left it and joined his sister-in-law on the patio.

"Good morning, Olivia," he smiled as he came up to her. "You are looking lovely, my dear! Not too many people can wear black with such grace as you do." He sat down across from her. It was not that she was actually ugly as her features were fine if just a little too big for her small head, but it was the constantly dissatisfied expression that spoiled any chance of prettiness.

She looked startled at Owen's rare compliment. "Well, thank you!" she stuttered. "I do feel it is only right. Do you know where Father-in-law is? He seems to be nowhere about and I am worried about him."

"He and James left early for Dover to notify the police about Edward's murder and then they have further business to attend to."

"Police?" she said the word as though it was a rather nasty thing. "Well, yes, I guess they do have to be called in. Owen, we must be careful not to bring this matter to a scandal level, for the sake of the family. Edward would not want that."

"Yes, of course!" Owen agreed and had to fight not to laugh. Edward in his short life did nothing but bring scandal to the Tabor name. "We do not want to end up like Lord and Lady Delacourt, do we?"

"Oh dear! Wasn't that just terrible but then this 'matter' could never sink that low, could it?" she asked with concern as she bit onto Owen's bait.

"I can't say that I heard all that much about it. You know how it is way out here in the countryside. We are rather out of touch, aren't we?"

"It was all so tragic and too shocking. Who would have thought that such things would happen to such a good family? Poor Lord Delacourt, arrested, charged and convicted of terrible things. I surely do not believe for a minute that he was guilty of any of them. It was all too much for Lady Jane Delacourt and so the poor lady took her own life. Can you think of anything more terrible?"

"When did all of this happen?"

"Let me see," she frowned in thought. "Well it must be three and a half years now. It all happened just after their only child, Elizabeth, I believe was her name, went missing. She just vanished and no one had any idea where she was and that was the beginning of the misery for poor Jane! She was a very dear friend of your late step mother, did you know that?"

"Jane Delacourt and Isabelle were good friends?" Owen asked and paused, then asked, "What was it that Lord Delacourt was charged with?"

"Oh, I could not possibly tell you that, Owen. It is far too unspeakable!" she blushed behind her black fan.

"Olivia if you are going to gossip then at least enlighten with the full story!" Edmond said as he appeared from the house.

"I did, Edmond!"

"Hardly, you left out the best parts."

"You can hardly expect me say that?"

"Well, I will tell Owen then. Lord Delacourt, pervert in highest style was arrested, tried and convicted for such sins as debauchery, drug addiction and buggery and homosexuality. It seems the man has some very unhealthy habits, to say the least!"

"Lord, Edmond, you are awful!" Olivia stood and with great distress and some drama rushed inside the house.

"I have offended my sensitive wife!" Edmond said his voice flat with sarcasm.

"So it seems! She will get over it. So old Delacourt was of that breed, was he?"

"Yes and much worse. Seems he thought he was some kind of warlock or some such thing. All sorts of evil trickery going on behind the scenes. It is not like you, Owen to have an interest in gossip."

"You know how it is, Edmond, ever so often it feels refreshing to hear of misery worse than one's own."

"I never thought of it that way. Have they had any luck finding Edward's head?"

"No, I doubt it is around anyplace. They would have found it if someone threw it off the walkway. I think the murderer took it with him. The bloody puzzling thing is how he got away. The door of the walkway was still locked from the outside. I had to break it down to get out there."

"Good Lord!" Edmond looked up to where Owen had stood just before. "Then there would be no way down from there without tying a rope to the railing. But that rope would still be there, wouldn't it?"

"That is what I wondered. We've an interesting puzzle here! Now Father has gone to enlist the help of Abbey Prichard, believe it or not!"

"Abbey! Why in God's name?"

"The old fool seems to think that she can help him break this ridiculous curse."

"He is rather a fool these days!" After a moment of thought Edmond asked Owen for the key to the locked parlor. "In the mayhem of last night I forgot my pistol in there. I will bring the key back to you when I am done." Edmond disappeared inside. After a moment, Owen heard him call. "Owen! Quick, come here!"

"What is it?" Owen asked as he joined Edmond at the parlor doorway.

"Where is it? The body! It's not there!"

Edward's remains were gone. The shawl that had covered him thrown to the side;

the knife lay beside it on the floor.

"Jesus! What the Hell is going on here?" Owen demanded.

"Did you move it?" Edmond asked stupidly.

"What would I do that for?" Owen yelled at him. "Alright, I have had enough of this!" Owen continued to yell as he walked back down the hallway. "Where is everybody? Hastings?" Owen bellowed through the swinging doorway that led to the servants' quarters. The startled butler appeared from the housekeeper's lounge pulling on his jacket. Cook followed not too far behind him.

"I want everyone and I mean every one of the household staff, the stable men and the gardeners; all of them assembled right away in the dining room. Go on, hurry up!" He ordered and the two startled servants rushed away.

"Owen, what are you doing?" Edmond asked but got no answer. He followed Owen into the dining room and sat looking forlorn as his older brother paced back and forth.

Eventually the staff began to trickle in, the men with caps in hand and the females looking frightened. They gathered along one side of the long dining room table across from where Owen stood watching them with his arms folded across his chest. Once they were all accounted for Hastings closed the door and nodded to Owen.

The long sad faces of his employees had caused Owen to lose some of his anger. "Now look! The lot of you! No one is going to be fired," he began.

"Not yet, anyway!" Edmond added from his chair in the far corner. As the usual, Owen ignored him.

"As all of you are no doubt aware yesterday at some point Edward Tabor was murdered. We left his body locked in the morning parlor. I know that this is a ridiculous question but do any of you have any idea why the corpse is no longer in that room?"

A chorus of mumbled negatives answered him.

"I thought not! This is the key to that door. I took it from Whitehall this morning. I very much doubt he moved the body. Does anyone know of the existence of a copy of this key?" He turned his attention to Hastings and his wife, Cook. "You two have master keys to every lock in the house, don't you?"

"Only the important locks, Mr. Tabor. Not the parlor doors, we have no need to lock them. So the keys have stayed in the locks," Hastings answered.

"Right!" Owen said with frustration running his hands through his hair. "From this day on I want this house completely locked up every night at sunset. All the windows and all the doors, without exception. Hastings you will see to that and Edmond, you will check after him!"

"Bit late for that, if you ask me," Edmond said under his breath.

"I didn't ask you," Owen looked at Edmond from the corner of his eye.

"One other thing I want to make perfectly clear to all of you. The death of our brother has nothing what so ever do to with the death of the gypsy, Jack Soskice, and that foolish curse. I will not stand for any gossip to the contrary. Moreover, if any of you have any information that would be of help in this matter I expect to hear about that right away. Anything else will mean immediate dismissal without reference and that also stands for anything else that you may learn in the future. Before the police, come to me! Now go back to your duties and for Gods' sake, stay alert!"

Hastings ushered them out but stayed behind closing the door once more. "I think that I may have something that will be of interest to you, sir," he spoke to Owen.

"Yes, Hastings?"

"I did not sleep all that well last night so I went to the kitchen for warm milk and to give my wife a moment's peace. I watched out the window that looks to the roadway leading to the front of the house out the estate or down to the tenant village, as I waited for the milk to heat," he looked at Owen for encouragement.

"Go on!" Owen urged.

"The wind had come up and was blowing away some of the fog but it was still very thick out there. First I only heard the wagon, and then as the fog parted briefly I saw it as it moved slowly towards the village!"

"What time was that? Do you know?"

"Yes, I do because the wife complained that I was bothering her at three am. It would have been just shortly after three in the morning. But there was something else strange that I noticed."

Owen just looked at the man and nodded.

"Well, it was a very dark night and all that fog and there was no lantern of any kind on the wagon or I would have seen the light for certain! So, I think someone was trying not to be seen!"

"So it would seem! Thank you Hastings."

When they were alone Owen told Edmond to go down to the barracks where the last of the Tabor army was housed. In the heyday of their smuggling empire they had kept one hundred strong and able men, now with reasonable and honest import and export business they kept only thirty men. Edmond was to tell them about the missing body, increase the number of Estate patrols, and have guards placed at the Manor House and at Hock House twenty four hours a day.

Owen went from there to the third floor of Tabor Hall and to the apartment Wilmot had lived in until the stroke and wheelchair confined him to the first floor. Wilmot had been a meticulous record keeper. Not a penny came or went without him recording it in some account book. The books were still stored in those rooms. If Wilmot and Delacourt had any sort of business or personal connections, he was interested in learning about them.

The first of Wilmot's apartment rooms was a sitting room. He closed and locked the door behind him. He pulled back the drapes and opened the window to let some air and daylight into the dusty, disused room. From that window, he could see across the carefully designed gardens over a growth of trees to the roof of his own home. Further back to the right were the stables that were a hive of usual daily activity. A dog was barking furiously and getting trouble from some unseen person nearby.

He went to the alcove that Wilmot used as his business office. Boxes of account books lined one wall. Owen pulled most of these boxes out by the open window and sat down on the floor beside them. It did not take long before he could see that all the filings were under company and corporation titles with rare exception was there any mention of names.

Owen left the boxes, crossed the sitting room and the bedroom and into the smaller room that Isabelle had used as her dressing room. The walls hung with rows of the beautiful clothes. Boxes of shoes and hats piled neatly on the shelves. The



familiar scent for her perfume reminded Owen of her happy, playful manner. There was no doubt that she had been a remarkable woman to suffer so long under the tirades of Wilmot. While Owen did not think he actually beat her, Wilmot's quick and loud temper was all he could remember as to how his father had treated his lovely and much younger wife.

He wondered why her clothing was still there. Could it have been from some well-hidden sense of affection? At the end of one rack of clothing were several gowns that still bore the makers labels and never been worn. Sadly, two days before the Christmas Holidays, three and a half years before, Isabelle had fallen down the stairs and died of a broken neck. These thoughts were on his mind when he heard a noise come from the sitting room. He took his pistol in his hand moved quietly through the master bedroom and looked around the corner of the doorway.

"Who is there?" he called out and heard nothing more. He stepped slowly into the bedroom and crossed to the sitting room. The door of the sitting room was wide open. Without any doubt, he knew that he had closed and locked it when he entered earlier. He

carefully searched any possible hiding areas and found no one. He closed the door and pulled on it to see if the draft from the window might have caused it to open. It would not open unless the handle was completely turned. He shrugged, threw over the bolt to lock the door and went back to the dressing room to continue with his search.

Carefully stacked along the shelves above the clothes were boxes of hats and shoes. At the farthest end in the corner almost missed at his first glance, he spotted a trunk. He pulled it down to the floor, opened it and found a very large collection of letters. It seemed that Isabelle kept every letter, note and invitation ever sent to her. He decided to search thoroughly to see if there was anything from Jane Delacourt. If they were such good friends as Olivia said, there was every chance that they did write to each other.

He separated the letters in piles, from his father, her family members and various outside interests she had. There was nothing of any interest in them. It was in a red velvet box where he found letters on Delacourt stationary. He took all the letters from Jane and placed them in his jacket pocket, then placed the trunk back where he had found it.

He moved through the master bedroom and out into the sitting room. To his amazement, the door that he had just locked was once again open. The window and curtains closed. The pile of boxes and papers he had left on the floor were back in the alcove. Everything looked as it did when he first entered. He was stunned and stood for a moment aware that the room was then exceedingly cold. He felt as though he was very much not on his own.

"This is insane!" he chided his fear, trying not to rush as he left the room. He moved down the stairs, where Isabelle had met her end and was certain that unseen eyes watched

him. "Pull yourself together!" he whispered under his breath but was nonetheless very happy to leave the house and stand in the warm, bright reality of the bright sunshine.

From down the roadway he saw the approaching police wagon and behind it, on horseback, was Edmond. Owen was happy for the distraction and the chance to discuss the matter of Edward's murder with Inspector Caruthers.

"Caruthers!" Owen said as he extended his hand to the man.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Tabor. I left as soon as I spoke with Mr. Whitehall! Terribly sorry for your family's loss!" Inspector Caruthers said.

Owen and Edmond brought the Inspector and his sergeant to the yew trees that lined the front side of Tabor Manor. Owen told them of how he and James had found the body. From there they moved up to the top of the house to what all were sure must have been the scene of the bloody crime. They noted the impossibility of escape from the locked widow's walk without the aid of ropes.

Finally, they moved down to the summer parlor. "So then," the inspector stepped up to the mentioned window and repeated the events so that they were clear in his head, "the maid came here to window in order to close the fog shutters," he turned the latch and pulled open the window. "Then the headless body that had been leaning against the window fell half way into the room! This witnessed by James Whitehall and the butler, Hastings."

"Correct!" Owen nodded in agreement.

"You were alerted by the maids screams, rushed into the house, then into this room and found the body hanging here and James Whitehall standing beside it."

Once again, Owen agreed. "Then my father was alerted to something amiss by the commotion in the hallway. He came in the room next and then shortly after him followed Edmond."

They continued and got to the place where the men left the room and Owen locked the door. All the while, the sergeant took careful notes.

"Now at this point I would ask you gentlemen if young Mr. Tabor had any known enemies! But sadly I am all too well aware that he did." Many of the problems created by Edward over the years had reached the desk of the local and outlying police. "So perhaps it would save time should you tell me of any enemies in particular that comes to mind."

Edmond pulled a paper from his pocket and handed it to Inspector Caruthers. "Knowing the importance of this information I wrote this up in the last few hours." It was a list of the names of people claiming a grievance against the murdered Tabor. Caruthers placed it in his files.

"Now, as uncomfortable as it is, I need to see the body." The inspector noted to the brothers. "Where have you placed it?"

"Well, Bob! That would have been on the floor under the window where we pulled it in from the tree had it not been stolen at some time last night. We now have no idea where it is!" Owen said flatly and for a few seconds he received only blank stares from the police officers.

"Good Lord!" Inspector Caruthers finally said. "Stolen was it? Now, that is highly unusual."

"I should say that rather puts a stopper on the bottle!" the usually silent sergeant said flatly.

Owen and Edmond explained the details of that morning.

"And no one else owns a duplicate of that key?" Inspector Caruthers asked.

"Well, someone must, but none that would admit to it from this household," Owen answered.

"If you are finished with me, Inspector I will leave you with Owen. I should go

and see to my wife, she is rather rattled and unhappy! I will be in my rooms should you need me again," Edmond said as he stood.

"Yes, of course!" The police officer nodded. "I imagine that Mrs. Tabor and the entire household are terribly upset."

Owen sighed and answered. "We have known each other for a long time now, Robert. So let us not gentle foot around this matter. Edward will not be missed by any of his family and I am fairly certain any grief shown by Olivia is only for self serving purposes."

Caruthers nodded. "I remember her to be a thoroughly unlikable female. Not a soft place for a man to land on in his evenings, I shouldn't wonder"

"Not a pretty picture, indeed," Owen agreed. "I have to wonder what my younger sibling was thinking when he bedded her! Not with his brain, that is a fact. I do have something else that I would like to discuss with you. Perhaps we could have a few moments alone."

Caruthers nodded at his man. "Perhaps you could see to the care of the horses before our trip back," the Inspector said to the sulking younger man as he closed the door behind him. "He's a good man if still a little green around the edges," the Inspector turned in his chair to face Owen directly and relaxed as though he was now in conversation with a friend. "What is it, Owen?"

"How well do you know my father?"

"Not as well as the previous Inspectors before me, of course. Those were his wilder days. I believe we have only met a few times."

"Well, he is very much what we would call 'of the old school'. Still thinks he is Laird of all he owns. That rickety old dog may have long since left behind his larceny but he has lost none of his arrogance," Owen poured two whiskeys and handed one over. He recounted the events before and after the death of Jack Soskice.

For the first time while they talked Caruthers sat straight up and seemed to take great interest. "You don't mean to tell me that you have Emile Soskice locked up in chains as we speak?"

"Yes, he is."

"That is bloody good news, Owen! Your father has managed to do what we at the force have been trying to do for years."

"Then you know of this fool. What can you tell me about him?"

"He is a murdering and treacherous bastard. At least three times in the course of my career we have had him locked up only to have him escape every blasted time. No amount of our chains could hold him so I hope your chains are a fair lot stronger than ours!"

"I see! At first, I wanted to set him free and boot him off the land with the rest of his motley crew. Now I would just as soon put a bullet in his head." Owen paused and smiled. "And you did not hear me say that, Bob!"

"Good Lord, do not set him free, Owen! Believe me there are many who would only be too pleased should Soskice suffer a fatal 'accident' while he visits here. Put a bullet in his head and toss him in the channel! There would be no questions asked. Of course, the right thing for me to do would be to take him into custody again but that would anger your father, no doubt?" Caruthers asked.

"Yes. He will be right upset that I let the rest of them go, but I can only indulge the old man so far!"

"Well, as far as I am concerned Lord Tabor can have his way with him and the sooner the better. I am far too close to the end of my career to irritate the knobs, if you know what I mean. You would be saving the Queen the money needed to hang the bastard. Whatever you do with him, do not let him go. Double his chains and his guard, as well. As a God fearing man, I would be doing you an injustice not to warn you to be very careful with this character. All is not what it seems with him!"

"More witch craft?" Owen asked incredulously.

"Well, your brother is dead, isn't he? And his body has somehow vanished!"

"Edward had more enemies than you could shake a stick at and you already knew of that before any of this. I refused to see how these two events are connected. It could simply be that Soskice has outside help, nothing more magical than that. And that same outside help could also account for his escapes."

"Perhaps!" the Inspector stood and pulled his immaculate uniform into order.

"So young man, do what you want with Emile bloody Soskice." after a pause, he added, "As far as this business with the gypsies goes, you and I have never had this conversation! Now, I have to speak with some of your people before I head back to Dover. I will return tomorrow or the day after to speak with Lord Tabor. I will need to get all your signatures on my report about Edward's death. But to be honest with you, Owen without a body or a witness to the crime I doubt that there is much we can do."

"That is fairly much what I expected."

"But, nonetheless we shall see what I can dig up!"

"I have one more matter I would like to ask you about, if you have the time, Bob?" Owen asked as they moved out to the hallway.

"Certainly!"

"I know these are not matters for the general public as such but I have heard lately some points of interest in the case of Lord John Delacourt, but I still have to yet find out why he was sent to prison. Can you tell me?"

"Well, that was some time ago! Charges ranged from drug addiction all across the gambit from extortion to sodomy."

He could see that the inspector did not mind in the slightest sharing a little gossip and decided to see what more he could learn. "Must have been bloody Hell for the family!"

"No light at the end of that tunnel, which is a fact. Lady Delacourt caught wind of it all a few days before he was arrested and killed herself, or at least that is what the coroner put it down to, but I thought that was a little thin!"

"Why is that?"

"You see, she had shot herself and that is not a female thing, is it? They are more likely to use poison or the like. Who can say what goes on in the mind at such a time? In addition, there was no suicide note. When a person has self murder in mind, they very much want the friends and family to know why."

"Did they have any children?"

"They had a daughter. That was a tragedy on its own. She disappeared just a few months before all this happened and no one has seen hide or hair of her since then! I suppose all this could have been too much for Lady Jane. May I ask you why you are

interested in the mess?"

"I was going through my father's files and found some unfinished business between him and Delacourt. Money we owe to that family. But as it seems there is no one to pay the money to I guess I will leave it be."

The Inspector nodded. "As sad as it is I doubt their daughter is still living. Three and a half years is a very long time."

"Well, I should let you be about your investigation. If you need me I will be at my house for the rest of the day."

Owen returned to Hock House through the front door hoping to avoid Hanna. He spread Jane Delacourt's letters on his desk. There were forty-two notes and letters in all. They covered the dates from 1864 to 1887. The first dozen or so letters just as one would expect from a woman with the station in life as Lady Jane Delacourt.

She wrote of the good works she was doing, her charities and educational interests for women. Occasionally she would seem to be replying to a question or a comment from Isabelle. She wrote of the birth of her Elizabeth. As the years passed her words showed the love and pride Jane had for her child and the wonderful hope she had for her future. The only thing of note that Owen could take from those letters was that Jane never referred to her husband. He seemed to take no part in her family life.

It was a letter dated June 1875 that brought personal memories for Owen. It was an all too familiar scene when a foolish husband betrays his wife and in her own bed. Isabelle had caught Wilmot and Abbey together. Owen was only fifteen at the time but he all too well understood what was happening that hot spring morning when Isabelle threw Abbey Pritchard off the Tabor Land.

'My Dear Isabelle,

My heart breaks for your terrible news. Whatever do these men think of to treat their wives so poorly? I do not blame you for your swift action in this matter. Of course, you must not have this harlot in your home a moment longer but you must not even consider leaving your husband.

That is your home, your place in life and those boys are your sons as well as his. If you leave, he will keep the boys from you and how could you live without them? I am not saying that you should forgive your husband because forgiveness comes to those who earn it. You must not give away anything that you cherish because of Wilmot's foolishness.

I have never mentioned my own marriage because it is of such nightmares that even the brightest authors could not dream up. I have felt only fear and loathing for John Delacourt in so long I cannot remember any other way. I stay and endure it only for the sake of my darling Elizabeth. I could not imagine a life without her.

It is fortunate for us that he is rarely here. Indeed, sometimes months go past when I do not see or hear from him and we have great peace in those times. When he is here, I am subject to evil that I cannot write. I will tell you all when I next see you because you must realize that there are far worse things in life than an unfaithful husband. I will also tell you of my dear, Reverend Thaddeus Browne. Without him I would never have survived all this. His words of wisdom may also help you. Until then my friend, you must stay at your home. It is your right.

With Love, Jane Delacourt.'

Isabelle Tabor was of Spanish noble birth. As strong willed as she was dark and lovely, she did not leave her husband after his affair with Abbey Pritchard. She did rule him from that time on with a heavy hand and he rarely had any opportunities to stray. In the final turn, nature took him down. In less than a year from his time with Abbey Wilmot suffered the first of the many strokes that had left him broken in spirit.

From that date on Jane would often mention her husband and never with anything other than fear and disgust. She did not write in details what it was he had done to make his wife hate him so but it was clear that she and Isabelle had often spoken about it in person.

The next letter of interest concerned Owen directly.

'Dear Isabelle,

August 1884

Please do not give the matter a further thought. It will not affect our wonderful friendship; you and I must believe that. Elizabeth assures me that even though the handsome Owen did try his best no relations of great matter passed between them.

The poor child is so desperately in love with him, though and her heart is broken forever.... or so she says!

She is so sad but I do admit that I envy her. Do you remember those lovely days of our youth when such love was not only possible but also completely consuming and so natural? I do and how I miss them! I loved like that once and if only I had listened to my heart! But well, that was then and now we have to deal with what we have. It could be a brighter future waits even for old dears like us!

Elizabeth will recover, I am sure of that. Who can say, perhaps one day Owen and she will come across each other again when he is more mature! Until that time I shall try to comfort her with the tried and true words of wisdom that will probably only make me feel better and her much worse. What a beautiful and sad thing is the love of a virgin!

As always, your friend, Jane'

Despite himself, Owen could not help but smile at this letter. How right Jane had been to think they might find each other again but she could never have guessed the strange events that would bring them together. He remembered Elizabeth more clearly now and had to admit to himself that she still stirred him sexually as she did then. She had teased him mercilessly in the summer gardens and he had been more than willing to play along, ever hopeful to win in the end. He had not and when her parents took her away from the Tabor Estate that summer he forgot her rather quickly.

Jane's letters from this point on took a somber tune. Without Isabelle's letters, it was difficult for Owen to understand what exactly was happening at the Delacourt home but whatever it was this woman was terribly unhappy and scared for her safety and that of her daughter. She no longer hid her shame under carefully couched words. The letters written after Elizabeth had disappeared were almost too painful to read. It was clear that

Jane and at least this fellow Browne believed her husband was somehow behind the tragedy.

Owen came to the final and unopened letter:

'Dear Isabelle,

Dec 20, 1887

I had an appointment to meet with Inspector Smyth from Scotland Yard. It is all just how I feared, and dared to hope! They will arrest Delacourt when he returns to London in the next few days. What a great shame will fall onto this poor family! I cannot bring myself to write here the charges that they will lie on the man for they are as bad as you and I discussed. I am now more than certain that Delacourt knows where my child is so perhaps there is a wonderful light at the end of this tunnel. How will they make him speak of her whereabouts I have no idea.

Isabelle, you must be proud of me. With courage given to me by yourself and Reverend Browne, I shall start a new life. I am packed and ready to leave within the hour. My brother will meet me at our carefully chosen place and then bring me back to the safety of his house in Scotland.

I am frightened so that my handshakes and I can hardly write this, but still buoyed by the faith I have that I will so very soon be finally free of that mad man.

Do not worry about me, my dear. I am sure that I will be fine in just a few short hours I will be happy again. I will write to you the very moment I am at Sebastian's home and I will see you very soon.

With love, Jane.'

Owen folded the letter and placed it back in its envelope. That letter was most certainly not a suicide letter and a strong suggestion that her husband or someone working for him murdered Jane Delacourt. Since she never left London, she must have died almost exactly after she wrote and mailed this letter. Then Isabelle herself died just a couple of days later and never read this letter.

He bundled the letters and locked them in his desk. He lit a cigarette and sat back to think of what would be the best way to handle telling Elizabeth the truth as he knew he would have to do very soon. It was obvious she had placed all her hopes for the future on returning to her family house. He would have to tell her that her mother was dead, her father in prison and that most likely she no longer had a home. To tell her this he would have to tell her that he had found out that she was Elizabeth Delacourt. She would be devastated by her mother's death and humiliated because of him.

His thoughts interrupted when Daisy opened the door and stepped quietly into the room. She twisted her fingers nervously as she fumbled for her words.

"What is it, Daisy?" he asked with more patience than he felt at the time.

"It is about Mrs. Soskice, sir!"

"Well?"

"She had her bath before, so Hanna and I went in to clear up. I know that we aren't allowed to talk about this....but maybe you could just listen and I'll do the talking?"

Owen stood, looking at her from under his eyebrows. "Daisy...." he said in a

threatening tone. He had seen her this way many times and had a feeling of what was coming.

"Please, sir! It is important," she looked as though she was about to cry and so utterly miserable he backed down.

"Go ahead!" he said with a frustrated sigh.

"She'd opened the curtains, sir. The ones over the 'window'!"

"So?" in the best of his moods, he had no time for her superstitious ranting about ghosts in his home especially the ghost of his wife and this was far from the best of times for him.

"She was there! I could feel it and I think I saw her! I don't think it is safe for Mrs. Soskice to be in there on her own," Daisy spoke as fast as she could.

"Who was it you saw, Daisy?"

"You know, sir! I think only from the corner of my eye. I am sorry, Mr. Tabor. I know it is painful but..."

She did not finish. Owen stood so suddenly the chair fell over backwards. He was furious. He opened the door, glaring at her. "Get about your business and keep your hallucinations to yourself!"

There was a time when Abbey Pritchard had been the toast of the Sunday parlors in the homes of London's society. She was renowned for her sweet, childlike beauty and well paid as a psychic medium. There was no insincerity or dishonesty in this. She was just an honest young woman with the unusual talent to connect with the Other Side and pass along messages from the deceased to love ones.

It was on one of these Sunday gatherings when she met Wilmot Tabor. He was attracted by much more than her psychic abilities. She was still barely a girl, sweet to all and very innocent to the nature of illicit lust. As was his way, Wilmot made his wants and material status very clear to her. Abbey hypnotized by his virility, wealth and power and quickly became his mistress.

Abbey was too naive to know better and fell completely in love with the older man. For many years, she was at his every call. She took many reckless chances to be with him. Including the dreadful day when she lay with Wilmot in his marriage bed at Tabor Manor. It was there where Isabelle found them when she returned early from a trip. It was that night when the affair ended and Abbey took more steps along the lonesome road to her maturity.

Wilmot did not abandon her completely at first. To keep Abbey quietly away from his wife he purchased the Turtle Dove and signed it over to her. As a wayside Inn on the road between Dover and London it was a strong and growing concern and with the well-known and talented Miss Pritchard there to delight her customers with a vision to their lost ones, it would surely be a success.

Wilmot promised her that they would still be lovers and that he would visit her at the Inn often. As she suspected at the time, he did not visit her and all her letters to him returned unopened. The years passed and the Turtle Dove was indeed a success until Abbey met Emile Soskice.

Her property was larger than it need be for its use and there was a good half acreage of unused land behind the main building. Soskice was in search of a piece of land that he could rent for his gypsy family and their caravan so they could camp more or



less unmolested away from the public land. He offered Abbey a great deal of money and so they quickly came to an agreement.

Soskice had sensed the raw talent in Abbey and that she was for that most part alone in the world. He took full advantage of this and every other weakness she allowed him to

Know. He had her quickly addicted to opium and dependant on him for her supply. Under the influence of this powerful drug, he drew her into the darker arts. At a time when she had been at her lowest and completely under Emile's control Abbey had committed unspeakable sins.

She had been an unwitting party to the creation of this latest shape shifter. It was because of that event she was finally able to find the strength to break her ties with the Soskice family. The day he left her land, he placed a curse on Abbey. That curse had stripped her of her talent and her beauty. Now every day was a battle to fight off her addiction and to forget the terrible things she and Emile had done.

The raven had spent her first few days on Abbey's property, so it was with instinct and some memory that she traveled there from the Tabor Estate. To her she was simply flying home again. It was in the mid afternoon when the bird landed on the rooftop of the cottage behind The Turtle Dove that Abbey had made her home. She perched there for some time, resting and watching the comings and goings of the familiar place.

She was watching when Abbey left the cottage and made her way to a backyard chair under a tree. Except for the curly bright yellow hair, now streaked with gray, she would not have recognized the woman so changed was she. Once her body had been slim, almost childlike and was now a mass of fat and hanging folds of skin that even her well made corsets and dresses could not conceal. She looked old, worn and grotesque.

Seeing an open window the raven flew inside the house and found her way to Abbey's bedroom. The one human condition that the raven hated more than any other was the need to wear clothing. The restrictions of any cloth on her body made the experience almost unbearable. Soskice had taught her how she could appear wearing whatever she wanted when she transformed. Now, when she appeared in her human form she was wearing nothing but a long black silk robe with a brilliant red S embroidered on the shoulder.

She took a moment to look around Abbey's bedroom. It was nothing like a madam's boudoir with garish furnishings and bright color. This room was feminine and sweet with an English country flavor. Above the bed hung a portrait of Abbey, as she had been when the raven had last seen her, slim, healthy, with a pretty, and happy smile. That was before she had fallen into disfavor and Soskice had wrecked his revenge on her. The raven shook her head slowly and wondered when people would learn never to cross her Papa.

Soskice told her that Abbey kept a small gun in the nightstand by her bed. She found it under a well-worn Bible. It was very dainty, hand carved with Abbey's name engraved in the silver butt. It was loaded and very deadly. She put it in the pocket of her robe and had to admit to herself that at least having pockets was a handy thing. With Abbey's hairbrush she smoothed her black hair and then she was pleased with her appearance she left the cottage to join Abbey in the garden.

She moved silently across the tall grass and was almost beside the women before

Abbey saw her. Abbey jumped up, moving as quickly as her bulk would allow, her book

fell to the ground and the chair toppled over. She gasped and took several steps backwards.

"Hello, Abbey! How nice it is to see you again," the raven said as she sat crossed legged on the long, cool grass. "Sit and tell me how you are after these few years?"

"What do you want?" Abbey managed to ask when she had her breath again.

"As you can see I am fine," the raven said with sarcasm as she moved her hand down the length of her body. "But you look absolutely dreadful. Sit again before you fall."

Not taking her eyes off the raven in human form Abbey sat. The chair creaked miserably under weight. "I do not want any trouble," she said weakly.

"Well then, that is good. We shall have a very productive talk and then there will be no trouble. And, who knows, perhaps this will be a happy day for you after all!" The bird spoke the words just as Emile had told her to do.

Abbey sighed and again asked, "What is it that you want?"

"Wilmot Tabor is on his way to visit with you. You will remember him, no doubt?"

"Lord no! I will not see him!" Abbey exclaimed with distress as tears formed in her blood shot eyes.

"But you will. He is going to ask for your assistance in a matter of life and death and since you are such a kindly soul how can you refuse such a dear old friend? You need not worry yourself too much about your dreadful appearance. Wilmot is an old man now and much reduced to life in a wheel chair. Granted he will not want to take you to his bed again but I doubt that he has such fine needs any longer!"

As the raven spoke, Abbey could see the evil gypsy's face transposed over hers and she was all too well aware that it was he who really spoke to her.

"What has Emile done now?" Abbey asked with resignation.

With anger the raven said, "It would be a wiser question to ask what Tabor has done? Our Jack was murdered by his son, the fool Edward and when Papa demanded justice he was instead thrown into chains and the rest of his family into the Tabor dungeons!"

"Please tell me that he did not curse them?" No one knew better than Abbey about the terrible dark power of Emile Soskice.

The raven smiled and nodded. "Jack's murderer is already dead; with all gratitude due to me. But there is still much more for us to do."

"But if the murderer is dead then isn't it finished?"

"You should know that nothing is ever that simple when it comes to my Papa. And you have been lucky enough to have been chosen to help us."

"Lucky? That is not the word that I would use." Abbey wiped small rivers of sweat from her face with her hanky. "Understand this, raven, and we will save time here and you can be on your way. I will never be a party to any more of Emile Soskice's evil doings most especially if those are intended for the Wilmot Tabor."

"We thought you might think that way but perhaps I can change your mind," there was a tone of threat in the raven's voice. It gave her even more the sound of Soskice.

"What more can Emile do to me? He took my beauty, my health and my only talent. If he kills me it would be better than life like this!"

"But you see, Abbey, it is not death that we offer you. What he took from you he can return and it is as simple as that. Do you not wish to be as you were? So lovely and such a gifted medium, in demand by so many or are you happy to be unloved and ugly?" the raven asked as she stood and began to walk towards Abbey's cottage.

"Where are you going?"

"I shall give you time to think and when you have decided come inside and tell me," she said over her shoulder as she reached the doorway. She stopped and looked over her shoulder but it was not the beautiful face of the shape shifter that Abbey saw but the ugly grimace of Emile Soskice.

"Good God, help me!" Abbey muttered and crossed herself. She did not in any way trust Emile but how could she take the chance to offend him yet again. It could very well be that he might lift this curse from her and that would be the answer of her prayers. In the fifteen years since she had last seen Wilmot Tabor he had not once contacted her to see how she was fairing. He had not even bothered to read her letters. So why, a small voice of reason spoke to her, should she protect him? With shaking legs, she got to her feet and went inside her small house.

"That did not take too long," the raven smiled at Abbey as she closed the door. "Have you come to your senses?"

Owen crossed the hallway and slipped silently inside his bedroom. Sunlight floated in across the length of the room but his bed in the corner was in the shadows. The air smelled of Hanna's fragrant homemade soaps and the sweet aroma of clean skin. He moved quietly to the side of the bed and watched the sleeping woman and her child. The baby's little head lay next to an exposed breast. The cloth that covered the other breast was wet with milk. Gently he covered them with a blanket.

He looked at her sleeping face and tried to remember the times he spent with her all those years ago. These memories were vague and blurred with the faces and bodies of the many other young females he had charmed. From what Jane Delacourt wrote to Isabelle he was certain that they had not actually had sexual relations but that would not have been for a want of trying on his part. This time their meeting stirred him in a different sort of way. An awakening somewhere in the long forgotten recesses of his heart, the powerful desire to protect and avenge.

Owen took a deep breath, crossed the room and sat in his favorite chair. He needed a quiet time to think and make some sense of the last days. The death of Jack Soskice meant little to him. It would seem that he got the justice that he deserved and would not be a loss to anyone. The murder of Edward was another matter. He was not surprised that Edward had met an untimely end but the events around the murder and the disappearance of the body was highly troubling. How the Hell, he wondered did the murderer get away from the widow's walk and leave the door locked from the outside? No one could have ever climbed down that deeply slanted roof without assistance of ropes but they would have still be there had someone escaped that way. What had happened to the head? These things he pondered as he sat in the quiet shadows of his room.

He dozed lightly and woke a short time later when he heard Elizabeth yawn and

sniff. He could tell that she was not aware of his presence and watched in silence as she carefully lowered the baby into his basket. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, stood, stretching and adjusted the bodice of her nightshirt. She walked across the floor towards the window at the far end of the large room.

She leaned across the window seat and slightly parted the sheers that hung over the glass. From there she could see some of the lovely gardens planted so long ago by Owen's mother and still bloomed all these years later. She sighed and sat down. "I have to get away from this place!" she whispered.

To the left of where she sat, a long narrow table covered with a dustsheet that caught her attention. She lifted the cover and saw that the table was set with an array of artists' supplies. There were a large number of paint tubes, brushes, bottles and scattered half-finished sketches.

Above that table hung half dozen paintings that were striking in their detail and brilliant color. The first and largest the portrait of a handsome woman with lovely peach colored skin and bright green almond shaped eyes. She had thick dark hair that was styled in the manner of several decades before. On the frame was a gold plate with the name Margaret.

Next to this were five other paintings of a very different woman. She was young, very well built and had a pretty, proud face. She had an almost elf like appearance and a charmingly sweet smile. One of these paintings was a nude. She lay sprawled with abandon on a bed. In this painting, she was not elf like but very sexual and alluring. Elizabeth was amazed with the excellence of these paintings and leaned closer to see the name of the artist. She found only the initials OT in the lower right corner. "OT? Could that be Owen? Did he paint these beautiful things?"

"Yes, I did, Elizabeth," he spoke quietly. She gasped and fell backwards onto the window seat.

"It is me, Owen!" he said quickly moving towards her when he realized just how much he had frightened her.

"Oh, bloody hell! You scared the shit out of me!" she exclaimed and Owen had to smile at the rough language that she seemed to use at times of stress.

"Sorry! But you were sleeping so nicely when I came in that I did not want to wake you!"

"Well, I am awake now, Owen. Lord, now my head is spinning again!" she came back and sat down heavily on the bed. "You painted those?"

"I did. My mother and wife. Do you like them?"

"They are wonderful, you are very talented," she whispered. She thought of his large, rough hands with the long square fingers and could hardly imagine them holding a tiny paintbrush, let alone creating such deep and sensitive pieces of art.

"Thank you. It has been a long time since I even thought of doing any painting. That talent is lost."

"No, Owen! Such a blessing is a gift from God and can never be lost, but maybe misplaced for a time. Hanna told me that this lovely room was the product of Lady Tabor's talent. You must have inherited the gift from her."

"I suppose so, but we are all born with some kind of talent. It is just a matter of finding it."

"Well, I have no such talent. My mother tried to teach me water colors but most

of my paintings look like puddles of mud," almost immediately, she remembered that she had told him her mother was not around in her youth and she blushed miserably as she added, "But that was before she ran away!"

"No doubt!" Owen said and thought that if Elizabeth had any talent it most certainly was not lying. "I understand that you are well enough to leave today."

"Yes!" she said quickly. "I am completely myself again. It would be wonderful if you could provide me with a ride to the nearest train station," she stopped suddenly aware that she wore only a nightshirt. "Oh yes! Of course, I cannot travel dressed like this. I do have some clothes in Jack's wagon. Not much more than rags really but they will do to see me home again. Could you please have someone fetch my things for me?"

Owen watched her as she traced the cracks in the wooden floor with her toes. "I am afraid that they are no longer here. I let the Soskice family go a few hours ago!"

"Sweet Jesus, you didn't?"

"I had to, Elizabeth. The police have come to investigate my brother's death. This is not the dark ages. We are soon in a new century! No matter how much he hates the thought, my father no longer has the right to hold whomever he likes in his jails. Nevertheless, I do not think that you have to worry about the Soskice Clan. They seemed to have little interest in you or for that matter in Soskice. Not a very loyal lot, that bunch."

"So you have not released Emile?"

"No! He is locked firmly away so you need not fear him any longer."

"I wish that was true. You do not understand! Emile will want Richard. Especially now that Jack is dead and cannot stop him. That is why I have to get to the safety of my

mother's house as soon as possible." She did it again only this time she did not notice.

"Surely you can find some clothes for me, anything at all. I don't care what I wear?"

"Let me see, stand up!" he said as he came to her. She did as he said and he placed his hands around her waist as though to measure her size. He felt her stiffen under his hands and pull away from him. "I am just checking your size," he stood back and looked her up and down. "You are too thin, do you know that?"

"Thank you!" She was indignant. "I have not been offered much to eat in these last few years."

"I can get you some clothes, a lot in fact. They may be a trifle on the large side, though. My late step mother's clothes are still on their hangers in her closet. She was wider than you but as you say, beggars cannot be choosers!"

"I did not know that Lady Isabelle was dead!"

"Did you know my step mother?" He wondered how long she would keep up her game.

"No, well...Hanna mentioned her to me this morning as well!" she stuttered. She felt dizzy and sat back down on the bed. God, please help me get out of here before he finds out who I am, she prayed silently.

"I will fetch you some of her unused clothes later on today. But you will have to make a deal with me first."

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"I have to go to London on business perhaps as soon as tomorrow. I will get you

the clothes and give back your money if you will wait here and accompany me when I leave.

I will take you safely to the doorstep of wherever you want to go. I would much prefer that other than just leaving you and the child at a train station. At least I can be sure you reach your home unmolested by any of the Soskice group."

"I would much rather leave today, right now. You do not understand how much danger Richard and I are in. Even in your house and even with him chained to your tower, Emile can still reach me. I have no idea how but I know he can."

"So if that is the case, will you be safe in your London home? Won't you be in as much danger there? If he can get at you here, he can get at you there. At least while you are here you have me to watch over you."

She knew he was right. Was there any place she could be completely free of Emile Soskice? "Oh God! What am I going to do?" She covered her face with her hands and shuddered with frustration.

"Fight him! That would be my suggestion."

She lowered her hands, looking at Owen with wide eyes, "Then give me a pistol and take me to him!" she stood, went to the window and pointed to the tower. "He is in there, isn't he? I will kill him and it will be the best thing I have ever done," she spun quickly back to Owen. "If that was possible someone would have killed him by now. Emile cannot be killed!" What little color there was in her face drained and her eyes fluttered.

"Christ, not again!" he rushed, caught her before she slipped to the floor and placed her back on his bed. "Is fainting a bad habit of yours?" he asked as he gently tapped her face.

She moaned slightly and opened her eyes. "What happened?" she asked.

"You fainted, again! I do not care what you say, Elizabeth, you are not yet ready for travel. You will stay here under my care and protection and I will take you home. That is all there is to it."

"Oh, hell! What is wrong with me? Look, Owen, I am so sorry for being such a pain. You are being very kind to me today. Thank you!"

"As opposed to my lecherous ways yesterday? Tell me; was what I offered so repulsive to you? For me, making love to a beautiful woman is a very natural and wonderful thing. Was I wrong in thinking that you are terribly damaged?"

"No, you are not wrong." she took a deep breath and let him wipe perspiration from her forehead and neck. "My sole desire is for home and safety," she paused for a second, sighed then added, "I will tell you this without shame, because it was not my fault, but I have known no sexual relations other than those forced on me. Perhaps I will never want any man in that way."

For the first time he knew she spoke the truth of her feelings. He was touched by her honesty and strength.

"What a terrible shame that would be. A woman like you," he looked down the length of her body, "should be given that special joy every day. I can only slightly understand what terror you suffered, please believe me, men like that are the exception and not the rule. The right man, a kind and gentle touch could ease your nightmare and wake you.

You'd soon find undeniable pleasure in your body and his..." he stopped, shook his head

as to shake away the images he was enjoying. "I should be quiet now. I am a visual thinker, the images are distracting and I am sometimes carried away."

Under all his facial hair, she saw that he was actually blushing. She smiled, "Actually, I was enjoying your words. I do not believe a word of it but the fairy tale was nice just the same." She tried to sit up but was quickly on her back again. "Why am I so dizzy?" she demanded with force.

Owen motioned to several small paper packages on the nightstand. "Do you want another of Mrs. Willard's powders?"

"No, they make me too sleepy and Richard will wake soon. I'll need to care for him."

"That reminds me!" Owen took the jar Mavis had given him from his pocket and pulled out the cork.

"What is that? Does it ever pong?"

"Be quiet and stay still. That bandage is foul!" Slowly he removed the gauze from her forehead. There was a great deal of blood in the bandage but the wound seemed to have begun to dry. The bruising that surrounded the large lump had spread down her face and under her hair. He dipped his finger into the salve and touched it to the gash. "Apparently this will help the healing and perhaps prevent the scarring. Sit up, turn around and lower your gown!"

"Pardon?"

"Mavis told me about the scars. Now, sit up, turn around and lower your gown."

She sighed and did as he told her. She held tightly to the front of her night shirt and let the back slide down. He pushed her hair forward. It was as the old woman had said; her back was a mess of torn and healed flesh. The more recent scars closer to her neck were still red and swollen. From her waist to her hairline was a morbid story of abuse and misery. He dared not to even think or ask about the burn marks. He wanted to say something to give comfort but any words he thought of seemed trivial. Gently he spread more of the suave over her back, across her shoulders and just slightly below her waist.

At his first touch, Elizabeth felt her face burn with embarrassment. The gently circling movement of his fingers was the first kind touch she had known for years. She closed her eyes, relaxed and without knowing it, she swayed slightly with the movement of Owen's hands. When he had finished he pulled the sides of her clothing back in place. That simple kindness broke the dam of tears that she had held in check for so very long. She began to weep, in long wrenching sobs. Owen put his arms around her, pulled her back against his chest and held her until there were no more tears.

"I am sorry!" she said turning to face him. "I did not want you to see my weakness!" As her tears stopped, she became aware of a cold sweat breaking out all over her body.

"It is not a weakness to cry, Elizabeth! I believe it is weakness to hold back tears. And you do not have to apologize all that time. As far as I can tell, you have done nothing wrong." He took a clean hanky from a drawer in his dresser and handed it to her. She took it and wiped her face.

"Have you learned anything new about Edward's murder?" she asked quietly. Her hand shook as gave him back his hanky.

"Not yet. The police are on to it now so we will see."

"Your family must be devastated."

Owen shook his head slowly. "He was a tragic waste of humanity right from the moment he was born! As a family we are not surprised that he ended up this way, but I did think he might last a while longer."

"I told you, Emile killed him."

"Edward had a great many enemies other than Emile bloody Soskice and none of them are chained to a wall!"

"While I am still here I can help you but only if you will let me!"

Owen had noticed her shaking hands and the paleness of her face under the bruising. "Are you sure you are feeling all right?"

"No! I am fine, Owen. Just so very tired. Richard had me up most of the night. I should sleep while he does. Would you mind leaving us for a little while?" She lay back onto the pillows and pulled the covers over her body.

"I will send for the Willard woman!"

"No, Owen, really I am fine, just tired, that is all."

Owen wanted to argue but thought better of it, for the time being. He pulled the bell cord to where she could reach it if she needed to and quietly left the room.

At twenty two Henry Tabor had two mistresses, gambling and alcohol, and each in their own all-consuming way demanded his energy. He was devoted to these two passions to the exclusion of all else. Soon after that dreadful scene with Edward and the rest of his family, he packed a bag and left the estate heading for the small house he owned on the outskirts of the city of Dover.

It was the perfect place for him to indulge his needs and just far enough away from Owen to dampen his attempts to control his life. He would return to the estate weekly, as his father demanded, in order to claim his allowance and whatever else he might be able to pry loose from his father's tight purse strings. He kept no full time house staff, only a grounds keeper and a groom. A housekeeper would come most days at 8 am. Often as not he would pay her, send her off again preferring to be on his own as he slept off the effects of the night before.

He spent most of that night and well into the morning hours of the next day at the house of a local doctor better known for his exclusive and high stakes poker games than he was for healing the sick. It was near dawn when Henry pulled his clip up to the side of his house.

He was preparing strong coffee when a loud knock came from his door. It startling him and did nothing for his headache. "What?" Henry snapped as he pulled the door open. "Good Lord! What the Hell are you doing here?"

"I have to speak with you, Mr. Tabor!" the visitor answered with an earnest and serious voice. "I am supposed to tell you something important."

"Alright! Come in and make it fast."

The visitor stepped smartly into the foyer and closed the door. Henry had turned his back to walk into his parlor. He did not see the knife that the other brought up and across his throat in one swift, deep slash. He felt only briefly a burning pain in his neck and saw a river of red run down his body as he fell to the floor.

It was helpful that Henry's home was on such a lonely lane and the morning mist



so thick. No one saw that stranger loading a rolled carpet onto the back of the wagon. No one heard the snap of the horsewhip or the bright tune he whistled as he rolled away into the countryside.

## Chapter Four

When the raven finished with Abbey late that afternoon, she was well aware of what Soskice expected of her. She would be required to deceive an old friend and lover. She would place a vicious enemy in his home. All so that she might finally be free of the terrible curse that Emile Soskice had placed on her. To end that curse was a much more powerful force than memories of a lost love.

"So, do you understand the situation entirely, Abbey?"

Abbey nodded. "Then..." she paused, looking for the right words, "when all is done, will I be myself again?"

"That will be so when the last Tabor is dead and not a moment before!" she narrowed her amazing silver colored eyes and spoke in a very menacing tone, "Make no mistakes with this or you will have me to answer to!"

Abbey did not respond. There was no need. She knew very well what the creature Emile had created was capable of doing. Born of the devil she had no limits to what she would do and knew only absolute loyalty to Emile. She was beautiful, wanton and deadly.

The hours seemed to pass very slowly for Abbey as she tended to the needs of her active business. No matter what the customers' demands might be, of either thirst or lust, they were satisfied. She busied herself with this and buoyed herself with glass after glass of whiskey until her mind was numb enough to ignore the danger and her tongue glib enough to act the part she must play.

It was near the dinner hour when she saw James Whitehall come through the tavern doorway. Unlike Abbey, he had changed very little in the years since she had last seen him. He was tall and lean with broad shoulders and had the confident walk of a man who was very comfortable with himself and his life. The gray of his hair and the lines on his face did not fade the powerful attraction of this male. She was deeply humiliated that he should see her as she looked then. There was nothing she could do, but face these men and let the whiskey give her courage.

He stood at the bar and ordered ale. At first, she pretended not to recognize him. She could feel his eyes on her and knew very well what he was thinking. Remembering her as the beauty she had been before and seeing the mess that she was then. Oh, well, she thought, let him have a good look because in not too much time, I will be what I was and he would beg me to lay with him.

"Excuse me!" James said as Abbey passed near to him. "Are you Abbey Pritchard?" He did not even try to hide his unhappy surprise.

"That would be me, indeed." She smiled. "James? James Whitehall? Well, I will be a monkey's uncle! It has been such a long time I hardly knew you!" She knew that he was thinking the same thing about her.

"A few years and more." He finished the last drops in his glass and slid some coins across the bar top.

"You keep your money, James Whitehall, what would I be if I could not give an

old friend a drink in my own establishment?" she held up the glass in an offering of seconds.

"No, thank you Abbey! As much as I wish it were, this is not strictly a social visit. Wilmot is waiting outside. He wants a quiet moment of your time?"

"Don't tell me that Wilmot is here as well? With me looking like something that dog dragged home. Yes, of course, we can have a lovely chat in my humble home out back. Bring your carriage around and I will meet you outside," she took another long drink and tried to steady her nerves.

She watched from the kitchen window as the grand black and gold coach pulled to a halt and James lifted down a wheel chair. It was true what the raven had said about Wilmot. Time had not been kind to him. This thought gave her some mean solace as she attempted to make sense of her matted and fuzzy hair and pulled the tent like dress into place.

"Just so you will be prepared, Wilmot, Abbey does not look as she did!" James said as they moved the carriage around.

"What?" Wilmot was distracted and frustrated with the extremely long day on the highways.

"She's a mess. Lord, she is so fat. I hardly knew her!"

"Well, that is not what we are here for is it. I don't give a pig's ass what she looks like just as long as she helps me!"

Abbey timed her exit just as Wilmot was being helped in his chair. "Wilmot, my dear old friend!" she said as she waddled up to the men. "How nice to see you again!"

She held out her hand and Wilmot took it. Perhaps if he had held back the slight shudder or resisted the urge to wipe his hand from the feel of her sweaty touch, Abbey might have tried harder to remember the time when he was her lover and the great love she had once held for him. However, she saw his reaction and the small voice of kind reason and good was silenced.

"Come inside my simple home, gentlemen!" she offered and led them inside and saw them comfortable with whiskey and cigarettes.

Abbey could see how intensely uncomfortable and impatient Wilmot was so she prolonged his agony with polite talk of old news, familiar names and best-forgotten issues. Finally, as she had refilled their glasses she said, "Well, Wilmot, I am sure you did not travel all this way just to see my lovely self, again!" she laughed with sarcasm. "So, why have you come?"

"Do you know of a creature named Emile Soskice?" Wilmot asked, greatly relieved to get to the nub of the matter.

"Emile Soskice, yes, of course I do! Anyone who dapples in white or black arts is all too aware of that man! For a time I rented a strip of land next to the river to him as a campground. An evil bastard he is too! I was happy to see the backside of him for the last time. Please tell me that you have not run afoul of him?" she asked, suitably disturbed.

"I have not run afoul of him; it is he who has run afoul of me. He is in my chains and in my tower." Wilmot said firmly.

"Sweet Jesus! Why did you do that?"

"Because my useless son, Edward killed his equally useless son and so he put a bloody curse on the Tabor name! That is why!"

Abbey closed her eyes and sat back in her chair. "Edward is dead? I am so sorry!"

"Save your sorrow for those who deserve it, my dear. Edward was not one of them!" Wilmot sounded tired and angry.

"Of all the evil people in this world Soskice is one of the worst. I have seen him with my own eyes walk with the devil and when I turned my back on him, he cursed me. He did this to me," she looked down at her body and then from one man to the other. "I presume that you have come to me for help?"

Wilmot nodded, "If Soskice did that to you, then you must hate him as I do! Abbey, help me to break this curse and I will pay you anything you ask!"

"But if she could break a curse," James spoke for the first time since they sat together, "would she not break the curse that has been placed on her?"

"I have tried, James, Lord knows how I have tried. We cannot break the curses set against us, only those on others. There is no one with the power to help me and the strength of the curse grows with time. I suppose I can help you, Wilmot and in that way I could get even with bloody Emile Soskice!"

"Good!" Wilmot rubbed his hands together. "Now, how and when do we start?"

Abbey took her time in answering, not wanting to seem too eager. "First I should tell you about my protégé, a young lady named Reine Crawford. She is a most talented medium and just the person you need. When I found her, she was barely a girl. She was then under the thumb of an uncle who would not hear of her special talents but now she is

in my care and teaching," Abbey paused for a moment looking at her distorted hands with fingers so fat she could no longer make a fist. She remembered, just barely, the last time

she had held onto the shoulders of a handsome lover. "You know, as I think of it, there is no doubt that a powerful hand guides in such times as these!"

"How do I contact this Reine Crawford?" Wilmot asked.

"You don't! I will do that. I have her cared for not too far from here so that I can continue working with her without bringing her here. This is not the place for such a gentle spirit as my dear Reine. I shall send word to her first thing in the morning and then we shall come to your Estate. Of course, you understand that I must come with her, for her own protection and I can also be a valuable help."

"Of course, Abbey, you must come with her and as I say I will pay you any amount for this service; that is if you break the curse!" Wilmot looked from her to James who just slowly shook his head. "If you do not break the curse well, then I will not be here to pay anyone anything."

"That is settled then. Now, you go back to your home, Wilmot, gather you sons about you, double the guards on your home and let no one in that you are not sure about. Reine and I will arrive tomorrow!"

She sat and watched as James wheeled Wilmot out to the coach and was not surprised when he returned to her parlor.

"Yes, James?" she smiled at him.

"Abbey, I am not sure if you understand the seriousness of this situation. I am not a believer in curses as they stand but I do know that to the people who believe in them they are indeed powerful things!"

She nodded in agreement.

"So, to save time I will just say that I do not trust you. I never have. I shall be watching you and this protégé of yours very carefully."

"I understand James and I do admire such loyalty. You have nothing to fear from me."

"But you have a great deal to fear from me if you double cross us!" With that, he was gone and Abbey did not move until the sound of the carriage faded away. Then she stood and pulled open the door of the armoire and waited as the raven stepped out.

"Well done, Abbey! I have to say that you missed your calling; you should have been on the stage!" She grinned. "Where did you get that name Reine Crawford from?"

"You have to have a name. A few years back one my girls died. I still have the things she brought with her. The suitcase she brought when she came here has the initials RC on it. I packed all her clothes and things back in it and put it in storage. We will bring that with us tomorrow."

"But I don't need clothes; you know that! As much as I hate wearing clothes I can appear as I want."

"But, Reine!" Abbey said with sarcasm. "I thought you were smarter than that? From now on, you need to appear in every way 'normal' so you had better have luggage, don't you think?"

"Perhaps you will be a value after all," the raven nodded. "I have to get back to Papa." She gave Abbey instructions on where and when they would meet the following morning. "Rest well, Abbey!" she said as she raised her hands over her head and lowered her body to the ground.

"Excuse me, Miss Elizabeth! Please wake up!" Daisy said as she gently touched the sleeping woman's shoulder. She was holding Richard who was complaining miserably. "It is only that your little one has been crying for a while."

Elizabeth sat up quickly looking confused. "Oh dear! What time is it?" She threw the covers back and got to her feet.

"After six in the evening," Daisy answered watching the other woman closely. The brighter look to her pale face was gone. The horrible bruising stood out clearly on the white skin.

"I usually wake at his slightest noise," Elizabeth said with surprise. She hardly got the words out when an overwhelming sense of nausea spread over her. She bent with the pain and leaned heavily on the desk beside the bed.

"Are you alright?"

"I am fine," she snapped and pulled back. "Just fine," she added with a little less force. The sick feeling came again but this time she could not hold it back and just made it to the bedpan on time before wave after wave of painful nausea rolled through her.

"Bloody Hell!" she gasped when she felt it was over.

Daisy took a diaper from the nearby stack, wiped Elisabeth's face and covered the bedpan.

"Daisy, please promise me that you will not tell Owen or Hanna about this!" Elizabeth asked breathlessly as she pulled herself to her feet.

"But, you are sick, Ma'am!"

"I am not sick. This is just a small set back from my head wound. That is all!" She lowered herself into the large leather chair. The cool leather felt wonderful against her burning skin. She took the baby from Daisy and put him on her breast, laid her head back and closed her eyes. "Promise me that you will not tell them!"

"I promise, I won't say anything!" Daisy had to agree for there was little else she could do. She looked out the window across the Tabor land to the hills at the cliffs where the black tower pointed to the sky. "Do you think it is him in there that is making you sick?" she asked.

"What?"

"Is it the gypsy making you sick? Maybe he wants your baby and has cursed you like he did the Tabors!"

"No!" Elizabeth answered with much less conviction than she had hoped. "It is nothing of the sort. I am recovering from a head wound that is all. These things are to be expected."

"If you say so, Ma'am!" Daisy sounded doubtful.

"I do and so the subject is closed."

Daisy remembered the original reason that she came into the room. "Oh, I almost forgot. Mr. Tabor has brought all these clothes over from the main house for you. And even some under garments, as well," she held up a rather large and heavy corset. "But I think you will have to wrap this around you twice before it fits!" Both women laughed breaking the tension that was so thick in the room.

"If then!" Elizabeth said. "Thank God I will finally have something to wear. I am growing really tired of being almost naked in a strange man's bed.... oh dear, that did not come out the way that I really meant."

Daisy giggled as she folded the garment and placed it back on the table. "I think that Mr. Tabor would very much like to join you in his bed!"

"Daisy!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "Heavens, you should not talk that way." She could not help but like the sweet and honest young girl.

"There's no shame in having a man want you in that way. The shame is in the doing, or that is what Hanna says. I'd rather like to have a man like Owen Tabor in my bed and I ain't done that, ever!"

"Keep it that way and you'll be happier. A man will only break your heart in the end. I think I need to eat, Daisy!" Elizabeth added the last more to change the subject than anything else.

"Oh my, I almost forgot that too! Mr. Tabor wants you to join him for supper in his study, if you are feeling up to it. It will be ready in about half an hour or so."

"Yes. It will be nice to leave this room. I feel as though I have spent years in here and in this ugly nightshirt. Please tell him I will join him there."

Daisy smiled, picked up the bedpan. "Are you sure you are well enough?"

"Yes, I am sure. I am fine!"

When Richard was satisfied and back in his basket Elizabeth examined the clothes that Owen had brought for her. They were elegant, well made and in the style of Isabelle Tabor as Elizabeth remembered her. With the exception of the petticoat, the undergarments were impossibly large for her small frame. Oh well, she thought, I can do without underwear for the time being, no one will ever know.

She chose a straight black satin skirt and a green silk blouse. She took a white

lace shawl and tied it tightly around her waist as a belt to help make the clothes feel and fit better. Then with Owen's rarely used hairbrush and a ribbon she pulled from the sleeve of one of the dresses she brushed her hair and pulled it into a smooth loose braid that she wore down her right shoulder. Taking a closer look in the mirror, she studied the wound on her forehead. It was not as swollen as it had been. She made a mental note to use more of Mrs. Willard's salve that night.

Hanna knocked lightly on the door and opened it. "My! You do look lovely!" she smiled brightly at Elizabeth.

"Thank you! I do feel much more like myself with real clothes on again."

"The evening meal is ready, if you are hungry?" Hanna asked.

"Famished!" Elizabeth nodded.

"Would you want us to keep an eye on young Richard while you and Mr. Tabor eat? Give you a few moments to relax."

"Well that would be very nice of you. I am sure he must be tired of seeing only my face or the inside of that basket!"

Hanna picked up the baby and his basket bed and the two women went out into the hallway. Hanna pointed to a door across the way and down a bit. "Owen's a lovely man, my dear," she whispered, "but he is a little too high strung in some areas!" Just so you will be warned." She hurried off down the hallway.

The younger woman smiled and nodded in agreement. Her stomach growled hungrily at her as she stepped into the study.

He was standing looking out the window and turned to her as she entered. "Well, well!" he said looking her openly up and down, "you do clean up rather nicely!"

"I will take that as a compliment," she smiled at him. Somewhere in the back of her mind a warning voice sounded. No matter how nice he was or how handsome she must never let her guard down, not for a moment. The voice was barely a whisper and easy for a woman starved of affection to ignore.

"I hope that you do not mind my rather informal manner of eating. I take most of my meals in here and this is as dressed up as I ever become," he wore the same black trousers and knee-high boots, white shirt and leather vest that she had seen him in the day before.

"I see! Perhaps you might want to change your shirt once in a while, do you agree?"

"But I did change my shirt. Some strange woman got blood all over the last one I was wearing."

"Then you should be more careful of the females you pick up," she could not resist the little joke and was pleased to see Owen laugh. It was a deep, full laugh and Elizabeth

liked the sound of it. "I will buy you a new shirt one day to replace that one," she said as she admired the warmth and comforting style of the room. The room was full of drama, texture, color, and much like the great room.

Owen led her to a small circular table that was loaded with bowls of roasted potatoes, vegetables, a lovely smoked ham and a freshly baked loaf of bread and a large slab of butter. They sat and Owen poured two large glasses of wine.

"Do you think I should drink that? I mean, well, maybe, oh well, why not?" she raised her glass and added, "A toast?"

"Yes, of course!" Owen raised his glass. "But to what? I will leave that to you."

She thought for a moment and said, "To freedom!"

"A toast to freedom and to honesty! Both certainly worthy of a toast!" he agreed and they touched glasses. He watched as she began her meal with great relish. He was pleased to see that she was not of the foolish belief that an appetite was not feminine.

Elizabeth was aware that he was staring at her but was far too hungry to care. For the most part, they ate in silence. It was the easy, quiet time of two people who are well used to each other. She finished her plate and drink quickly and Owen refilled her glass. She felt so much better than she had just a short time before and decided it was simply being so hungry that had made her so ill.

She sat back in the chair and noticed that he had hardly touched his food and was still watching her closely. "Do you always stare at your dinner guests like that?"

Owen shrugged slightly and answered, "I am trying to think of what to do with you!"

"Do with me? I think that you really do not have much choice!"

"I mean what do to with you right now!" He suddenly seemed to make a decision and stood. "Come along."

"Why? Where are we going?" She refilled her glass and stood.

"Outside. You need some fresh air and so do I."

"I can't go outside; what if I am seen?"

"You should try not to be so paranoid, Elizabeth. I have told you that you are safe with me." He smiled and motioned for her to follow him as he took a key from his desk and unlocked a narrow door at the far end of the room. "Trust me, you will be fine at the end of all this, I promise you that!"

"Alright, I guess that it is me who has no choice then."

"Exactly. Now come on!" He took her hand and pulled her behind him up the stairs behind the doorway.

"Lord, it is as dark as a whore's ass in here! I can't see a bloody thing!" she complained.

Owen continued upwards holding her hand tightly. "You should really try and work on your language, although I must say I do find it rather charming!" He could not help but smile and she mumbled something that he could not hear but could imagine what it was.

He opened another door, pushed it open and they stepped out of the darkness. "This used to be my bedroom. No one has been in here in a very long time." The furniture covered in dust sheets that were themselves covered in gray dust. He pulled opened French doors that led out to a large stone balcony. Still holding her hand, he led her outside. In the shade of an ancient oak tree were a garden swing and several chairs.

"This is very nice! Do you never use any of the rooms on this floor?" She sat on the swing, ignoring the leaves and twigs scattered on it.

"Not since Nora died. As there is just Hanna, Daisy and myself who live here there did not seem to be much point. I do not entertain and chose to live rather simply." He pulled forward a chair and sat across from her.

"That will surely change when you are Lord of the Manor, don't you agree?"

"Not in the way that you might think. I will continue to live here. I have often



thought that I might do something worthwhile with the Hall. Perhaps I will turn it into a home for poor children, some such thing. I don't know for sure but it is a terrible waste for so much to belong to a few when many are homeless."

Elizabeth was surprised and said so. The glasses of wine had loosened her inhibitions. "I think you are really are marvelous man, Owen Tabor and when all is said and done I think I will have a lot to thank you for!" she leaned forward and briefly placed her hand on his knee. "Please come and sit beside me I have something I wish to tell you!" Some of her words were now slightly slurred.

Good Lord, Owen thought, she is drunk. That was not what he had in mind at all. He wanted to tell her about her mother and father and the fact that he knew who she was. He had to wonder now if this was the best time. He did as she asked, sitting facing her with one arm along the back of the swing. He fixed his piercing green eyes into hers and waited.

"This is all very sad and personal but you should know this to understand me better!" Owen said nothing so she continued after taking another long drink from her glass. "I was a virgin the night I was given to the Soskice men. I had knowledge of the sex act but no experience....but I have already told you that!"

"Yes, you did."

"Well, I want to explain it more! Jack and Emile and the woman who was with them, I guess she must have worked for them, made me drink something that must have knocked me out because I have no memory of leaving my father or the place that he had taken me," she sighed, shook her head and finished her third glass of wine.

"When I woke I was in some place that I had never been before. I was alone with that woman. She had removed all my clothing!" She shrugged, took Owen's glass from his hand and drank it in one mouthful. "I was naked on a bed with my hands tied to the head board. She told me to be calm, just do what I was told and then it would not hurt so much."

"You do not have to tell me this, Elizabeth."

"But I do, I have to tell you. I have to tell someone! Please, can I tell you?"

He nodded. A painful knot settled in his belly. He felt the shame of man for the terrible acts of another.

"She tied my feet to the bedposts and put some terrible perfume on me. I begged her to let me go but she ignored me. She left the room and Emile came in after her."

"Emile?" Owen exclaimed. He knew what she was going to say next. Anger raced through his blood as he saw in his mind's eye that wretched thing in the old tower.

"Yes, Emile. He stood there for the longest time just looking at me and I prayed to the Lord to help me but He did not. Emile. touched my breasts and asked me if I had fucked before. When I did not answer, he used his fingers to see if I was a virgin. I tried to move away from him. He slapped my face and told me that he would fuck me or kill me, it was up to me. After a long time he raped me!"

"The following day they made me marry Jack and again they tied me to the bed. That night Emile raped me again and Jack watched. Then Jack did as his father and Emile watched. You see, Owen, what I am telling you is that every time I have been with a man, every time it was a vicious, disgusting thing. Repeatedly for all those years, almost nightly I faced that nightmare. In time, I no longer fought because the beatings

were so unbearable.”

Owen said nothing and struggled to control his rage. To his surprise, she leaned forward and very gently kissed him on the lips but before he could react in any way, she pushed him away and got quickly to her feet. “My Lord!” she exclaimed with anger, “why did you make me drink that much wine?”

“I did not make you, it was your ....”

“Shit!” She straightened her blouse and pulled the shawl belt tighter. “Why is that I cannot spend more than ten minutes with you without making a total and complete ass out of myself. God, I cannot wait until I am back at my own home again!”

“Be quiet!” he said gently as he took her arm and pulled her back down onto the swing seat. This time he kissed her, as softly as he could until he felt her begin to relax and return the kiss. He felt the beginning rise of passion in her and then holding her face in his hands he pulled back from her. “You have been living in a brutal night mare. I may

have been slightly selfish. But for God's sake, Elizabeth, you did invite me with your lovely dance,” he stopped, cleared his throat and tried to get back to his train of thought. “I will make no more advances on you. I hope that one day you wake and find that the nightmare is truly over. And, if I am a lucky man you will want to spend more interesting time with me.”

She let her eyes stay locked into his and said breathlessly. “Then I will try very hard to wake and when I do you will be the first to know.”

Then he smiled and laughed. “I like you, Lizzie. I have to admit that at first I did think you were just another gypsy slut but I was wrong. Believe me; I do not admit to be wrong often. You are a female with a unique nature of strength, you say what you think and I admire that.”

Downstairs unseen and unheard the ghost of Nora Tabor moved slowly in her snake like fashion around the great room. She searched for the baby, lured by the warmth of the young one's life aura. She kept her eyes shut and her face turned to the floor because the things she saw terrified her. Things that suggested to her that this might no longer be her home, that Owen might no longer be her man and that she should leave his world. The things she would never accept so she stayed locked in her world of memories.

She could soon tell the child was not in the room and began to panic. She would have to leave her sanctuary and go in search of him. In her sad and impossible sad state, she had never left the room where she and Owen had married.

Hanna and Daisy had fun playing with Richard. They washed and changed him. They fed him mashed potatoes with just a touch of beef gravy and he showed all the signs of being a great admirer of meat and potatoes. Now he was back in his basket studying the possibilities of eating a large wooden spoon. They had placed the basket on the floor to the side of the room as he was beginning to roll over and at anytime might tip the basket.

Summoning courage Nora slid through the crack between the door and the floor and pulled to a sitting position. She was too far from the baby to feel his energy and she knew that she would have to open her eyes to look for him. She covered her face with her hands and peaked through her fingers as a child might do. She saw him then, the ring of fiery energy glowing from the top of his basket. She smiled and closed her eyes

and slithered down the hallway, never leaving the safety of the floor beneath her.

Neither Hanna nor Daisy was aware of the presence. Nora was not interested in them. She needed the baby. She curled around the basket and in a strange, lonely way was happy again.

Owen brought the rather wobbly Elizabeth back down to the Great Room. She lay heavily back onto the chaise, laughing for some unknown reason, then hiccupped. Owen smiled and thought that at least she is a happy drunk. He went to the kitchen to bring Richard back to his mother.

"My God, Hanna! Didn't you feel this draft?" he asked as he picked up the basket.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Hanna said and she felt the air where the child had lain. "There has never been a draft here before!" The air was indeed very cold but she could not find any source for the draft.

Owen stopped at the door and turned back. "I think our guest has somewhat reached over her wine limit. A pot of your herbal mixture would help, I think."

The cold spot quickly faded once the child was gone.

"That would be Mrs. Nora? Do you think?" Daisy asked.

"Shhh!" Hanna exclaimed as she rushed to shut the door. "You know we are not allowed to speak about that."

"It is just that I think maybe she might do a mischief to the child."

"Nonsense, Daisy! Absolute nonsense!" Hanna said but her voice had a lack of conviction.

The rest of the evening passed quietly for Owen and Elizabeth. He sat back in his chair, silent and deep in thought. He had a score to settle with Emile Soskice and that was upper most of his mind at the time. Elizabeth sobered with the help of Hanna's herbal tea and took a slight scolding from Hanna for drinking wine in her weakened condition. She also sharply informed Owen that he should have known better.

"Are you sure you won't be happier if I slept in the study?" Owen asked. "It is just across the hall and we can leave the doors open."

"No, you must stay in here with me. I do not want to be alone and I do not care what anyone else might think!"

"Then you have the bed."

"Please!" she snapped, rubbed her hands across her upset stomach. "Just leave things as they are. I just want you to sleep with me tonight."

He smiled at her choice of words and was going to say something sarcastic as was his usual style but thought better of it.

Sleep did not come easily for Owen. When he slept, he dreamt he was a child again and alone in a barren wasteland and tormented by a large, angry raven. That dream was an unhappy repeat from his youth. He could not remember whom; perhaps it had been his mother, told him that a raven was an evil creature. They were black and without beauty because they were aligned with the devil. He doubted that but still had a lifelong hatred of the large and aggressive birds.

Emile lay asleep on the floor of his stone prison waiting for the return of the shape shifter. He was at his happiest in that place known as the Dark Side where he would visit in his dreams. He would often stay there ignoring the return of the bird but that night he was more than interested in what she had to tell him. He sensed her presence,

knew her smell and woke from his trance.

When she transformed she still wore the silk gown. "Look!" she laughed as she pulled the pistol from the pocket and handed it over. "Abbey's gun! I found it just where you said, Papa."

"Well, my dear, some things never change!" He examined the gun saw that it was loaded and in working order. "You have done well, very well indeed. Now put it in your pocket and keep it there you will need it very soon!" he said as he handed it back to her. "Now tell me all that happened today. I want every word that passed with our old friend."

She told him all and Emile was best pleased.

"Do you see how wonderful this is, little bird? Are we not guided by such a great power?" he asked and when she looked at him with confusion, he continued. "Now with you as a trusted ally in Tabor Hall we can truly destroy them, slowly and with great precision."

"But why can't I just kill them, as I did Edward?"

"That was my plan but as you know they still have Richard. For now, that holds my hand...but not for too long, so do not pout. Now that Tabor has called in our old friend, Abbey, I see some fun added to my revenge. This way will be so much more interesting and further my important cause! Do not ask me what. Everyone will see very clearly and very soon." he pulled her to him and said, "Now come, spread you lovely legs and sit on me for a while. Then after you have eased my needs, we will sleep; the morning will be a busy time for you!"

After a restless and brief sleep, Owen woke to the sounds of gurgling and cooing from Richard, but something was odd. He sat up and looked over the side of the bed. All night the baby lay in his makeshift bed beside his mother half way across the large room. Now the basket was next to his bed. Owen had no idea how the basket got to his bedside but thought no more of it as he quietly moved him back to Elizabeth's side.

In not too long, Richard let out a cry. Owen heard as Elizabeth woke and pulled him under her covers. "Lucky little blighter!" Owen mumbled. He tried to sleep again but it was pointless. He dressed quickly and left the house.

The sun had just begun its rise. Fingers of yellow and silver cut through the dying night sky. He checked and saw that the guards were as they should be although sleepy and bored.

He saddled Majesty, rode him hard past the courtyard of Tabor Hall and onto familiar woodland trails. As horse and rider moved along, he thought of Elizabeth. He wondered what lay ahead for her and her child. After all, he thought, she was just another woman, just another pretty face and he knew so many. She was not ready to take him as a lover and might never be ready so why not just see her to the nearest train, give her money back to her and wish her luck. That was what she wanted and she had made it very clear to him. Why should he not go to the tower blow the head off that thing chained to the walls? He would be doing the world a favor and easing his rage. But would that ease his rage? What would soothe these strange, restless feelings that he could place no name to?

That morning came, as usual, far too early for Tim O'Connor. His marriage to

Ivy Whitehall meant he no longer had to live in the soldiers' barracks but stayed with his wife in her father's cottage. He dressed, wrapped his head in his familiar red bandana and walked through the parlor where his very pregnant wife was sleeping fitfully. He watched her for a moment but gave her little thought as his mind filled only with himself. It had fallen to him to feed that thing in the tower every morning and some bright light had decided that had to be before anything else.

Grudgingly he went to the Tabor Manor kitchen. It was full of busyness and talkative females. He took a loaf of bread and a pitcher of water, growled a complaint to Cook,

headed outside and walked the distance to the old tower. Once there he carefully climbed the rocks and slid into the doorway unaware of the hateful silver eyes that watched him from the trees.

O'Connor unlocked and pulled open the rusted prison doorway and stepped inside. The stench was unbearable. Emile sat against the wall. The loaves that left the other mornings still sat untouched but the water jugs were empty. He placed the new loaf on the floor and threw the others out the broken wall.

"Are you trying to starve yourself to death, old man?" he smirked at Emile. "Might be a very good idea that is the only way you will ever get out of here!" He laughed as he slammed the door and relocked it.

The raven had moved from her hiding place and stood in the open leaning against a tree trunk. Her gown was open exposing her beautiful body. She had one hand raised above her head in a provocative manner and the other hand in her pocket. He saw her as he crawled down the rocks. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes as though to make sure she was truly there.

He took a few steps forward, "Fuck me! Who are you?"

She did not answer but licked her lips and moved one leg so that he had a full view. He made a sound like a growl, dropped his rifle to the ground. He was opening his trousers as he stepped up to her. She smiled sweetly as he reached his hands to her breasts. She pulled her hand from the gown, quickly pressed Abbey's gun to his temple and pulled the trigger. He fell dead at her feet. She threw the gun into the bushes. She wanted to ride his soul as she had done with Edward and so many others she had killed but she could not take the chance. Someone might have heard the sound of the shot. She transformed to the bird, pulled the red bandana until it came free and took it to the tower.

Owen noticed the Willard wagon tied at the Whitehall cottage. He fastened Majesty to the gate and went quickly up the walkway. James responded to Owen's knock and stepped out onto the doorstep.

"Mavis is here early. Is everything alright?"

"I hope so, Owen! Ivy is in labor," James said. He looked pale and tired.

"Don't worry, old man, she will be fine," Owen said with a smile. "She is in good hands. Does Tom know?"

"I don't think so. He leaves early to feed Soscice. She does not need him around now. Mavis told me that there are many hours to go yet. Apparently I am in the way, as well."

"How did it go with 'our Abbey'?" Owen asked as they walked down the pathway.

"Beautiful animal is your Majesty!" James said and rubbed the horse's head. "One cannot say the same thing about Abbey any longer, though. She must weigh the same as any horse!"

"Really? I remembered her as pretty, in a simple sort of way."

"Now she is ugly in a large sort of way. The years have worn her down poorly but she blames it on a 'Sokice curse'."

"Of course!" Owen rolled his eyes and laughed. "Or perhaps it is over eating, drinking and whoring around. Did the old man manage to talk her into helping him with our own version of the curse?"

"Yes and she was all too eager if you ask me. She just about jumped at the chance to get involved. She is bringing some other psychic woman with her. Lord only knows what Wilmot thinks they will be able to do! I do not trust her at all and I told her that very clearly. I am going to watch that witch like a hawk. I suggest you and Edmond do the same."

"That is just what we need around this place, more troubled females! I suppose you have heard about Edward's body disappearing?"

"Jesus, yes! Hastings was waiting up for us last night when we got home. What the Hell happened to it?"

"Damned if I know. Edmond and I went in the parlor around the noon hour and it was gone. What did the old man say about it? I imagine he hit the roof!"

"Well, he was surprisingly calm about it. Stunned, I'd say! Not his usual style, is it? He was too tired to think much about then, that would be my guess."

"No doubt I shall hear all his thoughts on it and at full voice when he is rested. But how the hell is a person supposed to assume that somebody would steal a dead body?"

"Hastings said that Caruthers came and was asking questions. What did he say about the missing corpse?"

"What could he say, James? Not too much he can do now is there. Edmond and I showed him the widow's walk. He agreed that it was most likely the murder scene and he took our statements. He will be back at some point today to take statements from you and Father."

It was then when they heard the shot that killed O'Connor. "That was a gun shot from the direction of the tower!" Owen exclaimed. They mounted their horses. "You go along the road way and I will head over through the trees. We'll meet at the base of the tower."

Holding his pistol and straining to see through the dim gray morning light Owen moved through the tree line that edged the cliffs. He did not see or hear anything unusual.

That was the same for James. He traveled the road that took him along the front of Tabor Manor and Hock House. The guards there had also heard the shot and watched anxiously as James approached. "Just stay here and keep your eyes open!" he told them as he rode by and did the same as he passed the front of Hock House. He circled around the barracks building and then down into the valley and along a pathway that led to the old tower.

"Owen?" he called out into the mist.

"Here!" Owen answered. "Just ahead of you!"

James saw Owen on the top of a slight rise. He was off his horse and kneeling on the ground.

"What is it?" James asked as he jumped down off his horse and walked up the rise. "Good Lord! Is that Tom?"

"Yes, I am afraid so. Shot in the head and dead as a door nail!" Owen answered as they looked from the body to each other with shock.

"Christ Almighty!" James whispered after a moment of silence. He walked a small distance, pushed the long grass with his foot and picked up the handgun. "No doubt this is the murder weapon," he said as he handed it to Owen.

"It is loaded, but with one bullet missing." Owen turned the gun over to look at it properly in the poor light. Then he saw the name A. Pritchard engraved on the butt handle. He showed it to James.

"Abbey? What the bloody Hell is going on around here Owen?"

"Damned if I know. Go down to the barracks and have the body brought there. I want every man in there out and on patrol all day and night. Let the lazy lot earn their keep for a change. Have a man placed here and at your cottage as well. Do not tell a soul about the gun for the time being. Then meet me back at Hock House."

Elizabeth was awake when Owen left that morning. She lay quietly nursing her son and listened as he dressed and left the room. She also found sleep hard to come by that night but for far different reasons than Owen. Now that her mind had cleared somewhat from the drugs given to her by Mama Soskice and Mrs. Willard she had to face the fact she had agreed to let Owen bring her to London. There was no doubt that he would expect to take her directly to her home. Repeatedly over the last few difficult days, she had lied to him about just who she was.

She thought about how foolish she had been. Why in God's name had she not just told him the truth? She had not wanted him to see how far she had fallen in life. Foolish pride had caused her to lie and not very well. Now she would do the only thing she could and would admit to her lies. Owen would certainly think she was an idiot and she did not really blame him. She decided she could not change what he thought or felt about her and that she did not care. "That is a lie, as well!" her small voice of reason yelled at her.

Mostly she could ignore this voice but not then. In the cool light of sober morning, she knew that try as hard as she certainly would, she could never love another man as she loved Owen Tabor.

Richard was full and sleeping soundly so she dressed, quietly left the room and leaving the door open so she could listen for the baby she went down the hallway to the kitchen. Hanna and Daisy were not in the room but a pot of water sat on the stove waiting for the boil. To her surprise along the far wall, she found a lovely wicker high chair and a matching cradle. The high chair recently cleaned but the cradle was dusty and a sack of what appeared to be clothes sat inside the cradle. She bent to examine the furniture just as Daisy came in through the back door.

"Where did...?" Elizabeth began. Daisy jumped and dropped the pan she was holding.

"You did scare the life out of me!"

"I am sorry!"

"I thought you were....well, never mind!" Daisy said catching her breath and picking the pan off the floor.

"What did you think?"

Daisy looked around quickly for sight of Hanna, and then whispered. "Thought you were the ghost I told you about. I must not talk about them because Miss Hanna is a Catholic."

"Are you certain that there is a spirit here?"

"Oh yes! I have seen her. Only out the corner of my eyes, you know and when you look away, she's gone. Maybe she is weak or shy. I don't know but I think she is getting stronger. Now she moves things, shuts doors and the like and always in the Great Room."

"What makes you think it is the ghost of Nora Tabor?" Elizabeth was curious about the woman who had won the heart of Owen.

"Well, the Great Room is his bedroom, after all! I know that sounds odd but she does like to lie on his bed. I will make it and do it neat, as I should. I turn around minutes later it looks as though someone has been laying on it and there is no one else in the room. That makes the hair stand up on my arms, it does!"

"I guess it would. It is so sad! How lonely for the souls that do not make it to the other side."

"Oh, I know and poor Mrs. Owen staying here for the love of her man, that is the saddest of all. Then there is also the likes of her at Tabor Hall. That one there is easily seen and scares the stuffing out of those that see her."

"Do you also know who that ghost is.... or was?" Elizabeth asked.

Daisy poured the boiling water into the teapot and put slabs of bacon on the stove to cook. "Yes! That one is a female, too! Lady Isabelle Tabor. They see her on the second floor staircase and in the rooms she used to share with her husband. But she did not stay because of love, no not at all!"

"Then why?"

"It is hate that holds her here."

Elizabeth remembered Isabelle very well from that summer when she first met the family. She was a lively, happy woman. She could not picture her full of hate.

"What happened to her?"

"She fell down the very stairs that she haunts and broke her neck, just a few days before Christmas, three years ago. It seems," Daisy spoke in a very low whisper, "that she was pushed and wants revenge! Least ways that's what the servants at the Manor say!"

"Murdered?"

"Yes, but the coroner said it was an accident. That was just for Lord Tabor, you know, so there'd be no scandal or the like! That is what we all think."

"Is there any talk as to who might have pushed her?"

"Well, I guess that will always be a mystery because everybody has their own ideas. I do not know for sure on that."

"So both ladies died very close to each other?"

"Now as I think about it, yes, just before Christmas for Lady Isabelle and a month or so later for Mrs. Owen! I wasn't working here then but I know they were very sad days for the Tabor family."



"I imagine they were." Elizabeth agreed and Daisy went back to her bacon. Elizabeth thought then of how hard the last three years had been for both the Tabors and the Delacourt family. Hanna joined them so the conversation changed to the baby furniture.

"I brought them up from the cellar. They were Mr. Owen's from when he was a wee one. I have cleaned up the chair. We will do the cradle later so at least the little fellow can have a cozy sleep tonight. With a soft cushion in there he will be as snug as a bug in a rug!"

Elizabeth smiled. She liked these women, they had been very kind to her and Richard and she would miss them.

She stood and lifted the sack from the cradle. It fell open as she placed it on the floor and the sleeve of a dress slid out. She turned it over in her hands and remembered all too well when and where she had last worn this dress, the terrible night her father gave her to Emile and Jack Soskice. A paper under the dress caught her attention. She pulled it and saw that it was the marriage license that Soskice had forced her to sign. She shoved it and the dress back into the bag and pushed it further underneath the large table. Owen must have brought these things into the house and so he must have known all along exactly who she was. Why had he not told her? Why had he let her lie and make such a fool of herself? None of it made any sense. She was angry, confused and embarrassed.

"Do either of you know where Mr. Tabor is right now?" she asked trying to sound calm.

"Taking his horse for a ride. He likes to exercise him in the mornings."

I will exercise Mr. Bloody Tabor when I next see him, that is a fact, Elizabeth thought as she sipped her tea. A few moments passed then Elizabeth saw Owen come in through the front door. She watched as he stopped at the doorway to his bedroom.

"Hanna!" he called out in the direction of the kitchen. "Bring me the key!"

"It is locked?" Elizabeth said as she rushed towards him. Her recent and strong anger was quickly being replaced by fear. "I left it open so I could hear Richard from the kitchen!"

"Well, it is bloody locked now and he is wailing his head off in there!"

Elizabeth frantically pushed on the locked door. She could then hear her baby crying pitifully from the other side. "Oh dear God!" she cried. "Please tell me you have the key?"

Hanna was rushing to join them and searching her pockets for the key that Owen had left with her.

"We don't have time for that!" Owen left the women and came back from his study with the large axe that he had pulled from a display on the wall. "Get out of the way!" he said pushing Elizabeth back from the doorway. With a few hard swings, he shattered the lock and kicked the broken door open.

Elizabeth rushed in first. Richard was not in his basket where she had left him but in the middle of Owen's bed, naked and frantic. His clothing scattered about on the floor.

"Is he alright?" Hanna cried.

"I think so!" said Elizabeth as she quickly checked him and wrapped him in a

blanket. She held him tightly, rocked him as he stopped crying and began to hiccup. "Shit! Feel how cold the air is around the bed. It is freezing!" Elizabeth exclaimed moving her arm through the air around her.

The other females stepped forward and felt the air. It was so cold they could see their breath.

"How did this happen?" Elizabeth asked with fear. "When I left him he was asleep, dressed and in the basket! Who locked the damn door?"

"It is just like I said, Miss Elizabeth. It is the ghost, must be!" Daisy exclaimed, tears rolling down her face.

"Be quiet, the lot of you!" Owen only just controlled his anger. He stooped and threw some fuel into the fireplace and lit it.

"Yes Daisy! I have told you not to talk about...!" Hanna started to speak but was interrupted loudly by Owen.

"I said, be quiet and that means you as well, Hanna! Sit down and listen to me! All of you!" he ordered and without hesitation, the three women moved from the frozen air around the bed and sat on the settee.

"I will not waste my time with talk of ghosts and other foolish, childish ideas. I do not know how any of this happened and I am damned sure it was not a ghost! And under no circumstances will this child be left alone again!" He glared at Elizabeth and she glared back at him. Three sets of anxious eyes watched Owen as he poured a full glass of whiskey and drank half of it before he spoke again.

"We have had another murder on the estate! Tom O'Connor has been shot," he finally said. Hanna gasped but no one dared say a word. "This happened less than an hour ago. I suppose that none of you saw or heard anything unusual, other than what just happened here?"

No one spoke and Owen took that as an answer. "I need not tell you that from now on we shall all have to be very careful. I have put all our guards on constant patrol. Hanna

and Daisy do not open the doors to anyone, front or back, without checking with me first. Without exception, is that understood?" They nodded. "Good! I will stay here today until the police arrive then I shall have to go to the Manor. I will leave a guard in here with you when I am gone," after a pause and finishing off the whiskey, he added. "Now you should do your best to go about your duties. I am famished; we will all need to eat to keep our strength up and our wits about us."

"Yes, of course!" Hanna stood and pulled Daisy after her.

"Are you alright?" Elizabeth asked Owen when they had gone. She had gathered up the baby's clothes and redressed Richard.

"Alright?" he snapped at her. "How could I possibly be alright? I am fucking madder than Hell. We have a murderer loose on the land and no one has even the slightest idea who it is. And how could you be so stupid to leave your baby alone?"

"You are the one who keeps telling me; over and over that Richard and I are safe in your house. Obviously that is not so! I have told you many times that Emile Soskice is behind all this. It is your fault that you will not listen to me."

"Then I shall go and blow the bastards head off and be done with the matter!"

"Don't be a fool, Owen! How would that end all this? I would help you with that if I thought for a moment that killing Soskice would help. Of course it is not he

personally who killed Edward and this Tom person but it is someone working for him. That is who you have to stop."

"Well, since you are such an expert on this man perhaps you can fill me in on whom this person might be?"

"Not until you calm down and lower your voice, you are frightening Richard!"

Owen took a deep breath and sat across from her. "Right then, Elizabeth, I will be quiet and you talk. I am all ears!"

"If you had the brains to go with those ears, I would be much happier." She took her time arranging herself and Richard under a blanket so she could feed him. "I will start by telling you about my second attempt to escape and the impossible way Jack and Emile found me. This may give you a clearer idea...." She sighed and stepped back into her nightmare.

"Emile did not often stay with the caravan. When he was with us, he would stay at a distance. Only Jack could approach him. Sometimes he would be away for weeks at a time and then return with pockets full of money and drugs. Opium mostly! He used these drugs to keep the males in the group under his control. To control the females he used fear... more potent in some cases than drugs, I guess!"

"I had tried to escape one time before this. From then on Jack would chain me to his bed in the evenings. He would fasten a strap to my ankle and it padlocked to iron railing at the bottom of the bed. Simple but effective, as was the beating I took for my first escape attempt."

"This pathetic try for freedom was in the first few weeks my pregnancy. I wanted to get away from them before they knew I was with child. I waited and prayed for an opportunity."

"This came one night when Jack and Emile left for some reason. At dawn, Jack came home alone. He was so inebriated he could hardly make it into his wagon before passing out. I was able to get at his money and keys and freed my foot; it was as simple as that. I took it as a sign. Foolishly, I thought my prayers answered and an angel might be guiding me!"

"Jack had left his horse saddled so I took him. I knew only that we were north of London so I headed south. I have always had a good sense of direction. As much as possible I stayed off the beaten pathways and highways. I should have gone to the nearest town and the nearest police station, but so obsessed was I to get back to my mother and the safety of her home that was all I could think of."

"The whole time I kept a constant watch over my shoulder to be sure that I was not followed. I traveled like this without stop for eight hours or more. I never had the slightest reason to believe that any of the Soskice group followed."

"By sunset, I needed to rest and eat. I stopped at a small Inn run by an old woman and her grandson. I rented a room, had a meal and the boy saw to the horse. The old woman told me that I was only a four hour ride from home. It was so wonderful to sleep that night, unmolested in a real bed! Before sleep, I asked the woman to wake me at dawn."

"When I woke that next morning I knew right away that it was well over that time. I thought that the Innkeeper had just forgotten about me so I dressed and left my room to look for her to pay my bill and be on my way. I found the room that I think was hers, as the bed had been slept in; her slippers were still by the bed but there was no sign of her."

Elizabeth paused here and looked at Owen. He was watching her intently, his piercing eyes never leaving her face as she spoke.

"Quietly I moved down the stairs, unsure but I thought I could hear two people talking. I crept to the hallway and heard Emile and Jack in the kitchen area. I ran out the front door but right into the arms of one of Emile's men, Tom Hobson!"

"They took me back to the camp and even though I told them that I was going to have a baby I was still beaten mercilessly until I thought I would die. Perhaps I wished I would die and save my child a life with these men. By that time I was sure I would never be free of them. They drugged me daily and the ankle chains never removed. I have no idea how my child was born so wonderfully healthy."

Owen stood, walked to the window and looked across the land towards the tower, his hands at his sides in tight fists.

"How did they know where I was, Owen, I swear I was not followed. I did not even know where I would end up that day so how did they know. It was always like that with Jack and Emile, no matter what happened or whether or not they were around they always knew everything that any one of us did. It was as if they had eyes everywhere."

He turned back to her. "No man is invulnerable, my dear. I will find his secret eyes, you can be sure of that." From his dresser he took out a carved wooden box. He opened it and brought out a small handgun, loaded it and handed it to Elizabeth. "This belonged to my mother. Are you brave enough to use this?"

"We will see, if the need arises, Owen." She took the gun and placed it in the pocket of her skirt.

They ate breakfast in the kitchen with Hanna and Daisy. There was very little conversation. Each of them lost in their own troubling thoughts. Owen raged against his

unseen enemy. Elizabeth wondered if she should leave these people at such a time of peril. Would Owen really need her help or would she be only another person he would have to protect? At the back of her mind was the fact that he had held from the knowledge that he knew very well who she was. She wanted to confront him with this but knew this was not the time.

Early that morning, Abbey had the dead prostitute's luggage and her own secured in her wagon. She had a few last words with her staff and pulled away from the Turtle Dove. The puzzled and somewhat worried faces of her staff watched until she disappeared from sight. She had not told them where she was going or when she would return.

"Look here," exclaimed the barkeep to the others as they turned away from the doorway, "the pistol she keeps under the bar is gone!"

"Nothing good will come from this, I tell you. I can smell evil in the air," a prostitute said in response.

"That is your own smell. Just remember what Abbey told us. Now let us get about our business," ordered the one left in charge.

Abbey rode in a straight, quick clip for several hours without stop. She would not allow herself pause to think any longer. She had spent most of the night deep in worried thought and could not get past the fact that she might finally be free of the brutal curse that stole her talents and doubled her body weight. If she failed to help Emile and

his shape shifter they would kill her, she had no doubt about that. If she did help then that would bring ruin to the Tabor family. It was that fact she refused to consider as she traveled that bright morning.

About an hour's ride from the Estate she pulled off the main road and headed down a narrow secluded pathway. She came to a stop at a clearing with a small lake surrounded by deep forests. She pulled the horse to the lake edge and lowered herself down from the drivers' bench. She was stiff, hot and dreadfully uncomfortable. From one of her bags she pulled a bottle of whiskey and took a long drink. The familiar burn as it hit her belly was at least slightly comforting. She sat on a large rock at the water's edge and splashed water on her face.

"Where is that bloody creature?" she said a loud as she scanned the woods. "If she isn't here soon I shall forget this whole damn idea and just go home!" She kicked with frustration at the sticks and stones around her feet.

"Now is that nice?" the raven asked as she emerged from the bushes directly behind Abbey. "I do think you should not refer to me as a 'creature'. That might be rather confusing to the Tabors."

She looked stunning in a white brocade traveling suit trimmed with a thin edging of black fur and silver buttons. It was a perfect fit for her small waist and full breasts. She carried a white sequined purse and matching parasol. Her hair was styled in fashionable black curls that spilled down one side of her face onto her bare cleavage. Placed carefully at an angle into the curls she wore a white hat with a grand display of long black feathers.

Reine, as Abbey must now think of her, was a remarkably beautiful woman. It was only if you knew the truth, then you see could she see traces of the raven. The silver gray eyes were set just a little too far apart and slanted upwards. The black brows were long and shinny. Her long nose and strong chin were just slightly pointed and the smile that never seemed to leave her face was too wide.

"You are just a little too fancy, don't you think?" Abbey asked. "After all, I portrayed you as my young and innocent protégé!"

"Then we shall have to change that image. Do try to hide your jealousy, my dear!" Reine answered turning around in a circle so Abbey could get the full effect. "I think I look just grand."

"Well, it is up to you, I suppose." Abbey answered. Then after a pause with direct eye contact, she said in calm but rather menacing voice. "Remember this, Reine, I am no fool!"

"Then at least in that, if nothing else, Abbey, we are equals. Now shall we be on our way?" Abbey was pleased to see her take a place in the back seat. She did not want to sit beside her for the hours ride that lay ahead of them.

Abbey was not surprised to see the iron entrance gates of the Estate closed and guarded. "Abbey Pritchard and Reine Crawford. We are expected!" she called down to one of the two guards. He nodded to the other and the gates opened for them to pass.

Abbey would look neither left nor right as they made their way up the narrow road that led to the Tabor Manor House. She did not want reminding in any way of the years when she had been Wilmot's mistress and the love she had once felt for him. She could not dare to think of the evil force she was bringing into the home of the man who

had turned to her for help. She must only think of the sick and awful body that trapped her and how she might soon be free of it.

Owen grew restless as the hours slowly passed. By the afternoon, he had placed a guard in the Hock House kitchen area with orders to shoot anyone who needed shooting. At the bottom of his front lawn, he spotted a wagon coming up the roadway. He kept a hand on the pistol tucked in his belt until he recognized the driver. Like all else who had not seen her in years, he was appalled at her appearance.

"Who is that?" Reine leaned forward and asked when they pulled to a halt near him.

"Owen Tabor! Is that you?" Abbey ignored Reine and called out as he walked up to them. "Yes! I would know that handsome face anywhere," she beamed down on him. Of all the Tabors, he was the one she remembered most fondly. He had a kind manner, quick wit and a dry humor and now she had to add to the list that he was even more handsome with maturity.

"Abbey! My old poker friend. It is good to see you again," he smiled broadly at her and wondered how a gun with her name on it ended up at the murder scene of Tom O'Connor. He agreed completely with James that she would need careful watching.

"And I can still beat you every time or have you worked on that poker face?" she laughed at him.

"I let you win, Abbey! That is the gentlemanly thing to do, my dear!" he responded as he climbed up beside her.

"We shall see about that." Abbey turned around and introduced Owen to Reine. Reine gave him her dazzling smile and remembered him as the one who had thrown a rock and shot at her. I shall seduce him and kill him, she thought as she took his hand. Owen looked her over quickly, decided she would be an easy woman to bed, and wondered if she would really be worth the effort.

He and Abbey chatted about happier times as they went the rest of the way to Tabor Hall. They pulled to a halt beside a familiar black carriage.

"It looks as if Inspector Caruthers is already here," Owen said as he helped Abbey and Reine down from the wagon. Hastings and a small flurry of busy footmen met them.

"Hello, Hastings!" Abbey said and smiled. So perfectly trained was he in his profession that he showed no notice of how the once lovely and petit Abbey had changed. For that, she was grateful. "It has been a long time!"

"Yes, indeed, Miss Pritchard," he made a rather bleak effort at a smile and after a quick introduction to Miss Crawford, he turned to Owen, "Lord Tabor has just asked me to send for you, Sir! Inspector Caruthers wishes to speak with you." To Abbey he added, "Would you and Miss Crawford care to join them or perhaps first be shown to your rooms?"

"We shall join the family." Reine answered quickly before Abbey could say just how much she would prefer to rest. "Have our luggage taken to our rooms."

"Yes, Miss Crawford." Hastings looked at Reine, as though she was a naughty and out of place child. Abbey had to hide a smile. It was not a good idea for Reine to make an enemy of the head of the household staff but that was her worry. They followed Hastings along the cool, dark hallway and stopped as he stuck his head around the doorway. "You guests have arrived, Lord Tabor, as well as Mr. Owen."

Edmond stood and met them at the doorway. "Miss Pritchard! How kind of you to come all this way to help us!" he offered his hand and smiled at her but his eyes were drawn to the magnificent woman who stood beside her.

Before Abbey could speak, Reine took his hand and said, "Not at all, we are all God's children after all and it is the least we can do to help each other," she said as she fixed her silver gaze into his startled and pleased face. Abbey wanted to laugh and scream in the same breath. The evil creature that stood there beside her was the furthest from God's child that one could ever imagine.

Introductions were made all around. Looking pale and drawn, Wilmot asked his guests to sit.

Olivia joined them. She stopped briefly looking at Abbey and Reine, nodded and stood close to her husband.

Inspector Caruthers began the conversation. "Not wanting to be rude, Lord Tabor but what I have to tell you is of an extremely personal nature, perhaps you would rather speak without your guests present."

"Miss Pritchard and Miss Crawford have come to help us in this matter so they are very much a part of this conversation. Please continue!" Lord Tabor said.

"Very well. First, I must ask if you have had any luck in the search for Edward Tabor's corpse."

"I am sorry and I do not wish to interrupt," Reine spoke then to everyone's surprise, "but are you saying that the body of Edward Tabor is missing?" Abbey felt the woman beside her grow stiff and she felt a strange but familiar prickling sensation at the back of her head. Was she sensing fear in Reine? Was she somehow getting her psychic abilities back?

"I am afraid so Miss Crawford," Edmond answered.

"That is just terrible!" Reine said and the prickling feeling in Abbey grew stronger.

Wilmot sighed and told the police officers that there been no luck in the search for the body.

"That is too bad! And I am very afraid that I have more bad news for the family."

The Inspector nodded at his Sergeant. He flipped open his note book and read. "At 8 am this morning a Mrs. Stanley Beamish, cook and housekeeper for Mr. Henry Tabor reported to the desk officer that she had found a very bloody scene at the Dover home of Mr. Tabor. Two officers immediately dispatched and did indeed find a massive amount of blood on the parlor floor. A search of the house and grounds showed no sign of Henry Tabor."

Everyone sat in stunned silence and watched as Inspector Caruthers pulled an envelope from his pocket. He opened it and pulled out blood stained spectacles. "Do you recognize these, Lord Tabor?" he leaned forward and showed them to the old man.

"They could be anyone's glasses! They all look the same," he answered but there was no denying the dreadful look on his face.

Owen took the glasses and he showed them to Edmond. "Those are most certainly Henry's spectacles." Edmond said quietly.

"Hell!" Owen spoke with force and anger. "What are you doing about this mess,

Caruthers?"

"Well, we are certainly looking for Henry Tabor. However, I went to his home before coming here today and I have to say that no one could have survived that much blood loss!"

Now Abbey could clearly hear the raven thinking and Abbey wanted to laugh and cheer for it was certain that her psychic talents were returning to her. She sat very still, feeling the shifter's distress and need to speak with her 'Papa'. It was obvious she had known nothing about Edward's missing body or the possible death of Henry. Perhaps, Abbey thought, this Queen's throne is not that high after all.

The inspector looked at Wilmot and said, "I think, sir, that under these serious circumstances it would be wiser for all concerned if I was to stay at Tabor Hall for this day and night."

"A police man staying here on my property?" Wilmot asked incredulously.

"For the safety of your family, as well, Lord Tabor!"

"Alright!" Wilmot shrugged. "Suit yourself. As you were not able to prevent the death of another of my sons, I have little faith in your abilities. I shall look towards high sources for my protection." He looked at Abbey and a few seconds longer at Reine. She flashed him a brilliant smile of assurance.

Leaning on her husband Olivia began to cry loudly.

Owen shook his head and spoke flatly. "We have had another murder on the Estate. One of our workers, a fellow named Tom O'Connor, was shot this morning!"

Olivia was now almost hysterical.

"Take her out of here, Edmond!" Wilmot demanded angrily. Reluctantly Edmond did this, scolding her for being a bother as they moved up the stairs.

Owen recalled the events of the morning, interrupted here and there by Inspector Caruthers.

"But that could have nothing to do with us, Owen!" Wilmot complained.

"O'Connor was not my son but my late sisters' son. So his death was not a part of the curse."

"He was your blood, nonetheless, Wilmot!" Abbey added.

"And, Lord Tabor, a murder is still a murder and the most serious of crimes."

Inspector Caruthers said firmly. "I would prefer that we have the rest of this conversation as you show where the events of the morning happened and, hopefully, the body."

"Where is James?" Wilmot called as Owen and the police officers prepared to leave.

"He is at his house, Father. Ivy is in labor and now that she is a widow, she will need her father more than you do." Owen called over his shoulder as he, the Inspector and the constable left the Hall.

"Do you see what I am up against, Abbey?" Wilmot wheeled his chair over to Abbey and Reine. "Owen does not understand the serious threat we are under, even now that we have Henry's death in our hearts. Do you still think that you can help us?"

"Without a doubt, Wilmot. My friend here is a very powerful source of protection. As long as she stays in this house, not another Tabor will be hurt in any way!" Abbey answered with a soothing smile and felt her companion stiffen with anger.

"I would like for you to guide us through the events of the morning. It would be



best if we walked and the sergeant can take his notes," the Inspector said to Owen.

They walked to the gate of the Whitehall cottage. The shades were drawn and all seemed quiet and Owen wondered about Ivy but now was not the time to stop and ask.

"This is where we were standing when we heard the shot," Owen said.

"What time would you say that was, Sir?" Sergeant Taylor asked.

Owen had to think for a moment. "Between 6:15 and 6:30 am!"

The Inspector said that it was not necessary to follow that exact route that Owen rode that morning so to save time they cut across down the hillside and the field that led to the base of the Old Tower.

"This is where we found him," Owen said. He pointed to the dark stain on the grass that was by that time attracting insects. "His head was at this end and his arms down by his sides. The wound is in the right side of his head. I assume that he must have died immediately. Perhaps his assailant hid behind the tree but it is rather a thin tree."

"Were you here at the time of the murder?" Caruthers asked the man newly stationed as guard at the base of the tower.

"No, sir. Mr. Whitehall put me here just afterwards. I got here at seven."

Caruthers walked his companions a slight distance away from the guard so they would not be over heard. "Was it normal for Mr. O'Connor to be in this area of the Estate at this time of the morning?"

"Well, for the last few days, yes. Give or take a few minutes, I suppose." Owen looked up to the top of the tower thirty feet over them, glanced at the sergeant and the Inspector took the message and nodded.

Taylor had wondered off pushing his boots through the long weeds and grass. "Was there any sign of a weapon, sir?"

"No, but I cannot say that we actually looked for one," Owen lied, feeling the weight of the small gun in his pocket as he spoke.

"Perhaps you should look here, sirs!" Taylor called back to them from the sun-bleached stones at the very base of the tower. He pointed down as Owen and Caruthers joined him. "Blood stains, I am sure. They look like bird tracks to me." Several finger shaped wedges of dried blood crossed the white stones.

"Bird tracks?" the inspector said as bent closed to the ground. "I supposed a bird landed in the blood puddle and from there flew or jumped to here."

"Yes, but it is odd, though. A bird would not go anywhere near fresh blood for fear of being attacked as well, if you know what I mean."

"You seem to know a lot about birds," Owen said as his mind flashed back to the large raven in the tower.

"I know a lot about a great many things, Sir," the sergeant said with confidence.

"Then can you tell me what kind of bird made those tracks?"

"Not one hundred per cent. But it was without a doubt a very large bird, falcon or raven; something along those lines."

"Do you keep any falcons on the property?" the Inspector asked.

"No! But those bloody ravens are all over the place."

"Now, Owen would you take us to the body? I certainly hope it is still there!"

"It damn well better be!" Owen led them towards the main gate entrance of the Estate and the barracks. "I had James bring it to the barracks first thing."

"You have barracks on the property?"

"When they were built a hundred years ago or more, they were used to house the Tabor soldiers but really now they house the farm workers for the hop fields. They are single men and if they marry, they receive given a piece of land to build and farm on. There were at one time one hundred men but now perhaps there are thirty."

"Was Tom O'Connor housed there?"

"Until recently, yes. He married a few months ago. He did nothing with his land and was living at the home of his father-in-law, James Whitehall."

"I see!" Caruthers said thoughtfully. "And he was your blood cousin?"

"Yes."

They walked the rest of the way in silence and soon came to a clearing and two old stone buildings. They went down to the cold and dark of the root cellar and to the body of Tom O'Connor.

Elizabeth was not comfortable in the Great Room while Owen was away. She and Hanna moved the cradle with the sleeping Richard into a corner of the study. Hanna left Elizabeth with tea, sandwiches, and a gentle warning not to take Daisy's talk of ghost to

heart. "After all," she nodded knowingly to the young woman, "she is not a Catholic and given to hysterics!"

Elizabeth thought that the same could very easily be said of a great many people.

Trying to find something, anything to keep her mind occupied, Elizabeth wandered Owen's study. The walls and high ceiling were painted a deep violet. The trimmings and ornate frescos antique gold. Bright tapestries, needlework and watercolors hung on almost every available space. There were watercolors signed with O.T. They were a breath-taking blend of the subtle nature of that type of painting and daring use of brilliant color.

A deep, comfortable rose and gold brocade settee and matching chair formed the center of the room. Brightly colored rich tapestries covered the walls. Delicate Irish lace curtains covered the two large windows. The effect was elegant, feminine and charming.

Owen had most likely added the very masculine touches. A large ornate black mahogany desk sat off center and cluttered with papers and books. An old shirt lay across the seat of the swivel desk chair as though someone did not like to sit on the horsehair seat cover. A tall and very well stocked drinks cabinet was right next to the desk, throwing that corner of the room off balance. Elizabeth smiled thinking that it would be very handy for anyone sitting at his desk.

On either side of the fireplace were two very large deep and comfortable leather chairs of the same make as the one near his bed in what was then his bedroom. There had been a further attempt to roughen the room by hanging two swords and several other weapons over the fireplace and a space was bare where Owen had taken the axe to break the lock on the great room door earlier. The effect was surprisingly warm and comforting.

The room smelled of polished wood and old books and reminded her somewhat of a church. There was also another smell, something deeper and musky, the smell of a powerful male presence. She chided herself that she must not notice that. There was danger there and she must not think of anything other than returning home to the safety of

her mother's house.

"This time tomorrow, or the next day, little one," she whispered to Richard "you will be with your Grandmother." He was sound asleep, one chubby hand holding onto the curls at the back of his head. She smiled, straightened his blanket and went to one of the bookcases to pick something to read, to pass the time and to keep her from dangerous thoughts. She chose a book of quotes and poetry and sat in the window seat.

Opening the book at random, she came across a poem written by a man who was mourning the death of his son. How ironic, she thought. It was the last few lines that touched her the most:

'And so he is gone  
The world and events somehow move on.  
And even though my light is done  
My old heart still beats and the tide still travels'

After reading for awhile the warmth of the sun, shining through the window made her sleepy. She rested her head against the cool glass and fell asleep.

She was standing naked on a sandy beach in a secluded cove. All around her jagged, black rocks pointed to a gray and low sky. Thick mist sat on the still, dark water. The air was as cold as a winter day but she was burning hot. Lines of sweat rolled down her face, neck and parted at her breasts.

A step forward and the cool water lapped at her ankles. The water hissed and sputtered as it touched her searing skin. She moved further out. The wonderful cold water eased her fire. The mist closed in behind her and she could no longer see the shoreline. When the water reached her neck, she lowered her face and began to sink.

Strong arms reached around her and brought her to the surface. It was Owen. He pulled her to him. She could feel the length of his naked body against hers. He kissed her forehead, her eyes and then her lips. With gentle force, he opened her lips and pulled his tongue across her teeth and into her mouth. She clung to his shoulders and wrapped her legs tightly around his body.

He carried her to the shore, never ending his passionate embrace and gently laid her down. Elizabeth looked into his eyes, saw his need and his love and gave herself over to him. She thrilled as he kissed her neck, her shoulders and then drew circles around her breast with his tongue. She arched her back so that her nipple was in his mouth and as he sucked she felt her milk flowing. The world ceased to be; all that existed was the passion that stirred in her. She would lie like this and feed him forever.

He moved and gently lay down on top of her, whispering in her ear. "I want you to wake up, Elizabeth! Wake up!" she did with such a start that she almost fell off the window seat. "Wake up!" Owen said again say as she opened her eyes. My God, she thought, it was a dream, just a dream. So very real, she could still feel the passion in her veins. "I was sleeping," she said breathlessly.

"So I noticed!" he gave her a small smile. "Do you always sleep so soundly?"

She stood, straightened her skirt and went to the cradle so that she could check the child and regain her composure.

"Sit down, please!" Owen asked as he closed the door. His voice was stern and serious.

The constables had taken O'Connor's body to the Dover morgue. Caruthers was back at the Hall and Owen had decided now was as good a time as any to tell Elizabeth about her mother.

She did as he asked and he sat beside her. There were deep lines of worry across his brow and a sense of dread pushed the last of the passion from her blood.

"Yes?" she asked nervously.

"Do you have many relatives?"

"Pardon me?"

"Do you have any aunts, uncles, cousins or grandparents?"

"I told you, didn't I? I have no one but my mother and she lives in London. I believe that my father is dead." Her lies were unraveling around her and she felt trapped by them.

"Lady Jane Delacourt died three years ago, this past Christmas," he spoke quietly, his eyes searching hers.

After a long while and with a small dry voice she asked, "What did you say?" She had heard him all too clearly but perhaps, if she gave him a chance, he would take back those awful words.

"I know that you are Elizabeth Delacourt. Your father is in prison most likely for the rest of his natural life. Your mother died three years ago. I am sorry, but that is the honest truth."

She let her body fall back into the seat. "No," she shook her head, "I am going home to her tomorrow. You promised me. You told me that you would take me home."

"Yes, I did. That was before I found out that Lady Delacourt was deceased. I was going to tell you last night when we were out on the patio but you had too much wine ...."

"Liar! You are lying, Owen Tabor!"

"Why would I do that?"

"To keep me here with you so that I will sleep with you, that is why. That is what you have wanted ever since you brought me here."

"I am not so desperate for you that I would create such a web of low falsehoods. I have my choice of many females and need not waste my time on one who will not co-operate!"

She moved quicker than he did and slapped his face with all her anger and fear. She raised her hand it to slap him again but this time he took both her hands and held them tightly.

"But for the fact that I deserved that I would slap you back, Elizabeth. Do not push me too far!" He glared at her and continued to hold her arms tighter than necessary until he felt her relax. He took a deep breath, let go of her arms and continued. "If you wish I will bring Inspector Caruthers over here to speak with you. He knows of the case around your mother's death very well!"

"He would say what you wanted him to say," she argued but with less strength and conviction.

Owen shook his head sadly and unlocked a drawer in his desk. He pulled out the package of letters that Lady Jane had written to his stepmother. "Your mother wrote often to my stepmother; this is the last letter that she wrote," he said as he handed it to her

and her hand shook when she took it from him. "It was unopened when I found it and that it understandable since Isabelle died just two days after Lady Jane."

After she had finished reading it, she let it fall to the floor. "That tells me only that she knew of my father's impending arrest and that she was preparing to leave him. She was leaving to live with her brother in Scotland. That is where she is now."

For a long while, neither said a word. He had to give her time to think to realize that he spoke the truth. He sat quietly, smoked a cigarette and watched her closely. To have survived all she had she must be a remarkable woman but could she stand up to this last terrible disappointment. Finally, he broke the silence, "I know it is not too much of a help, Elizabeth, but I am truly sorry for your loss."

It seemed that she had made a decision. She cleared her throat and asked, "How did she die?" when he paused she added, "Tell me, I have to know! She was murdered, wasn't she?"

"Yes. Shot in the head."

"Was it my father?"

"Most probably, or someone in his employ but it seems that they did not have enough evidence to charge him. So who can say for sure?"

"I can say it, Owen! If he would sell his only daughter, he would murder his wife!"

Owen nodded in agreement. He opened his drink cabinet, poured a small brandy and handed it to her. She drank it in one mouthful and motioned for more. When it looked as though he did not want her to have another one she said, "Owen, for God's sake, I am not a child. I want another brandy!"

He did as she asked only it was a very small amount.

"Well, that is that then. I shall have to face the fact that I am very much alone in the world. What a fool I have been!" One single tear fell down her cheek and she wiped it away.

"It is not foolish for a child in danger to want to be with her mother. Wouldn't that be normal human nature? But you are a woman now and have your own child to protect; that is the fact that you must face."

Owen sat down next to her once again and took her hand in his. This time she did not pull away.

"You need not look at me that way," she said when she recognized the pity in his eyes. "I am not going to fall into hysterics of grief. My mother is dead and that is all there is to it. I shall have to make another plan that is all! I will go back to London and rent a small place. The money I have is enough to see us through for a long while if I am frugal. I am young and strong. I will find employment or a suitable man to marry. Some old fart with enough money and no lusts...." she paused and tried to force a laugh. "To look after my son and me."

"That is what you aspire to? An old man who will pay you just for looking pretty? If you think that is possible then you are more naïve than I thought."

"Then I suppose I will just have to suffer whatever else there is. You would be surprised, Owen Tabor, what a mother would do for her child."

"So love and passion mean nothing to you?"

For a moment, she said nothing but returned the cold stare of his deep green eyes. "It is you who is naïve and thick headed as well," she decided to change the subject. "I

saw the things you brought back from the caravan. Why didn't you tell me that you had found out my true identity?"

He sighed and stood. "As I said, I was going to tell you last night. It was not the time. I knew it would lead to telling you about Lady Delacourt."

"And that is the only reason?"

He looked puzzled and shrugged. "What other reason could there be?"

"None, I suppose!"

"Well, now is the time for us to make plans. For the sake of their safety, I have sent Hanna and Daisy to stay with the staff at Tabor Manor. In the morning I will take you to stay with friends of mine."

"That is kind, but no! I think it is time for me to stand on my own feet! Just give me a suitcase, my money and leave me at the nearest train station. That is all I need from you!"

"If that is what you think then maybe you are a fool after all. How long do you think you and Richard would be safe out there on your own? Wasn't it you who told me of the

powerful, bloody Emile Soskice?" he was losing his temper. "How long do you think it would be until they tracked you down, killed you and took the child?"

"Yes, but ...."

"Hell! Do be quiet! You will do as I tell you. I have had enough, more than enough of your arguments," he stopped here, trying to regain his temper. "I think that another of my brothers has been murdered."

"What?" she asked standing and turning him to face her.

"They have found signs that Henry has been killed or at the very least badly injured."

She turned and looked through the window towards the dark tower on the horizon. "This O'Connor man, was he related to you?"

"Why?"

"Just tell me!"

"Tom O'Connor. He is, was my cousin. Wilmot's sister's son, for whatever that matters."

"And they have not found either the body of Edward or Henry?" she asked with growing anxiety. "Shit, Owen, do you know what that means? Soskice is going to make a new shifter! Or something worse!" She shook her head. That second thought was too unbearable to contemplate.

"No, Elizabeth, not that again!"

"But do you know what a shifter is? I doubt you do. It is a deadly, evil thing that can change at will from a human to an animal...."

"I said no! I will not waste another minute on that foolishness. Not another word!" he raised his hand to silence her. "I have made up my mind and you will do as I say. I will spend the rest of today with you and Richard and then first thing tomorrow morning I will take you to safety. Then I will come back here and blow that creature's head off as I should have already done!"

"Listen to me, Owen, please! Is it too much to ask?"

He pushed his hand through his hair, sighed and sat down. "Tell me."

"If you chose not to believe me, there is nothing I can do about that but at least I

have warned you. You cannot kill Soskice with a bullet. Many have tried and I have seen that to be a fact with my own eyes. There must be a way to kill that bastard but I have no idea what it may be. You also have to identify who the shifter is and kill it. If it is that he is about to make a new shifter you had better move fast. Every shifter is more powerful than the one before."

"Right, is that it?"

"Yes, for now."

He opened the study door. "Now come along with me to the kitchen. I am hungry and I want you to cook for me!"

"Did you not have breakfast?"

"No and I have quite the appetite, you know," he smiled at her, "for food, as well. Get the child!"

By then Richard was awake and had pulled down the shawl that had covered the cradle. He was chewing and sucking on one corner of it.

"Does he always gnaw on things that way?" Owen asked as she picked up the baby.

"Yes, he is teething."

"Isn't he young for that?"

"Teeth can come in at any time."

"Well, I guess I am weak on my baby knowledge. Doesn't it hurt then when you feed him?"

She smiled and blushed from the memory of her so recent and delightful dream, "Isn't that question just a little personal?"

"Perhaps, but an interesting one from my point of view!"

"Do you want to eat or not?" she asked and they moved to the kitchen.

She secured Richard into the high chair and gave him a few spoons to play with. Owen sat next to him and watched with interest. Elizabeth fried sausages and prepared eggs for an omelet. She made strong coffee and a runny porridge for Richard. She was thankful for having things to do to keep her mind off the terrible grief that stirred just under the surface.

"You are handling the news about your mother very well."

"I am a pillar of strength," she answered with sarcasm as she placed his meal in the plate before him.

"That is for the best. Sometimes weak females can be very tiresome."

"I agree! As can arrogant, narrow minded males!" She said pointedly but did not think that he took her meaning.

"This is good!"

"I can cook. Actually, I am able to do a great many things. I am not just another pretty face, you know," she smiled at him.

"Good for you!" He shoveled more food into his mouth.

"How old were you when your mother died, Owen?"

"Six."

"So young. A hard time for a young fellow to lose his female influence."

"Difficult for me, but not so hard for my father. He married Isabelle in only a few weeks and that was a good thing too, as Edmond was born in very short time."

Elizabeth nodded and sipped her coffee.

"But in all fairness, Isabelle was a good wife and always fair and kind to me."

"I remember her very well. She died from a fall on the stairs at Tabor Hall?"

"It is my opinion that she was pushed," Owen said darkly after a moment's thought.

"Pushed? How terrible...." she stopped letting silence finish her sentence.

Then it all hit home for her. The terrible heartache that she would never see her mother again burned in her heart. She put her head on her arms on the table and let the tears fall. She made little sound; except for the slight heaving of her body, she was rigid.

Owen said nothing, continued to eat and passed small pieces of egg to Richards' tray. When his plate was empty, he stood and went to Elizabeth's side. He handed her a napkin. "Enough, Elizabeth!" he said with more kindness than force. She wiped her face and mumbled something about being sorry.

He pulled her to her feet put his arms around her and held her tightly. "There is no shame in feelings that are so natural. How could it be wrong to show what you really feel?"

She pulled away from him looking up at his face and tried to smile. "Yes, of course. You are right, Owen, whatever could be wrong with that?"

"Just remember that and you can't go wrong. Now I will have to find a suitcase for your things."

There was a sharp knock on the back door and they both jumped somewhat.

Owen saw that it was Mrs. Willard. He unlocked and opened the door.

"I do hope you have good news for us, we could use some!" Owen said as he let her in.

"I do, most certainly I do! It is a girl! A lovely, healthy and large little girl."

"Well, thank God for that!" Owen laughed as he slapped the old woman hardily on the shoulder. "And Ivy is well?"

"Oh yes! Her father is with her and the babe right now. He is telling her about poor Tom! What is happening here, Mr. Tabor? So much death!"

"At this point, I do not know, but I can tell you that I will find out very soon!"

"I hope so!" Mrs. Willard rubbed her hands together with worry. To Elizabeth she asked, "And how are you feeling my dear?"

Elizabeth tried to smile but the effort was pathetic. Her eyes were red and swollen with tears. The bruising now covered nearly half of her face and the gash on her forehead looking painfully raw.

"Have you been using that lotion I gave you?" the old woman asked.

"Just once. Should I continue to use it?"

"Yes, yes, it is excellent. If you wish I can come back and help you do your back!"

"Thank you, but no! I will be fine. I won't forget!"

"Oh yes, James has asked me to tell you that he and Ivy and the baby, of course, will be moving into Tabor Manor tonight, for the next little while. Ivy will be in the nursery and I fear that poor James will be back in the valets' room once again."

"Thank you for all your kindness, Mrs. Willard." Elizabeth said as the woman prepared to leave them.

"Not at all, my dear! That is what I am here for."

"Should I have told her that I am leaving tomorrow, I wonder?" Elizabeth asked



Owen when she was gone.

“No, I think it is best that we keep this to ourselves. Trust is something neither of us can afford right now!”

## Chapter Five

Edmond took it upon himself to show Reine and Abbey to the adjoining rooms they would have during their stay. Reine stood just a trifle too close to him as they spoke at the doorway. She was pleased with the look and manner of the man. Edmond was not as tall as Owen was but he was certainly handsome, sure of his manhood and aware of his attraction to women. He did not step back when Reine was so close but openly studied her long, slim neck and the ample cleavage.

"Will you be joining us downstairs before dinner?" Edmond asked.

"Well, as you can see my friend is not feeling her best these days. I think I will stay with her here until she has rested. Would it be alright if we waited to join the family until the dinner hour?"

He smiled. "Of course! My father chooses to eat rather early, so the meal is ready by seven. Shall I come for you then?"

"That will be nice!" Reine smiled as she closed the door behind him and turned quickly to face Abbey.

Abbey could see through the shifter's icy smile to the anger held in check just below the surface. The moment that they were alone Reine pulled Abbey from the doorway.

"I know why you told them that they would be safe with me in their house, but it will not help them in the least!" she hissed at Abbey through clenched teeth. "When Papa tells me to kill them I will do it! And remember just like that, without a moment's thought I could break your fat neck, fly out that window and that would be that for you!"

"But you won't do that, my dear!" Abbey smirked and pulled her arm from Reine. "That would ruin the perfect plan to destroy this family and you would never do anything against Emile! So, I guess in that way for the time being I am safe from your temper. And from what I can see your obsessive desire to please Emile may be your weakness!"

In a fury, Reine raised her hand and brought it with amazing speed against the side of Abbey's head. Abbey fell across the bed and landed on the floor beside it. "I have no weakness. I was created for perfect evil and perfect evil can never fail!" she spoke with the voice of Soskice.

Abbey got to her feet, straightened her clothes and wisely said nothing else. She went into her room and lay down on the bed. Her head was ringing and her heart thudded like a hammer in her chest. Reine still had more to say and followed behind Abbey.

"I have not finished yet; so listen carefully and don't make any mistakes. I have to leave and may be away for several hours. You heard me tell Edmond that I would rest with you until the dinner hour, so you must not show your face until I arrive back. If for any reason any of them should see that I am not in my room, tell them that I have gone to walk the grounds to get a feel for the place. And make sure that the window in my room is open at all times. Do you understand?" Reine stood over Abbey with her hands on her hips. Her voice cracked with anger.

"Yes, I understand. Just leave me alone," Abbey answered. She heard Reine open the window in her room and whispered to herself; "I swear to God if I survive this mess I am going to kill that bitch!"

The raven landed beside Emile and transformed. He was as always, sitting leaning against the wall with his head hanging down on his chest. She lifted the veil that hung over his face and he grinned up at her up at her.

"And so, are you a welcome guest in the Tabor household?"

"Yes, of course! And more than welcome from the looks on the faces of Edmond and the old man! I shall enjoy playing with them before I kill them."

"Ah, yes, without a doubt, my dear! Not yet though, I want to enjoy this a while longer."

"But why did you have Henry Tabor killed? I thought that I was your eyes and hands?"

"You cannot have all the joy, my dear. That would not be fair, would it?" he laughed at her sulking face.

"Who killed him, was it that O'Connor man? Is that why you had me kill him?"

"You ask too many questions? That is not what I expect of you. It is better that you do not know."

"Please tell me, I will never say a word about it to anyone ...." she stopped when he raised his hand to hit her.

"Do not argue with me!"

"I am sorry Papa! I am only curious. When I do not know something it makes me worry."

"Curiosity and worry! Those are all too human traits!" he leaned closer, glaring at her. "Remember who and what you are. These next few days you will be spending a great deal of time in human form and it would be very unwise for you to indulge in their weaknesses!" After a moment, he sat back and smiled. "Now, I am hungry. Go and find me something lovely to eat. However, do not take too long. I have more instructions for you."

When the raven left the tower late that afternoon, she was excited with the new challenge ahead of her and it was without a doubt the most important yet. She left the estate grounds and headed for the secluded, winding country roads to the south. She knew exactly what she needed and that it was only a matter of time before she came upon it.

Steward Hubbard was taking his time riding home from the market that day. He had done two turns through the village just to be sure that as many people as possible saw his lovely, new mare. It was true that hard work pays in many ways and he was proudly showing off that afternoon. He was only a mile from home when as he turned a sharp bend in the road he came across a young woman who appeared to be in distress and waving at him to stop.

"Is something wrong?" he asked her as he came to a stop and jumped down beside her.

"Oh, yes, please will you help me? My horse is stuck in a mole hole. I cannot move him because of the weight of the carriage and he is too upset to let me near him!" she had tears in her bright silver eyes as she spoke.

"Not to worry, Miss, I am as strong as an ox or so my old woman says and I have a way with horses. Lead me to him and I will soon have you on the go," Mr. Hubbard was always ready to lend a hand to anyone who needed it.

"The Lord sent you to me, I am sure of that," she smiled with relief. "I am on the narrow road just past the hedge row."

He followed her across the field and back of the roadway. At a thicket, she stood to the side to let him go first. "Please go ahead of me, in case of insects, they do scare me so!"

Mr. Hubbard smiled and nodded knowingly as he pushed aside some of the bushes and stepped into the brush. Moving in directly behind him she grabbed his head with such force that his legs came off the ground. With a resounding snap she broke his neck and turned his head so far around it was facing her and had a very startled expression on his face. She threw him further into the thicket.

"Idiot!" she said with disgust as she wiped her hands on her skirt.

She went back to Mr. Hubbard's pride and joy and approached it slowly from behind. From experience, she knew that animals did not take to her when she was in human form. Eventually she climbed on the horse and headed in the direction of the Tabor Estate.

During her flights across the Tabor land, and the outlying boundaries, she found an old barn on a long forgotten and over grown pathway. Covered with so much foliage the barn was almost indiscernible from the ground. With a little coaxing, she got the horse up the rutted pathway and into the barn. She tied her firmly in place in the far side of the barn and pulled the rusted doors closed. A thick stick served as a bolt to hold the doors closed for the time being and she was done. Reine walked into the shadows behind the barn and in a moment the raven flew up and back towards Tabor Hall.

It was near to the dinner hour when Abbey went into Reine's room. The raven was sitting on the windowsill. She cocked her head at Abbey. "You had better transform before Edmond comes for us, don't you think?"

The bird hopped down to the floor, lowered her head and in a moment, Reine stood and grinned. She wore a tight fitting, straight lined evening dress made of the finest pale gray velvet with a row of small, pearl buttons down the front. The only jewelry she wore was a delicately carved cross on a silver chain. Her hair was loose on her back, held in place with a gold lace ribbon.

"Well, what do you think, Abbey? Do you think I am meal enough for a hungry man?"

"By that I assume that you mean Edmond! Is he next on Emile's list?" Abbey asked. She had done the best she could with her appearance wearing black as usual. She had fussed for a long time with her stubborn wiry hair but knew she was pale indeed beside the beauty of this other woman.

"Edmond will do for this evening but I would much rather get my hands on the lovely Owen Tabor. That is a man I will enjoy seducing. He thinks far too much of himself!"

"Edmond may be as you say a hungry man but I think that you will find Owen is a tougher piece of meat to chew on! Do you think that a man like that will sleep with just anyone?"

"Well, that is what you think! I am not just anyone; look at me! I am

beautiful!" Reine laughed. "I have never failed in any seduction. For me the fun is in the seduction; it is the challenge of a man like Owen Tabor that will be the best part. And just think, if you do as you are told and please Emile you might be able to get a nice cock for yourself once again and I am sure that you would welcome that, poor dear!"

"You know, Reine, you should leave Emile and come and work for me. With a talented whore like you I could make us both very rich!"

Reine laughed loudly and was still laughing when Edmond knocked on the door and Abbey opened it. He was wearing a black armband on the sleeve of his elegant dinner jacket. "May I escort you ladies to the dining room?" he asked, smiling widely at his unknown mortal enemy.

"Mr. Tabor, how handsome you look!" Reine said as she took his arm and pressed a breast against his arm.

Abbey took his other arm and as soon as she did this, she could hear his thoughts. They would not have pleased his wife at all.

There was no doubt about it, Abbey thought as they descended the staircase, that with or without Emile she was getting her psychic powers back. Trapped as she was in this strange and dangerous position, she was feeling much better.

The ornate dining room and large table seemed a lonely place with only Wilmot, the Inspector and Olivia seated around it. Reine was disappointed not to see Owen but set her energies on the possibilities at hand.

"How are you feeling, Lord Tabor? My heart aches for all your loss," she asked as she took her place at the table.

"I think that should be obvious, Miss Crawford. My father-in-law has lost two sons in as many days. He is devastated, of course!" Olivia spoke with an extremely unfriendly tone.

"I am perfectly able to speak for myself, Olivia!" Wilmot snapped at her. Then turned to Reine and smiled. "I am bearing up, Miss Crawford. No doubt I am much better than I would be if I did not know that Edmond, Owen and I are safer under the protection of you and dear friend, Abbey."

"I am sorry, Father-in-law. I was only trying to be helpful." Olivia said, her cheeks were red and she did not sound at all sorry. "Perhaps, then I will be permitted to ask our guests just how they plan to issue this protection? Surely, as Edmond is my husband I will be allowed to ask this?"

"Of course, Mrs. Tabor. I understand your concerns very completely. Not only are Abbey and I here to offer protection but to break this sinful curse. That requires a great deal of work and with that extreme secrecy. We must keep our methods to ourselves."

"Then I guess we will all just have to pray that we are not killed in our sleep." Olivia said with barely controlled frustration.

"Olivia!" Edmond gave her a warning look. "I hope that you will forgive my wife. She has the unfortunate habit of saying what she thinks and sometimes, as now, she speaks without thinking."

"Well, then Edmond, if that is what you feel perhaps I should take the rest of my meal in my room." Olivia was on the verge of tears.

"No please, I do not wish to cause any more difficulties for this poor family and I am sure Abbey agrees. We have only come to help, if any of you feel that we cannot do

this then we will certainly leave.”

“My guests will stay and Olivia you will be quiet for the rest of the meal,” Wilmot said with controlled anger. “We will not pry, in any way, into what they are doing and they will have the full run of the house and the land in just the same way that I have given the Inspector. Do you understand, Olivia?”

Edmond’s wife just hung her head in silence and tears dropped onto her skirt.

“As you can see Miss Crawford we are a family coming miserably apart at the seams,” Edmond said after a few moments of awkward silence. Reine said nothing but gave him a look of understanding and compassion.

To break an awkward silence Abbey spoke to the Inspector. “If I may ask, as I have great respect for the police, what direction does your investigation lead to?”

“Well, Miss Pritchard, under normal circumstances it would not be at all appropriate for me to discuss the progress of a case but this mess is hardly a normal circumstance so I am free to tell you that I do not believe the answers will be found here on the Estate. After hours of questioning I find that there is not a shred of evidence that points to the direction of any individuals who live on this land,” his tone was pompous and condescending.

“Really? Even in the death of the O’Connor man?”

“My main concern is the death of Edward and possibly Henry Tabor. It could be true that O’Connor’s death is also connected but I very much doubt it, my dear. My sergeant

has taken that body to the coroner in Dover and will be back for me in the morning and from there I will be looking for outside enemies of Edward and Henry.”

“I am sure that you know best!” Abbey answered with a smile.

“Miss Crawford,” Wilmot said after a further strained silence, “you are hardly eating a thing!”

“Oh!” Abbey gave a small laugh, “my friend eats like a bird! I do not know how she manages to do all that she does!”

Reine leveled her brilliant eyes on Abbey that had more than a hint of a warning. “A talent I have acquired to keep healthy. I find over eating very unfeminine.”

“I should take a lesson from you, I am sure,” Abbey said as she filled her mouth with buttered potatoes.

“What I would really like to do while there is still light enough is to be shown around the immediate grounds. Tomorrow, when there is more time, I need to see the entire Estate. That way I will have a firm picture in my mind. Would you be so kind as to walk me through the grounds when we are finished here, Mr. Tabor?” Reine asked Edmond.

“Of course we will do that,” Olivia said quickly with a look towards her husband.

“I need to spend time alone with all the Tabor men, Mrs. Tabor. So that I can correctly gauge the strength of their auras and the danger, they are under. In a group I pick up so many mixed feelings!”

Edmond smiled and nodded. “That makes perfect sense, Miss Crawford. I will be only too glad to show you around.”

That was it for Olivia. With her usual display of drama, she stood from her seat and left the room.

“Please forgive my wife,” Edmond said loud enough for his wife to hear, “she has

appalling manners when under stress. I have lost my appetite. When you have finished eating, Miss Crawford, we will leave for our walk."

"Oh, I have had my fill. A walk would be lovely," Reine smiled at him. "You will excuse us then, Lord Tabor?"

Edmond led Reine out of the room and directed her to a small study across the hall. "Please wait for me in here for just a moment. I feel I should have a word with Olivia."

Reine could see the anger in his pale amber eyes.

"Of course."

The room was small, beautifully decorated in several shades of blue. Large, white brocade, comfortable and overstuffed chairs circled a low marble table. A carved crystal vase held an array of fragrant spring flowers. A shining, black mahogany writing desk sat in front of the lace curtains that blew slightly in the early evening breeze. In her brief time with human experiences, she had never seen such opulent wonder as she had seen in this house. She was greatly impressed with the surroundings. "It must be grand living in this style," she whispered as she sat on the side of the desk.

From the window, down across the lawn and through some treetops, she could see the red roof of the house where they had come across Owen on their way into the Estate. She thought for a moment of his handsome face and broad shoulders and the thought of her 'quiet time' with Edmond filled her with an unknown sense of excitement. She pushed those thoughts aside. Her Papa had warned these feelings were far too human and dangerous.

"Excuse me, Miss! I have to dust in here but I can come back later," a tiny voice startled Reine from her thoughts. She looked up to see Daisy standing nervously in the doorway.

"No, go ahead. Do what you must. You will not bother me," Reine watched Daisy begin the tedious job of dusting the books "Have you worked here long?"

"Two years now. I do not work in this house much. I work in Hock House!"

"Hock House?" Reine asked.

"Just over that way!" Daisy pointed out the window. "That is Mr. Owen Tabor's house. It is really called Hollyhock House because of the gardens around it but Mr. Tabor prefers to call it Hock House."

"No doubt," Reine smiled. "But then why are you here dusting all these books?"

"Mr. Tabor sent his staff to stay here for safety's sake. But there is just the two of us; just me and Hanna!"

"A small staff for such a large house. That must make for a lot of work for Mrs. Owen Tabor?"

"Oh, that Mrs. Tabor died three years ago now. Since then Hock House has been a lonely place."

Reine remembered seeing Owen carrying the unconscious Elizabeth into his house. Elizabeth was still there so it was rather unlikely that Mr. Owen was very lonely. "How sad. A happy marriage is so important!" she stood and walked closer to the busy maid. "Would you say that the marriage of Edmond and Olivia Tabor is a happy one? I ask that because this will help in my position of protection here."

"I should not speak of this but as you say, it is to help the family," Daisy whispered stepping closer to Reine. "They did have such a lovely wedding and so

romantic too. It was right after I came here. They were married in the center of the garden maze! That is supposed to bring a married couple luck but not for them! Not much gets past the servants, Miss. You see, Mr. Owen made them get married!"

"Made them?"

"Well, Mrs. Olivia got in the family way!" Daisy's cheeks turned bright red. "And Mr. Owen insisted. He does rule most of what happens here since the Laird took poorly. But it was so sad since shortly after they were married they lost the baby."

"That is a shame!" Reine said with such sincerity Daisy had no idea the fuel she was adding to the dangerous fire inside of the strange woman. "Is it just my imagination or is Olivia older than her husband?"

"She is thirty!" Daisy spoke as though that was something shameful. "Mr. Edmond is only 24!" She stopped speaking at the sound of Edmond's footfall.

"I am sorry I was so long, Miss Crawford," he offered and she could tell he was even angrier than he had been when he went to see Olivia.

"Not at all! I have just been enjoying this lovely room. So very peaceful!" She took his offered arm and they went from the house out into the gardens.

As they walked the carefully manicured spring gardens, she was able to steer him to a seat on the far side of a hedge that was out of sight from the house. "May we sit for a while, Mr. Tabor?" She fanned her face with her hand. "It is rather warm tonight and so humid, I think it will rain! And please may we use first names?"

"Of course!" he smiled at her as they sat down. He was not sure just what to make of the woman. Like Owen, he had little faith in the abilities of mediums and psychics. He was very drawn to her beauty and very powerful sexuality.

"The gardens are so lovely, Edmond! It is still so early in the season. It must be a wonder when in full bloom. Surely, I see the hands of a female at work here. Perhaps Mrs. Tabor?"

"Olivia? Good Lord, no! She would not want her hands to get dirty even for the sake of a garden," Edmond answered with a bitter tone.

"Well, nonetheless the Tabor Estate is a beautiful place. With the exception of that!" Reine nodded in the direction of the old tower as it jutted up, black and ugly against the bright sky. "May I ask you what it is?"

"Yes, it is ugly isn't it? You know, there is hardly a place on the Estate where it is not visible. It is all that is left of the original Tabor Castle, built along the cliff side over 300 years ago. Time knocked most of it into the channel. My mother wanted Father to have the last of it destroyed but he felt it was too dangerous and that in time it would fall on its own."

"I can feel that there is something very evil about that thing," she said with emotion. "Something very evil, indeed!"

Edmond looked at her with the beginnings of astonishment in his eyes but then it faded as he thought she could have easily learned that Emile Soskice sat chained in there from normal sources. She was aware that would be the natural course of his thoughts but she was nowhere near finished bringing him under her spell.

"May I hold your hand? You see, I can pick up so much more about a person with physical contact," she did not wait for a reply but slid her soft, cool fingers over his hand.

He did not pull away. It was not her psychic abilities he was thinking of then.



As he went to speak, she raised her hand to his lips. "Sh! Please! Let me concentrate." She closed her eyes and lowered her head. Despite herself, she was enjoying the closeness of Edmond's body. He was young, virile and so handsome compared to the man she had to service. His hand felt warm and strong under hers.

"Behind us, on the other side of the hill, beyond the stables is a very private part of the Tabor gardens. There is a wonderful huge maze designed by the clever use of interlocking T's. Just beyond the maze is a small cottage painted pale yellow and that is where the caretaker for the maze lives with his wife and two small children. Behind the cottage is a small barn, also painted a pretty yellow where he keeps his tools. Their children are twins and have curly blond hair. One is called Billy and the other Sam," she felt Edmond's surprise and again touched his lips to silence him.

"There in the center of the maze is a lovely heart shaped fountain but this can only be seen when one reaches the exact center. In the water of the fountain I see the statues of two angel children made of pure gold," she paused here for effect and then continued to recall the things she had seen in her many flights over the land. "As they blow the water through their flutes when the sun is just right they create wonderful rainbows. How lovely!"

"There is no way you could know any of that. None of it is visible from any area of the house. Abbey could not have told you because the maze was not built when she was here!" Edmond was truly astonished but Reine was not finished.

"But it is simple, Edmond! I know these things because I am psychic. I also can see that you and Olivia were married in the heart of the maze in hopes of good luck, but that luck and happiness were not to be yours," she stopped talking and leaned forward and gently placed her lips on his and kissed him gently with compassion. "I am sorry!" she whispered as she pulled back from him. "I should not have done that. I sensed your unhappiness."

"I could be very happy, Reine, under the right circumstances," he said taking her face in his hands and kissing her. His kiss was as soft and tender as hers was. She could tell he was testing her. When Reine did not resist he pulled her against him and allowed his long bent up need to flow.

His passionate kiss stirred in Reine for the very first time, the feelings of human sexuality. She was surprised and thrilled as the divine heat spread through her blood. She responded quickly to his hands, his lips and his tongue. So often Emile had warned her that she must not indulge in any human needs she may find. This tide of passion that pulled her along then was far too wonderful to resist.

"You are so lovely!" he whispered huskily as he kissed her neck and shoulders. He slid his hands down her arms to her waist and then brought them up to her breasts. She gasped at the feel of his hands and his hot breath on her neck. She raised her hand slowly up his thigh to his lap to feel the solid reality of his passion.

"Jesus, Reine, don't do that unless you want me to take you right here and now," he looked into her eyes. She saw that his usual pale amber eyes were then dark and brilliant with passion and that those words were not an idle threat.

"No!" she pulled away from him.

"Reine, are you teasing me?" his voice heavy with passion.

"I am not teasing, Edmond! I never tease," she kissed him again. "I will please you, but not here, not now! Not just for a few quick moments while we are still dressed.

I want to feel your naked body next to mine. We could be seen ....”

“Then let them watch and learn something,” he unbuttoned her bodice and saw that Reine was not wearing any undergarments. Pulling the sides of her dress open, he exposed her breasts and kissed her nipples. This thrilled her with a passion she had never thought possible.

“Stop!” she insisted, pushing him firmly away and fighting for control of herself. “Come to my bedroom, but not tonight!”

“Yes, tonight, Reine!”

“No!” she stood and backed away from him and refastening her buttons. “I have important work to do with Abbey and it may take all night. To protect your family is the most important thing I have to do here.” It was Emile's plans that she had to see to that

night and she must do what he wanted without fail. “But tomorrow night, after midnight if you can get away from your wife...!”

“Oh, I will be there, Reine and believe me you will not get away with teasing me then,” he sat back resigned to her decision and trying to relax.

“My!” she sighed, and smiled as she sat next to him again. “Please do not think poorly of me. I am not usually so emotional. Perhaps it is the beauty of this place or the handsome man so close to me. I did sense your need. Please do not think that I am a slut. Because I promise you that I am not!”

“A slut, no I don't think so. I am able to spot that quickly. It could be though, that you are mighty a tease, and that remains to be seen,” he took her hand and kissed it.

She liked the look and the feel of this man and for the brief moments, while they sat regaining their composure she forgot completely that she would soon be required to kill him.

It was growing dark when they returned to the Hall. Abbey was in the parlor with Wilmot and the Inspector. Reine could feel Abbey's eyes on her, searching to see what had happened between her and Edmond and she was glad the woman could not tell. Reine was shocked to the core at what she saw might be a weakness in herself. She was confused and more than a little scared because she had been tempted and accepted one of the great joys of being human. In the very short time alone with this Tabor, she had reveled in human sexuality. She had stepped over Papa's most feared boundaries and to her greatest shock and surprise she was glad she had.

She made her excuses to retire, saying she was so very tired. Edmond followed her out into the hallway. Just the near presence of him stirred her. She turned to him leveling her silver eyes into his and saw that his eyes were still dark with lust. Aware that no one was watching she leaned forward placed her hand on his face and whispered into his ear. “Do not waste any delicious energy on your wife tonight! Save it for me!”

Edmond returned to the parlor. “I will check on the security with Hastings then if you and Miss Pritchard will excuse me I shall retire as well.”

“At least tell us if Miss Crawford enjoyed our gardens?” Wilmot asked with a smile.

“I think she found them entertaining,” he answered ignoring his father's sarcasm.

Wilmot wheeled his chair closer to Abbey, as usual, the old dog Belle was at his side. She could smell whiskey and brandy on his breath. “I think that Edmond is

rather taken with your lovely protégé! I cannot say that I blame him. I am sure that prig he is married to is a frigid bitch. What do you think, my dear?"

"Has Mrs. Tabor always been like that; I mean so high strung?"

"As far as I can tell she was born a tight little mouse and will die that way and the sooner the better for my son's sake!"

"Why in Heavens' name did Edmond choose her? I mean to say, he is a handsome young man, with a strong body and very healthy bank account! Surely there were many females for him to pick from?" Abbey asked what so many had wondered.

"He did not choose her. She choose him would be more like it! She made sure that she got with child as soon as possible and went to Owen with that fact. As much as it pains me to say it, I feel Edmond thinks of his brother before his father. When Owen insisted they marry before the child was born. There was no baby born and now over eighteen months have passed and Edmond is still in a state of shock! Perhaps your lady will bring him out of it!"

"Perhaps!" Abbey nodded as she refilled their glasses.

"He has had affairs in the mean time, do not get me wrong. I think she has as well. It is just a matter of time before that poor marriage ends and he gets rid of Olivia."

"Just like you did to me," she had hardly said the words before she regretted them. "No, I am sorry I should not have said that. I knew full well that you were married when we started our affair and I had no right to place any claim on you or to expect anything from you!"

"I should never have brought you to this house, Abbey. I was thinking only of my own self as usual and without care of what it would mean if Isabelle found out! For God's sake, she often went away for weeks on end and never came back unannounced. God, I wasted so much when I lost you!"

"Did you really feel that way, Wilmot?" as she spoke, she laid her hand on his.

"I had many mistresses before you and after but none had the power over my senses that you had. I should have kept you in the safety of London. Isabelle would have never been the wiser! I do not have many regrets but that is one I will admit to!"

"But I wrote to you and told you how much I missed you! Why did you not come to me? You knew where I was!"

"I never received any letters. Did you really think I would?"

"If you had received them would you have come to me?" Try as she could she could not hold back her tears. She could feel that every word he was saying to her was true.

"Maybe, most likely, but that was long ago. We are long past the lusts that drove us then!"

"And I am far past the time when any man would want me!"

"So you are fat and I am old and wrinkled. Do you think I attract many females as I am now? Not even as much money as I have can make up for the fact that my body fails me in a great many ways!" He took her hand in both of his and held it tightly. "But sweet Jesus, Abbey, how well I remember the way you would ride me. What an incredible lover you were! If only we go could go back in time even if for just one night!"

"If only! If only, Wilmot!"

"Tears? Do not waste the energy on tears. Be happy for the sweet memories if

that is all we have. Perhaps we will have a new friendship in the future. If nothing else that is refreshing.”

“Tell me, Wilmot,” she leaned close to him and whispered. “Belle, how old is she now? Doesn’t anyone ever wonder about....?”

She stopped talking as Wilmot’s valet came into the room looking irritated as he announced that James was there waiting to retire and that it was time for the Lord to have his medicine and prepare for bed. “Ah, you see, Abbey I am so old that I have to have a nurse maid to put me to bed and another old man as my body guard. But I would much rather have a woman with huge breasts and an accommodating manner!”

Abbey laughed long and hard. God, she wondered later, do I really hate this man enough to deceive him this way?

Owen found a suitcase for Elizabeth and she packed it with all except for what they would need for that night and morning. During the course of the afternoon, a heavy and dark mood fell over Owen. He paced the length of the Great Room, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

When she could stand it no longer, she said to him, “Owen. I will be safe here with the guards outside if you wish to go to Tabor Manor. I would understand completely that you wish to be involved with the investigation.”

“No, Elizabeth! When I brought you into my home, you became my responsibility. I shall stay with you until I bring you safely away from here,” he snapped with anger.

She did not wish to be the brunt of Owen's frustration so she took Richard and moved into the study. She changed him, fed him and when he settled in his cradle, she sat back in the window seat. The sun was low in the sky and dark clouds were rolling in quickly from the cliffs. There will be rain soon, she thought and then she wondered if she would ever see this lovely place again after tomorrow. She very much doubted it.

“What are you doing?” Owen startled her with his sudden appearance in the room.

“Just, well, thinking.”

“Well, I don’t want you to think. I want you to talk!”

“I do not understand?”

“Tell me everything you can, no matter how unimportant it seems about Emile Soskice.”

“Oh, I see! I have already told you a great deal. Will you really listen this time?”

“As much as it galls me to say this and as much as I do not much believe in ‘magic’ I would be a fool not to realize the danger. So please, just talk to me,” he pulled the chair out from the desk and sat on it, stretching his long legs out before him and folded his arms over his chest.

She nodded and sighed. “Jack spoke a lot about his father, especially when he was intoxicated. I am sure he said far more than Emile would have wanted. Emile had a powerful hold over his son with drugs and God only knows what kind of depraved sex. I have to admit that the things he told me are impossible! But I have seen the results.”

“Then just tell me what Jack told you.”

“Emile Soskice was born from a prostitute mother and a demon father, a creature named ‘One Wing’,” she paused, waiting for him to laugh or call her a fool but he said nothing so she continued. “It had been planned; Lord knows how, that he would

possess his father's evil powers and his mother's wanton nature. It was the want of the creature that fathered him to create a perfect demon/human, a perfect human body but with the dark soul of Satan. As you saw, Emile is far from perfect in body so his father had little use for him. They murdered his mother when he was born. One Wing rejected Emile and forced him from the lair. Jack always said that showed how powerful his father was because One Wing always killed the offspring who did not please him." Elizabeth shook her head and shrugged.

"Emile was still a boy and he was taken in by a group of renegade gypsies. Emile matured very quickly; probably he was never a child, in the true sense of the word and soon became leader of the gypsy clan. Jack said that Emile took all the young females as his wives and placated their men with a constant supply of drugs. Over the years he had a great many children."

"I thought that Jack was his only son?"

"That is fact only in Emile's demented mind. As the children matured and wanted lives of their own Emile would have none of that. They were to submit their will, their wives and children to Emile or to leave the clan. Except for Jack and a few of the weaker females, they left. Emile disowned them. I think that he might have killed some of them as well. Emile called Jack his only son but there are many Soskice men out there."

Owen nodded. "And most of them hate their father?"

"Not a soul who ever met Emile Soskice feels anything but hate for him," Elizabeth said with venom, "except for whoever or whatever is helping him now."

"You told me that Emile did not spend much time with the caravan. Tell me more about that."

"He never stayed with the 'family'. As far as I know, he never once slept in the wagon with the woman who was Jack's mother or even ate with us. I noticed that Emile never seemed to eat or drink. He would sit outside his tent with his back against a tree or a rock or whatever, perfectly still with that veil over his head and not move from that spot for the whole of the day."

"He had no campfire and no one from the wagons ever brought him any food or water. His tent was never any closer than about twenty yards from our camp and no one was permitted to approach it but Jack. Even the grandchildren kept their distance and were rightfully terrified of him. They did not call him Grandfather but called him 'Mr. Soskice' and that was not discouraged by their parents. As far as I know I was the only member of the family other than Jack who was ever inside Emile's tent."

"Why was that?"

She lowered her eyes. Owen wished he could spare her from his further pain but he had to know everything. "Sometimes..." she paused, took a deep breath and continued "Jack would bind my hands and place a hood over my head. It had a drawstring on the bottom and he would pull it as tight as he could and still allow me to breathe. Then he would take me to Emile and he would do whatever he wanted. Then after a while Jack would come back and get me."

"I am so sorry, Elizabeth. Believe me you will see your revenge. Did you ever get a chance to see or hear anything at all while you were with Soskice that might be some help here?" His voice was thick with emotion. As he listened to Elizabeth, he felt

the powerful, burning hatred for Emile Soskice growing in his soul.

"Well," she sighed and raised her eyes again. "One time I heard something strange but I have never been absolutely sure what it was. I was sure I heard a female voice, so close that she must have been in the tent with us. I did not know the voice nor could I make out what she said. Emile told whomever it was to shut up and then I heard what I can only say was a laugh but it was an ugly, high pitched sound and more like a squeal!"

"Like an old woman?"

"Maybe, I do not know for sure! It was more like a bird."

He remembered the large raven he had caught with Soskice and the laughter he had heard. Despite his resolve to remain a skeptic, he felt his skin crawl.

"Often Emile would disappear for days or weeks at a time, but it was no relief to any of us," Elizabeth continued. "If we broke any of his rules, especially any of the females, he always knew about it. I swear to you Owen it was as if he had unseen eyes always alert and watching us. I know how ridiculous it sounds but there is no other way I can explain it."

"Tell me about the males in his clan!"

"At the time we came here there were only three males other than Jack. Each of them was married to one of Emile's daughters. The youngest is Peter. I do not know his last name. He is a mute so I know little about him except that he is as strong as a bull. He and his wife, Rose had a baby just a few weeks before I had Richard. Even that birth was a disappointment to Emile as it was a girl."

"Then there is Joshua Albert who is married to Betty. He is a large man and mean spirited to his core. He has a vicious temper and is a crack shot. They have two small daughters."

"Tom Hobson is married to the oldest daughter, Tara. He is much older than she is and he is her second husband. I believe he has only been with the family for a few years more than I was. They have no children but he brought with him a son from an earlier

marriage. He was kinder to me than most of them and often would give me food and water when Jack left me chained in his wagon."

"When I had been injured by Jack or Emile, sometimes he would be sent to treat me. They call him 'Doc'. I think he trained as a doctor before he joined the troupe. He was with me when Richard was born and seemed to know just what he was doing. I would say that of all those people he is the closest to being sane, if that is the right word."

"A doctor? No doubt educated and he would be the one most likely to take over in the event of Emile's death?"

"Yes, I assume so. Especially now that Jack is dead! But even if Jack was alive I doubt he would have had the strength to take his father's place; too addled by his addictions."

"You have told me about your second escape attempt; now tell me about the first."

Elizabeth thought for a moment. "That was not as nearly successful as the second. I simply ran away, on foot. It was nighttime. They caught me after only an hour or so. Emile was furious and wanted Jack to kill me now. Jack for once resisted and I was somewhat spared. As usual, with a hood tied over my head, they took me to a

jail but it was more likely a cellar in someone's home. It was a small room, just big enough for a cot and a chair. A tiny window near the ceiling looked out onto some foliage and a brick wall. That was my only source of light."

"I was kept there for four months, I think but even that is not clear as soon the days and nights began to blend together. Jack would come by every so often and as desperate as I was for human contact even that was a blessing. He told me that he was talking Emile into letting me out of there but that it would take time. I did not believe him but

had to hang onto something to keep my sanity. I received food, water and the likes through an opening in at the bottom of the door. All I ever saw of my jailer were her hands. I think that in time she began to feel sorry for me because she began to bring me better food and books to read in the poor, murky day light."

"Then one night I heard a terrible row going on above me. I could hear Emile and Jack fighting. Things went quiet for a long while and I thought that Jack and Emile had left but I was wrong. They came to my 'room' placed that hood over my head and took me from the house. I rode in the wagon for some time before they took the hood off and things went back to the way they were."

He shook his head, ran his long fingers through his hair, and then asked, "What can you tell me about any connections outside of the family?"

"Jack would often brag to me that they could kill me or anyone else for that matter and that nothing would ever happen to them. They had no fear of prosecution because Emile had some very powerful men under his control."

Now Owen sat forward and leaned his forearms on his legs. "Go on."

"I think that must have been true because several times while I was with them Emile was arrested for various and serious charges. Word was that Emile always managed to escape but Jack told me that their 'high up' friends had helped him. It is without a doubt that Emile had some kind of hold over John Delacourt and the other men who brought their daughters to parade in front of Emile and Jack that night. These were rich men and not in need of money enough to sell their daughters."

"So, Elizabeth can you tell me anything about Emile's enemies?"

"Good Lord, Owen. They had nothing but enemies! Where would I start?"

"Begin with anyone who had not been corrupted by the Soskice Clan. Did you ever get the impression that there was any one in those 'high up' offices who was a threat to them?"

She smiled. "It was my only source of faint hope that I might be someday free of them. What fools those men are! They are not nearly as smart as they hope. Most of the time when they speak to each other it was in the Romany language and I had no idea what they were talking about, but for one thing, occasionally I would hear a name I knew very well. The tone they used when they spoke of him was, well, fear! He was the one person I thought might one day rescue me! My Uncle Ted!"

"Who? Your mother's brother?"

"No. My mother's brother is Sebastian. I have never met him. Ted is not really my Uncle; I just call him that. Reverend Thaddeus Browne. He is my Godfather."

Owen rubbed his beard thoughtfully. "He was mentioned in your mother's

letters.”

“They are or were very close. Lover’s, I hope. He is a delightful man and more like a father to me. He is the Reverend at St. Andrews Church in Highgate. I must contact him!”

“I will do that. From this time on or at least until this matter is ended you will do nothing but stay where I put you.”

“You have no right to boss me like this. I am tired of being held prisoner under some man's thumb.”

“You are not under my thumb, Lizzie, but under my protection and that is a very different thing, so save your anger for those who deserve it. Now explain to me about these so-called ‘shifters’.”

“Yes and that is a very important thing for you to understand. I do not have detailed knowledge of the process it takes to make them but there is one thing happening here that troubles me the most. It could be that Soskice is planning to make a new shifter. Jack told me that they use bodies of dead who are connected by blood.”

“Tom was a cousin to the Tabor family,” he said more to himself. “What do they do with them?”

“God knows. Edward is dead, his body missing. Henry may be dead and they could have that body as well. O’Connor is dead and he is a blood cousin to the Tabors. You had best be sure his body is burned and quickly!”

“Tell me about the strengths and weakness of these so-called shifters?”

“Well, from what I can tell they can be any kind of animal, whatever their creator decides. They are very strong and fast; in either form. They are completely without human compassion. I am sure beyond any doubt that Soskice has a shifter.”

Owen thought for a moment. “I am not saying that I believe in the existence of these things Elizabeth, but if they do work as you say that would explain how Soskice was able to find you when you made your escape attempts.”

She nodded. Finally, she thought, there may be light coming into his thick head. “You will only survive this, Owen, if you keep your mind wide open.”

“It is difficult to weaken a life time of solid reason, Lizzie.”

“Weaken? You will not be weakening your reason by opening your mind. You will greatly strength it.”

“I hope so, we shall see!” The clock over the mantel struck ten times. “Bring Richard; it is time for bed. As usual it will be you on your uncomfortable sofa and me in my large, comfortable and rather lonely bed,” he took her by the arm and led her into his bedroom. “Unless, of course, if you feel you have some needs that I can help you with?”

“No, I am fine thank you!” she had to laugh at his mock sad face. It felt wonderful to laugh again. For such a brief moment the death, pain and sadness of her life ceased. She began to say something else but stopped.

“What were you going to say?”

“Well, I will be worried about you. I want you to assure me that you will be very careful.”

“I have no intention of ending like my brothers. Do not worry about me but look after yourself and your child!”

Hanna was not pleased when ordered over to Tabor Hall. Not only was it wrong



forcing her away from her home it was also very wrong that Owen and Elizabeth be completely alone in Hock House. Before leaving for the Hall, she did win a small victory by placing two decorative screens across the room between the bed and the settee.

"Poor old dear!" Owen called to Elizabeth from behind the screens as they prepared for bed. "She does so worry about my virginity."

"Maybe it is your soul she worries about, Owen."

"Ah! Is that what it is! Well, I have not my virginity or a soul so she is at a loss!"

"I would rather that we were sleeping in the study. I don't like this room!"

"Are you still thinking about our 'wee ghostie?'" he laughed. Richard, near his mother in the cradle, heard Owen laugh and mimicked it. "You see, even the babe agrees with me."

"Sh! Please lower your voice or he will never go back to sleep. Can you explain how a baby of five months, who cannot even roll over on his stomach was able to get across the room, up on your bed and take off all his clothes?"

"You are the one who is talking too much, good night, Elizabeth."

She sighed and tried as best she could to get comfortable on the narrow, hard cushions. She could see Owen clearly through the hinged joint in the screen. He was sitting on the side of his bed and removing his boots. He tossed them and his socks onto the floor and began to unbutton his shirt. That small voice, so often ignored, told her that out of respect, she should look away and that was what she would want him to do. Nevertheless, she argued, he would not have looked away, would he? What could be wrong with watching him remove his shirt? He threw the soiled shirt aside and stood. She could not miss the wonderful wide, strong shoulders. A dark mat of thick hair ran in a perfect v down his chest and flat stomach.

He began to unbutton his pants and again the voice urged her to roll over to go to sleep and a safer place. The heavy pounding of her heart drowned the voice and heat began to spread through her veins. This was a wonderful feeling, one she had never known before. She was fascinated with watching him and the effects on her body. He lowered his pants and sat to take them off. Then stood again and pulled down the bed covers. Owen was as she had feared and longed for, a magnificent man and she did not look away.

What would it be like to have him as a lover, to run her hands down that lovely mat of hair, to hold that powerful body against hers? How unfair it was then even though she was a woman and a mother she had never wanted a man the way she wanted Owen then. What was it like to have sex with a man she actually wanted and to enjoy the wonder of a handsome man's body?

Turn away, go to sleep, that voice then so easy to ignore pleaded with her. He will only break your heart again! Whatever could be wrong with feeling what is so natural? Over the warning voice, she heard the words he had said to her earlier. Nothing is wrong with that, nothing at all. This could be her only chance; the last chance she would ever have to lay with this man. What a fool she would be to deny herself the memories this night could give her! What could be wrong with one single night of joy with a man she had loved for so long?

She stood from her make shift bed and walked across the room. She was burning with a passion she had never known possible and terrified. Owen heard her

approach. He turned in his bed to face her but said nothing.

"I forgot to use the lotion," she said as she reached for the small bottle on his night table and she tried to keep her breathing normal and her voice calm. She opened it and touched a small amount to her forehead. "Will you put some on my back?"

Owen stayed silent, sat and took the bottle from her hand. He let his fingers touch her hand as he did this and could feel her shaking.

As she had before she opened the laces of her gown and let the back fall away from her body. Gently and in small circles, he rubbed the lotion the length of her back to far past the place where the scars ended. She wondered what he was thinking. Why is he so silent, this man who always had so much to say? Was his blood heating like hers and was his breath coming in small gasps?

She closed her eyes, summoned her courage and whispered. "I was watching as you took your clothes off."

Owen still did not speak, his gentle massage stopped for the briefest second then continued.

"You said that the right man could show me how to enjoy my womanhood. Did you mean that or were you just hoping to make me feel better?"

He lifted the sides of the nightgown back into place and turned her to face him. She did not dare to look at him and kept her eyes on her hands.

"Yes, I meant what I said," he spoke softly. He lifted her face to look into her eyes.

"You make it sound so easy."

"It would not be easy for you or for him," he sighed and pulled her back as she tried to turn her face away again. "Look at me and listen. I cannot say that I understand the terrible pain you have because that would be impossible. But I think I know what you need to realize and do."

"Tell me then, Owen."

She looked so frightened and sad. She reminded him of a nervous virgin. That is what she is, he decided as he watched her then. A virgin in her mind, if not in her body and a woman desperately searching for the meaning of her sexuality.

"You need to understand that the things done to you by those men do not make you the woman you are now. What they did, well, that was before, it is over and done. It was a horrible crime but it was their crime and not yours. They placed a nightmare on you. Until you end that that nightmare and wake yourself, the chains they held you in still hold you firmly in place."

She sat silent for a long time, searching his face, looking for signs of deceit or humor and found none. She lowered her eyes, running them down his chest. "I have never touched a man willingly. Owen, may I touch you?" she did not wait for an answer and did not expect one. She placed her hands on his shoulders, slowly moved them down his arms, back across his flat belly and up onto his chest. She could feel his heart beating and that more than anything thrilled her.

Owen put his hands on hers and held them in place. "Elizabeth..." his voice heavy with his growing passion, "you should go back to you bed."

She smiled slightly, stood and let the gown fall to the floor. She could just barely see his face in the dim light and watched without shame or shyness as he studied every inch of her body. She could see the quickening rise and fall of his breathing and

with courage that she did not know she possessed she reached forward and pulled the covers off his body.

"What a beautiful body you have!" she whispered so softly and was so breathless she did not think that he heard her. "You wanted to make love to me before. Do you still want me?"

He closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath. He took her hand and pulled her to sit beside him again. He put his hand lightly on her thigh and his fingers burned where they touched her. "More than I could ever put into words. But what is more important is that you know what you want."

In answer, she lowered her face to his and gently kissed his lips, ran her tongue across his teeth and into his mouth. Then she pulled her head back so that he could look in her eyes. There he saw that same fire that had enticed him that night when she had danced before him. There was no denying the passion he saw there.

"Are you sure, Elizabeth? I will make no false promises to you."

"It is not your words that I want. I want to make love with a handsome man. I need you to show what it really is to be a woman," she ran her hands down the length of his body and wrapped her fingers around his growing penis. With a gasp of pleasure, he pulled her across his bed and laid her gently beside him. This first feel of his naked body against hers surged her with an undeniable and burning lust and all sense of inhabitation and fear vanished.

He kissed her neck, her shoulders and then her breasts. He ran his tongue lightly across her nipples and she felt her milk begin to flow. Small drops of milk appeared on her nipple.

She held his head with her hands and briefly looked into his burning emerald eyes. "Are you thirsty, Owen? I hope so, because I am so full...!"

A slow, wide smile spread across his face. "Oh, sweet lady! I am so thirsty and so very hungry."

She pulled his head down onto her breast, moaned and arched her back as she felt her milk flow into his mouth. He put his arms around her and held her tightly. Her warm, sweet milk thrilled him.

For a long while, he gave her everything she wanted. Only when she was ready, after she had asked him several times did he lay gently on her and show her just what it really meant to be a woman.

Two hours later, in the secure comfort of his arms Elizabeth fell asleep. Her last thought was that perhaps he did not remember her from when she was a girl but he would never forget her as the woman he had loved that night.

It was an unusually hot night for June. It had rained for several hours. The air hung heavy and still. Thick clouds blocked out any moon light but the raven needed little sight for what she had to do. The cover of darkness was just what she needed. When Reine left Tabor Manor, the household had been silent for hours.

She flew directly to Hock House her heart beating with excitement. She circled the house a few times. She had to find a way in. Nothing apart from death would stop her from pleasing Emile. There was an alert guard at the front of the house but she was far luckier with the man stationed at the back. He sat under the back steps where he had most likely gone to get away from the rain. He was sleeping and snoring loudly. The raven jumped down beside the man. An empty wine bottle lay at his feet. She pecked

his leg hard to see what state of alertness he had and even though she had drawn blood, he did not move. He would be no threat to her cause.

She flew up to the roof. There would be only one way in. As a bird and as the human she had a hatred and fear of small spaces. What must be, will be! The chimney that led to the kitchen was cool and she could not smell any smoke. Since this chimney would be the one most often used, it was likely that the flue was open. It was, so down she went knocking soot to the fireplace and out onto the floor.

She landed with a small thud the kitchen floor. It would have been safer and easier to hide as the bird but for a while, she needed human hands. She chose to appear in the black silk robe so that her white skin might not be so visible.

The first thing she needed to do was assure a safe and quick way of escape. There was no fear of the guard at the back so she pulled the bolts on the kitchen door open and quietly checked to make certain the door would open for her when she needed. On the floor she found the covered basket that had been the child's bed. She took it and a large butcher knife and stepped into the main hallway. The lack of any moon light made the way very dark but she had the eyesight of a bird so the deep shadows would only help to hide her.

She listened and sniffed the air. She knew that humans most often slept in their upstairs rooms but the strong scent of musk pulled her along the marble floor. She stopped at the broken door of the great room, hearing a familiar low rumbling sound and knew that what she was hearing was the soft snore of a man.

Without a sound and staying only in the darkest shadows, she moved into the room. There was a large bed in the corner. She could see the forms of two sleeping people and just make out Elizabeth's long wavy hair spread across a pillow.

Well, well, Reine thought, it seems our injured and not so grieving widow has her strength back! What a shame she would be so sad once again!

It was not Elizabeth or Owen that was the center of her attention. She found that sleeping soundly in his crib behind the screens. The shifters main worry then was that as she moved the baby he would cry. She watched him closely for a moment and shook her head in wonder as to what it might be that made these strange little beings so bloody important. In one quick, smooth movement, she wrapped her arms around the pillow he rested on and slid it into the basket. She sat very still for a moment with her knife ready should he cry. He did not wake. Neither Elizabeth nor Owen stirred.

From her place under the floorboards, Nora could sense it the moment that Reine was in the house. She felt the thick, black evil aura that spread far out for the shifter. Frightened and confused she rose from her hidden home. She knew it was pointless to try to wake Owen. Many times, she had tried to reach him but found success only if he was dreaming. Then his sleep was flat and complete, his white aura close to his body and she knew he was not dreaming. She saw Elizabeth beside him but only slightly grasped the meaning of that. She was more concerned with the evil thing approaching.

Nora watched as Reine stood in the doorway, stepped into the room and looked around. She saw the knife in her hand and moved with Reine as she stepped behind the screen.

Reine took up the basket and was unaware of the shade that followed her. Silently and quickly, she was out of the room, down the hallway and outside the kitchen door. She placed the basket on the top of the porch steps, dropped the knife and

transformed to the

bird once again. As she did this Nora condensed all her energy and buoyed by her love for the child slid around him in the basket.

Grasping the basket handle in her strong talons the raven lifted off into the night sky. Now Richard was crying but no one other than the bird heard him and she did not care. Far above the men that patrolled the Estate, she traveled the short distance to the old barn just off the Tabor property borders and landed in the shadows.

The stolen horse was nervous and skittish when Reine finally brought her out from the abandoned barn. She thought how the mare would be well ready for the long fast run that lay ahead of her.

The baby was still crying as she carefully fastened the handle of the basket to the saddle. "Be quiet, you noisy little bugger!" she said harshly as she opened the lid and looked at him. It was beyond her why Emile was so devoted to the noisy and demanding little thing. Certainly, he looked like Jack with his thick and curly black hair. What good was he to anyone? What could he do for Emile that she could not do?

If she had her own way, she would drop him in the channel as she had done with Edward's head. She did not have this choice and would always do exactly what Emile wanted. Pleasing him was her sole focus, the reason for her existence and it would be impossible for her to do anything else. She fastened the basket securely to the saddle.

She rode directly west as fast as the horse would go. She liked the feel of the powerful animal beneath her body and the wind in her hair. She thought that it was the closest to flying that a human could achieve; it was nowhere near the same but it would have to do until she got rid of this burden. One good thing was that the constant, if somewhat hectic motion seemed to have calmed Richard and he was no longer crying. Nora held him fast in her cold embrace.

She left the main roadways and began to move across the fields and farmlands. As when she had traveled to Abbey's she knew the way to this destination through human memory and animal instincts. It was just under two hours when she came across the back lands of Tom Hobson's farm. As she expected she saw the Soskice wagons parked alongside a thick grove of trees in an effort to hide them. As the nearest neighbor was miles in either direction, Reine thought that was hardly necessary.

She tied the exhausted horse to the back steps, tried the back door and found it locked so she walked around to the side of the house, took a hefty rock and threw it with force at an upper floor window. It shattered and Reine smiled as she heard the commotion coming from the room. She saw a tall shadow near the broken window and she called out, "Hobson! It is me!" He moved to the open and looked down. "Come on!" she demanded. "Or I will break the fucking door!"

"Alright, alright!" he called back with anger. In the Soskice family only Emile, Tom, Jack and Mama Soskice were aware of who and what she was. Emile kept his shifters apart and very secret from anyone else. Quickly he was at the door and pulled it open. The rest of the family gathered behind him, puzzled and worried over the intruder.

Richard was crying again as she unfastened the basket from the saddle and brought it up the steps. "Here," she said as she handed it to Hobson. "Do something about this, will you! I think it is hungry!"

No one felt the cold energy break away from Richard as the drained spirit of Nora

Tabor allowed herself to slip back across time and miles and into the floor of Hock House.

"Who is she?" Tara, Hobson's wife demanded. He ignored her and picked the baby up, checking him carefully.

"Oh, he is fine! But get that female out here to feed him and shut him up!"

"Tara," Hobson turned to his wife, "we've got Richard back! Go and get Rose right away!"

"But, where is Elizabeth?" she asked as she hesitated.

"Just do as I say!" he yelled at her and she disappeared up the stairs.

Reine looked at Hobson from the corner of her silver eyes and stepped so close to him that her body touched his. "So forceful, Tom!" she whispered. "That is interesting.

Perhaps you and I shall meet in the woods again. Emile did so much enjoy watching us." She saw his surprise and his face reddened. She stood back and laughed. It was a terrible sound, more like an old woman in pain.

"Don't tell me you didn't know he was watching? Why else would I allow you to fuck me if not for the pleasure of Emile! I suppose I should be quiet. The wife is coming back and I am sure she would not be as happy about your interest in me!"

Tara returned with Rose and Mama Soskice. Reine watched as the females fussed over the baby. The old woman cried with joy as she watched Richard happily suckle his aunt.

"Who are you and where is his mother?" Tara turned and faced Reine.

"Who am I?" Reine looked at the woman, her silver eyes locked into Tara's and for the briefest moment the face they all saw was not hers, but Emile's. All but Hobson took a few steps back. Reine shook her head and thought that they were a sad lot.

"You are all to wait here for Emile but I cannot say when he will arrive. And be sure to care well for the brat! Oh yes, and one other thing, did you come right here after leaving the Tabor Estate or did any one of you go to Dover?" She wanted to know whom it was that Emile relied on other than her.

"We all came right here! Why?" Hobson asked.

She ignored him and walked out of the house across the yard to a grove of trees. There out of view of the house she transformed and headed towards Tabor Hall.

Dawn was just beginning when Owen woke. For a while, he lay quietly as the sweet memories of the last few hours filled his mind. Elizabeth had indeed surprised him, first with her courage and then with her sexual powers. She was a remarkable female to bed

and he knew he had only begun to explore the wonders of her passion. She had a fine mind and welcoming body. Elizabeth could make his bed a very warm and happy place and he did not intend to let any harm come to her.

It had been far too long since he had had the pleasure of waking with a beautiful woman in his bed. He leaned closer to her, put his arm around her shoulders and gently kissed her back. As he felt the horrible ridges of the scars he remembered all too well who had put them there. He moved back from her and rose from the bed. There was a lot to do that day and it was best for an early start. He pulled on his trousers and placed a pistol in his belt. Elizabeth had not moved and there was no sound from the baby. He decided to go to the kitchen and make some coffee before waking them.

He was half way down the hall when he saw the silhouette of a man against the kitchen window. He froze and took out his pistol. The man in the kitchen must have seen or heard him as he called out, "Owen! It is James!"

"Christ man! What the hell are you doing?" Owen exclaimed as he joined James and lit a lantern. "How did you get in here, James? I bolted that door firmly last night?"

"It was not even closed when I got here!" James answered. "The guard was dead drunk and asleep under the porch! And this knife was on the steps." James had his pistol in one hand and with the other held up the butcher knife for Owen to see. "Are you and Elizabeth alright?"

'Bloody hell!' Owen said with anger as he rushed out the door and down the steps. No trace of the guard remained but for an empty bottle and a puddle of vomit. He picked up the bottle and smashed it against the wall. "Where is he?" he demanded.

"He's gone! I fired him. But I think it best that right now we search Hock House for intruders." James suggested and Owen agreed.

They lit another lamp, James headed upstairs searching, and Owen went from room to room on that floor. They searched thoroughly until they were sure that the house was empty but for them. They met again in the main floor and James followed Owen into the Great Room.

"I have checked this room, it is clear," Owen said. They placed their lanterns on the table.

James moved to the bedside and saw Elizabeth sleeping, her nightshirt on the floor. He thought sadly that Owen had made yet another conquest but said only, "She sleeps heavy. Where is the baby?"

"Behind the screen, in his bed," Owen answered as he pushed open the curtains on the window nearest his bed.

James moved to the screen and looked behind it. "There is no baby back here!"

"What?" Owen pushed past James and saw the empty wicker bed. "Jesus! Is he with his mother?" He rushed to the bed and pulled Elizabeth over onto her back. She fell limp, her hair in a dangle across her face and she did not stir. He pushed her hair back, looked into her face, and shook her. "Elizabeth! Wake up!" There was no response.

James took her wrist and felt for a pulse. "The pulse is very weak! Does she have any wounds?"

Owen threw the blankets down and held the lantern over her. James did not look away and did not miss the fact that she would please a man as they looked carefully and saw that she had no new wounds. Owen rolled her over and except for the brutal map on her back, she seemed normal.

"That was from her husband and father-in-law!" Owen said when he saw the look on James' face. "Before this matter is done I will blow that bastards head off!" He pushed the hair back from her face and slapped her gently.

"Let me know when you are going to do it and I will join you," James said fiercely. "Do you want me to fetch the Willard woman?"

"No. She will need better than her. Go and get the double trap. Hitch Majesty and Simon and get back here quickly."

James thought that the smarter move would be to bring her to the nearest hospital

but he would not then argue the point with Owen.

As he waited for James to return Owen found the smelling salts that they had used on Elizabeth a few days earlier. This time she did have a little reaction but only gagged and coughed lightly. Her breath was shallow, her pulse weak and there were no other signs of life.

"Lizzie, don't you dare die on me!" he whispered to her with a combination of panic and anger. He finished dressing, including a shoulder holster. He wrote a note for Caruthers saying that he and James were away on urgent business and would be back as soon as possible. This he gave to the guard at his front door. He questioned the young man but he had not seen or heard anything unusual.

Back inside he rolled Elizabeth in blankets. He noticed that her skin was getting very hot to the touch. He carried her to the kitchen and waited impatiently for James to return with the carriage. It was only moments but seemed like hours when James finally pulled to a stop in the small courtyard. They laid her down on the long rear seat and tied her carefully so that she would not fall off as they traveled. Owen took the reins and they left the Estate to the puzzled looks of the gate guards.

"Where are we going?" James asked but only because he should ask. He had a good idea where Owen was taking Elizabeth. There was very little about Owen Tabor did that James did not know of.

"To the Coast Highway and then about one hours ride north. I have friends there who will know what to do!" Owen answered avoiding the point of the question and with more conviction than he felt. They rode along in silence for some time. The horses true to their nature took them along at a fast clip.

"Soskice has the baby; I've no doubt in that. I am going to get him back and then I am going take great joy in killing him. And God damn me, James for not doing that by now!"

"Did Elizabeth tell you that Soskice has an interest in the child?"

"Time and time again. That was why she was in such a panic to leave the estate. I did not pay much attention. I thought it would be simple enough to keep her and the baby safe."

"Safe while she recovered from her head wound or while you waited for the chance to seduce her?" James asked with his usual bluntness.

"Both!" Owen answered flatly.

"And last night you were successful?"

"Yes, James, since you seem to have an interest in the matter. I did have sex with her last night and believe it or not when it came down to the act it was her decision."

"That is a shame, Owen!" James looked evenly into Owen's eyes. "I had hoped that this woman would be different."

"You should mind your own business!" Owen said harshly and then after a moment with less anger he added. "She is different, very different."

Most mornings, when the children fed and settled in their activities, Sister Meg would tend to her large vegetable and herb garden. The feel of the soil in her hands, the smell of the growing things and the challenge of bringing in a healthy fall harvest made this the happiest time of her day. It will be a good harvest this year, she thought as she stood, pushed stray hair back from her face. She squinted into the sunlight and noticed a familiar wagon coming up over the rise of the nearby hills.



"Oh dear! And what a mess I am!" she exclaimed, looking down at her dirty smock and hands, and rushed into a small building behind the main house.

"Brother John, please go and unlock the main gate. Mr. Tabor is coming down the road!" she said to the young monk who was busy at her herb table.

She washed her hands in the basin and tidied her long gray braid pulling some of the loose forehead curls into place. She had a broad, handsome face with round, bright green eyes. She had good skin with few lines and looked at least ten years younger than she was. Meg was slim and taller than most females her age. She carried herself well and with pride.

"Goodness, if I had known he was coming I would not have made such a mess!" Brother John said as he looked around at the stacks of drying herbs.

"He didn't come last month and I have been worried about him. Do not worry much about your clutter. He will not notice. Just between you and me Owen Tabor is the messiest man on God's green earth." She smiled and thought about the clutter and mess that always seemed to gather around Owen when he was more than a few minutes in one place.

"The Orphanage of Saint Francis!" James read the sign on the gate as they pulled their horses to a halt. "You have friends here?" he tried to sound genuinely surprised.

Owen nodded as he climbed to the back seat and cut the ropes that held Elizabeth in place. "You should wait here, James," he said as he picked her up and stepped down from the wagon. "I will come back and speak with you as soon as possible."

Sister Meg watched with concerned interest as Owen carried the limp form of Elizabeth across the yard with Brother John trying to keep pace with the taller man's long steps. She opened the door just as he reached for the handle.

"Owen! What has happened?" she asked leading Owen to a nearby cot.

"I have no idea what is wrong with her. She was fine a few hours back and now I cannot get her to wake up!"

Sister Meg touched the pale, pretty face and felt her fever. "She is burning hot!" she exclaimed and went to pull the blankets down, then turned to the young Brother. "Please go to the kitchen and prepare some tea for Mr. Tabor. He has had a long dusty ride!"

It was obvious that the nosey Brother wanted to stay but he did as she suggested. She shut and locked the door behind him and pulled the blankets from Elizabeth. She was drenched with sweat. "These blankets will only make her worse, Owen! Why is she naked?"

"I did not think that I should take the time to dress her! That is why!"

"I see!" Sister Meg said as she covered Elizabeth with only a light sheet. "What happened to her head?"

"Two days ago, she fainted and hit her head on a rock. I have been caring for her since then. She seemed to be recovering very well..." he stopped and carefully turned Elizabeth on her side so that Sister Meg could see the terrible scars on her back.

"Dear Lord! Do you know who did this to her?"

"Her husband and his father, the family Soskice."

Sister Meg noted the bloated hard breasts. "This woman has a child. Where is the baby?"

"At this time I do not know. He was taken at some time during the night, no doubt by the family of the baby's father."

"How did she come to be with you?" Sister Meg asked as she took various bottles down from nearby shelves.

"For Heaven's sake, not now. Just see to her."

"Don't lose your temper with me Owen Tabor. I have to know what happened to her if I am to help her."

He rubbed his head with frustration. "She has been held captive for three years by the Soskice gypsy clan. She escaped a few days back. I found her and the child hiding on the Estate. She fainted and hit her head. It was a bad knock so I brought her back to Hock House. She has been there under my care and protection ever since." As soon as he said those last few words, he wished that he had chosen better.

"Well, it would seem that since she is now here, naked and ill and has lost her baby that your protection was severely lacking."

"Yes, so it seems!"

"I do not need you here, either, Owen! Why not go and see Brother John in the kitchen. I will join you there shortly," she held the door open for him and he heard her lock it behind him as he moved across the yard.

Owen knew she was so right to criticize him. What a fool he had been to let his lust place Elizabeth and Richard in such a vulnerable position! He should have brought them here just as soon as she told him the danger she was in. So much of what was happening made no sense and was unpredictable. It was the sense of having no control over the issue that frustrated him the most.

He was almost at the main building when he first noticed a figure standing in the shadows. Tight and raw as his nerves were his first reaction was to place his hand on the handle of his pistol.

"Come out where I can see you!" Owen demanded.

"I am a friend. You've no need of that!" the man said as he stepped into the sunlight. He was young, tall and handsome. His left arm was in a sling and a paintbrush in his right hand. "You are Owen Tabor?" he asked with a friendly smile.

"I am," Owen answered, relaxing slightly. "And you are?"

"Jeffrey Slocomb, sir!" he tossed aside the paintbrush, wiped his hand on his trousers and offered it to Owen. "Pleased to meet you, Sister Meg has often spoken of you."

"I have no knowledge of you, Mr. Slocomb." Owen replied. "What is your business here, if I may ask?"

"Of course. This!" he nodded down to his wounded arm. "My horse and cart over turned on that steep bend in the hill. I do not remember too much after that but that the good Brothers and Sister Meg brought me in and cared for me. Broke my bloody arm and knocked the Hell out of my noggin."

Owen nodded. It was not the first time they had brought and cared for people other than the children. "They have done well by you then?" Owen forced a smile.

"They have been a God send. I have offered them money to pay for my care but they refused to take it. So now, I have insisted on working off some of my keep. At least I have one good arm to offer. And Sister Meg has been quite the task master!"

“No doubt,” he was not sure what to make of this man but for the time being he felt he had much more important things to deal with.

“Well, I had best get back to it. I promised to have this side finished before night fall.” He stooped and retrieved his paintbrush and watched as Owen disappeared around the side of the building. “And so, Owen Tabor, at last we meet. And it would seem the battle has begun!” he mumbled under his breath. When the light hit his hazel eyes just right, as it did then, they had a distinct silver glow.

## Chapter Six

James brought the wagon into the compound and under a cluster of trees for shade and water. He stretched out on the front seat and put his tattered hat over his face. Owen heard James snoring and knew that he must be tired from the long day and night before. He decided to let him rest for the time being and headed for the main building.

The familiar kitchen where he had spent so much time over the years smelled as usual of scrubbed wooden surfaces and fresh baked goods. The headmaster of the orphanage, Father Smith, greeted Owen heartily.

"Owen, my dear man! Welcome!" the monk took his hand and shook it. "It has been a while since you were here. It was Easter, I believe!"

"That sounds about right, Father. All is well here, I hope?" Owen asked and sat at one of the old church pews that lined the long kitchen table.

"Well enough and more! We've 43 children now and all are thriving greatly," Father Smith brought a teapot and a plate of warm muffins to the table. "Brother John tells me that you have brought a sick friend."

Owen nodded as he pulled a slab of butter across one muffin and took a mouthful.

"Well, you need not worry too much. I have no doubt that Sister will have her right as rain in no time. There is no more natural healer in all of England, I dare say!"

"That is true!"

"So how goes all at the Tabor Estate?"

"Is that a question in general or do you really want to know?" Owen asked without his usual sarcasm.

Father Smith looked at his friend from the corner of his wise eyes. "Tell me what is wrong?"

"In as few words as possible it is this; a few days ago and it does seem like years, my idiot brother Edward killed the son of a gypsy fool named Emile Soskice. Wilmot in his way insulted the wounded father further and had a ridiculous curse placed on the Tabor family! In the normal course of things that should be the end of that but in less than 24 hours Edward was murdered and his body stolen."

"James Whitehall and I found one of our workers murdered and now it seems that Henry Tabor is missing and a crime scene found in his home. The woman I brought here today was the unwilling wife of the dead gypsy. They had held her captive for several years. This morning, the actual day I was planning to bring her here for safekeeping, I found her unconscious and her baby missing. That is the short version!"

Father Smith looked at him with blank eyes for a moment and then said, "Good Heavens!"

"A little difficult to believe, isn't it?"

"Well, Owen, I think that it is easy to see that the curse placed on your people is working!"

"Not another one! You are not going to tell me that a man of your education has faith in that foolish stuff?" Owen asked incredulously.

"The point is because I have faith that I know not to turn a blind eye to the obvious."

"So I have been told a fair bit lately."

"And where do you think the child might be?"

"No doubt he was taken by some members of the Soskice family. Although, damn it! I had that house so firmly locked up and there was no sign of break in, how the Hell did they get in and take that child out from right under my nose!" Owen could only barely control his anger. "I refused to be cowed with talk of evil magic."

"Well, whether it is black magic or not they appear to know something you don't and if I were you I would not waste too much time finding out what that is. That much is obvious, my boy! It is my experience, as is often said; the devil is in the details. Rethink all that you have seen, heard and done these last few days, you will no doubt find some clue, and that is where to start your search. The truth will always come to the surface. But then sometimes it falls on us to force it to the surface."

"I have always closed my mind to anything other than fact and logic."

"Then you have missed a lot, Owen. I have to get back to work. I will leave you with your thoughts. I will say a prayer for you, my friend."

Owen nodded wearily. "You can pray all you want but I prefer to place my faith in my logic and a few pistols."

Father Smith was gone a few minutes when Owen heard the quick, purposeful steps of Sister Meg. In the kitchen, she opened an upper cupboard and took down a bottle of whiskey, sat down across from Owen, poured herself a cup of tea and topped off her cup and his with a fair share of liquor.

"Is it as dire as that?" he asked.

She sighed and shook her head. "I have left Brother John to keep his eye on her," she took a large mouthful from her cup. "Well, Owen, I am not sure what or how but I am certain that Miss Delacourt has been poisoned!"

"But she and I ate the same things last night; as a matter of fact she did the cooking. Who could possibly have poisoned her?"

"There is a smell to her breath and a yellow coloring to her eyes. I have done some tests but it will be a few hours before I get the results and if it is as I think then I can give her an antidote."

"Bloody Hell!" Owen slammed his fist on the tabletop. "Is she going to die?"

"A prayer might help!"

"I have just heard all that from Father Smith. You can pray to your imaginary God if you want but I am a man of action, not words. The only thing I am sure of is that if Elizabeth dies there will be Hell to pay for some people. It is they who need to pray!" He stood quickly and began to pace the small space between the table and the fireplace.

"As you say, Owen. That is up to you. We must all walk our own pathways," Sister Meg poured more tea and whiskey into his cup. "Sit down, save your energy for a better use," she came over to him took his arm and led him back to the table. She waited a moment or two to give him time to think and then asked, "Is Elizabeth your mistress?"

"What?" he asked, distracted by his rage and frustration.

"Is she your lover?"

He sighed and relaxed back into the bench. "There is a lot that I have to tell you

about what has happened on the Estate in the last few days. So much, in such a short time. Elizabeth and I have become very close so I would have to answer that question with a yes. But I cannot see why you ask this."

"Are you in love with her?"

"I have only known her a short time, just days!"

"But that is more than enough time to bed her? I guess hidden away as I am from the world I have lost touch with much." She looked into the worried eyes of this man she knew so well and wondered if he was aware of his feelings. Men often took a long time to know what was in their own hearts and sadly, many never did know. She let the subject drop for the time being. "Then tell me what has happened? I should know."

He told her of the Wilmot's birthday fiasco, the curse and his father's reaction to it and all that followed.

"My Lord, I am so sorry!" She could hardly believe the incredible story he told her. "What do the police have to say? Have they questioned this Soskice person?"

"Hardly! They would rather I took care of the matter. It seems that Inspector Caruthers is near to retirement and does not want to anger Father by interfering with the old fool's plans to keep Soskice locked up until he removes the ridiculous curse. Now, he sits chained up in the old Tower and three men are dead, a woman poisoned and a child missing. For all of these crimes no one as seen or heard anything or at least that is what the Inspector says!" Owen pushed his long hands through his unruly dark hair. She knew that that was always a sign of his distress.

"It sounds as if you do not trust him."

"It is not a matter of trust. It seems his only concern is keeping Father as happy as he can and get through all this mess without it marring his career. Under those restrained circumstances it is doubtful he will do all he should."

"Then it will be up to you, Owen. That is all there is to it!" She sighed and took the teapot back to the counter and looked out of the window. "Who is that lying in your wagon?"

He took a deep breath and prepared for what was about to happen. "You don't recognize him?" he asked and came to stand beside her.

"No! All I can see is a hat...!" she backed from the window, her eyes wide with shock. "James?"

"Yes," Owen answered with gentle firmness.

"Are you insane? Why have you brought him here?"

"You know you can trust James."

"I do not know that, Owen. Why is he here?"

"I have to go back to the Estate and I want him to stay here at least until I get back here some time tomorrow."

"James cannot stay here. That is impossible!"

"I will hear no arguments on this matter. None! Not a word!" he raised his hand to silence her. "With Elizabeth here you will need protection."

"I see that, but at what risk to me?"

"No risk what so ever. I trust no man more than I trust James. It is far past the time for him to know the truth. You knew this day would come," then in a softer voice, he added, "It is alright, my dear. I have to be assured that you and Elizabeth are safe

and for that James must stay.”

“But there are many men here. There is no....”

“Men in skirts, who think only of peace and prayer! As well meaning as they are they do not seem to be any sort of force.”

She thought for a moment and knew that Owen was correct. The time she had so long feared had finally arrived. “Wait!” She held his arm before he could go out the door. “How do I look? Not like I feel, I hope!”

“You are lovely!” He tried not to smile at the frantic look in her eyes.

“Oh Lord! Owen, this is all too dreadful. Please promise me that you will be careful?”

“Don’t worry about me, I will be fine.” He winked at her and heard her muttering as he closed the door.

James woke and sat up with his hand on his gun when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. When he saw Owen he relaxed and climbed down from his seat. “How is she?”

“Whether she will live or die is still unsure. All we know is that she has been poisoned and is gravely ill!” Owen answered as he unlocked a storage area in the back of the wagon. From there he took out two shotguns and several boxes of ammunition that he handed to James. He lifted his saddle and jumped down with it.

“Damn!” James exclaimed as he took the rifle without question. “Owen, if it is that serious should we not take her to the hospital.”

“No! No hospitals! If anyone can save her, that person is here, James!” Owen had begun to unfasten his horse from the wagons hitching. “I am going back to the Estate alone. I want you to stay here and protect the females. I have little faith in the fighting abilities of these men of peace.”

“The females? I thought this was a place of monks and children?”

Owen heard the kitchen door open behind him. He watched as his friends expression went from interest to astonishment. His dark eyes traveled from the face of Sister Meg to Owen, with many questions and then back to her again.

“Margaret! Margaret Tabor?” he asked.

“Hello Jamie! How wonderful to see you again!” she said sweetly, offering her hand to him.

James took her hand but looked with confusion and dawning anger at Owen. “I have been led to believe that you were dead! What the Hell is going on here?” his voice was dangerously flat.

Margaret looked nervously from him to her son. “You have every reason to be shocked and angry but please come inside with me out of this hot sun; we have much to talk about,” she took his arm firmly and led him inside. James sent one last narrow look at Owen as she closed the door.

“Looks like I am in the deep and murky!” Owen said to himself and went about the business of saddling his horse.

This done, he walked back to the infirmary and knocked lightly on the door. Brother John unlocked it and let him in. He went to Elizabeth. “How is she doing?” he asked as he felt for her pulse. It was as before, steady but weak.

“Not much different, sir!” the young Brother answered.

Owen touched her head. She was burning with fever. “How old are you, boy?”

he asked. "You look very young to be a monk!"

"Eighteen! Father Smith is my uncle. I came here as an orphan when I was a child. Can't say that I plan to stay as a monk, though!" he answered proudly.

"Good! Are you able to fight and shoot if the need should arise?"

"Fight? Well, yes, of course! I can shoot the eye out of a rat at two hundred paces, if I may say so!"

"That must come in rather handy," Owen smiled. Then with grave seriousness added, "A deadly and nasty group of gypsies has tried to murder this woman and they may well be back to finish the job, so you may well have to shoot a few rather large rats before this time is over. Do you own a pistol?"

"Yes, sir! But I am not supposed to, so it is well hidden!"

"Well, dig it up and hide it amongst your skirts for the time being. I am leaving a guard here and you are to assist him. Do you understand?"

Brother John nodded wide-eyed and eager.

Owen found Jeffrey Slocomb a little further along in his job and a lot more covered in white paint.

"Going to give me a hand?" he smiled as Owen approached.

"Where are you from, Slocomb? I can't place the accent."

"Well, I was born in England but educated in America. Came back home almost four years ago."

"And your employment?"

"Teacher. English and history at Marlborough Public School. Do you want to see my credentials?" Jeffrey answered with a touch of sarcasm.

"Marlborough Public?"

"Did you attend there?"

"No. My youngest brother was expelled from there....twice!"

"Ah, the perils of youth! We are on summer break so I thought I would do a little sightseeing in the British countryside. I think I am better at teaching than I am at painting."

"I certainly hope so!" Owen agreed looking at the dried white paint in the other man's blond hair. "Do you have a gun with you?"

"Do you mind if I ask why all the questions, Mr. Tabor?"

"Miss Delacourt, the woman I brought with me is the victim of a murder attempt. If they find out that she is still alive, they may try again. I cannot be sure that we were not followed. If you have no gun then I will provide you with one."

"I see!" Jeffrey replied, his tone now much more serious. "Yes. I have a pistol. I thought it might be practical to be armed while wandering around the countryside."

"Good. Then get it and keep it with you at all times. I have to leave here now but I will be back as soon as I am able tomorrow. I am leaving my best man here as guard."

"I will do whatever I can. Who are these assailants?"

"Gypsies!" Owen said with disgust. "And make no mistake, they are dangerous!"

They stopped talking as Margaret and James left the main building and crossed the yard towards the infirmary. She was walking slightly ahead of James and neither looked at all happy.



"There's your biggest challenge in this matter, Slocomb. My mother is...!" he quit speaking in mid sentence. It was the first time in all the years that he had let slip that Margaret was his mother.

"Your mother! Sister Meg is your mother?"

"Yes and she is a head strong and willful woman. She will take unnecessary chances and rarely listens to advice."

"Don't worry! I will keep a close eye on her. We have grown very close over the last few weeks and I will see no harm come to her."

"Good!" Owen said as he turned and walked away. He stopped after a few steps and thought to ask the younger man what he meant by 'very close' but shook his head and pushed the impossible thought from his mind.

"I must be coming unglued!" he mumbled as he headed for his horse.

Through the long ride back to the Estate Owen raged at himself for the fact that he had so terribly let down Elizabeth. Try as he did to focus on what he needed to do and not on what he had failed to do, his mind kept falling back to simple fact that he had been a fool not to take her fears seriously. Elizabeth may die and her beloved child was most likely in the hands of the Soscice family; the worst of her nightmares, and he had done nothing to keep it from happening. Now he swore to himself that he would find that child no matter what it cost and if the worst happened and Elizabeth died, he would care for the child; it was the least he could do.

The Brothers were busy preparing the afternoon meal so Margaret led James into her small sitting room where they could more privately talk. Neither had said a word until they were alone and seated stiffly across from each other.

"You have every right to be mad at me, Jamie," she began when he remained silent.

"Angry? I have not reached anger yet. I am still in astonishment but I am sure you will be the first to know when I reach anger!" he glared at her from under his bushy, grizzled eyebrows.

She sighed and realized how difficult reaching James was going to be. She leaned forwards in her chair and was going to take his hand but thought better of it. "I know that it is a weak word, but I am truly sorry if I hurt you!"

"If you hurt me?" he exclaimed. "For over twenty years I believed you were dead and from a suicide! Believe me, Margaret, there is no 'if' in the matter."

"Then perhaps it will help if you try and remember that it was you who ended our....affair. You did not love me. That is what you told me; am I right? To prove that point to me, did you not marry Alice Murphy? Did you think I could sit by idly and watch you in married bliss with that woman?" she sat back in her chair and tried to control her anger at what she saw as his unbelievable arrogance.

"How much does Owen know?" James asked her ignoring her important points.

"About us? Nothing! How could he?"

"I would not be too sure on that, Margaret. He is not a child any longer. But since you have proven to be very good at keeping secrets, perhaps he doesn't know! How long has he known you were alive? He could not have kept this secret when he was a boy."

"Dear God, James. You cannot blame Owen in any way. I was hiding from

Wilmot, not you! If Wilmot had found out I was alive he would have killed me. You above all should know what he is capable of.”

“I asked you, how long Owen knew,” he repeated slowly.

“I had him brought to me here when he was fourteen. I felt he was old enough then. He was protecting me from Wilmot. What else could he do?”

James cleared his throat as he stood up. “Now, I am here with an important task. It has little to do with our foolish youth. I have no interest in reliving any of it. I will need to see the layout of the place. I am sure one of the Brothers would be more suited to that matter.”

“Of course, you are right. I have to get back to my infirmary. We should waste no time on things we cannot change. Come with me and I will find you a guide,” she led him from the room, keeping her face from his, so he would not see the tears in her eyes.

Reine had been too exhausted from the nights work to join the others for breakfast. It was close to noon when Abbey woke her for the second time that day.

“I think you had better join us for luncheon, my dear!” Abbey said with some sarcasm. “They will wonder if you sleep the whole day away and I am sure Edmond is looking for you.”

“Is he? Well, I am not surprised at all!” Reine laughed and sat up, “I think he finds me interesting!” She climbed from the bed and stood for a moment naked looking out the open window. A coach was winding its way along the road. “Who is that?”

“That cop and his sergeant! They are going back to Dover in pretense of searching for the murderers of Edward, Tom and Henry. That old fart is as dirty as the day is long. I hope that the Tabors know that,” Abbey answered and then asked, “But tell me, Reine, if you did not kill Henry, then who did?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. Lock the door,” she ordered Abbey as she began the strange ritual that would change her back to the raven so that she could appear dressed and ready for the day. When she was done and this time dressed in lovely green lace with her hair high on her head and long curls down the side.

“Does it occur to you that your style is that of a woman of wealth, not a poor student learning her craft? Not that I care just how you come off.”

“Good, then if you don’t care then keep your thoughts to yourself. You are just jealous, that is all!”

Abbey shrugged and left the room.

Reine took one last look in the mirror, pushing her breasts higher in her corset. When she left the bedroom a few minutes later she was surprised to see Olivia standing at the top of the stairs. It seemed as though she had been waiting for her.

Reine stopped and gave her a wide, cheerful smile. Edmond's wife looked far different than she had the day before. Dressed still in the same black dress was wrinkled and opened at the neck. Her hair was loose and hung across her shoulders. Her face was flushed and her eyes swollen from crying “Good day, Mrs. Tabor! How nice and casual you look today. You should wear your hair down more often; it does make you look younger.”

Olivia said nothing but continued to glare at her new enemy as she moved down the stairs. Reine was immensely pleased with herself and the wonderful sense of victory

she felt over that foolish stick of a woman. The knowledge that she was better in every way than Olivia was and could take the man she loved with barely the lick of her tongue was yet another new thrill for her to enjoy.

Reine continued across the entranceway, out the front door and was pleased to see Edmond digging in the garden. He stood as she walked across the lawn. "Hello, Reine!" he said with a broad smile. "My God, you are even lovelier today than you were in my dream last night!"

"How sweet! Did you really dream of me last night?" she asked trying to feign a blush. "Was I pleasing?"

"Beyond my wildest dreams and then more!" he answered, taking a step closer to her. She turned her head very briefly and saw that Olivia was watching from a dining room window.

"Sh!" she said as she looked back at Edmond. "Your wife is watching us!"

"No doubt, but she cannot lip read," he sighed, rubbed some sweat from his forehead. "Listen, Reine, my wife and I are now married only in name. She does not yet know it but I have already seen a lawyer in the matter of divorce."

"I do not want to cause you and her any more difficulties, Edmond. That is not why I came here. Are you sure you want me to stay?"

"You are free to stay or leave as you please but I very much want you to stay," he took her by the arm and moved her closer to the building and out of sight of any windows. "Reine, you want many things; I felt that in your kiss and in your body yesterday and I also know for a fact that you do not want to leave," he pressed his body against hers and immediately Reine felt the wonderful heat in her blood and it astounded her. "Tell me what you want, Reine!" he whispered into her ear.

She looked into his eyes, "I want you to make love to me!"

"Say it again!" he demanded hoarsely, "Tell me what you need!"

"I need for you to remove my clothes. I need you to touch and kiss every part of my body. I need you to lie me down in a lovely soft bed and make passionate love to me," for the first time in her short existence in human form, Reine spoke every word of truth.

"Good!" he smiled as he let her back into the sunlight. "Then we have an understanding. I will give you all that you need when the house is quiet tonight! Now go inside, we have put on enough of a show!"

Reine did as he said. She was still breathless from just the few minutes of closeness to him. She found Olivia, Abbey and Wilmot sitting in the morning parlor. She sat down across from them fanning herself with her hand.

"Are you alright, Miss Crawford?" Wilmot asked. "You look rather flushed."

"No, I am fine; it is just the heat..."

"If she is flushed it is because she had been too busy trying to seduce my husband!" Olivia said in a shrill voice.

"Abbey, please close the door!" Wilmot said. "Be quiet, Olivia! Get control of yourself!"

Abbey closed the door and sat beside Reine taking her hand as though concerned for a friend. Reine tried to pull away but Abbey held tight and gave her a quick look.

"I will not be quiet! I saw them out there. They knew I was watching; so why did they have to go into the shadows? What was said then, dear, helpful Miss

Crawford?" Olivia stood over Reine her small face red with rage.

"We were discussing the garden, Mrs. Tabor! That is all! I am an avid gardener, as my friend will agree and I like to speak with other like-minded people. I am not interested in your husband...or for that matter any other married man!" Reine answered sounding insulted and indignant. Abbey felt the fading of the sexual passion that Edmond had stirred in her and something else but she could not place it just then only that the emotion was stronger and deeper than a sexual urge.

"You are a liar and a slut!" Olivia yelled at her.

"No, I am not!" Reine yelled back at her and stood. Abbey had to hold her arm to keep Reine from striking the woman. Wilmot was on his feet and pulled Olivia by the shoulder throwing her back onto a nearby chair.

"You will be quiet or you will leave my house!" Wilmot bellowed at Olivia. Edmond heard the commotion through the open window. With his pistol in his hand, he rushed into the parlor. A guard was close at his heels.

"What the Hell is going on in here?" he asked and was quick to assess the situation and turned to Reine, "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I am fine," she answered raising her head and looking down her nose at Olivia. Abbey, still holding onto Reine, saw a picture that was in her mind. Reine was pulling a long silver dagger upwards through the body of the screaming Olivia. The picture was so real, so horrific she had to let go of Reine to get it out of her mind.

"Your wife is delusional, Mr. Tabor. Perhaps she should be given a sedative!"

"How dare you talk about me like that? Wilmot, I demand that this creature be removed from the house," frantic with anger Olivia got to her feet.

Edmond took her by her arms and pushed her towards the door. "I am sorry, Reine, this will not happen again!"

"Let me go! You are as low as she is. You are nothing but a male whore!" Olivia screamed and tried to kick at her husband. With a movement almost too quick to see, Edmond raised his right hand and slapped his wife hard against the side of her head. The sound of the slap silenced them all. Olivia hung limp and Edmond held her tightly around her narrow chest.

"Foolish bitch!" he cursed her and to his father he said in a voice just barely controlled, "I do not want Reine to leave this house. Keep her here. I will be back when I am finished with this matter!" He threw Olivia over his shoulder as though she was a sack of flour and went back into the hallway. "Get back outside!" he ordered the guard who was still standing there looking confused and embarrassed. "There is nothing for you to do in here!"

Abbey left Reine and rushed to Wilmot, helping him back into his chair. They were silent and heard the sound of Edmond's heavy footfall on the stairs then the slamming of his apartment door.

"Dear God! I am so sorry, Wilmot!" Abbey said.

"It is not your fault Abbey, or yours, Miss Crawford. Please do not feel in any way responsible. The female is obviously deranged. She has been that way for a long time now."

"But if I...!" Reine pretended to be suitably upset.

"I will have her hospitalized right away," Wilmot spoke firmly.

"This is the last thing I wanted to happen, Lord Tabor!"

"This has nothing to do with you, my dear! Olivia has had breakdowns before. She will stay at the hospital until this matter has ended."

Reine stood, sighing heavily. "Please, I must go back to my room now! Tell Edmond that I will not leave but I would like some time on my own. Abbey, you understand, don't you?"

"Of course!" Abbey looked at her flatly over the top of Wilmot's head. "We understand completely."

"Yes! You must go and rest after that nightmare. Be assured I will see to it that you enjoy the rest of your time here unmolested."

I will enjoy my stay here, old man, Reine thought as she moved up the stairs but I plan on being molested; pleasantly and often. Alone in her locked room she thought with pride how well the night before had gone and wondered why had there not been a clamor from Hock House about the missing baby?

She looked at the red roof of the house across the way. Perhaps no one in Tabor Hall knew that Elizabeth and the baby were at Hock House. That would make sense since Wilmot would have had them locked up with the rest of the gypsies. She needed to know what was happening in Hock House. In a moment, the raven flew out from the window.

She circled several times around Owen's house but other than the two men on guard duty, she saw no other signs of life. With Owen's servants at the Hall, it should only be Elizabeth and Owen in the house. Would they sit by quietly with Richard missing? From what Reine had seen of the human mother that did not make sense. They could have left the Estate while she was sleeping that morning, that was entirely possible, but where did they go? She dared not think of what her 'Papa' would do if she lost knowledge of the whereabouts of Elizabeth.

She flew down to the window ledge nearest the bed where she had seen Owen and Elizabeth sleeping that morning. The reflections in the glass made it difficult to see much but she could tell that the bed was empty and that there seemed to be no movement in the room. She was tempted to go back down the chimney but decided to leave that as a very last choice. She was sure that Edmond would at least give her at least an hour on her own to recover from Olivia's pathetic attack so for the time being she would sit in the cool shadows of the roof and wait and see what happened.

Owen took a short cut across the Tabor land that led through the vast fields of hops. It seemed strange to him to see the men going about their daily routine as though nothing had changed but for Owen a great deal had changed. His powerful sense of confidence based on his control of the Estate and his family was shaken to the core. He left his horse with a groom and crossed the yard to the back entrance of his home.

An alert looking guard stood to face him as he approached. "Good day, sir!" he said brightly.

Owen nodded using his hand to shield his eyes from the glaring afternoon sun. "How is everything, George?"

"Well, enough Mr. Tabor. All is quiet but Lord Tabor has been sending people out to find you and Mr. Whitehall."

"If asked you have not seen me," Owen caught a movement in the gables of his roof and in the same breath, he said, "Get on the ground!" and knocked the startled man over. He pulled out his pistol, aimed and shot into the area of movement. There was a

screeching sound and a flutter of black wings as the wounded raven flew off into the trees.

The guard jumped to his feet confused, holding his rifle at the ready and looking for a target. "What is it?" he called to Owen. "What are you shooting at?"

"There!" Owen said and pointed in the direction the bird.

"A crow?" the frightened man asked with surprise.

"That is not a crow," Owen said as he placed his pistol back in his pants. "It's a bloody raven. I hate those damn birds!"

"I don't think you hit it, sir!"

"Damn! They would have heard that shot for miles. I am in no mood for anyone right now. Tell anyone who wants to know that it was you shooting at the bird. Remember, I am not home," he went up the steps and closed the door behind him just as he heard the rushing of footsteps to his back yard.

"Fuck!" Owen mumbled as he prepared to boil water for coffee. "That boy will have Hell to pay for what I did. I will make it up to him later." He was uncertain as to why he had shot at the bird and knew that under the circumstances it was a foolish and dangerous thing to do. He sat at the table listening as the raised voices outside began to fade away. For the first time in memory, he was alone in his house and was thankful for that.

It was then that he noticed the soot left on the floor when the raven came down the chimney earlier. Hanna kept a spotless kitchen. She would have cleared it away had it been there when she was home. Odd, he thought as he stooped to look at it. Not too far away on the floor was a long black feather. He picked it up turning it over in his hand. Birds do fly down a chimney. But where was it now? It certainly did not have the sense to fly back up the way it had come. It would be frantically trying to get out. He checked the house and saw no sign of a bird.

Back in the kitchen, he noticed the pantry door was slightly open so he looked inside. There on the floor was the sack of things he had taken from the gypsy wagons and had forgotten all about it in the confusion of the days that followed.

He brought the sack down to his study and placed the items on the table. He pulled the box with the silver daggers and examined them. Each one was perfectly balanced and razor sharp, deadly weapons, indeed.

For the first time he felt sorrow for the end of Edward and vowed he would soon get the opportunity to use one of these knives on whoever killed him. Henry was no doubt dead as well. As far as Owen was concerned, only a fool would think that their deaths were from separate causes. He took one of the knives, picked a mark on the wall above the great room door and threw the knife. It hit that mark and slid at least two inches into the hard wood. He slid one of the knives into his tall boot and locked the others in his desk.

The raven waited, hiding in the trees until she was sure that Owen would not take further shots at her. She had a grazing wound on her left foot. The pain she felt paled in comparison to her anger at Owen. He had thrown a rock at her and this was the second time he had shot at her. Several times, he had insulted her and she was more than ready to get even with him.

She flew back to Tabor Hall as a small crowd gathered at the back of Hock House. After a short wait on the ledge when she was sure no one was looking, she hopped inside

the window and transformed.

Now back in human body the slight nick on the birds' talons was a bleeding gash on the bottom of her foot. The pain she felt was another surprise in the realm of human feelings she was going through. This time it was not pleasant like the feelings of triumph over Olivia or the sexual needs that Edmond inspired in her. This was miserable and almost unbearable. She called through the door to see if Abbey was in her room.

"What?" Abbey answered from the other side. Reine unlocked the door and opened it a crack. "It is alright! I am alone. Good Lord, what has happened to you?" she asked when she saw the bloody footsteps on the wooden floor.

"Owen shot me!" she gasped and sat down heavily on the bed. "I wasn't bothering him, just watching from his roof and the pig took a shot at me!"

Abbey had to laugh. "Well, then you are damned lucky it is not a Hell of a lot worse than that," she took a closer look and added, "It is only a scratch, you will heal and quickly if I know anything about shape shifters," she took a towel and pressed it against the wound to stop the bleeding.

"Changeling, for crying out loud! I am a changeling! And stop smiling, this is not funny, Abbey, it hurts!"

"Well, it would hurt, wouldn't it? Have you never had any pain before?"

"No! Not like this!" Reine answered sounding more and more like a frightened child.

"If you plan on spending time as a human you'd better get used to it. Pain is our constant companion. Physical pain like that and mental pain like what you have given to Olivia."

"I did not give it to her. She let it happen and that is not the same thing. Now shut up and get something to help me."

"If you say so!" Abbey pulled a long green bottle from her suitcase and handed it to Reine. "Take just a small sip or you will be out on your back side for hours! I'll go down to the wash room and see if I can find any bandages," she tossed a blanket at Reine. "Now cover yourself up in case anyone comes in!"

Reine opened the jar and took a mouthful of the opiate. The smell very much reminded her of Emile and she did not want to think of him then.

"They have a well stocked medicine cabinet," Abbey said as she returned with bandages and a bottle of iodine. "This is going to hurt," she warned as she put iodine on the wound.

"Shit!" Reine exclaimed, pushing Abbey's hand away, "what the hell is that?"

"It will keep you from getting an infection. If you are going to be in human form you will have to get used to such things."

"I do not have to get used to anything, Abbey. I am fine the way I am!" she fell back on the bed and let Abbey finish dressing her wound.

"There! You will be back to normal in no time; whatever normal is for you!"

"Has Edmond asked for me?" Reine asked as she sat up. She was feeling a great deal better.

"Not that I know of. I doubt that he has even left his apartment. At least I have not seen him." Abbey frowned in thought and then asked, "Have you had sex with him so soon? Shit, you have only known him a few hours."

"Not yet! But he is more than willing!" Reine laughed. "He would have taken me yesterday in the garden had I let him."

"Why didn't you let him then?"

"We will have a much better time in my bed tonight, Abbey! He is coming to me when the house is quiet. Won't that be lovely?"

"I can't say Reine, will it be lovely? You are really attracted to him aren't you? I mean you want Edmond. I can sense it and I am sure that is not a part of Emile's plan!"

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Abbey. He is a handsome man but that is all."

"Are you sure that you are not becoming infatuated with him?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I am not capable of such foolishness!"

"Maybe so, Reine but I think the longer you stay in human form the more human you become. Think about it! Just today alone you have felt passion, fear, anger, pain and no

doubt a sense of victory over Olivia. That sounds very human to me," Abbey said as she folded her fat arms in a matter of fact way across her belly.

"You talk as though you know so bloody much. It would serve you better to remember that it is up to Emile who lives and who dies here. The very moment he tells me to kill Edmond I will do so and you as well!"

"I would not be so sure if I were you. If you let that man into your body you may also be letting him into your heart."

"Maybe you are jealous, Abbey! But you may watch tonight if you want. You can see my bed through the keyhole. That might be better than nothing," Reine laughed again as she went back into her room.

"I have seen and had more sex than you ever will, Reine. There is nothing you can show me I need to see and I have enough knowledge to know when a woman is falling in love."

Reine slammed the door hard. "I am getting very tired of that cow," she muttered to herself as she sorted through the mess of clothes that lay scattered about her room.

Wearing in the same dress that she had worn the day before when she had had so much success with Edmond she stepped out onto the landing and went to the door of Edmond's apartment. She thought she could hear the faint sounds of a woman crying but did not hear Edmond.

She had to get into Owen's house and find out if Elizabeth was still there and she knew that Edmond could distract her from that important mission so she was glad not to run into him. She cut across the garden, decided to avoid the stern older guard at the front of Owen's house, and headed to the back entrance.

The harried sentry stood at the base of the stairs as she approached. "No one's home here!"

"Mr. Tabor is home. I saw him return earlier," she went to move past him but he again blocked her way. It was her first instinct to remove him physically from her way but knew that would not be appropriate. "I am Reine Crawford and I am a guest of the family. Announce me!"

"I am sorry but I cannot do that, Miss."



"Really?" she glared at him with her brilliant eyes. Then after a moment of gathering her patience, she turned from him and walked to the kitchen window. She picked up a handful of pebbles and threw them at the window.

"Please don't do that!" the guard said with surprise.

She ignored him and watched the window.

Owen was drinking his coffee when the stones hit the glass. He looked out and saw Reine. He unlocked and opened the back door.

"I am sorry, sir. I told her to go away."

"Go back to your station!" Reine ordered as she came up the steps and turned her dazzling smile to Owen. "I am sorry to bother you, Mr. Tabor, but it is urgent that I speak with you."

"Then you should come inside, Miss Crawford, if you have finished throwing rocks at my windows," Owen smiled in return and nodded at his guard. He pulled out a chair for her to sit with him at the table. "I am afraid that you will find I live a very informal style at Hock House. But I do have a pot of coffee ready if you would like a cup or are you a tea drinker?"

"Coffee would be fine but only if it is strong and black."

"What is it I can do for you, Miss Crawford?" he asked as he placed a steaming cup of coffee in front of her. He refilled his own and sat across from her.

"But I am here to help you, Mr. Tabor. I thought you understood that?"

"I understand a great many things but not a thing that has anything to do with the supernatural. It would only be fair to warn you that you will not find me any easy mark, my dear!"

"An easy mark?"

He could not help but smile as he leaned the chair back on two legs and folded his arms across his chest. "I simply mean that I am a man of action not prone to wasting my time with foolish words of magic. You and your ilk are little more than con artists."

"Really? I would have thought that a man of action did not hide in his home when he believes that he is in a time of danger," she was angry, her silver eyes flashing in the mottled kitchen light. For a time they sat silently watching each other.

Owen broke the silence. "This is not going too well, is it? If you have a point perhaps you will get to it," he spoke the words slowly. He was hoping she would just get up and leave. He felt he had made his opinion very clear to her.

"No, it is not!" She paused, pulling her quick temper into line. There was too much at stake here for her to make an enemy of this man at this early stage. "I must apologize for my rudeness. I should not have said that."

"I believe people should always say just what they think, Miss Crawford. As I do!"

Pompous ass, she thought but to Owen she simply smiled, "Then we shall start again and do please call me Reine, if I may call you Owen?"

"Of course, Reine," he shrugged and realized that she would not be too easy to put off. "We shall start again and perhaps it is just as well that we understand each other right from the beginning."

"So would you please at least give me a chance to prove my abilities to you? That is not too much to ask, is it?" she leaned further across the table aware that as she

did so the cleavage and curve of her breasts were very visible to him.

"Go ahead! I am all ears," he said as he enjoyed the view she gave him.

She laughed slightly. "No, Owen! I think you are very much more than that! Now give me your hand. I can read more about a person with physical contact."

"As can I!" he agreed.

"You must be serious. I need to concentrate on your thoughts."

"If you must but I should warn you they are not always gentlemanly."

"But enjoyable, none the less, I am sure." Pleased with how she felt she had turned things around, she held his hands.

Owen just nodded. She had confirmed his earlier opinion that she would be easy and fine to bed. It is too bad; he thought that was not in the mood for a whore.

"Now, be quiet and give me a moment just to think and I will pick up some of your memories," she closed her eyes and lowered her head. She enjoyed the strong warmth of his hands. They were smooth, long and strong. She could sense that he was a far different man than his brother; more of a challenge and that excited her.

"I see a misty place, I think in the early morning, not too long ago. The mist is very thick and so I cannot see too clearly where you were but there are high gray walls on three sides. Perhaps it is a courtyard. You were standing alone in this space looking at a dark stain on the flagstones when you heard a footfall coming to you."

"It is an older man who is as tall as you are and has a very great deal of wild and bushy gray hair. I can only hear some of the words that passed between the two of you. You spoke of burying a man and of your anger towards Edward. Then you stooped down, took up a stone and threw it hard into the dark shadows," Reine lifted her head. "Does any of that ring true to you, Owen?"

Owen was indeed surprised but not with any realization of her psychic abilities but with absolute knowledge that someone had been watching him and James the morning after the death of Jack Soskice. He was more than certain that they could not trust this female.

"That scene you recount did happen, just as you say. I most certainly cannot deny that. Tell me what else can you see?"

"Alright," she said and circled the palm of his hand with her fingertips.

"Now all this is very clear to me because it is a bright and sunny day. You are alone standing on a high area that might be a roof. There is some kind of walkway or porch up there but it is not visible from the ground. For while you walked around and seemed to be looking for something, then you bend down and appeared to be checking the railing. There is another large stain and I can see that it has the appearance of blood. You felt confused and angry. Then after being there a few moments more you left and came back down into the house." Reine stopped talking; let his hands go as she looked up at him.

"Well, Reine you are indeed very talented. I have no idea how you could know any of that but I shall make it my business to find out," he spoke with ominous tone.

"I know these things because I am psychic. My presence here on Tabor land is a powerful source of protection for you and your family. Is it not true that in the last twenty hours I have been here there have been no further injuries? Am I correct?"

He thought of Elizabeth, and how terribly ill she had been that morning, but he said nothing about that to Reine. He had not forgotten it was Abbey's gun that killed

Tom O'Connor and these two females were very closely connected.

When he did not answer, she moved onto the real reason for her visit to Hock House. She had to find out if Elizabeth was still there. "I will not keep you too much longer but it would be of great help to me if you would be so kind as to show me the layout of your house."

"Why?"

"So that I can have it accurately in my mind's eye as I surround it with protection. You may not believe such things are possible but surely, it will not put you out too much! If you insist, I not include your house in my protection. I have often had to face that kind of irrational fear."

He ignored her provocation, shrugged and stood. "There are only a few rooms that are now in use. But I see no reason that I should not show them to you."

"Good!" she said as she stood and smoothed the creases from her dress. Owen saw what she had wanted him to see; she was not wearing corsets and did not need them. "I am sure that will be more than enough for my purposes."

"Well, you have seen my kitchen and this is where we take most of our meals. Through that door is where my cook and maid have their living quarters. If you will follow me?" He led her down the hall.

"The dining room is rarely used these days," he said as they moved along. "There is a washroom in here. This is my study," he announced when they entered the room.

As she did in Tabor Hall, Reine wondered at the beauty and the opulence of the place. Owen watched closely as she moved around the room touching the furnishings and decorations almost as though in a trance.

"It must be wonderful to be so rich!" she said half to herself. "To have whatever you want, whenever you want it!"

"You do not strike me as someone who has suffered poverty," Owen responded and she seemed to wake from her thoughts.

"And the rest of the house?" she asked as she followed him across the hall.

"This is what they used to call the Great Room or the Ball Room but now it is my bedroom."

She came behind him and passed just underneath the Soskice dagger without seeing it. "This is where you sleep? Am I being rude to ask why?"

"Not rude, just nosey!"

"True. That is just who I am, filled with insatiable curiosity."

"Oh...I see."

She moved to the side of the huge bed, ignored the baby garments spread about and went right to the night gown that was still on the floor where Elizabeth had let it fall the night before. "Are you a married man?"

"No."

"But you do not spend your nights alone?" she held out the simple cotton garment and then let it fall to the floor.

"Not if I can avoid it," he took a few steps closer and stopped only inches from her.

Reine could feel her heart beat faster. "That is good, Owen, I would hate to think that your bed was a lonely place," she openly studied his broad shoulders and

strong wide chest.

"Is your bed a lonely place, Reine?" he asked placing his hands on her slender shoulders.

"What do you think?" she smiled up at him.

"I think it must be a warm and busy place," he leveled his cold eyes into hers and held a steady gaze as he moved his hands down her arms. He felt her give a small involuntary shudder.

As she had done with Edmond, she reached up taking Owen's head in her hands and gently kissed his lips. Unlike his brother, Owen gave her no sign of surprise or response and gently pushed her back from him.

"You do not find me attractive?" she asked with confusion.

"On the contrary," he said in a low voice as he slid his hands onto her breasts. "You are most appealing and should my bed ever become a lonely place you will be the first one I seek out."

Now she was angry and pushed his hands away. Hoarsely she whispered back at him, "And you should also hope that then I am still in the mood for you!"

"I will take my chances." He held her firmly in place for a moment and then continued, "I have never seen eyes like yours before. No doubt many men have become lost in them!"

Like the child she was emotionally, she fell to his flattery and lost her anger. "Thank you!" she said seeing his comment as a compliment. "They are just like my father's eyes." She let him hold her in place though she could have easily thrown him on his backside. This tall and wonderfully handsome man was a puzzle. Why had he rejected her advances? That had never happened before.

"Now, if you are finished seeing my living quarters and trying to get laid..." he caught her hand before she could connect with his face; he held it tightly and pulled her body against his. "See me as friend or as foe, Reine, it does not matter to me. Just remember, one way or the other, no matter what I do I am the one on top."

She wrenched her arm free. "Lucky for you, I suppose. Many men suffer from limited imaginations." She followed him to the front door.

"I will walk back to the Hall with you. Here!" he said as he quickly pulled the dagger from the wall and handed it to her, "tell me what you 'see' in this thing?"

Her reaction was startled and immediate as she pulled her hand back and let it fall to the floor. "You should be more careful, Reine. You would not want that to stick in your foot!" he bent down and picked it up. "Isn't it a lovely piece of work?"

"Where did you get it?"

"Why don't you use your psychic abilities and tell me?"

"No! I cannot pick up anything from it. I suggest that you get rid of it," she was visibly upset. "Now can we please leave? I should get back to Abbey."

Owen shrugged and pushed the knife back into the wall and they left Hock House. Neither spoke as they crossed the lawns and came to the front of Tabor Hall where they came across Abbey.

Margaret prepared a strong mixture of herbs and sapphire oil. She poured the mixture into a tub of hot water. The infirmary filled with the wonderful aroma of juniper and sage.

For reasons of modesty and respect, she closed the curtains and pushed over the door bolt. She removed the sheet covering the young female and began to massage the soothing mixture into her skin. She started with Elizabeth's feet and slowly moved upwards, in the direction of her heart until she reached the bruised forehead. She spoke to her patient about how she must not leave her child and must fight for her life. There was no reaction but she knew that the woman's soul would hear every word she said and the lotion she rubbed into the skin might stir her to conciseness.

With some difficulty, she was able to roll Elizabeth over onto her stomach and began the process again. Before reaching her terribly tortured back, Margaret took a washcloth to wash off the yellow lotion that Mavis Willard had said would aid in the healing. While doing this she noticed the strange smell of the ointment, it was familiar and unpleasant.

Brother John sat on guard outside the door. She took the cloth out to him. "What does this smell like to you?"

"Awful! Like burnt coffee, I'd say!"

"That is what I thought! Good Lord, I think that I know what is wrong with Miss Delacourt."

"That is good, Sister Meg! Then you can help her, can't you?" he looked up at her hopefully.

"Perhaps, but for this miracle she will need all our prayers. The poor woman has been poisoned with Monks Hood."

"Good day, Owen. Your father has been worried all day about you and James," Abbey said with what appeared to be real concern as she came up to Owen and Reine on the walkway.

"I can imagine. We had urgent business. As you can see, I am fine. Can I say the same thing about those in there?" he asked, looking up at the imposing structure before him.

"Fine is not quite the word that I would use. Your sister-in-law has had some kind of brutal breakdown but no doubt Reine has told you all about that?" Abbey answered looking at Reine.

"We have been discussing the layout of Hock House and not much else of any importance. What is bothering Olivia now?"

Reine sighed and said, "She is under the impression that I have some ideas about her husband. It is all very embarrassing and ridiculous!"

"So, you have been having a go at him, as well." Owen smiled at Reine. "I thought so. Although I'd say that you most likely had more luck with him. With a wife like Olivia he must be desperate!"

Reine rolled her eyes. "I will ignore your insults. They mean nothing to me."

"Do they really? I will have to try harder then, won't I? Oh well, I guess we had better get inside and face the music. Coming, ladies?"

"Not me! I have had enough for the time being. I am going to sit for a while in the gardens. You do not mind if I leave you for a short while, do you, my dear?" Abbey could sense that Reine was frightened and distracted. "Or would you prefer to join me?"

"No, Abbey. It is much too hot and I don't care to be uncomfortable," she

answered and started up the steps.

Owen followed behind her and spoke over his shoulder at Abbey, "Another day in Bedlam!"

They found Edmond pacing in the parlor. "Jesus, Owen! Where the bloody Hell have you been?" he demanded angrily.

Owen ignored the question. "I hear that your lady has been acting up again. What is wrong with her now or should I not ask?" Owen poured two whiskeys and handed one to his brother. "Would you like a brandy, Reine?"

She just wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

"Her reasons hardly matter. I will not stand her bad behavior any longer. She is going back to Easterbrook first thing in the morning. I will take her there myself. Then when she is well again she can go and stay with her mother in Cornwall while I decide what I want to do with her."

"Oh dear! What is Easterbrook?" Reine asked.

"It is a hospital in Dover. They have an excellent wing for those with mental disturbances. Olivia is a frequent visitor, so frequent I have a room reserved there for her!" Edmond said with bitterness.

"Apparently she has even had the room redecorated to suit her! A handy place to store a wife when the need be, right Edmond?" Owen laughed as he lit a cigarette.

"Shut up, Owen, there is nothing funny here," Edmond said with exasperation. To Reine he added, "I cannot tell you how sorry I am for my wife's appalling behavior."

"Mrs. Tabor has every reason to be upset with all the tragedy that has happened to her family in these last few days," she said as she sat down fanning herself.

"You are much too kind, my dear!" Edmond smiled with relief at her.

"Whatever pain she is going through she should not take it out on our guests. "

Owen finished his glass and decided he had had enough of this. "Where is Father now?" he asked.

"Resting, I hope! Will you be joining us for dinner for a change?"

"I will be here. I think I will leave you two and join Abbey." As he closed the French doors behind him, Owen saw Edmond sit beside Reine and take her hand.

He found Abbey sitting with her back to the house looking out over terrace to the Estate below. "Hello again, Abbey," he came up to her without making a sound.

"Good Lord, Owen!" she gasped. "Do you always sneak up on a person?"

"When it suits me," he smiled as he sat across from her. "You must tell me, while we have a moment alone. What kind of creature is it that you have brought to us?"

"What do you mean?"

"For lack of a more suitable title, your protégé. What is it that she is learning from you? Is it your psychic abilities or something more earthly?"

"I am afraid that she is rather a sexual being and far too much of a flirt! What has she been up to?"

"With me she did not get anywhere as far as she wanted to but I doubt that can be said for my brother."

"I am sorry, Owen."

"Don't be, Abbey! Edmond was in dire need of a reason to be shed of his ball and chain....if only for a time to think! I am the one who should be sorry. I pushed

them into marriage. Then she was a far different woman than she is now. I guess she lost her senses when she lost her child!"

"I see," Abbey said sadly shaking her head. "That is all too common I am afraid!"

Owen was silent then for a while, thinking of Elizabeth and wondered how she would react when she learned of the loss of her son. She would hold it against him and with good reason, if she lived.

Abbey could see he was lost in deep thought. As though a concerned friend she placed her hand gently on his jacket arm.

Owen looked down at her chubby hand, a huge diamond and gold ring cut into the flesh. He pushed her hand down to his hand and held it. "Doesn't it work better with flesh contact?"

"I don't understand?"

"You are trying to read me, aren't you? That is what Reine did when she tried to regale me with her feats of mind reading!"

Abbey sighed. "Oh, I see! Did she, regale you then?"

"All she told me she could have gotten some way or another from some other person. Tell me something that no one else could possibly know Abbey or perhaps I should cut your stay here short!"

"Very well, Owen, if you are sure," she was more than nervous and it sounded in her voice. She was well aware that she might not see anything but she could not risk what would happen to her if she and Reine had to leave.

"Go ahead, Abbey, earn your stay here. My mind is an open book to you," he sat forward holding both of her hands firmly in his. His eyes not leaving her face.

For a while, her mind was a blank and on the verge of panic, she finally began to see something. She was walking down a long, dark hallway. She saw a faint light coming from under a doorway and heard soft voices, so she quietly and slowly opened the door.

She began to tell him the visions as they came into her mind. "I am standing in a doorway of a bedroom. Somewhere in the background, I hear a baby crying. The only source of light is from my left, two French doors lead to a balcony. It is winter and a bitter wind hits the windows. There are two people lying on the bed. You are one..." Abbey paused for a moment as in her mind's eye she walked around the room to get a better look at the other figure. "The other figure is a slim, very pale female. She is pretty even though obviously very ill. She has a long brown braid that flowed down the side of the bed. I do not know who she is but she is very dear to you."

"You are rubbing her head gently with a cold cloth. Now she is speaking to you, her voice weak but clear, 'Owen,' she said, 'I was wrong to make you promise me that you would never marry again.'" Abbey paused. "Are you sure you want me to do this?"

"Don't stop!" his voice was hoarse and he held her hands even more tightly.

Abbey winced with pain, closed her eyes and continued. "You told her to be quiet and to sleep. The woman was insistent. 'No Owen, you must make another promise to me. That one was wrong! I can see that now! You must find happiness and a mother for our baby. You must promise me this or I will not be able to rest!' Then you lay down beside her, held her head gently in your hands and said, 'Nora, you are not going to die, do you understand me? There must be no more talk like this. We

are never going to be apart, Nora, do you understand? Never parted, never! Promise me that you will never leave my side.”

“The woman gasped out her promise.”

“Then there is silence and after a while you slept. When you woke again, she was dead!” Abbey took a deep breath. “I am so sorry!”

His face was even closer to hers and black with rage. How dare she see his most terrible failure? How dare she shake his solid disbelief in all things unseen? “So then, Abbey, you are so very wise; too much so!” He squeezed her fingers with his powerful grip and twisted her arms, pushing them down between her knees. She winced with pain and tried to pull away but Owen crushed them harder. “Tell me what I want to know about Emile Soskice or would you rather I broke every bone in your fat, fucking hands?”

“Owen, please, let me go! You are hurting me!”

“This pain is nothing compared to what I will do to you if you do not tell me what I want to know!”

“But we have always been friends. Don’t you know you can trust me?”

He did not answer her but twisted her arms more and could feel the small bones begin to crack.

“Alright! Alright! Stop! I will tell you what you want to know!” she gasped looking over Owen's head towards Tabor Manor.

“What are you looking for, Abbey? Hoping your cohort will help you. Believe me her so-called blanket of protection has a great many holes in it!” He pushed both of her hands into one of his and loosened his grip slightly. They were already going black and blue.

“What do you want to know, Owen? I can tell you only what I am allowed to see!” Abbey asked her eyes wide with fear.

“Then you had better pray that you are shown enough to satisfy me! The murders of Edward, Tom and Henry are they the acts of an accomplice of Soskice?” he placed his free hand on the handle of his pistol. “Remember this Abbey. I could just as easily shoot you right here and what would the body of a murdered madam mean to Inspector Caruthers when all he cares about is pleasing my father.”

“Soskice is behind the deaths of Edward and Tom, and maybe Henry, that much is true!”

“Who is this doing Soskice’s dirty work?”

“I do not know, Owen, I swear it! It must be a shape shifter....”

“I can’t tell you how fucking sick I am of hearing that foolishness!”

“But it is true!” Abbey moaned.

“Then who is this accomplice?” Owen demanded with a voice so fierce Abbey shivered with fear. “Is it Reine?”

“No, of course not. I have no idea who it is! I swear it! We were not here or anywhere near here when Edward and O’Connor died and you know that. I have no idea who is helping him.” Cornered, she could see no way out but to stall him. “I will find out if you want me to.”

“Right, you will do that. Then tell me this; how is it that it was your small hand gun that killed Tom O’Connor?”

“What?” she was shocked. “I did not kill him, Owen!”



"Well then, it may interest you to know that whoever did it was using your gun and likely trying to frame you; so maybe you had better think even more about whatever plans you and Soskice have."

"I have no plans! I have not seen or heard a word from him in a very long time. Lord, Owen! He did this to me; cursed me when I threw him off my land. He is the cause of my disgusting appearance. I hate him so why would I help him?"

"Why indeed? Now, I will tell you a story, Abbey because in some ways I am a seer as well! When all is said and done, I will be still stand. If you are in any way double-crossing the Tabors I will make very sure you will wish you were never born. I swear to that!" he let go of her hands then and got to his feet but did not take his glare from her face and Abbey already wished she had never been born. "So I suggest that you do some serious thinking as to what side of the fence you want to land on in this problem. Walk very carefully, old friend!"

"I am not in league with him, Owen!"

Over her shoulder, Owen saw Reine and Edmond walking in the direction of the maze. "You stay right here until you see me again," his voice still ringed with warning. He turned and walked back to the Hall.

He wanted to have a good look around their guests' belongings. He went first into Abbey's room. With little disturbance he searched every drawer, cupboard or shelf. He looked under the bed and between the mattresses. He went through her clothes and every pocket.

It was not until he opened her suitcases when he found anything of interest, three bottles of whiskey, a bottle of laudanum and fully loaded pistol. His smiled and placed the weapon in his jacket pocket. "Abbey needs to keep a closer eye on her guns!"

Then he crossed into Reine's bedroom. One of the housemaids was busy straightening up the mess.

"Hello, Betty. My, bit of mess in here, isn't it. Our new guests keeping you busy?"

"Yes, Mr. Tabor. Thought I had better clean up while Miss Crawford is out. She is none too happy having me about. Keeps telling me to get out. But I got to hang up all these pretty things."

"Keep at it. I think she will be away for a bit yet so I am going to have a look around. Times like this we need to know just who is in our midst."

Owen looked through drawers, over the dresser top and under the bed. Except for the disarray, he found nothing of interest. He sat on the bed, watching the maid. "Tell me, from a female point of view what is your opinion of our new guests?"

"I can't really say, Sir. They have only been here a short time."

"First impressions, Betty!"

Betty puckered her mouth thoughtfully. "Well, Miss Pritchard is nice enough. Says please and thank you but you'd not get that from the other one. She is a strange one, if you ask me. Far too full of herself."

"Anything in particular you noted? I am referring to something she might have said or done that gave you reason to pause."

"She doesn't say anything but to tell me to get out and stay out. She did give me a blast for closing her window. Wants it open at all time," Betty shrugged. "Needs the air, I guess."

He looked out the window and then turned back to Betty. "I want you to keep your eye on these two for me. You tell Mr. Whitehall or me, anything they say or do that seems even remotely odd. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir! You know, there is one thing that strikes me!"

"What?"

"Well, it is the hat boxes. She hasn't got any."

He frowned and followed her gaze to the top of the wardrobe.

"Those hats. They cost a pretty penny but she hasn't a hatbox. They make a big fuss about their hats. They'd not be squashing them into a suitcase."

Owen ran his fingers along the back feathers that decorated the white hat. "She was wearing this one when she arrived."

"Yes, but she'd have brought the box for it and one for the other hat too. Ladies always do that, Sir!"

"It could be that Miss Crawford is not that much of a lady."

"Slut, I would say if you don't mind Mr. Tabor. I've a nose for a slut and that one stinks to high heaven."

He laughed. "You've the fine nose of a blood hound!"

When he was sure he had seen all there was to see he went back to the parlor. Abbey was still sitting on the garden bench where he had left her. There was no sign of his brother or Reine. He thought of how Edmond had fallen into the whore's game. He had to admit too that he would have been more than willing to play with her had he been in Edmond's shoes.

"Owen!" Wilmot called with frustration as he wheeled into the room. "Where the flipping Hell have you been? I am so damn tired of having to ask you that and what have you done with James?"

"We had unavoidable business off the Estate. I will be away from here tomorrow as well. James is busy. I may bring him back when I return tomorrow." He sat down, stretched out his legs and waited for what he was sure to come.

"You two have no business off this Estate. This is your only business!"

"If you want to talk to me, Father, lower your voice! I am not deaf!"

"I need a brandy!" Wilmot said and lowered his voice.

"Haven't you had enough? That is usually the reason for your rages."

"For Christ's sake, I was very worried about you. Of all my sons you are the only one worth his salt."

"There is nothing wrong with Edmond that a few more years of maturity won't help. And no doubt the lovely Reine is helping him with that right this minute."

"I had enough of that with Olivia. Miss Crawford is a fine young woman and there is nothing going on between her and Edmond. She has only been here for one night, after all."

"Well, I spent one hour with her at Hock House and she was more than willing for whatever I might want. Less than ten minutes and she was just about grabbing my cock."

"You will not molest Miss Crawford. She is a guest in my house!"

"She is a whore and you know it. Perhaps you should have a go at her yourself and see what happens!" Owen answered with his usual angry sarcasm. "Might do you some good to fuck again, take your mind off all that scares you."

The old man slammed his fist on the arm of his chair. "How dare you speak to me that way? Who do you think you are?"

"I know just who I am. I am a man who does not cringe over foolish curses or hide behind worn out whores."

These words hit Wilmot as though a fist. He slumped back into his chair looking very much like the old man he was.

Sensing Wilmot was done Owen shook his head. "I am going to see Ivy. Abbey is out in the garden. Tell her I said it is alright for her to come back inside now!"

"Good Lord, why can't my sons leave my guests alone?"

Owen ignored him and headed up the stairs.

Edmond had given his wife a strong sedative as he often did to find peace. He took Reine to the center of the maze. He told her about his life, his love of gardening, his education and the travels he had taken around Europe with his late mother. He told her about the workings of the Estate, his father's wealth and the power the name Tabor employed.

Never moving her eyes from him, she listened closely to every word he said as he exposed to her a wonderful world of luxury and adventures that she had no idea existed. She was fascinated by him and by the excitement she felt just sitting near to him. She knew all too well that Emile was calling her but with Edmond so close in the lovely sanctuary of the Tabor maze, she ignored the old man. The sharp edge of her loyalty to him was fraying with every moment that she remained in human form.

When Edmond felt that Reine was suitably impressed he stopped and asked her to tell him about herself.

"Oh, there is so little for you know about me, Edmond. Compared to your life mine has been at best boring and wanting. My education acquired in matters of life. I have never even left England."

"My Lord, Reine, surely that cannot be. A woman such as beautiful as you are must have had many opportunities. You have had no rich suitors?"

"Not at all! Abbey and others have kept me very well sheltered from anything but my psychic studies! I have never even known a man."

"Are you telling me that you are still a virgin? Reine, after yesterday, how could I ever believe that?" he had to hold back the laughter as he spoke. "A virgin does not heat up as fast as you did! You knew just what I have and where it goes. And my God..." he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, placed his hand on her neck and gently pulled her to him. "I have never been so instantly and completely aroused. I would have taken you then and there if you had touched me one more time."

"I am a virgin, Edmond! Yesterday, well, I suppose it was my withheld lust making me so bold. Of course, I know what about the sex act. I may be a virgin but I am not dumb." She looked him straight in the eyes as she gave him this lie. All the while she spoke she slid her hand up his leg. When she stopped speaking her hand was firmly on his lap.

He pushed slightly towards her. "Well then, Reine, if that is true, and I doubt it, be very certain that you want me to come to you tonight because if I do, believe me you will not be a virgin when I leave," he leaned forward kissing her gently. She slid eagerly into his arms returning his kiss.

Owen knocked lightly on the door and into the nursery. Ivy and her bundled

newborn were sleeping soundly. Owen sat in a chair by the bed and gently touched Ivy's arm.

"Hello, sleepy head!" Owen smiled as she looked up at him. "How are you two doing?"

"Wonderfully, Owen!" Ivy said returning his smile. "Isn't she lovely?" They both looked down at the tiny being.

"She is indeed lovely, but where is her hair? She is as bald as a bat!" He thought of the baby Richard and his head of thick black curls.

"Silly! Most babies are born bald. Her hair will grow in over the next few months. I have named her Alice after my mother."

He nodded, remembering the red haired, high-spirited woman that James had married. "Well, as far as I can tell your Alice will be as beautiful as her mother and her grandmother!"

"Thank you, Owen; you will spoil me! Where is my father? Nobody seems to know and I am worried about him."

"I am sorry. I should have given him a chance to tell you but we had urgent business off the Estate. He is fine and will be back tomorrow afternoon. I am so sorry about your Tom, Ivy. Rest assured I will get to the bottom of his death and that of Edward and Henry. And of course, as far as your future goes we will always look after you and little Alice!"

"I know that. You have always been my best friend and I know we will always be here for each other," she held his hand with affection.

"We could have been much more than that, Ivy, if you hadn't been so stubborn all these years!"

"Oh Lord, Owen, do you ever think of anything else? You are shameful!"

"I will settle for good friends; perhaps in the long run that is much more important."

"Maybe you are growing up, after all! I am not the right woman for you." She paused looking into his eyes. "And deep inside of you, Owen, you are very aware of that."

He smiled and nodded in agreement. From the distance, they heard the ringing of the dinner bell. "I had better go; the old man is spitting bullets as it is!"

"Poor man, he must be devastated."

"Hardly! He is concerned only in how this all affects him, nothing else!" his voice full of the hatred Ivy knew he felt for the man he called father. "Here!" Owen said as he showed her the pistol he had taken from Abbey's suitcase. "I know you are a good shot. Use it without hesitation if you are threatened."

"But surely this is not necessary...." she started to say but stopped when she saw the stern look on Owen's face. She nodded and slipped the weapon under her pillow.

He went to the door and pointed to a bolt lock near the top. "The nannies had this installed to keep Edward out of mischief, not that it helped much. I want you to be sure and lock it before you go to sleep tonight."

"I will. Owen! Please be careful!"

"Of course, Ivy. I will be back to see you tomorrow."

As Owen opened the door he was surprised to see Mrs. Willard standing there as though about to come in.

"Oh, Mr. Tabor you did give me a start!"

"Sorry! Mother and child are resting comfortably," he said just as Alice let out a loud cry. "I guess I spoke too soon!"

As he moved down to join the others in the dining room he was troubled with the clear impression that Mrs. Willard had been standing at the door listening when he opened it.

He joined the others who were already settled in the dining room and was only slightly surprised to see Reine sitting in Olivia's place. He was going to make a remark but decided to save his fire for a later target. He took a seat next to Abbey and saw that she was wearing fingerless clothes, no doubt to cover the bruises he had given her.

For a while, all but Owen discussed all the possible combinations for the following day's weather. In a pause Owen said, "I think that Abbey with her powerful abilities should be able to tell us exactly just what the weather will be tomorrow."

"But I do prefer to use my talent for more important purposes than weather forecasting, Owen," she smiled at Owen, her eyes tired and cold.

"But still, only for entertainments sake!"

"Very well, if you insist," she paused for a moment and then said, "there will be rain tonight and thunder storms, in the morning there will be a heavy fog and when it lifts we will have another hot, sunny day like today."

"Ah, then we shall see, won't we?"

After a small amount of strained silence, Edmond spoke to his father. "How is the young mother doing? I have not had a chance to see her yet!"

Owen saw Reine's reaction. She dropped her fork and did little to hide her surprise. "You have a new mother in the house?" she asked.

Wilmot nodded. "You have not met my Estate manager yet because Owen occupies his time far too much. His daughter and her newborn babe are resting in our nursery. They are very well, Edmond, but I am sure she would like a visit from you since she misses her father," he gave a sideways glance to Owen as he spoke.

"Oh, how nice!" Reine said but seemed to have lost her enthusiasm.

"I had hoped that by this time my house would be full of grandchildren. But so far my sons, dwindling as they are, have not blessed me," Wilmot was drunk and slurring his words.

"It is true that babies do make a house a happy home!" Abbey agreed.

"Really?" Owen asked turning again to Abbey. "And how would you know that? Have any of your whores reproduced?"

"Owen!" Wilmot said rubbing his forehead. "Be quiet!"

"No, Wilmot, it is true! We all know what I do for a living these days," she turned to Owen. "My girls are all very careful and have had no babies. There are far too many unwanted children in this world."

"How thoughtful of you, Abbey. I had no idea you were that sensitive. Perhaps I will be able to change my opinion of you after all."

"Owen, won't you at least be civil for Father's sake?" Edmond demanded.

"No, I rather think that I will leave the civilities to you Edmond." He looked from his brother to Reine and then back to Edmond again. "Anyway, I have had my fill of this meal. I have had a long and tiring day so I will go to my home now!" he stood from the table.

"But wouldn't it be safer for you to stay in this house tonight?" Wilmot asked.

"Safer? I very much doubt that and I much prefer the comfort of my own bed," Owen answered. He stopped at the doorway and turned back to the four sets of eyes that watched him. "Since we have been blessed with the protection of the Miss's Crawford and Pritchard I am sure that when I return here first thing in the morning I will find all safe and sound!"

"I am sure that all will be just fine, Mr. Tabor," Reine smiled at him.

"Good. Then at least we understand each other!" Owen replied and closed the door behind him. He was tired beyond belief and wanted nothing more a good sleep but the night still had much for him to accomplish.

It was just a few minutes past midnight and after closing time when Owen crossed the floor of the Turtle Dove and stood bar side. Except for a few curious working women who were obviously interested in the tall, handsome stranger, he was the only customer.

A buxom and worn looking barmaid smiled at Owen as he wiped the sweat from his face.

"Hotter than usual, ain't it sir?"

"Too damned hot for my liking," he agreed, motioning for her to pour him ale.

"We be closed but for a new customer, there is always a drink or two!" she took his money and watched as he took a long drink to clear the dust of the ride out of his throat. From outside in the distance came the long roll of thunder.

"I understand that a Miss Abbey Pritchard is the owner of this establishment. I wonder if you would fetch her for me?" Owen said as the woman studied the fine cut of his clothes, his smooth hands and educated speech. This was a man of means and worth the effort to be friendly, she decided.

"Oh, that is a shame, sir, as she is not here right now and I can't say when she will be!" she flashed him another interested smile and showed him more cleavage as she leaned across the bar top. "I hope you ain't traveled too far for nothing!"

"Far enough but I am not one to give up too easily," he winked at her and her pale face turned a deep pink. "A lady friend of mine asked if I might stop by and see to hiring Miss Pritchard to do one of her famous séances in her London home."

"She doesn't do that sort of thing anymore, sir! She lost her powers, a few years back, she did! Mind you, when she had them she was the best around. People would come from miles away to have her read for them. Some nights we make more money from that than from anything else."

That did not make any sense, Owen thought, she was indeed very psychic when she told him of the terrible day that Nora died.

One of the prostitutes joined them. She stood next to Owen giving a long look of welcome and eyeing his drink.

"Isn't that right, Rose?"

"Isn't what right?"

"Our Miss Abbey, when she was a seer she was a damn good one?"

"Oh yes, May! The best! We all have our talents don't we? We just need a little push to bring them out, is all."

"I think Rose here would like a beer and have one for you, as well," Owen said throwing some money on the bar top making sure that they both saw the handful of

pound notes.

Rose beamed. "Isn't he a gentleman and we don't get many of those around here?"

"Did Miss Abbey 'push' anyone else into their physic talents? Perhaps she had a protégé?"

"A what?" Rose asked.

"Protégé. That means student. I have heard that there is a young woman she teaches in the arts of the occult."

May grinned, remembering the instructions Abbey gave her crew should anyone come asking questions. "Yeah, she had some girl was helping with 'seeing' and the like. She talks about her now and then but she never brings her here. Mind you, she does 'teach' a thing or two around here that might interest you, sir! And they ain't got anything to do with things unseen!"

"And there ain't anyone better than myself to show you some of those things, if I may say so!" Rose added placing her hand on Owen's, sliding her fingers in between his.

"Do you have a private room where we might have a talk?" he asked Rose and passed the barmaid a pound note. "Have my horse seen to and I will be spending the night as well." The prostitute took him firmly by the arm and eagerly led him down a hallway and into a small bedroom.

She sat on the bed and began to open her bodice laces. "What would you like?"

He smiled, took a chair out from the corner and sat down. "How much for talk?" he asked, taking another note out from his pocket. Rose's face lit up at the sight of it.

"Dirty talk?"

Now Owen had to laugh. "No, not dirty talk!"

"Well, what'd ya want then?"

"Just answer my questions. If I get the interesting answers there will be another to match this. If the answers are poor, then nothing at all. A load of lies will get you nothing but trouble!"

"I will tell you what I know. And no word of a lie from me!"

"Good, then we understand each other. I want to know why Abbey no longer does her psychic work. Can you tell me why that is?"

"I will tell you what I know but it is a strange story and you will be hard pressed to believe it!"

"I will be the judge of that!"

"Well, it is like this. See, we had this old gypsy and his family that rented some land off Abbey down by the river for him and his motley family. Abbey and he used to be real close like cause he always had pockets full of money and had a keen eye for all the magic stuff they was always doing. They would laugh and drink and God knows what else!"

"Funny how his old woman did not seem to mind, but then he was an ugly mess of a man, if he were a man at all. He got this one arm, that was all black and his hand looked like a bird's foot, with claws and the like. He tried to hide that and his head under a veil but I saw it. I would not have touched him with a ten-foot pole. We all thought he was some sort of witch or devil like!"

"That does not tell me why she stopped doing her psychic work!"

"I do get off the track sometimes. It was not her idea to stop. You see that old man and Abbey had a fight and he put a curse on her. He took her powers and told her she'd get real fat and ugly and damned if she didn't put on the lard right in front of our eyes!"

"What was the argument about?"

"We lost one of our girls! Rachel was her name and the poor thing got herself in trouble so the gypsy sends in one of his men he says is a doctor but I don't remember his name. He does the operation but botched it and poor Rachel died, poor bitch!"

"When was all this?"

"Well, that must be about three years ago now, three and a half. Now this is the part that Abbey told me and I don't think she told no one else. When the old man found out that Rachel was dead he came late at night while everybody was asleep and cut out her heart....can you believe it?"

Owen did not reply and she continued. "When Abbey found out she went mad and that is when they had their fight. The gypsies left the place and Abbey got her curse! Abbey also told me that she thinks they made Rachel die on purpose! But we couldn't call in the coppers of course and had a nice funeral for Rachel right out in the back by the river."

"Have you ever heard of a woman named Reine Crawford?"

She thought for a moment then shook her head. "We get lots of girls that pass through here but I have a good mind for names. No one by that name!"

"Not even just as a friend or guest to Abbey?"

"No. She don't usually have friends come by anymore; not with the way she looks now! Can't say as I blame her! You ain't heard any of this from me. I'd lose my position here you see!"

"Don't worry; your secrets are safe with me."

"But, you know Abbey did have one guest a few days back just before she left. And that was strange too!"

"Tell me about it."

"Well! I was out back hanging up some things to dry when I heard Abbey and a woman talking. Seeing as she does not get any guests and they were not talking friendly like I thought I would take a peak. Now, I ain't never seen any signs that Abbey was a dyke but there she was sitting with this female and all this woman was wearing was a black robe and it open showing all she had, let me tell you. She weren't hiding nothing. Then suddenly they stopped talking and the woman gets up and walks into Abbey's cottage."

"You couldn't hear what they were saying?"

"No."

"What did this strange woman look like?"

"Oh, she is very pretty! Tall and slim like. Very long and shiny black hair!"

"Have you seen any of those gypsies here since then?"

"No I ain't."

"One last question! Is there a basement or cellar of any kind underneath Abbey's cottage?"

"No, it just sits on the land is all."

"Well, Rose, I have to thank you. You've a good memory and have answered



my questions very well," Owen pulled slightly on the bodice of her dress and pushed the two notes between her breasts.

"I am good at other things too!" she said as she pushed his hand against her breast. "Seeing as you have been so nice to me I will give you a cut price!"

"I make it a policy never to pay for what I can easily get for free," he stood, smiled at her and left the room.

"Good for you, I am sure!" Rose called after him.

Once he was sure they had seen to Majesty, Owen had the barmaid take him to his small but comfortable bedroom. He locked the door and pushed a small chest of drawers across it. On a chair beside the narrow bed, he placed his guns and the Soscice dagger. He could get at them quickly if he needed to. He removed his coat, dropped it on the floor and fell down exhausted on the bed.

He turned over in his mind all he had just learned. To her friends Abbey had long since lost her psychic abilities; to him she very clearly still had them. Did his father know of the strong connection between Abbey and Soscice? What was it that Abbey and Reine were after, money or revenge or both?

It was his urge then to return home, throw Abbey and Reine off the land and kill Emile but then he might never know the who and the why of the murders. The most important thing of all was to find Richard. He knew that for a while, at least, he must continue to play the game.

He tried not to think of Elizabeth but her face, deadly pale as he had last seen her, hovered behind his every thought. Before he slept, he thought of the sense of wonder he had felt as she had slipped into his bed just twenty four hours before. That wonder had faded; in its place was a deep sense of shame and loss.

The sound of a dog barking woke him six hours later. He felt dreadfully stiff and sore as he pulled up from the bed and looked out the window. From there he could see across the yard to Abbey's cottage and to the right over some fields he saw the narrow band of the river where the gypsies had camped during their stay. The thought of Emile Soscice brought him completely awake. He replaced his weapons and pulled on his coat.

In the tavern, Owen ignored the curious faces and comments of the few gathered prostitutes as he paid his bill. Rose and her friends watched as Owen rode away.

"Cor', he is a sweet one, that he is!" one of the whores laughed and nudged Rose. "Lucky you! Well hung, like his stallion, I'll wager!"

"I can't say nothing about it. All he wanted to do was talk!" Rose sighed in disappointment. The disillusioned women turned from the window and went back to their mundane chores.

It was eleven when Edmond brought a mug of hot milk into his wife's bedroom. She was sitting in her bed looking miserable.

"Drink this!" he said placing the milk on the night table. "You missed your dinner."

"I was not hungry."

"That is just as well. God only knows what you would had said or done!"

"Well, I will find Miss Crawford and apologize."

"You may do so but it will make no difference to me nor change my decision. You will be leaving for Easterbrook Hospital as soon as possible."

"No, I will not! After the last time you promised me that I would never have to go back again!"

"And you promised me that you would not need to go back again. Your behavior has become unbearable. You have given me no choice. As well it is Father's wishes that you leave."

"Do you think I am a fool?" she yelled at him. "You only want me to leave so you can fuck that woman. You are a whore just like she is!"

In a rage, He took her by the shoulders, shook her and threw her back onto the pillows. "Jesus, Olivia!" he pulled her back up and held her head in his hands. "I am sorry! Before I met you, I never even thought of hurting a woman. Now it seems that is all I do. I am so frustrated and miserable I drink too much and lash out at you. Do you see what this marriage has done to me?"

"No, Edmond," she pleaded. "You love me. You need me."

"I do not need you and I have never needed you, not for one minute. It is not my plan to hurt you but do you really want to spend the rest of your life married to a man who has nothing to give you?"

"Then you can have her, I will not stand in your way or say a thing! Just, please, do not send me away!"

"It is not Reine or any other woman. It is our failed marriage! Jesus, Olivia, we have both broken our marriage vows. Without a second thought, we have taken other lovers. Two people must love in a marriage and I have never loved you. Have I ever once said that I loved you?"

"No! But that is not your way, it does not mean..." her voice trailed off.

Edmond took two small envelopes from his pocket and stirred their contents into the milk. "Drink this while it is still warm."

"No! I don't want it."

"You will or I will pour it down your throat. Do not push me more Olivia!"

"Then give me all the powders. I have no reason to live any longer!" She took the mug from him. He watched until she drank it all. "Please don't go to her tonight, Edmond! Won't you at least wait until I am no longer in the house?"

"Do not be ridiculous, Olivia! There is nothing between Reine and me. I hardly know the woman."

"It is you who are ridiculous, Edmond, if you think I would ever believe that!" she rolled over, crying into the pillows. Neither said another word. After a while, he shook her shoulder and saw that she was asleep. He pushed his pistol into his belt and went to Reine's bedroom.

Reine was sitting by the window watching the dark sky as the first strike of lightning hit in the distance. A loud clap of thunder rolled across the valley. "I do not like that noise!" she said nervously as Edmond walked across the room and stood near her.

"What noise? The thunder? That is nothing to be afraid of, Reine. God's belch and the devils fart," he smiled down at her.

"Really?" she laughed. It was a strange, cracking sound but he did not notice. Edmond had other things on his mind.

"Certainly! That is what my mother told to my brothers and me when we were small. We were never again afraid of a storm."

"You are funny! Did you really feel that you needed to come armed?" she asked as she pointed to the butt of his pistol.

He looked over his shoulder as he put the pistol on the dresser top. "Who can say, Reine?" he sat on the foot of the bed. "Are you friend or foe? It may be that every man dreams to have a beautiful woman who is ready for anything drop into his lap...so to speak. But does it ever really happen?"

"For you it has, Edmond. Don't tell me you still think I am only a tease?" she let the side of the gown fall open, exposing a naked hip and leg.

"So far all I have had is a few feels and promises. I get more than that in my dreams."

Reine smiled and turned her body to face him, arched her back in a long stretch; let the robe fall open and slide down her shoulders. She lowered her head, looked down at her body, and slightly spread her legs. She looked up at him, her silver eyes bright in the dim light of the room. "Then I suggest, Mr. Tabor, you show me what you have to offer and perhaps I can find a way to please you."

He let his eyes run the length of her beautiful body. He stood, removed his shirt and stepped up to her. "You want my trousers off, Reine, take them off yourself."

She moved her hands across his naked chest and up to his broad shoulders and felt the length of his strong arms. She placed her face against his chest and seemed to smell him as she ran her tongue across his nipples. He groaned with pleasure.

She moved around to his back, pressed her breasts into his back and slid her hands around his stomach. "I love your scent," she whispered and ran her tongue across his back. She lowered her hands to his belt, pulled free his belt buckle and very slowly began to open his trouser buttons. When they were open, she held his growing penis.

"When I did this to you yesterday in the garden, how did it make you feel?" she asked as she kissed his back.

"As though I would take you then and there and did not care if the whole world watched us!"

Still behind him, she lowered his trousers, helping as he lifted out his legs. She pressed her body against his back. Her voice husky with passion she whispered over his shoulder. "Please, Edmond just for this moment let me look at you," she moved around to face him. "Then I will do anything, everything you want. I promise I will make you so very satisfied." With the deformed and foul Soskice as her lover, she marveled in every way at the strong, healthy body before her.

For a few minutes, Reine studied him with almost childlike fascination. He watched her with amazement and an undeniable passion.

"Edmond," she whispered. "Please make love to me."

In one fast movement, he lifted her, placed her on the bed and gave her all that she wanted. All the while Emile called for her but she could not hear him.

It was rare when the shape shifter dreamed but she did that night. She had taken Emile's place chained to the wall in the old tower. She was naked and cold as she lay on the wet stones. She pulled on the chains but the leather straps only dug deeper into her neck and wrists. There were slow muffled footsteps on the stairs outside the door. Panic set in and she tried to cry for help but the sounds stayed in her throat.

A key turned in the lock, the door squealed on rusted hinges, and it moved open. Leaning heavily on his stick and covered in his black veil, Emile Soskice stepped into the

horrible place. As he moved closer to her, she noticed for the first time the smell of his rotting flesh, never washed body, and was repulsed.

"When I call, you are to come right away!" he hissed at her from under his veil. "Do you understand what I can do to you for disobeying me?"

She did not answer but lowered her head, her body shaking with cold and fear. Emile pulled his clawed hand across her belly then held it to his face.

"I smell man on you? Is it Tabor?"

She nodded.

"That is good then. You will seduce them all and turn brothers and father against each other. And....you will come when I call you, no matter what!"

"Yes, Papa," she was finally able to speak and began to cry as she desperately tried to wake up.

"Tears?" he spat at her with anger. "Human tears?" He growled at her as he again raised his clawed hand digging the three talons into her shoulder and racking the skin down and across to the opposite breast. She called out with the pain and woke, sitting up and dripping with sweat.

Edmond was on his feet, pistol in hand before he was even awake. "Reine! What is it?"

She gasped for air as she tried to collect herself. "I was dreaming. A terrible nightmare!"

He lit a lamp and still holding his gun he sat on the bed and pulled her to him.

Reine leaned against his chest still crying. He leaned down and to comfort her he kissed her shoulder and tasted blood.

"Shit!" he exclaimed pushing her back and looking at the bleeding wounds. "How the Hell did that happen?"

"It is nothing, Edmond!" she answered covering the wounds with the bed sheet.

"Nothing, my ass!" He left the bed checked the locked doors and searched the room until he was sure they were still alone.

"I must have scratched myself while dreaming," she said when he came back to the bed. He took a towel from the washstand and pressed it against the deep cuts.

"Your short nails did not make these wounds!" he said angrily. "Tell me, who did this to you?"

"Edmond, please! They are nothing. Won't you please just lie beside me and hold me?"

Ready for anything other than sleep then he did as she asked. He was more than ready to fight who ever had done this to her but there was no doubt that they were alone in the room. Edmond watched Reine as she slept and wondered who this captivating and mysterious female was. He had known her less than two days and yet felt as though he had known her for a lifetime. Without a doubt, she had lied to him about being a virgin and he had to smile at the thought of it. That did not matter in the slightest. No matter what her past she was magnificent and he would keep her.

It was nearing dawn when he quietly dressed. He took the gold cross, chain from around his neck, and pressed it into her hand. Fixing the door so that it would lock behind him he went back to his room.

All that first day at St Francis Orphanage James had done his level best to avoid

Margaret. When it was necessary for him to speak with her, he did so in as few words as possible. At one point she had tried to tell him what she had discovered about Elizabeth's illness but in the face of his rudeness she gave up in anger. He will just have to learn about it through Owen, she decided, and went about the business of preparing and administering the antidote.

When the children settled for the night Father Smith, Jeffrey and Margaret gathered to discuss the day's events in Margaret's small sitting room. James spent most of the day and ate his meal in the infirmary.

"I should apologize for Mr. Whitehall's behavior. I know he has been terribly rude at every chance today," Margaret said to her companions.

"He does seem very distant but then, he has a lot on his mind," Jeffrey said kindly. He could easily sense and see her embarrassment.

"Balderdash!" she exclaimed with force. "He is a stubborn old goat and is still bears a grudge for something that happened twenty four years ago."

"Well, to be honest, Sister Meg, seeing you alive and well after all that time must have been quite a shock," Father Browne smiled at her.

"I am confused," Jeffrey said. "But, then, it is really none of my business."

Margaret sighed. She was tired of the secrecy and the lies. James's treatment of her that day had left her anxious to say her side. "All those years ago I was desperately unhappy. The reasons hardly matter now but I was young, immature and felt trapped in a marriage with a man I knew to be a murderer. A man I deeply hated. One night when I was at my lowest, I tried to kill myself. The note I left and other things led everyone in my family, including James, to believe that I had succeeded."

"Good Lord, Margaret! And since that time you have been here?" Jeffrey asked.

"More or less!" she paused and seemed about to say more but shook her head and said only, "Father Smith and the Brothers brought me in, protected me and finally I had a happy home."

"James will come around in time!" Father Smith smiled. "Every man is a stubborn creature." He stood made his excuses and left the room.

"Owen told me that you are his mother," Jeffrey said when they were alone.

Margaret looked sharply at him. "He did? Why is he doing this?"

"He didn't mean to. It slipped out when he mentioned you by name as 'Mother'."

"Well, it doesn't matter any longer, I suppose. Yes, he is my son and I am very proud of him. It has always been a shame in my heart that I hurt him for all those years he thought I was dead."

"How old was he when he found out you were alive?"

"Fourteen. Man enough, I believed, to keep my secret from my husband, and I did miss him so!" she looked into Jeffrey's kind eyes and handsome strong face. "You should be married, Jeffrey, you would make a wonderful husband."

He laughed. "Are you offering?"

"Don't be silly! Good Lord, I am old enough to be your mother, as well!"

"A fine wine, well aged is more than anyone could ever ask for!" he said with a seriousness that embarrassed her further.

"I should go to Elizabeth."

He smiled as he watched her leave.

When it was time for sleep, Margaret insisted that a cot be made so she could be near to Elizabeth. James would take the small storage room off the back. He sat silently watching as she made up the bed for him and then as she applied a cold cloth to Elizabeth's burning face.

"Will she live?" James asked finally breaking the heavy silence.

"I can't say for certain but I have my doubts. I have done all anyone could do. Now it is up to her and God. Poor child; what a dreadful life she has had. Whatever will happen to Owen if she dies? However will he handle the guilt?"

"I survived the guilt of your death and did very well, Sister Meg! He will do just fine."

As much as she had planned to ignore him, as he had done all day, now a powerful heartache got the better of her. "Jamie! Is it not possible for us to be friends? For old time's sake?"

"Old time's sake! You make it sound as though we were just child hood sweet hearts!" he stood and faced her, his face menacing and dark. "Friendship, Margaret, is based on honesty and trust. Since you have not been honest with me for over twenty years how in Hells name could I ever trust you?"

"Oh, I see! I did not know that your ideas had taken such a decidedly feminine turn. I did remember you as much more manly," she whispered hoarsely, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Perhaps you should leave before I say something as equally ignorant!"

She raised her hand to slap him but he was faster grabbing her arm, pushing it behind her and pulling her body tightly against his. She struggled but had no power against his strength. "As I said, you should go to your bed before I forget that I am a gentleman, Mrs. Tabor!" he whispered in her ear and then pushed her away from him.

With a look of bitter disgust, he left her and took his place outside. Margaret, frightened, shocked and exhausted she lay down on the cot. Then she could not hold back the memories when she and James had been lovers. What wonderfully happy days they had been! How deeply and completely she had loved him until that terrible day when he ended their affair. How could he believe that she could continue to live next to him as he set up his life with another woman? Then she could no longer hold back the tears. She wept for a long while with a pain that she had so long thought finished.

From the chair where James sat guard, he could hear her cry. Although he wanted greatly to hold and comfort her, pride is a stern and lonely taskmaster so he closed his mind and his heart and ignored the painful sounds. He could not let her know just how happy he was that she was alive.

## Chapter Seven

In order to guard the infirmary James, Jeffrey and Brother John divided the night hours between them. Brother John took over for James at midnight. James was very glad to lay his head down on a pillow.

Jeffrey was to relieve John at three am. He tried to rest in the mean time but the gathering sense of doom he felt made that impossible. It was two when Jeffrey finally pushed his pistol into his pocket and made his way quietly to the kitchen area. From there he could see the front of the compound to the building in the back that served as Margaret's small hospital. He paid no attention to the courtyard and out buildings. It was the dark shadow gathering over the infirmary that caught his attention. With every passing minute it grew stronger, diving closer and closer over the place where Elizabeth lay so deathly ill.

"Bloody Hell!" he cursed under his breath. "She cannot die!"

He knew that when the shadow of death came there was a very good chance it would not go away alone. It would ask her if she wanted to go home and if she agreed, as the tired and life beleaguered often did, she would pass. If Elizabeth Delacourt died all that he waited so long for might be for not. He needed her alive and Owen Tabor filled with fire and the need to regain esteem in her eyes. If she died, the loss and guilt would be suffocating. There was only one thing he could do. It was very dangerous but he had to take the chance.

He smiled at the sleepy and bored looking Brother John as he crossed the yard. "All is quiet?"

"Yes, sir!" the younger man said getting quickly to his feet. "But I've an hour yet before you take over?"

"I can't sleep, so I might as well do something useful. Go and get some rest," Jeffrey offered and the relieved boy eagerly agreed. He did not see what Jeffrey did; the thickening cloud of black silk that hovered ever closer to the fading heart.

When John was out of sight, Jeffrey took a deep breath and moved inside the infirmary. Margaret was sleeping soundly on the cot. From a room nearby he could hear the rumbling snore of James. It was there that he would need to go first. With his hand on his pistol and very light steps, he moved silently across the stone floor and stood beside James. He raised his right hand, held it close to James' face and with one quick movement pulled his hand down and away. James snorted, rolled onto his side and fell into a very deep sleep.

He stepped back into the main room and was surprised to see Margaret sitting in her cot pointing her gun at him.

"It is alright," he whispered quickly. "It's Jeffrey!"

"What are you sneaking around for?"

"I am going to try to keep Elizabeth from dying and I need your help," he offered his hand and pulled her to her feet.

"What are you going to do?" she asked anxiously looking from him to Elizabeth.

"I can't explain now, Margaret, there is no time. If we don't act now she will pass before the sun rises," he looked at the bottles on the nearby table.

"We are doing...."

"Which of these is the antidote you have for Monks Hood? Please tell me you have some left?"

"This!" she picked up a small round bottle. "I made extra. What are you doing?" she asked as Jeffrey stepped closer to the patient and lowered the sheet that covered her.

"I am going to take her illness. When I do, you have to give me the antidote right away. Do you understand?"

"No! I do not!"

"Then you will understand at a better time. Just be ready. I will need your help or I may die in her place. If you help me I will be fine in a few hours, then I will explain."

"Jeffrey, no!" She tried to pull him away but he held fast.

"Do you want her to die? If I do not help her, she will. Now be quiet! I have to concentrate." He placed his right hand on Elizabeth's head and the other one, still in its sling on her heart.

Margaret watched as a pale red glow started at the young woman's feet, the tips of her fingers and the back of her head. As the seconds passed, the glow grew stronger and began to move towards her heart. Jeffrey gave Margaret a reassuring look, closed his eyes and lowered his head. She tried to pray but the words stuck in her dry throat.

Very quickly, the red glow reached Jeffery's left hand and then with one blinding flash it passed from Elizabeth and into Jeffrey. He gasped, shuddered and fell sideways. Margaret caught him just in time, keeping his head from hitting the floor.

"Dear God, what have you done?" she gasped as she pulled his mouth open and poured the rest of her antidote down his throat. He coughed and sputtered but she held his mouth shut until she was sure that he had swallowed it.

With effort, she was able to pull him up onto her cot. It had only been seconds' but his body already burned with fever.

Margaret turned back to Elizabeth. Even in the dim light, she could see that her color was returning. Her pulse was strong and her breathing even. From the sudden clamminess of her skin, Margaret knew the fever had broken.

She sat on the floor beside the cot. "Jeffrey, can you speak to me?" she whispered to him.

He moaned slightly and opened his eyes. "It is alright, Margaret. I will be fine in a few hours. You will see!" he tried to smile but it was more of a grimace. "How is Elizabeth?"

"Lord, Jeffrey, I don't know!" Margaret was frightened and confused. "She seems better, her pulse stronger. How did you do this? What are you?"

"A healer, like you and that is all!" his eyes rolled back in his head.

"James!" she called as she rushed across the room. "James!" she said louder as she shook the sleeping man by the shoulder. "Wake up!" she yelled into his ear but all she got in response was a grunt.

"Margaret!" Jeffrey called out for her.

She came back to him. "I am trying to wake James!"



“No!” he gasped at her and took her by the hand pulling her back down beside him. “You must not tell him. No one must ever know!”

“But, I ....”

“Tell no one; swear it to me!”

Margaret inhaled deeply and nodded in agreement.

“I need to sleep now.” He rolled away from her.

Above them, the black shroud lifted and faded into the night sky.

Resting her head on the cot Margaret slept. It was dawn when she woke and James was standing over her.

“So you finally decided to join us!” she said as she struggled to get to her feet

“What are you talking about?” he demanded angrily looking from her to Jeffrey then to Elizabeth. “Why is he sleeping?”

Jeffrey stretched and sat up. Smiling up at James, he looked well and as though he had had only a good night’s sleep. “I shouldn’t have eaten those pork pies! Should I, Sister Meg?”

“No!” she answered catching on quickly. “I warned you they were a little off. Are you feeling better now?” she asked looking at the young man with only slightly veiled amazement.

“Right as rain! But a little embarrassed that is all!”

“You were sick?” James asked. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“I tried but you wouldn’t budge,” she insisted. She turned from the men to Elizabeth. She was just sleeping, her pulse steady and her fever gone.

“I am not a heavy sleeper,” James began to argue.

“It does not matter that much, Mr. Whitehall!” Jeffrey interrupted.

“Be quiet, both of you.” Margaret whispered harshly at them. “Elizabeth is much better.” she paused as the room began to spin. “She needs only to sleep now and I do not want her to....” her words failed and she leaned heavily on her workbench.

“She’s exhausted,” Jeffrey said.

“Is that so?” James asked taking Margaret firmly by the arm and leading her into the bedroom he had just left. “Well, you will rest now; you will be no good to us if you fall sick as well!”

“No!” she tried to pull away from him. “I have to help the brothers feed the children.”

“For once in your life, Margaret, you will do what I tell you,” James insisted as he pushed her down onto the bed.

“But....”

“Be quiet and rest! Jeffrey will go and see to the breakfast and make me some strong black tea.”

“Are you sure you are well enough?” she asked looking past James to the young man watching from the doorway.

He smiled at her. “Didn’t I tell you that I would be fine by morning? Why is it, Mr. Whitehall that women never listen?”

“Damned if I know, that one is worse than any!” James said as he closed the door behind him.

She curled up under the blanket. Her head was spinning with the events of the last few hours. Was I dreaming, she asked herself? No, it had all happened, the proof

was in the wonderful improvement of Elizabeth when she had been so close to death. Her last thoughts as she fell asleep were that Jeffrey had a lot of explaining to do.

Contrary to Abbey's predictions, the morning was bright and sunny. Reine woke in wonderful spirits, briefly forgetting Emile's attack. She noticed the chain that she still held in her hand.

"How sweet of him!" Smiling, she fastened it around her neck. She jumped happily from her bed to see how it looked in the mirror.

"Shit!" she exclaimed looking at her reflection and seeing the terrible, deep scratches on her chest. "Now I shall have to wear my clothing to cover them."

"Reine!" Abbey called through their adjoining door. "Are you up?" she rattled the locked handle.

"What?" Reine snapped back at her.

"It is breakfast time. You should come downstairs with me." Abbey answered as Reine opened the door.

"Do you like the lovely gift Edmond has given me?" she asked showing her the cross.

"Good heavens, did he give you those cuts as well?"

"No, don't be an idiot! Why would he do that? He is very fond of me!"

"I shouldn't count too many chickens before they are hatched, my dear! Do you think you are the only woman he has indulged in this way?"

"He is getting rid of his wife, isn't he?" Reine shot back at her.

"And he could just as easily bring her back again when he grows tired of you."

"I will make sure that doesn't happen."

"How did you get those cuts?"

"Emile did it!" Reine snapped at her.

"Why?" Abbey noticed that was the first time she had heard Reine refer to Emile Soskice as something other than Papa.

"Just go, Abbey and let me get dressed! You don't need to wait for me."

Minutes later, she appeared from her room wearing a lovely, high-necked white chiffon dress. Light peach lace covered the bodice. Folds in the narrow shirt, held up with peach roses, showed a white lace petticoat underneath. She had her hair in a simple loose bun and wore green emerald earrings. The effect was to make her less sexual than the day before, more feminine and alluring. The high neckline covered the unexplainable wounds.

"Well, Reine, you do give a man a reason to get out of bed," Wilmot said as Reine joined him and Abbey in the breakfast room.

"Thank you!" she smiled and poured a cup of tea.

"Yes, she is amazing, isn't she?" Abbey agreed.

They chatted for a while when Edmond came in the room. Abbey watched as Edmond smiled at Reine. She could not stop the blush from her face. Abbey could clearly see that he was having quite the effect on the shape shifter.

"Good morning, ladies, Father!" Edmond said as he filled a plate with eggs and ham. "I am famished this morning."

"You always did have a large appetite from what I can remember," Abbey smiled at him.

"You as well, Abbey!" he said with a small laugh.

"Well, I do enjoy my food!"

Somewhere upstairs a door slammed and a female voice called for Edmond. He cursed under his breath and went to the doorway "What is it?" he called towards the stairs.

"I want to see you right away," Olivia yelled down at him.

"I have nothing more to say to you."

Another door slammed. Edmond, his face edged with anger, came back to the table. "That woman is enough to make a saint swear!" He sat next to Reine. "How are you this morning?" he asked her. His cool amber eyes level with hers.

"I am very well, thank you. I had a very pleasant night's sleep!"

"I should be back in the early afternoon, Father. But maybe it will take a little longer to get her settled this time. She is in a rage and will not have any more sedatives. Would you believe she has even threatened to kill me?" Edmond laughed at the thought of it.

Reine did not see the humor as the words. They hit her like a physical blow.

"She is deranged," Wilmot said. "With all that we have to deal with around here right now, we do not need her foolishness!"

"Nonetheless, Edmond, you should be careful!" Abbey grinned. "You know what is said about a woman scorned!"

To Reine the words had become a blur of sounds. All she could hear was the threat that Olivia had made to Edmond. She put her hands up to her face and lowered her head.

"Is something wrong?" Edmond turned to her.

"Yes, my head aches! I think I will return to my room for awhile!" she said standing and steadying herself on the back of her chair.

"Are you in need of a doctor?" Wilmot asked.

"No, I have the medicine I need. Edmond will you see me to my room?"

"Is it those wounds?" he whispered as they went up the stairs.

"No, Edmond. It is just a headache. I get them every so often. Quiet and dark is all I need!" she leaned on him enjoying the feel of his body again.

She lay on her bed as Edmond closed the drapes. He sat down next to her. "You are going to have to tell me how you were hurt last night, Reine. I have not forgotten that," he saw the sad look on her face and changed the subject. "You were beautiful, Reine. I have never known a woman like you!" he kissed her lightly on her head. "Do you like my little gift?"

"Yes, thank you! I will always wear it!"

"There will be many more gifts and they will be grander than that!"

"Did she mean it, Edmond, that she would kill you?"

"Oh, good Lord yes, at the time, but she has not the guts and she is too much in love with my money! I will see you when I return, in the meantime, rest, for tonight!" he smiled at her and left the room.

When she was certain that he would not return she jumped from her bed and locked the door. Very soon, a large raven flew in high circles above the waiting carriage outside Tabor Manor.

With a single purpose in mind, the raven followed Edmond's coach, never losing

sight of it. They traveled the road that passed the city of Dover and after a few more miles turned down a driveway stopping at the locked gates. The sign above read 'Easterbrook Nursing and Rest Home'. She flew on ahead and circled the large L-shaped building a few times before landing on the patio area that overlooked the Dover Cliffs.

She remembered Owen saying that they kept a private room for Olivia that had décor to suit her tastes. She flew around the building a few times. On the back wall, there were six sets of windows facing out directly over the cliffs to the water. Of those windows, all but one had beige drapes. On the third floor, top left was an open window with curtains of deep royal blue. She landed on the ledge of the window so that the curtains hid her from sight. She heard Olivia's angry, grating voice.

"I will never forgive you for this Edmond Tabor!" she cried. "Doctor, do you want to know why he is doing this? I am not sick, I am furious. He has a whore waiting for him and wants me out of the way. That is all; there is nothing wrong with me, except for having an adulterous husband."

"As you can see she is as bad as ever!" Edmond said wearily.

"Please, Mrs. Tabor. Do try to relax. This is for your best interest," an unknown voice answered.

"No! Please, no more drugs. Let me out of here!"

The raven peaked around the curtain to see Edmond and the doctor holding Olivia firmly on the bed as a nurse administered a needle in her arm. "No!" Olivia yelled. "You have no right to do this!"

"There, there! Mrs. Tabor!" the nurse spoke as if she was a child. "In just a moment you will be yourself again!"

"Witch!" Olivia yelled at her, but the edge was already off her voice.

Edmond turned from the bed and walked to the window. He saw the raven. They made eye contact before the bird ducked from view. So distracted was he by the scene in the room that he did not notice that instead of flat black eyes this raven eyes were a bright sparkling silver.

"We will leave you to say good bye to your wife, Mr. Tabor," the doctor said after a brief silence.

"Yes, thank you, Doctor," Edmond went back to the bedside as the others left the room.

"Are you happy now?" Olivia asked him with weak bitterness.

"No, I am not happy and neither are you. We will be far better off apart, in time you will see that."

"I will never divorce you, never! I would rather see you dead and with your brothers in Hell, than with that disgusting female!"

"Good bye, Olivia! I will return in a few days to see how you are doing," Edmond said as he walked to the door. "Then we will discuss our divorce and your return to your mother's home."

She just moaned in desperation, the sedative clearly taking control of her body and mind. The bird looked back into the room and heard as the nurse locked the door from the other side. She left her perch and flew to the entrance of Easterbrook watched until Edmond was inside the coach and it headed back up to the road way. With a cry of excitement, she jumped into the air.

Reine landed inside the room and transformed. From the sound of Olivia's breathing, she knew the woman was asleep.

She needed to be certain that she would have the time to transform and get away should anyone try to get in the room. There was no lock on the inside of the door. She pushed the heavy wardrobe over the thick carpeting, wedging it in front of the door. It would take several strong men to push that out of the way and that would give her more than the time she needed.

She stood for while looking down on the sleeping woman who was so unaware of the mortal danger she was in. For Reine the threats she had uttered against Edmond were not just frantic lashings of a desperate woman but true, actual ideas. She would protect her lover from this woman. Rage grew with the excitement of a pending kill; her breath was in short gasps.

She straddled Olivia sitting across her abdomen and pinning her arms down with her powerful legs. With one hand, she slapped Olivia to wake her and with the other held her head firmly. "Wake up!" she hissed at her.

Olivia startled but groggy from all the drugs she had had over the last two days thought at first that she was dreaming.

"Good morning, Mrs. Tabor! Do you recognize me without my clothes? That slut you have been so worried about!" Reine asked with sarcasm, sitting back so that Olivia could see her naked body.

"Get off of me!" Olivia struggled weakly.

"Edmond recognized me without my clothes! He liked it very much. Last night I gave him all that he wanted and much more than you ever could. Do you see what he has given me?" she pulled Olivia's head up by the hair and showed her the cross. "Small, but I am sure it is just the first of many gifts to come!"

"Somebody help me!" Olivia cried out in fear but her voice was weak and did not leave the room.

Reine pushed her hand against Olivia's mouth and held it tightly shut. "There is no one to help you. Do say hello to Edward and Tom for me!" Reine laughed but it died quickly as pure hatred filled her face. With one hard, viscous snap, she broke the woman's neck.

She climbed off the bed, supremely proud of herself. Edmond was free of this tiresome burden. This time she did not give a single thought to flying with the soul as she had so enjoyed after past kills. Her thoughts were only for Edmond and quickly getting back to him.

She pushed the window open as far as it would go, checked outside to see if there was anyone on the patio below. In the heat of the morning, it was empty. Back at the bed in a moment of morbid curiosity, she pulled the coverlet that lay over Olivia and lifted her nightgown to see her body. She was thin as a pole and her breasts little more than that of a female child. Poor Edmond! It was no wonder he was so hungry! Then she took the left hand and pulled off the wedding ring. It was a thick gold band with a T styled in diamonds. She put it on her own hand and was pleased to see that it fit very well.

She picked up Olivia's body and tossed it out the window. She heard the dull thud as it hit the stones beneath. Quickly she pushed the wardrobe back into place. Two nurses had seen the body hit and rushed outside but did not think twice about the

raven that flew briefly overhead and then out of sight.

Abbey wheeled Wilmot out onto the lower, front patio in time to watch Edmond carriage roll away. "You look tired, Will," she said as she sat beside him.

"Not tired! It seems as though my house is emptying of Tabors rather quickly. I guess the gypsy curse works one way or another."

"But surely Edmond will bring her back when she has rested," she thought that Emile would not see Olivia as a target. She was not a blood Tabor.

"Not this time, Abbey! I do not think that we will ever see that tiresome female again. Edmond brought her back before because it was easier than facing the alternative. But now he has something far more basic in mind!"

"You are thinking of Reine. She assures me that there is nothing between her and Edmond. I have every reason to believe her; she has always acted in a most lady like way!" Abbey knew how ridiculous her words were.

"Then, my friend, you are blind or a liar! For the time being because I need you here I will choose to believe that you are blind. But I wonder what will happen when I am forced to face that you are a liar?" he looked at her in a menacing way. Belle, her tired old body as always right beside his chair, looked up at Abbey and growled low in her belly.

"I am not lying, Wilmot!"

"Abbey, I do not care if Edmond fucks the back end off the female! Just as long as you both stay here and the last of my sons and I are safe. I know Edmond well and I can tell you he has already had a go at her, but you may believe as you wish. It is probably easier for your female sensibilities to think that way."

Abbey laughed long and loud. "Female sensibilities? For Christ's sake, I am a brothel madam and have seen the ceilings of more men's bedrooms than you could ever imagine. Do you think I have any female sensibilities left?"

"There you are! That is the Abbey I remember! Why are you pretending to be someone else? I loved the free spoken, carefree and sexual being you were. Why are you pretending to be so precious now? It is as boring as Hell?"

Abbey was stunned. "Did you really love me Wilmot? Really? And not just for the sex?"

"I loved you as much as I could love anyone. Oh, I loved my wives too, but that was different or maybe I was just a different man when I was with them. When I was with you, I felt free and young again. And for once in all the years I had a female that did not seem to be after my money."

"I never gave that part a second thought. I just wanted to be with you. I don't think it would have mattered if you were a farmer in a shack....well, maybe a little bit!" They both laughed. "No, in all honesty I was impressed by your wealth and power. That I will not lie about but it was you I wanted. God, I wish we were young again. What a time we could have!" she smiled and placed her hand on his and this time he did not pull away.

"We are not dead yet, my dear!" he winked at her.

"Good Lord, not the way I am! How could you ever want the terrible old body that is now mine? Do not play with me, you mean old man," she scolded him.

"Then, Abbey, may I ask, if you are still of a sexual nature why you let yourself

get so fat?"

"I told you Wilmot, it was Emile that made me this way!"

"But I have seen you eat more in these last few days than all the rest of us put together!"

"I do not!"

"You do, my dear! You will fill your plate two times or more! Perhaps you would lose the weight if you stopped eating like a horse!"

"I..." she stopped, her anger died in its tracks. "You are right, you know, you bloody old fart! I do eat all the time and it never once crossed my mind. If I lost some of these rolls would you still be able to get it up?" she asked, looked at him from the corner of her eyes.

Wilmot smiled slowly. "I will make you a deal, you work at shedding some of that fat and I will work at getting it up again. I think you would be well surprised!"

"Funny thing, as I sit here I can feel my appetite fading, my appetite for food that is!"

He took a more somber tone. "Owen and James do not trust your motives here or that of your 'friend' but I need you here and I also want you here. Do not let me down. Do not use this as a means to get revenge on me for what I did to you."

She looked deep into the icy blue eyes that had once meant the world to her and for the briefest moment, she was lost in them.

Margaret was waiting at the gates as Owen rode up. "Good morning!" She smiled brightly at him.

"You look happy. I thought you would be angry with me," he tried to return her smile but it was a weak effort at best.

"Mad? Oh, you mean because of James! No, the man is a stubborn fool and not worth our worry."

"How is Elizabeth?" he asked anxiously. Despite his worry, there was a light in his eyes. They had been so cold and dull since the death of Nora.

She took his arm, leading him towards the kitchen door. "Well, I have good news for you there, Owen! When I went to sleep last night she was so terribly ill, her fever so high I really had no hope. However, this morning she is very much better. She will live although it will be some time before she has her strength back again. It is wonderful, Owen! God has helped her, no doubt!"

"Where was this God when she was in the hands of her tormentors?"

"He was here last night when she needed him the very most. Come inside and sit with me, I have things I must tell you."

"I want to see Elizabeth."

"In a moment; we have to talk first," she insisted as she led him into the kitchen.

When they settled at the table with their usual whiskey laced tea she began to tell him what she had discovered since he left.

"I know what it was that made Elizabeth sick. It was as I thought, she was poisoned!"

"What?" Owen was stunned. "But how? Who?"

"Who was it who rubbed that mess into her scars?"

"I did on the night before she took ill."

"Then it was you who poisoned her!"

He slammed his fist onto the tabletop. "That lotion was poison?"

"Yes. I have no doubt. There is a plant very common in British gardens, named, 'Monks Hood'. When ingested, it is a very deadly poison. Mixed as it was here with olive oil and bees wax it would set up to a consistency thick enough to hold on the skin and sink in through the weakened, wounded areas. Had she taken it internally she would certainly be dead by this time. Owen, who made that awful stuff?"

"Mavis bloody Willard!" Owen exclaimed. "But for God sake, why?"

"I do not know why, but I suggest that you find out and quickly. Does she live on the Tabor estate? I have no memory of that name."

"She has lived with her son in the grist mill for years," Owen's face was red with rage. "Why the Hell would she harm Elizabeth, unless she is in league with Soskice!"

Margaret saw the fierce hatred burning in his eyes, a fire far different from what a mother would want to see. "No doubt so they could easier steal the child."

"Shit!" Owen muttered under his breath. "Does Elizabeth know about Richard?"

"She is only partially aware; in and out of consciousness. She has asked for him and for you as well," she stopped talking for a few seconds looking directly into his eyes. "I told her than you would explain it all to her when you got here. She is confused but does not have the strength to argue with me. I think that might be different though, when she hears what you have to tell her."

Owen nodded. He should be the one to tell her but he dreaded this more than anything else he had done in a long while.

"For her comfort's sake I have had Elizabeth moved into my bedroom. Come along, Owen! Then you have to get out there and find that child."

"And," he pushed his hands roughly through his hair. "I am going to deal with the Willard witch."

"Do you think it was she who did the other murders?"

"She is involved somehow, one way or the other she is a dead woman!"

Margaret watched as he disappeared down the hallway. He is so much like his father, she thought; God please protect him in the days ahead!

He tapped lightly on the bedroom door and opened it when he got no reply. He sat on a chair next to the bed. Elizabeth appeared to be sleeping but only lightly now and not in the deep death like trance she had been in when he had last seen her. Even her black eye and the gash on her forehead seemed much better. One thin arm lay on top of the covers so Owen touched her hand lightly.

"Elizabeth!" he whispered. When she did not respond, he touched her cheek. "Wake up. I have to speak with you."

Her eyes fluttered open. "Owen?" she blinked a few times then held onto his hand with cold, weak fingers. "They have Richard, don't they? Tell me, please."

"I am afraid so. Someone got into Hock House and took him while we were sleeping and before I knew you were ill."

"My baby!" tears quickly began to fall.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am for not listening to you and understanding what danger you were in. I will regret that for the rest of my life."

"Oh God, no, Owen please tell me it is not true!" she begged him to wake her from this dreadful nightmare. "Please! You told me you would keep us safe!"



The pain in her eyes added more fuel to his barely controlled rage and frustration.

"I will get him back to you, Elizabeth. You have my word and promise."

"No, no, no!" she tried to sit but fell back onto the bed. "They will kill him! Why didn't you just let me die? I don't want to live without my baby!"

"Listen to me!" he held her face in his hands. "Listen! You are not going to die and I will get your son back to you. I let you down once but that will never happen again, ever!"

"You cannot fight Emile. Can't you finally see that?"

"No, I cannot see that and you must stop thinking that way."

He heard the door open behind him and looked up at his mother she came and stood beside him.

"Was it worth it?" Elizabeth snarled at him. As weak and ill as she was there was no mistaking the hatred in her eyes. "You had to fuck me and I was stupid enough to give you what you wanted. Now they will kill my baby! Was that lay worth it, Owen?"

"You should go now, Owen!" Margaret said as she sat on the bed and pulled Elizabeth into her arms. "Find James and tell him about the Willard female."

"You did not tell him yet?"

"That man has become an idiot and there is no reasoning with him. Go now, Elizabeth does not need you in here," she nodded to the door and Owen did as she told him.

Stunned by the fierceness of Elizabeth's obvious hatred Owen left the building and sat on a bench by the doorway. He leaned back against the wall. The hot early summer sun burned his face and heated his black clothing. Elizabeth was right and her words cut him to the core. He was ashamed and humiliated and these feeling were new to him.

After a few moments, he stood and walked slowly around to the courtyard. He found James in the stable, grooming Majesty. Various children laughed and romped around the yard.

"I have been sent to talk to you," Owen said as he joined the older man. "It seems you are being unreasonable."

"Is it unreasonable to be angry for twenty four years of deceit?" James asked looking evenly into Owen's eyes with anger and not a little pain. He paused, took a deep breath and asked. "What is it that she wants you to tell me?"

Owen wanted very much to make the man who meant so much to him understand why he and his mother had done what they did but he knew that this was not the time. James needed to calm down first so he let the matter drop for the time being.

"Elizabeth was poisoned. That lotion that Mavis Willard gave us was made mostly of a deadly garden plant."

"So she is part of this mess!" he shook his head in disbelief. "But that old woman could not have killed Edward!"

"That is true. We have a great deal to learn and we will before too much more time goes by! I have a good mind to go home and throw Abbey and her whore off the land, kill Soskice and turn the Willard witch over to the police. But that will be showing my cards too soon and I would not retrieve the child. That is what I want most!"

"Elizabeth is better. Does she know about the baby?"

"Yes! Bloody hell, James I was such a fucking fool! I am going to get that child back to her if it is that last bloody thing I do."

"You had your reasons for keeping her at your house. They were not honorable, I could see that at the time, but I cannot say that I would not have done the same thing. Elizabeth is a remarkably beautiful woman and a mighty temptation. Are we going back to the Estate today? I don't think I can stand the boredom of this place any longer."

"I would rather you stayed on here, James."

"Hell, Owen! I have watched them and I am certain that that Slocomb fellow and Brother John will keep their eyes on things here. I need to be with Ivy."

"Are you sure they are up to it?"

"Yes! If need be we can send some of the Estate men down here to help. But I am going home to my daughter!"

Owen nodded and glanced back at the infirmary. "Right, then you will come back with me. I think Mother would prefer to see the back of you. I do not think you understand the situation, James. It could be that you are being unfair to her!"

"It could be; but I doubt it. I will let you know when I am ready to speak about it."

"We should get going soon. I have been away from the Tabor lunatics for over twelve hours. I spent the night at the Turtle Dove."

"Well, then you have had a far more interesting time than I have had. Tell me!"

Owen repeated all that the talkative Rose had told him.

"So I was right and the old whore was lying. She is up to her fat tits with Soskice, mark my words! The sooner we get back to Tabor Manor the happier I will be. I have my own child and grandchild to think of."

"I saw Ivy and the baby before I left last night. They looked well if tired. How did an ugly old goat like you manage to create such a line of lovely females?"

James laughed. "I have many talents. I just don't brag about them as you do!"

"A hidden light gets very little attention. I gave Ivy a pistol."

"Good! She'll use it if she has to."

"I know; that woman's got more strength than most men I know of!"

The raven flew as quickly as she could back to the Tabor Estate. She was filled with exhilaration from the kill and proud of herself. As much as she wanted to see Edmond, she decided that she had better go to Emile. She was still furious that he had attacked her and frightened at what might be next. To pacify him she went in search of food. He was better pleased when she brought him something.

Bob Willard was busy chopping wood and as always, he whistled as he worked. The raven landed near him and watched as the malformed young man cut the wood. Long muscles rippled down his squat torso. His powerful arms and bowed legs were too short for his size. She decided that he was a very strange specimen of human male flesh.

He looked up for a moment, and saw the bird, smiled, clicked his tongue and went happily back to his work. There was no sign of Mavis so the raven followed the scent of raw meat into the kitchen. On the table was a lovely, large hunk of raw beef, no

doubt for the Willard dinner. It would greatly ease her way with Emile. She gripped it in her claws and flew off to the tower.

Soskice was as always in his death like trance. She dropped the meat by his side, backed into the shadows and transformed.

He lifted his head slowly, gave her his grimacing smile, hooked the meat onto his claws, and began to eat it.

"Are you still angry with me?" Reine asked.

"When was I angry at you?"

"When you did this!" she said stepped into the light so he could see the raw scratches.

He ran his fingers along the raised edges and as he did so, they vanished. Her flesh was completely healed and unscarred. "I don't see anything out of place! Anyway, it would have been gone by tomorrow and you know that."

"That is going to be very hard to explain to Edmond."

"Just tell him that you heal quickly. Let him wonder, it will only add to his confusion and pain."

"He has no pain when he is with me."

"That will change; remember that! Come closer!" he demanded. He smelled the air around her, frowned and said, "I smell death on you! Who have you killed without my permission?"

She told him about Olivia "She was in my way! See the lovely ring I took from her!" She held her hand up for him to see.

"Are you sure it was not more to soothe your human jealousy?" Emile asked, ignoring the wedding band.

"No! I am not human! Does it matter?"

"Just as long as you do not forget that you are mine and exist only to please me." He opened the front of his filthy trouser with his bloodied hand and pulled her onto his lap.

For the first time Reine noticed his dreadful smell and the unpleasant feel of his jagged bones underneath her. When he was done, she went back to her room at Tabor Hall. She hid the ring and ordered the maids to prepare a bath for her immediately.

While James hitched up the wagon, Owen took Father Smith aside. He needed assurances that they adequately provide protection for Elizabeth and his mother.

"I understand your concerns, son! Someone tried to murder Elizabeth. Whoever it was may try again. We are called 'men of peace' but we are still men!"

"Yes, I know that, but..."

"I am also aware of the loss of our patient's child. It is your duty to go and see to the outcome of these events. It is our duty here to see to the safety of Elizabeth. Jeffery,

Brother John and some of our younger men are well up to the task. I still have some fight left in me, as well! If I may say so myself."

Owen laughed and slapped the Father on the shoulder. "Good for you! Do you know where my mother is?"

"I cannot tell you how much it does my heart good to hear you call Meg 'mother', Owen. I believe she is in the kitchen."

"I think I shall say good bye here, Owen," Margaret said as she handed him a package of sandwiches she had prepared. She could see James waiting for Owen in the wagon.

Owen kissed her gently on the fore head. "He will come around, just give him time! I would like to see Elizabeth for a moment before I leave."

"Oh, I don't think that would be a good idea, at all!" she said but Owen just turned and walked down the hallway. Brother John was sitting outside Meg's sitting room doorway.

"Keep up the good work!" Owen smiled at the young man as he opened the door and went inside.

"Go away!" Elizabeth said weakly when she saw him.

"Not until I have said what I need to say."

"I don't care what you have to say, Owen! I know why you kept me so long at Hock House and I was fool enough to fall for your tactics. You got what you wanted, so leave me be!"

"You have every reason to feel that way. I admit that you were right. I wanted you in my bed; I never made a secret of that. It was not so much just for the sex but for the need to share it with you. I care greatly about you and I will bring your baby back to you, I swear it!"

"You said that before. Now if you have nothing else to say, go away." She turned away.

He left the room and could not remember a time when he had felt more of a failure.

"Be careful, Owen, please! You are all that I have in this world! Promise me you will be safe." Margaret reached up and kissed his cheek.

"You need not worry about me, I will be still standing when all this is said and done. You just look after yourself and Elizabeth."

"I will." she answered and said a prayer for his safety.

Jeffrey watched from his bedroom window until the Tabor wagon disappeared on the hilltop.

"Do you think Miss Delacourt is awake?" he asked John.

"Fairly certain, Mr. Slocomb. Mr. Tabor has just been in to see her."

"I think I will pay my respects," Jeffrey quietly opened the door and walked across the sitting room.

"Go away! I have nothing left to say to you!" Elizabeth said as she heard his footsteps.

"Complete rejection even before we have been introduced. That is a first, even for me," he replied as he stood in the doorway of the bedroom. He could not resist a smile.

She turned quickly to face him. "Oh! I thought you were someone else!"

"Well, in this case, I am glad I am not someone else. Jeffrey Slocomb. Would it be alright if I sit and visit with you for a few minutes?"

"Yes, I suppose so, Mr. Slocomb." she answered. He could feel the sadness that had settled in her. It seemed to reach out and hold his heart.

"Please just call me Jeffrey. The Mr. does make me feel old!" Lord, she is pretty

was his first thought as he sat next to the bed. The second thought he put quickly out of his mind.

"Are you a monk? You don't dress like one!" she asked with very little interest in her voice.

"Good Heavens, no! Hardly! I am, or was, a patient here, like you," he answered nodding down to the sling that held his left arm in place. "Now I am house painter and general handy man, at least for a little while, anyway!"

She sighed. "You look familiar to me. My mind is so muddled. I do not even know what is wrong with me. Sister will not tell me."

He leaned forward, searching her face with his penetrating very dark brown eyes. "Do you really want to know?"

"Of course!" She finally seemed to show interest and rolled onto her side to be closer to him.

"You were poisoned," he said flatly and slid his hand over her hers. Her jaw dropped slightly. "That lotion used on your wounds was a deadly mixture of a plant called 'Monks Hood'."

"Mavis Willard made it!" she whispered in shock.

"Then I would say, Elizabeth that she is someone you need to deal with. I tell you this because you need to be aware of all the facts in order to protect yourself. It would be easier for me if you did not tell Margaret what I have told you."

"I don't care anyway," she said as tears filled her eyes. "I have lost my child. I wish I had died."

"No. You do not want to die. You have great cause ahead of you; I promise you that." He had noticed a cup of warm chicken broth on her night table. "You should eat. Sit up!" He said and without waiting for her answer, he lifted her by her shoulders and pulled the pillows up for her to rest on. He held the cup to her mouth and she sipped it.

"More!" he said gently. "It is good isn't it?"

She nodded. "I have the most awful taste in my mouth!"

"Here!" he pulled a sprig of mint leaves from his pocket. "I had the same problem this morning. Chew on some of the leaves after you have finished your soup. It will help."

Elizabeth watched him closely as he spoke. She liked the look of his clean, smooth skin, his thick straight blond hair and intensely kind eyes. She could not shake the feeling that somehow she knew him.

They sat quietly as she finished the last of the soup. He knew she was studying him and trying to decide if she could trust him. That was good, he thought, she is already learning from this misery.

"I should let you get some rest now," he said as he put the empty cup on the table and stood.

"I think that is a very good idea!" They were both surprised to see Margaret standing in the doorway. Jeffrey had avoided her most of the morning, not looking forward to finding answers for all the questions she must have for him.

She stood next to him, held onto his forearm, making it very clear that he was going to stay with her for the time being.

"Will you come back and see me later?" Elizabeth asked.

"If you wish," he smiled at her as Margaret led him away.

"Promise?"

"Yes," she heard him say as Margaret closed the door.

Neither of them spoke as they walked across the yard and went inside the infirmary. The cool, quiet room was soothing to Jeffrey. He sat down on the bed, resting his head in his hand.

"Are you still sick?"

"Bloody awful!" he nodded at her. "Like the worst hangover I've ever had!"

"Vomiting?" she asked and took a jar out from a shelf.

"All morning. And, Lord, my head aches!" he complained half hoping his misery might cause her some mercy with questions he could never answer.

She mixed some brown powder in a small amount of honey and handed him a spoonful. "Here, this will help your stomach!" she said as he swallowed the mixture. "And make you sleep!"

"Damn it, Margaret! You could have told me that before. I don't want to sleep!"

"Now talk!" she demanded, ignoring his complaint. "I have sworn to secrecy and you know you can trust my word."

"Then you will understand that I also have secrets that I cannot tell you! I am a healer that is all!"

"No, that will not wash, Jeffrey, I am a healer. I use these herbs, spices, roots and the like. Nevertheless, I cannot do what I saw here last night. That was a miracle!"

"No, not a miracle. Just a simple man doing what he can to help," he sighed and continued. "When I was about seventeen I took a kitten as a pet. Sweet little female I named Angel. One day I accidentally stood on her paw, crushing it. I was devastated to see her pain. It was simple. I prayed to God that he should fix her and give me the wound. In a moment she was romping, right as rain and I had two broken fingers!"

"Good Lord!" Margaret whispered.

"By the following morning my fingers were fine. Of course, I never told anyone about any of this. Who would have believed it? There is more Margaret, but no matter what you can say that is all I can tell!"

"But, if that is so why has it taken your arm so long to heal?"

"There is nothing wrong with my arm," he pulled off the sling and dropped it to the floor. He stretched his arm and smiled at her. "Glad to get rid of that thing."

"But why did you pretend?"

"Well, it was broken but I could hardly tell you that it was fine the following morning could I? Since then, well....this place is the closest I have had to a home since I left the United States. I just wanted to stay here, that is all! Are you going to make me leave now?"

She stood from the bed, walked across the room and looked out at the half-painted main building. "Good Lord no! You still have a lot of work to do here! I will leave you here to sleep for a while."

"Look, Margaret, this is important! You must not let me sleep for more than two hours."

"Why?"

He forced a smile and yawned. "Must you ask so many questions? Just wake me in two hours!"

She nodded and closed the door behind her.

Owen and James rode for a while in silence, eating their sandwiches. The tension between them was strong.

"You should have told me that Margaret was still alive." James finally broke the silence.

"I thought you did not want to talk about it yet."

"We have important issues at hand and I do not want this cloud hanging over us Owen."

"Fair enough, James. First, so that we can speak frankly I will tell you that I know that you and she were lovers."

"She told me that she did not tell you!"

"And she didn't. I saw the proof of that fact in her eyes every time I mentioned your name. When I told her that your Alice had died I saw the faint glimmer of hope that faded quickly when the reality of the situation returned to her."

James just shrugged and sat staring straight ahead.

Owen continued. "There are several things you do not know and I think you should. Of course, as I was only a child at the time, I did not understand what was happening but I do now. You do know, though, as well as anyone, what a miserable brute of a man Wilmot was until his health failed. He did not hold that misery back from his wives. I can still hear their terrible arguments. She would repeatedly refuse to comply with his sexual needs, so he would just take what he wanted. The only peace she had was when he was away and no doubt the times she spent with you. Then it came to the time when he introduced other women into his bedroom along with his wife!"

"Christ almighty, Owen! I do not need to know this!"

"Yes, I think you do, James. Unless you plan to walk home you had better be still and listen. He would bring prostitutes home from Dover or wherever and make Mother endure his perversions. Did you know of that?" he looked sharply at the older man.

"No," James answered his voice thick.

"I will not say that I am sorry to you for not telling you the truth because it really seemed to me and her that since you had ended your relationship with her and so quickly married that she meant little to you. But from your reaction to all of this now I am not so sure!" Owen finished and waited for James to speak.

A long time passed before James said anything. He sounded tired like this was a story he had had to tell once too often. "We had been lovers for several years when Wilmot started to become suspicious that Margaret was being unfaithful. Perhaps that was because she had stopped sleeping with him, or at least had tried to stop sleeping with him. I had no idea that he was abusing her in that way. If I had, I would have probably killed him but that is of no matter now."

"Wilmot told me that he was having her watched day and night and that she was unaware of it. If he found out she was unfaithful then he would most likely have her shot, at the very least divorce her, and not let her see you again. Lord, I was living on

his land; how could I continue to sleep with his wife and not be found out.”

“I begged her to run away with me, time and time again. I told her I was tired of sharing her with another man. That seemed to me to be a very normal way to feel. She would not hear any of it. She said she was afraid Wilmot would follow us and take you away from her. I gave her time, more than enough time to see the wisdom of what I wanted, but she is a thick headed woman.”

“I decided that for her sake the only thing I could do was end our affair, although it was the hardest thing I have ever done. I loved her and I know she loved me but I could not risk her life or continue to share her.”

“She would not accept it and became more and more brazen in her attempts to reach me...so I did what I thought was the only thing I could do to make a wall between us. I married Alice.”

“You did not love Alice?”

“She was a lively thing, a fine woman and a good wife but I never loved her, not in the way I loved Margaret! Tell me, Owen, in all these years, twenty four now, that she has been at St Francis has she not had another lover?”

“Good Lord, No! She lives in a world sheltered by monks. How in Hells name was that going to happen?” Owen had to laugh in spite of the seriousness of the situation.

James shook his head. “What a bloody waste!”

“I agree!” Owen smiled. “You could change that, James. She is still a fine looking woman and I don’t think you are past it yet!”

“Owen! That is your mother you are speaking of!”

“I know it! She still loves you and it is far past the time she had some happiness of her own.”

“You have no idea what you are talking about!” James said flatly. They finished the ride home each lost in their own thoughts.

“What is first?” James asked as they walked from the stables across the courtyard and found the Willard wagon parked at the back door. “I’d say we should have a go at Mrs. Willard.”

“I can’t tell you how much I am looking forward to that! But first we should see the old man and get that over with.”

They faced the music for a while under the wraith of Wilmot for being absent so long. Wilmot quieted when Edmond joined them.

“Where are your lady friends?” Owen asked mostly to change the subject.

“Why?” Wilmot asked. “Perhaps if you stayed around here once in a while you would not have to ask.”

“Nonetheless, I am asking?”

“They have gone for a walk.” Edmond answered. “What is wrong, Owen?” he asked taking a closer look at his brothers’ face.

“I will talk with you later Edmond! But first I will go with James to see Ivy.” They were leaving the room and Wilmot called after them.

“It is about time for that too! James, you have responsibilities to your daughter as well!”

James turned and was about to say something in return when Owen stopped him, “Don’t, it is not worth your time and energy right now.”

Ivy was more than happy to see them and they spoke for a while about her health



and the baby.

"Can I please go back home again, Father? I am well enough and it is damn boring being stuck up here all by myself, all the time!"

"Not yet, Ivy! You are safer here than in the cottage. We still have no idea who killed Edward, Henry and your Tom and until we do, you and Alice will stay here!" James said firmly. "I will be sleeping in here, as well."

"Blast it! I have to prepare for Tom's funeral, Father! How can I do that from here?"

"I will have Hastings see to that for you, Ivy! They have yet to release his body for burial so you just rest and enjoy your baby." Owen said.

"I hate the way you two treat me like a child!"

"Just the same, Ivy, you will stay put until I tell you otherwise! Have you seen Mrs. Willard in the last little while?" James asked firmly.

"Yes, she is in there having a nap." Ivy said pointing to the nanny's bedroom just off the nursery.

"Is she really?" Owen asked. "That is rather handy." He opened the door and the startled woman jumped up quickly.

"Good afternoon, Mavis!" Owen said to her without any hint of the rage he felt. "I wonder if you might accompany us to Hock House."

"Yes, of course!" she gathered the small brown case she always carried with her.

"I will be back to eat dinner with you, Ivy!" James said to his sulking daughter as they left the room.

"I had planned on stopping by there later and see how Miss Elizabeth was doing?" Mavis Willard whispered as they moved down the stairs as out of the house.

Neither man answered her. Owen held her arm tightly as they walked and he felt her stiffen with nervousness. They said nothing more until they were in the kitchen of Owen's home.

"Have a seat," Owen motioned to the table, his friendly tone ever less so. He removed his coat, letting her see how well armed he was. With great deliberation, he rolled up his sleeves.

"Sit!" James ordered when she had not moved. He had drawn his gun and pointed directly at her head.

"What is it? What is wrong?" she asked, sat quickly and looked with fear from Owen to James and back again.

"Watch her!" Owen said to James. "I will be back shortly."

Mavis watched as he went down the hallway and turned into his bedroom.

"Looks like you are in for a rough time, Mavis, my dear!" James said with a smile. He opened the side of Owen's jacket and pulled out the whiskey flask. He took a long drink, licked his lips but never took his eyes of the frightened old woman. "Want a mouthful?" he asked. "No? Too bad. I think you are going to need it!"

She sat rigid and silent. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead.

Owen picked up the jar of Mavis' homemade salve from the nightstand. He pulled the cork and took a smell. It was pungent, awful and suddenly very familiar to him. From his wardrobe, he pulled out boxes until he reached the bottom and took out a black satin pillowcase. He let a woman's night shift fall from the case to the floor. He turned it over with his foot. Along the once white garment where pale yellow stains.

He made a sound something like a growl, bent down and picked up the nightgown that Nora wore the day she died. He put his face to it and smelled it. Again, he ran the jar under his nose. He put the cork back in the jar, pulled the Soskice dagger from his boot and walked back to his kitchen.

Immediately James saw the difference in the younger man he knew so well. A darker and more deadly rage filled his eyes. James had no idea what had happened in those last few moments but he did know that Mavis Willard would not see another dawn.

"Good idea!" Owen sat when he saw the flask on the tabletop. He held it to his mouth and drank it all. He sat down across the table from Mavis and placed the jar of poison in front of her. The knife for now, he kept hidden.

"What is your connection with Soskice?" Owen demanded.

With her eyes fixed on the jar, the last of the color drained from her face. "I hardly even know the man. Why are you holding a gun on me?"

"I will ask you again; what is your connection with Emile Soskice?"

"But there is none. I hired him to entertain at Lord Tabor's party that is all! What is wrong? Has something happened to Elizabeth?" she looked to James for help but got none.

"You would like to know that, wouldn't you, Mavis. To know if your fucking poison worked!" he rubbed his chin thoughtful and pushed his hand through his hair. "Now witch, I give you one warning," his voice was a deep rumble of hatred. "I am in the mood to hurt someone right at this moment I would very much like to hurt you; is that what I should do?"

"But I haven't done anything wrong!"

Owen stood and let her see the dagger. She gasped at the sight of it. He reached across the table and in one quick movement slammed her hand onto the table and the dagger through it. She screamed in pain as her hand was pinned to the table. He pulled the knife out, twisting it slightly. Mavis rolled her hand in her skirts and screamed for her son to help her. Owen pulled the cork from the small jar and pushed it closer to her.

"He is half a mile away and no use to you now. Let's see!" he wrenched her hand from her skirts, blood poured from the wound. "We don't want you to get a scar or an infection, do we?" With the edge of her skirt, he picked up a large amount of the poison.

"No!" she screamed and tried to pull away from him.

"You see, I thought the smell of this garbage was familiar!" he paused and took a deep breath. "The dress my wife died in still reeks of the stuff. So I think it is only fitting, do you agree, James?"

"Fucking Hell!" James swore. He held the wailing and struggling woman's hand while Owen rubbed the poison into the open wound. James removed his bandana and tied it tight around the wound. "We will just make sure your 'medicine' sets in," he hissed at her, dragged the frantic woman to her feet and pushed her arm high behind her back.

Shaking with barely controlled rage Owen lit a cigarette. He stepped up to their terrified prisoner. "So, do you really plan on dying for Soskice?"

James twisted her arm further.

"I swear....I did nothing!"

"What do you think, James? Should I show old Mavis what it is like to have a cigarette put out on her skin?"

She squealed, tried to back away but James held her fast.

"Damn good idea."

Smiling Owen held her chin with one hand and pushed the cigarette so far into the flesh of her cheek it stayed there when he took his hand away. Mavis screamed and fainted. James let her body fall to the floor. He took a pitcher of cold milk and threw it in her face.

She coughed, sputtered as James pulled her back to her feet. He looked over her head at his companion; the face of a worried guard was at the window of the back door. Owen opened the door a crack, told him all was as it should be and sent him back to his station.

James looked down at Mavis then to Owen. "Tell me, Owen, while you waited and watched Nora die, did this thing not also care for your baby?"

Whatever slight cord still held Owen in check broke then as he realized the truth of what James had just said. He wrenched Mavis from James, lifted her off the floor and held her by the neck up against the wall. The memory of the dying face of the woman he loved and the painful screaming of his baby consumed him. He squeezed harder, she choked, and her eyes bulged.

James stepped up closer to Owen. "Not yet." he whispered at him.

Owen knew what he meant. It took every ounce of his will to relax his death hold. Mavis was then only semi-conscious; he threw her across the room. Immediately he was on her again. He pulled her up on her feet and pushed her out of the kitchen and towards the stairs.

"You need time to think and sample some of your own medicine."

"No, Owen please, let me wash it off!" she begged. Blood ran down the scorched hole in her face.

He did not answer but lifted her by her hair and the back of her dress and dragged her up the stairs. He nodded to the storage room and James opened the door. There was no window in the small airless room, only a stack of boxes, shelves of old books and a few pieces of discarded furniture. Owen threw Mavis into the room; she had hardly hit the floor when she began frantically rubbing her poisoned hand on her dress. "Do you want help?" Owen sneered at her.

She looked up at him, her eyes wild with fear. "Will you help me?" she gasped.

"Where is Richard?"

"I don't know, I swear it!"

"Think, old woman! I have the antidote to that poison. If you tell me where the baby is being held, I will give it to you....otherwise!" Owen closed the door, turned the key lock and put it in his pocket.

"But I don't know where he is! Let me out of here!" she called out as she pounded on the door.

"Save your energy; no one can hear you!" Owen called back.

"Do you have an antidote?" James asked when they reached Owen's study.

"No. That bitch will die tonight, James no matter what she tells us. And God help me James, I hope to watch her die."

"She murdered your wife and baby, Owen. As far as I am concerned, you have

the God given right to that and more.” James poured two large whiskeys, handed one to Owen.

“You are looking at the world’s biggest fool, James!”

“There was no way you could have known. We all trusted her. I just left my own child in her hands,” James sat down heavily and shook his head with disgust.

“Where did you get that dagger?”

“From the Soskice wagon and didn’t she look fucking scared when she saw it?”

“I noticed that.”

Owen finished a second glass of whiskey and stood. “Come along James, we have more people to deal with.”

Mavis Willard had no idea that she was alone in Hock House and continued to call for Owen and bang on the door with her fists. She knew all too well just how little time she had before the poison finished her.

The rest had already gathered at the dinner table when Owen and James arrived back at Tabor Hall.

“Good luck!” James said as he started up the stairs to go to his daughter.

From what Owen could see his father and Abbey had spent most of the day drinking and were not inclined to stop. Reine and Edmond were whispering. He looked distracted and out of sorts.

“I hope that you and James are finished with your wandering for the next while, Owen. I want you both where I can see you!” Wilmot said gruffly to Owen as he joined them.

“So you said, Father, many times. I think I will be rather busy, at least for a while. Isn’t that most likely, Abbey?” he asked looking at Abbey.

“If you say so!” she replied toying with a very small amount of food on her plate.

“But surely you and your protégé must know what we all face!”

“Not everything, Owen. Just the important things.”

“Important things? Such as how does one kill in impossible places, what does one want with dead bodies and where does one take a stolen child?” he looked from Abbey to Reine.

“Certainly!” she smiled at him. “If those things are important to you.”

“I think they are most important and I do love to solve a good mystery.”

“What are you going on about Owen? What stolen child?” Wilmot demanded. “We are none of us in the mood for your games!”

“I don’t know though, Father! I think that games are what Abbey and Reine are best at.”

“It seems as though Owen still does not trust us,” Abbey said rubbing the back of her bruised hands.

“Then I think it is time for him to come to grips with the fact that I do,” Wilmot said. His words were slurred and his eyes out of focus.

“Oh well then, I will get right to the point. Tell me, Abbey, what your magic has to say about this deadly thing!” he pulled the knife from his boot and slid it onto Abbey’s plate.

From what Owen could see had little or no reaction to the dagger. He watched Reine closely. As before, she froze at the sight of the knife and seemed unable to take

her eyes off it.

"Go on, old girl!" Wilmot encouraged Abbey. "Shut him up once and for all! Show him what you can do. Hold the knife."

"But I did show you yesterday, Owen! Didn't I?"

"Do it again!" he smiled at her. "I was recently told that I am a slow learner! That may be true."

Under the intense stare of Reine but once again cornered by Owen, Abbey had no choice but to carry on. "Very well, I will tell you what I see but it will be up to the rest of you to interpret it!"

Abbey relaxed back into her chair closed her eyes and after a moment of silence began to speak. "I am walking down a long dark tunnel towards a dim light at the end. The walls are wet and slimy and the stones I am walking on are slippery and treacherous. I am at the end of the tunnel and I am stepping into a large grotto. So large and high I can barely see the other side. In the center of the grotto is a deep pit. A red fire comes from it as though from a blast furnace. There is no smoke, none at all."

"This fire is the only source of light, it casts shadows that dance and flicker everywhere. There are large boulders, stalactites and stalagmites all around the circumference. The air is thick with the smell of human filth, drugs and strong incense. The atmosphere charged with hushed excitement and not a little fear. In the dark places, I can see moving shapes. They are not humans. Monsters and demons! This is a dreadful place of evil!"

"I don't think I want to hear this!" Reine interrupted.

"Carry on, Abbey. You do create such an interesting visual." Owen spoke with heavy sarcasm.

Abbey took a deep breath and continued. "An old woman has appeared from the same tunnel I came through. She is dressed in long red robes; her hair is a thick, gray matted mess that is almost to her feet. She is carrying a long tray but I cannot see what is on it," Abbey stopped for a moment as though watching intently and then began again. "The old woman is removing her cape. She is naked. Her body is so old; her nipples long and tied with what appears to be leather straps," Abbey gasped. "Oh, Lord, she has spikes down her spine and her back is covered in thick, dark hair. She is walking quickly around the fire pit. Silence falls and the creatures that hide in the recesses are still."

"Now I see something that I had not seen before. There are six large flat stones, she stops there and places the tray on the ground. These flat rocks are not bare; on each, lays a young female. Not like the others in this place, these are perfect in form and can be no more than fourteen years old. They are alive but barely moving. Now, a black fog is rising from the pit."

"Something is coming! I can feel the hot ripples of his evilness reaching out ahead of him. I do not want to see him, please take me from this place!" Abbey was breathing in heavy gasps and sweat rolled down her forehead. All that watched her then, even the disbelieving Owen were transfixed on what she was telling them.

"Edmond, please make her stop!" Reine tried again in vain to stop the flow.

"He is coming up from the pit. His footfall makes the earth shake and all that is good or lovely or healthy dies in his presence. I can see him clearly now. He is huge, half-human but only in appearance; there is nothing human inside of him. He has

stopped at the six females. The old woman takes the cloth off the tray. There are six daggers. The knife I hold is one of them. With his clawed hands he picks up a knife...he inserts it into the vagina of one of the females, she is screaming now and he slits her from there to her neck. He gives the knife back to the hag and she hands him another. He is going to do this terrible thing to each of these girls. No, I cannot see any more! I will not!" shaking violently, Abbey opened her eyes. "Good God, Owen, I will not see any more of that! Is that not enough for you?" she gave him the dagger. "This thing is evil. You must get rid of it."

"A very entertaining fable, Abbey. The stuff of nightmares!" he pushed the knife back into his boot. "I think that I may still have some use for it, though!"

"Wilmot, I have to rest. I am going to my room. Reine will you help me?"

"Yes, of course." she answered and helped Abbey to her feet. The three men watched as they disappeared up the stairs.

"God damn, Owen!" Edmond exclaimed. "What the Hell was all that about?"

"That is exactly what I intend on finding out!" Owen answered.

"Time and time again, Owen, I have asked you to stop abusing my guests. If you spend less time interfering with the lives of others you might have one of your own," Wilmot complained as he reached into his jacket for his pipe and pulled out an envelope. "Oh damn! I forgot all about this. It is a telegram from Caruthers." He pulled open the telegram and handed it to Owen. "I can't read this without my spectacles. What does that damn copper want now? Bad news about Henry, I have no doubt!"

Owen read it; it was longer than most telegrams but still right to the point. After he had finished it, he looked at Edmond. "It's about Olivia! Jesus, I am sorry Edmond, she is dead by suicide. And somehow the morons have managed to lose O'Connor's body!"

"What?" Edmond got to his feet. "She cannot be dead, what are you talking about?" He took the telegram and read it.

"That stupid cow!" Wilmot exclaimed. "We do not need more death in this family."

"For Christ's sake, Father!" Edmond yelled at him. "If she is dead she did not die to inconvenience you!" He stood rigid with anger for a few seconds, smashed his wine glass against the wall and left the room.

"Of course she did! The bitch did nothing but inconvenience me from the first moment you got her pregnant."

"That is enough!" Owen said taking the handles of his wheel chair and pushing him across the room and down the hall.

"Where are you taking me? I do not want to go to bed. I am not a bloody child!"

Owen banged on the valets door and to the startled young man he ordered. "My father is tired and drunk."

"I do not want this puissant to look after me, where is James?"

"He will spend the night in the nursery with Ivy and her baby." Owen said. To the valet he added, "Put him to bed. If I see him again tonight you are fired!"

"Are you alright?" Owen asked as he let himself into Edmond's bedroom.

"What do you think? Two of my brothers are murdered and now my idiot wife has killed herself and all in a few fucking days! I could not be better, Owen!" Edmond

answered loudly as he took a mouthful from a very large glass of whiskey.

"You need not yell at me; I am on your side, remember?"

Edmond sighed. "I have had enough that is all!"

"We have all had enough, Edmond! And you may have also had enough whiskey for the night." He wanted to talk to him about Reine but knew that this was certainly not the right time. "Did you read all of the telegram?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"Caruthers wants you to go to Dover tomorrow to claim and identify her body."

"Certainly...! That is if I am still alive tomorrow," Edmond said with tired sarcasm.

"I am going to join James with Ivy and then I will be going back to Hock House for the night. For God's sake, Edmond, be careful with that female!"

"What?"

"You know exactly what I mean. Ed. Keep your eyes and mind open."

Ivy and James were sitting by a small fire in the nursery. The new baby was sleeping nearby in a cradle. A moment of sanity in a mad house, Owen thought as he sat with them.

"We've had news from Inspector Caruthers," he stopped talking for a moment, sighed then continued. "Olivia died early this afternoon; they think it was a suicide."

Father and daughter looked at each other and back at Owen in shock.

"Olivia! Suicide! But that is the last thing she would do," Ivy said.

"My feelings at first but Edmond had shipped her off again to Easterbrook with warning that she was not coming back here. She was aware of his interest in Reine Crawford. Lord knows he did nothing to hide it. Who can say what was going on in her mind?" Owen said. "Anyway, Edmond is to go to Dover tomorrow morning and identify her body."

"Not another death!" Ivy took her father's hand.

"That is not all, Ivy! Tom's body is missing from the mortuary!" Owen said hardly able to believe his own words.

"What?" James stood so suddenly he woke the baby and she began to cry.

"But...I don't understand!" Ivy said as she took up the baby. "Why would anyone steal his body?"

"I don't know, Ivy! We have a great deal to figure and very quickly." Owen stood and to James he said, "Edmond is drunk and I can't rely on him to make sure that the house is properly secured. Come with me while I see to that."

"What has happened to Mrs. Willard?" Ivy asked. "Not that I mind, I cannot say that I like her all that much. Something about her is odd!"

"Mavis is detained away for a while." Owen went to Ivy's bedside and checked to make sure that the pistol he had given her was still there.

"Good night, Ivy!" he said as the two men left the room.

"I am not sure what to make of this suicide thing, Owen," James asked as they moved down the hallway. "I would have thought Olivia far too self-centered for that sort of thing!"

Owen nodded his head in agreement. "Other than the fact that she was a royal pain in the ass why would anyone want to murder her?"

"She is, was a Tabor. What are you going to do about Mavis?"

"I will see her when I get back to Hock House. I will give one more chance to tell me where Richard is," Owen shrugged. "Whatever she says ....she will die tonight."

"What are your plans for tomorrow? I will sleep better knowing what you have in mind."

"That depends on what I learn from Mavis, if anything. I need to find Elizabeth's godfather. For some reason the Soskice crew is afraid of him and I want to know why."

"Who?"

"Elizabeth's godfather; Reverend Thaddeus Browne." Owen said as they rounded the corner and saw Edmond taking Reine into his room. She gave a curious glance at James but had no chance to speak before Edmond shut his door.

"I take it that was your accommodating whore?" James asked when they had passed by.

"Not mine, James. For now she belongs to Edmond; until I find a better use for her!"

Under the floor boards in the center of the Great Room at Hock House Nora woke. She sensed terror, felt approaching death and smelled her trapped enemy. She smiled.

From somewhere not of the natural, a cool breeze fluttered across the head of Mavis Willard, stirring her from her terrified trance. The breeze quickly grew stronger. A page from a discarded newspaper whipped her face. She pushed back further into the corner and called into the thin strip of light under the door. "Owen? James! Please help me. I am not alone."

As thought fired by the sound of the voice, the breeze became a howling, frozen wind. It swirled down from the ceiling and slashed around the old woman with such force Mavis could barely breathe. Ice pellets stung her skin and froze solid in her hair. Papers and books caught up in the vortex; the old wooden bookcase splintered and blew to pieces. The walls vibrated from the power of the gale that could not be.

"Stop it! Stop!" Mavis screamed panic but the wind blew her words back at her.

Then just suddenly as it had started, it ceased. The old woman pulled her weakening body to sit. She squinted into the darkness. A solid black form slithered across the floor.

"Oh fuck!" Mavis moaned. "Emile! Help me!"

With her face still downwards, long black braid dragging on the rubble, the shade stopped just inches from Mavis.

"I know who you are," Mavis cried. "You cannot hurt me. Go back where you belong, Nora Tabor!"

"This is where I belong," the raging shade sneered.

"It is in the ground where you should be!" Mavis cried with more courage than she felt. The deadly poison was already working in her worn body. Even the frozen atmosphere did not ease her rising fever. Streams of sweat, mixed with blood from the wound in her cheek, ran down her clothes.

Buoyed and strengthened by hatred, Nora opened her eyes. She frowned as she studied the mess around her. She sniffed, smelled blood, fear and knew she had found



her prey. Slowly she lifted her head and saw the huddled female shaking just inches away from her. She tilted her head back, let it roll from side to side, bared her teeth and screeched.

Mavis moved quickly to the side, trying to stand. Nora was on her. She took the old woman's head in her hands and smashed it repeatedly against the wall. Still holding Mavis by the head and as though a rag doll, Nora threw her across the room.

Mavis had met many spirits, good and evil but none that had the force of anger that this one had. She scrambled through overturned boxes, books and papers. She threw her body against the door. "Owen! Open this door!" she pleaded weakly.

There was nothing from the house but stone silence. She turned back to the ghost. Then with all her horrible rage, built on loneliness and confusion Nora appeared in full form and solid. Growling like a dog, she stood from the floor and was so luminescent she lit the area around her as though it was day light. Nora floated up to Mavis.

Shaking with fear, so badly that she could barely stand and with her voice just a cracking whisper, Mavis lied. "Listen to me, Nora Tabor! I did nothing in any way to harm you. I fought so hard to keep you and your baby alive! There was nothing I could do. You are dead and do not belong here!"

"Liar! You did this to me!" The growling stopped. Nora lifted her hands and held them in front of Mavis's face. "You see how empty my hands are, how useless they are?"

Where is my husband? Is he with the whore he brought to my home? Where is the unfaithful father of my daughter?" Nora smiled and looked down. Mavis followed her look and saw the girl child she had murdered hanging onto her mother's leg.

Mavis's heart thundering like hammer, her vision was fading and she knew she was near to fainting. "It was not my fault that you died," she gasped.

Nora lifted her head back up to Mavis. The smile was gone, in its place a grimace of hatred. "I am not dead!" Nora screamed at her. She placed her frozen hands around her neck and squeezed with all her might. "I am not dead!" she said over and over, until Mavis passed out and crumpled to the floor.

Nora picked up her child and slipped back into the floor.

Jeffrey knocked lightly on Margaret's sitting room door. "Come in, Jeffrey!"

"How did you know it was me?" he asked closing the door.

"Oh, I don't know. Must be mind powers, I guess," she smiled at him. She was sitting on the sofa with an open bottle of brandy on the table and a half-empty glass in her hand.

"Are you drinking?"

"No!" she answered. "I am having a drink...well, maybe a couple! I have had a very strange couple of days, as you know," she slurred her words as she tried to focus her eyes on him.

"You are drunk," he could not resist a smile as he sat down next to her.

"I am not! I resent your imploration."

"I think you mean to say 'implication', Sister Meg."

"Well, you know what I mean! Please do not call me 'sister'! I am not really a sister. And I hate wearing this bloody thing!" she pulled the front of her rough gray

habit. "It is hot, itchy and makes me look like a huge boulder." She pointed across the room to a rack of dresses. "You see those? I made them, you know. With my own hands."

He pushed the brandy bottle away from her.

"Then why don't you wear them?"

"Maybe I will, maybe I will!" she smiled reaching for the glass as he pushed it further away.

"Tell me, Margaret; do you think that there is enough brandy anywhere that will give you the courage you need to tell Owen and James the complete truth?" his manner and voice turned serious.

"I did tell them the truth. James knows I am still alive, doesn't he? I have nothing else to tell anyone."

"You are a terrible liar, my friend. Where are you going to sleep tonight?"

"Why?" she smiled at him. Then when he frowned she added, "Right here! You see I even have my bedding all ready." A pile of blankets and a pillow sat on the tableside.

"Come and sit over here," he took her by the hands and led her to a nearby chair. "I'll make up your bed for you and then you are going to sleep."

"I'll sleep when I want. Why is it you men are always trying to get me to sleep?" she watched him as he spread a sheet and tucked it carefully under the cushions. She giggled, "It has been a very long time since a man has prepared a bed for me!"

"Behave yourself! You are going to be very embarrassed in the morning."

"No, I won't! Hells Bells, Jeffrey, I have been behaving myself for almost twenty five years now."

"Good for you. Then let us just try and add one more night to that, shall we?" He took her hands again and led her to the sofa.

"You are a very handsome man but you are as boring as peas!" she complained as he laid her down and pulled off her shoes. "I will not sleep, not for a minute."

"I know." He watched with a smile as she immediately fell asleep. Gently he pushed some loose strands of hair from face. He had turned to go into Elizabeth's room when he heard a crash and a thud.

He opened the door and rushed in. Elizabeth was lying on the floor near to her bed. "Are you alright?" he asked, turning her over.

"Yes, I am bloody alright!" she snapped at him in frustration. "But I can't get my damned legs to work."

"Just a few hours ago you were at death's door, Elizabeth! It is going to take some time before you have your strength back again," he said as he picked her up and placed her back on her bed.

"Shit on that! I don't have time!"

"What is it you are trying to do?"

"They have my baby, for God's sake. I just can't lay here doing nothing!" She held onto his arm tightly. "You can help me! I need some clothes and a horse. You will get them for me won't you?"

"If you can't walk how can you ride a horse?" he asked, sitting on the bed beside her.

"Then a carriage! Get me a horse and a carriage."

"And where will you go? Do you know where the child is?"

"No! But I do know where Emile Soskice is. I will make him tell me," she pleaded, tears showing that she understood the truth of the situation.

"Owen and James will return your child to you," he said with force as he pulled the covers over her.

"No, they won't! One is an old man and the other a selfish fool. How can they help me?"

"Nonetheless, they will retrieve your child and you will have to settle for that. Have faith in them, old and foolish they may be but they have strong reason to bring this matter to a happy conclusion."

"So you won't help me then?" she let the tears fall.

"I am helping you. What you need now more than anything is to rest and get well again. You have to do that for your son."

"Jeffrey, you do not understand! In days they are going to kill my baby, do you know that?" she raised her voice in panic. "How the Hell can I rest?"

"Sh!" he whispered to her and as gently as he could he pushed her back onto her pillows and then held his hand over her face. Elizabeth fell into a deep, complete sleep.

"You told me that you no longer had your psychic abilities! Why did you lie to me?" Reine whispered harshly to Abbey. Completely drained Abbey lay on her bed.

"I didn't lie to you! They just started to come back when we arrived here!"

"Why?"

"Damned if I know! Maybe Emile has let me have them again!"

"No! He would have told me!" Reine insisted.

"Maybe he doesn't tell you everything. It could be since you are leaning towards a different master that he no longer trusts you."

"Don't talk rubbish! I have no master. I am a free spirit."

"A free spirit!" Abbey had to laugh. "That is funny! Do not forget that I helped him to create you so I know just what you are. You are not human nor are you animal; you are a freak of the evil side of nature. You are nothing more than a tool to do Emile's dirty work. He has had many others just like you and when he was tired of them he killed them, just as he will do to you, especially if you continue to think more and more human like."

"That is not true!" Reine stamped her foot on the floor.

"Ask him then! I am sure that he cares so little what you feel that he will tell you. As far as I know, all of his shifters have been ravens. God knows why, they are so bloody ugly!" Abbey rose up on one elbow and leaned close to her companion, discreetly touching her hand. "Do you know how they make a shape shifter?" she asked.

"No! I do not need to know."

"Well, I will tell you anyway! It might give you some much-needed wisdom. Most importantly, he needs three human hearts, two connected by love or blood, one of a human baby and the cruel heart of a murderer. These hearts cooked over a long smoldering fire. Then he takes the animal of his choosing, kills it, ah but I will stop. I can see that you are not interested!"

"I am not interested because none of that is important to me!"

"You know; I have been thinking about the murders of the brothers Edward and Henry and how their bodies have disappeared. Tom O'Connor is dead. I wonder how long it will be before we hear that his body is missing, too!" Abbey paused. She sensed complete confusion from Reine. She seemed to grow smaller, her shoulders slumped and she hung her head.

"It could possibly be that Emile is once again collecting hearts to make a new shape shifter. He cannot have two shifters so that would be that for you! If he is building a new shifter all he would need now is the heart of a murderer and that would be easy to get; Lord knows that there are so many of them about these days! Now that I think about it, Edward was a murderer; after all, he killed Jack!"

"That is all garbage!" Reine said as she stood and looked out the window across the valley to the old tower. "Emile needs me and would never replace me."

"Are you sure?"

"Completely! Anyway, if I tell Edmond he will protect me."

"Tell him what, that you are a shape shifter and a vicious murderer. Do you think he will still want you after that?"

"Edmond loves me! I have made sure of that. It could be that he will soon ask me to marry him!"

"Marry you? Jesus, he has only known you a few days and already had the pleasure! You don't know much about the human male."

"I gave him great pleasure and that is what any man wants."

"You are insane and very naive! Anyway, Edmond is already married to Olivia."

"Not any more, he isn't!" she turned back from the window. Her strange eyes sparkled and she grinned.

"What do you mean? What have you done now?"

"She's dead! I snapped her fucking neck like a matchstick and threw her out the window. They will think that she killed herself and Edmond is free of that burden."

"Oh Lord, why did you do that? Surely her death was not a part of Emile's plan."

"It has nothing to do with Emile. She threatened to kill Edmond and she was in my way! Maybe it would be a good thing for you to remember that the next time you try and fill my mind with lies about Emile."

"I have no reason to lie to you. It is my plan to get out of this mess alive!"

They sat in silence for a while. Edmond knocked lightly on the door and stuck his head in. "Are you feeling better, Abbey?"

"I am fine, thank you, but rather tired."

"Then I shall take Reine while you rest!" He took her by the hand and led her from the room. "I have to speak with you."

She could smell whiskey on him. "Is something wrong?" she asked. They had stopped at Edmond's bedroom door as they heard the footfalls and the sounds of two men talking. They had just turned on to the landing when she heard Owen say the name Thaddeus Browne. Her stomach dropped. 'Oh Hell, not him again,' she thought. She would have to tell Emile but that would wait until she was finished with Edmond.

"What is it, Edmond? Is something wrong?" Reine asked anxiously when they were in his room.

"My idiot wife has killed herself!"

"No, it can't be!"

"Why, my dear? Why can it not be?" he stood close to her, his face dark with drink and anger.

Now slightly frightened by a side of him that she had not seen before, she did not know what to say.

"That selfish bitch would do anything to keep me from being happy but I will not wear the guilt of this on my shoulders!"

"And so you shouldn't, Edmond. If this is what she has done she did it by her own hand, not yours." she touched his cheek lightly. "Do you want me to stay and comfort you or would you rather be on your own?"

"Oh, you will stay, Reine and comfort me you will do! I am not in the mood to make love to you but I am in the mood to fuck you!" he sneered as ripped at the front of her dress until the buttons broke and flew through the air.

"Then that is what you must do," she lifted her leg and placed it on a chair, sliding her skirt up to her thighs. She wore only stockings and a garter belt.

"No underwear?"

"I like to feel free!" she pulled the sides of her dress down.

"What happened to those scratches?" he asked as surprise slightly tempered his angry, drunken passion.

"I told you they were nothing. I heal quickly."

"Nobody heals that fast!"

To change the course of these thoughts she pushed her hand hard against his crotch and whispered into his ear, "I thought you wanted to fuck me, not talk to me!"

He unbuttoned his trousers and did exactly that.

Back in Hock House Owen had only Mavis in his mind. He drew his gun and opened the storage room door. He saw Mavis lying on her face motionless amongst the shambles of torn books, toppled boxes and splintered wood.

"You've had quite the temper tantrum," he rolled her onto her back with his foot. Like the room she was in terrible condition, her hair once so neatly combed back into a tight bun was a matted mess, both of her eyes blackened and her neck was swollen and bruised.

Mavis moaned. Her eyes fluttered open. "It was Nora! She tried to kill me!"

Owen bent down took her roughly by the hair. "My wife is dead. You know that, after all you killed her! Where is Richard?"

"Let me out of here!" She tried to pull herself towards the hallway but Owen blocked her way. She held her chest and groaned.

"Tell me what I want to know and then I will help you. Or you can die where you are!"

"God help me!" She fell onto her back. "The baby is at Tom Hobson's farm!"

"Where is this farm?"

"I don't know, I swear it! I have never been there."

"Then I will have to ask that boy of yours!"

"No! Do not hurt Bob! He is a total innocent of all this," she spat and gasped for her breath.

"Who told you to kill Elizabeth?"

"Emile Soskice, he told me! And he told me to see to the death of Henry," as she spoke she dug her fingers into her chest. "Please, I told you what you want, you must help me!"

"I want the truth. How could Soskice tell you to do anything? You cannot get anywhere near him!"

"He....he can come to some of us when we are sleeping, in our dreams. He told me to poison Elizabeth with Monks Hood. He also told me that his shifter was going to take the child from her!"

"What do you mean by us?"

"His shape shifters!"

"Do not give me that bullshit, Mavis! You are not a fucking shifter!"

She moaned. "I was but not anymore! I haven't been able to shift in years."

"Then who is the bloody current shifter?"

"I...I don't know. That is always a secret."

"Where is the Hobson farm?"

"I told you, I do not know that either!"

"Then I have no more use for you!" He stepped out of the room, slamming and locking the door.

"You said you would help me!" Mavis screamed.

"I will help you the same way you helped my wife, my child and Elizabeth!" he called back through the door and walked away.

"Ghosts, curses and shape shifters! Stupid female foolishness!" he yelled in anger and frustration as he crossed his bedroom to the stained glass window. He pushed back the curtains. Even moonlight was enough to create a muted version of the brilliant color show.

With his pistol and Soskice dagger under his pillow, he laid on his bed. His mind was spinning. He had hoped to learn more from Mavis but at least he had a place to start and look for the child. He could find the location of the Hobson farm at the Land Registry Office in Dover or from the Pritchard bitch. Either way he decided that the morning would be the beginning of a time of better action for him. Eventually he fell into an exhausted sleep.

Aware again of the warmth of the colors that danced on the floor just above her, Nora slipped from her strange half world into the light. As she had always done when the colors called her she stood in their radiance with her eyes closed, she began to sway, then to spin in circles as though being guided by a partner.

Sensing that he was not alone in his bedroom, Owen woke. Shadows made by the dancing spirit flickered on the wall above his bed. Slowly he moved his right hand under his pillow, took his pistol and in one swift movement he was crouching on the floor beside the bed with his gun leveled ahead of him.

At first, more asleep than awake, what he saw was a woman in white dancing in the circle of light cast by the window. Was he dreaming? The cold, heavy metal gun in his hand led him to know he was very much awake.

"Who is here? Speak or I will shoot." he called as he slowly stood and took a few steps closer. It was then that he recognized her; the woman he had loved, married and buried. She was not a blurred vision but as real and as solid as she had ever been.

The air around him charged with energy and cold as a winter night.

"Nora?" he said in a voice that seemed to come from some place other than him. As he stood there watching her dancing and spinning, all the years of his skepticism and disbelief in anything otherworldly, melted away.

"Nora?" he asked again, this time in a voice loud and clear.

The specter stopped and floated off the floor, moving towards him. With her eyes still closed, she stopped just a few feet from him, lifted her arms and felt the warmth in the air that was his living soul. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

"My love! Do you finally see me?"

"This is not real!" Owen muttered, fingers of fear beginning to move up his spine. He took a few steps backwards. "You can't be here. Sweet Jesus....!"

"Owen!" she floated closer. "I miss you so much! Please, Owen, hold me again!" she reached for him, gently touching his face with her frozen fingers. Tears fell from her eyes. He wrapped his hand around hers, she felt so solid, bitterly cold and so very real.

"My God, Nora! Listen to me, you cannot be here, you are dead. You must move on; this is not right," he whispered and he let go of her hand. He was shocked and shaken to his core.

"No Owen, you are wrong! I am not dead, but the one who hurt me is dead," her sweet smile quickly changed to a snarl. "The bitch is dead. I smell that and that is good!" As quickly as it came, the snarl vanished and her lovely smile returned. "We will never be parted. Do you remember when you told me that? Never parted!" She wiped the tears from her face. "I love you Owen. Nothing, no one will ever part us!"

"I am so sorry ..." he stopped speaking when she placed two fingers over his mouth.

"Do not be sorry, Owen, for loving me!" she whispered. Then she pulled the two silver ribbons from her hair and placed them into his hand. "Keep these and you will know that I am always with you, my love!" She pulled back slowly growing small and fainter. The spirit Nora Tabor melted into the floor that was her place in her unhappy world.

"Christ Almighty!" Owen exclaimed as he stood, shaking with cold and fear in the dark of his bedroom. He dropped the ribbons, shook his head. "A dream, that is all! A bloody mad, dream!" He crawled back onto his bed.

## Chapter Eight

"You should not have come here tonight, Reine. I am not at my best when I am drunk. Go back to your room." Edmond finished with Reine quickly and stumbled back to his bed.

"You brought me here. You needed me to comfort you." She sat next to him and gently touched his face.

"Then I would say I have had the comfort any whore could give me!" He pushed her hand away, walked to his dresser picked up his wallet and tossed it at her. "Here! Take what you think you have earned. I am sure that there is more than enough in there."

Stunned, Reine stood and walked up to him. "I am not a whore!"

"Of course you are. You could not wait for me to bed you. Getting you was less trouble than a Dover doxey."

She slapped his face with a resounding crack that almost knocked him off his feet. "You are the adulterer, not me! You are the whore!" She spat the words at him, her silver eyes blazing.

"Then we can say we both got just what we wanted." Edmond yelled. He took her roughly by the arm and he pulled her out into the hallway. He hammered on Abbey's door then threw it open. "Keep your little slut away from me Abbey! I have had enough of her!" He pushed Reine into the room and slammed the door shut behind him.

Still completely off guard, Reine hit the floor hard. Instantly she was on her feet and heading for the door to go after him when Abbey caught her. "No, Reine! Leave him for now."

Furious Reine turned on Abbey, wrenching her arm away. "How dare that pompous ass speak to me that way? I will teach him some bloody manners!"

"Wait a minute!" Abbey insisted, placing her bulk in the doorway knowing that Reine could easily toss her aside. "Calm down and for once, give some thought before you take action. Why is he so mad?"

"How should I know? I just wanted to show him some comfort that is all."

Abbey looked at the torn dress front. "It looks as though he took you up on the offer. For God's, the man is drunk. You cannot take anything a drunken man says seriously."

"No one calls me a whore!"

"Well, with the way that you have so brazenly thrown yourself at him these last two days what else is he supposed to think? Leave him be for now and if I am any judge of men he will feel like a rats' ass in the morning and be very sorry for what he said!"

"I will never speak to him again. Maybe it is time for another Tabor to die! I shall ask Emile!"

"And what that decrepit old man says, you do. I am very well aware of that!"



Abbey took a whiskey bottle and handed it to Reine. "Take a mouthful of this."

"No, I don't like it!" Reine said but she drank some anyway.

"So you have decided then?"

"What?"

"You have decided that you would rather spend your days 'comforting' a rotting old man and sleep on the cold ground than have a wealthy, handsome man like Edmond and live in this luxury!"

"There is nothing I can do about that now. Edmond hates me!"

"I could tell you how to handle Edmond, but you would have to learn to think for yourself and not be Emile's puppet."

"Well then, if you know so much and that I doubt, tell me."

"What is the point unless you are willing and have the strength to defy Emile?"

"Why should I do that?" Reine asked as the last of her rage faded and she sat heavily down on Abbey's bed.

"Why should you defy, Emile? You are not that naïve, Reine! You know as well as I do that very soon he will tell you to kill Edmond, Owen and Wilmot to fulfill his curse. You will do as he says because you think you have no other choice. You think you have no will of your own because that is what Emile wants you to think. You need to know that you can make your own decisions."

"If I disobey him he will kill me!"

"Do you want Edmond to live or die?"

"Live, of course! Even if he is an imbecile!"

"Then I guess you will have to learn to think for yourself. Fight Emile!"

"That is impossible, Abbey. He can reach me whenever he wants. You saw the scratches he gave me when I was asleep!"

Abbey sat down beside Reine. "But that was all he could do at that time and I know it was a very great effort for him. Remember I helped him create you and I know more than he would like me to know about his powers. Now, listen to me, Reine, this may help save your skin, and God only knows why I am doing this! Maybe it is the only way I can get out of this mess alive."

"Emile can only kill you when you are in human form and only then and most certainly not when you are asleep. He has to kill the human form of the shape shifter that he created, face to face. If you ever feel you are in great danger from him then you must change to bird as quickly as possible. As the raven he cannot harm you in any way."

"Why should I trust you?"

"If you want some kind of human life with Edmond Tabor then you have no choice but to trust me," Abbey answered and was astonished to see that Reine was then in tears. "My God, you are in love with the man, aren't you?"

Reine nodded her head sadly, stood and went to her bed. Abbey listened as she cried herself to sleep. She would wait for the morning to tell Reine how to be around Edmond, it would be good for her to suffer for the time being. When Abbey retired that night, she slept easily for the first time in several years. Perhaps, she thought, as she fell asleep, there is a light at the end of this tunnel after all!

Reine had only been asleep for a few hours when she woke to the vision of Emile calling for her. Leaving the warmth and comfort of her bed then was the last thing she

wanted to do, but she dared not ignore Emile again.

She cursed as she threw the covers off and crouched on the floor.

"How prompt and wise you are!" Emile said as the raven landed on her place on the broken wall. He looked out from under his veil and gave her his distorted smile as he patted the cold stones beside him.

"Do you want me to hunt for you?"

"No. I am not hungry. I only wanted to see my lovely raven," he ran his clawed hand down her leg. "Did I take you from a busy Tabor bed?"

She shook her head. "I was sleeping alone tonight."

"Don't waste too much time, my dear! I shall want to see more Tabor blood soon, one way or the other. You have played with Edmond; now it is time for Owen. I want brother set against brother and nothing does that better than a beautiful whore!"

"I am not a whore!" she snapped angrily at him.

For a moment, he did not say or do anything. This was the first time she spoke to him in an aggressive tone. Slowly he ran his hand up her arm, put his hand around her neck, and pulled her roughly to him. "Are you showing me temper? Have you been in human form so long that you have forgotten your place?" When she did not answer, he squeezed her neck and shook her. "Well? Is it time for me to replace you?"

"No, Papa! Please, I am sorry! I am just tired, that is all. Haven't I always done just as you ask?" Horribly frightened, she remembering what Abbey had told her that he could only kill her when she was in human form and prepared to transform if he made another move towards her.

"If you are tired then lie with me here and sleep or are you becoming too comfortable in the Tabor beds?" He jerked her down towards the hard, wet stones.

"But you have not given me chance to tell you something important." She slowly backed away from him and sat up on her heels.

"Then, tell me!"

"Earlier tonight I overheard Owen mention the name Thaddeus Browne!"

"What did you say?"

"They were talking about Thaddeus Browne but I did not hear all they said."

"Why didn't you come and tell me this right away?" he demanded with a voice that was more like the hiss of a snake than that of a man.

"I tried but I could not get away from Edmond. I do not want to make him suspicious of me. I cannot just fly away under his very nose! Then I was so tired...."

"Blast the fucking Tabors! Go to the farm and tell Hobson to move the child!" Emile ordered in a frenzy of anger.

"Now?"

"Yes, you fool, now! Tell them to take Richard from there immediately and to go to the grotto. Then you come straight back to me, do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Then go!"

Quickly she was back in the air and on her way to the Hobson farm. She was angry and frustrated. Gone for her now was the thrill of the freedom of flight. This was a chore, boring and kept her away from the only place she wanted to be; in her lovers' home.

Reine waited in the shadows behind the Hobson house as streaks of gray dawn cut through the night sky. She saw the old woman going into the outhouse. When she appeared again she called out to her.

Mama Soskice stopped dead in her tracks when she spotted the hated shape shifter. Of all of her husband's shifters, this one scared her the most.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Come here!" Reine ordered in a harsh whisper.

"The baby is fine. We are taking good care of him."

"I have not come to hear about his care. I don't care a pig's ass about that bloody brat," Reine said with frustration as she grabbed the woman's arm and pulled her into the shadows. "You have to leave here immediately!"

"I like it here. We are not going anywhere. Why should we leave?"

"Because Emile says so, that should be enough. Get organized and out to the grotto as quickly as you can."

"Damn..."

"Listen, I have to ask you something and do not lie to me. Don't make me snap your fucking neck too!"

Mama took a few steps back from Reine. "What you need to know, Emile will tell you."

"No. You will tell me! Why does Soskice need that baby so badly?"

"He loves his grandson. What else?"

"Grandson?" Reine laughed. "That brat is Emile's son. He was fucking Elizabeth ten times more than the idiot Jack and you know that!"

"No, that is not true," the old woman spoke without conviction.

"Tell me!" Reine grabbed Mama by arm and squeezed it. "Is he planning on making a new changeling?"

"I don't know!" Mama winced with pain. "That depends on if you have displeased him, shifter!"

Reine cursed and pushed her. The old woman fell to the ground.

"You are dead, bird!" Mama screamed at Reine. The old woman said more but Reine did not hear her as she again became the raven and was on her way back to the Estate.

It was full day light when the raven circled Hock House and up the hill to Tabor Manor. Briefly, she watched a young maid hanging sheets to dry behind the Hall and thought of how lucky they were not to live under the thumb of Emile Soskice. She had completely forgotten his orders that she was to return to him when she was finished relaying the message to the family. More exhausted than she had ever thought possible she closed her bedroom window, pulled the drapes and fell in her bed. So deep was her sleep and filled with unfamiliar and pleasant dreams, even Emile could not reach her.

At eight Edmond slipped quietly into Abbey's room.

"Abbey! Wake up!" he whispered and shook her shoulder. "I have to speak to you."

"Edmond? What is it?" She turned and looked at him sleepily. His hair and clothing were a mess. He reeked of sweat, stale whiskey and vomit.

"What did I do to Reine last night? Tell me I didn't call her a whore?"

She sat up and sighed. "Well, I don't know what you did but she is very upset!"

"Oh Lord! Did I call her a whore?"

"Apparently!"

"Shit! I am such an idiot when I drink. Fuck!" he hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. He moaned and burped.

"You're sick?" Abbey asked hiding a small smile.

"Like a dog. Spent the last two hours throwing up everything I have eaten in a month!"

"A pretty picture, indeed," Abbey tried not to smile. She leaned over, pulled open a drawer in the night table and took out a small black case. She opened it, picked out two pills and handed them to the stricken young man. "Take these! That same dog has bitten me a few times. They will do the trick!"

"Thank you Abbey," he swallowed the pills. "I have to talk to Reine," he said turning towards the adjoining door.

"Wait!" she jumped from the bed and took his arm. "Let me talk to her first, sort of smooth the way!" She knew that there was a chance that Reine was not in there.

"Yes! Maybe that is a good idea." He held onto the bedpost, slid down into the bed, and fell onto his back. "I'll wait here."

She was surprised to see Reine sitting in her bed with her arms folded angrily over her chest. "I can hear Edmond's voice. What is he doing in your bedroom?"

"He wants to speak with you, Reine. I think he is sorry."

Reine shrugged and grunted. "I don't want to talk to him. Tell him to go away!"

"Don't be a fool. He made a mistake and wants to make it up to you. If you push him away now you may ruin your only chance with him."

"Really? He would give up that easily?"

"He might! Are you willing to take that risk?"

"Alright, tell him to come in. I will listen to what he has to say."

"Good....and don't have sex with him now."

"Why?"

"Just don't. If he tries anything, say no and say it nicely. Show him that you are not a whore."

"Fine!" Reine said sulkily. "Let the idiot in!"

Abbey opened the door and motioned for Edmond to come in. She stayed on the other side of the door listening to their conversation.

Reine took one look at Edmond and began to laugh. "You look like shit!"

He nodded and sat down heavily. "Reine! I am a moron when I am drunk. Will you please forgive me?"

"I was trying to be nice to you."

"I know and I am so sorry!" he sounded as pathetic as he looked.

"You stink! Are you sick?" she asked making a face and backing away from him.

"Yes. That is not important. Just tell me that you forgive me then I will go back to my bed and die in peace!"

"Well, since you are sick, stink and feel miserable, I feel better. Yes, I will forgive you but you had better not call me names again."

He rubbed his chin. A black and blue bruise was a sore reminder of the strength

of her slap. "No, believe me, no more name calling. I have to go to Dover and see Caruthers about Olivia. Would you like to join me?"

"Not really."

"Look, you will have a nice time. I promise. There is a lovely Inn where I sometimes stay; maybe we can spend the night there as well. It would be good for us to get away from here for a while."

"Yes it would. I will go with you but please take a bath."

He smiled and got slowly to his feet. "I think I had better sleep for a while longer as well as bathe. We will leave at 11," he paused and took a deep breath.

"Thank you, Reine! Last night will never happen again!"

"It better not." She rolled her eyes at him and curled back under the blankets.

Margaret ran out of her sitting room door; fell over the dozing young man and they tumbled together in one lump on the floor.

"Jeffrey!" she whispered anxiously and they disentangled themselves. "Quick! Get up and come inside."

"Good God, Margaret! What is wrong?"

"Sh, you'll wake everybody up!" she scrambled to her feet and pulled him after her.

"Me? You are the one running around like a mad woman! Let go of me and tell me what is wrong." He pulled his sleeve from her grip and quietly closed the door behind them.

"It's Elizabeth!" she pointed into the tiny bedroom.

Jeffrey looked down at the sleeping female. Gently he touched her wrist and her forehead. "She looks well to me. She is just sleeping."

"But I can't wake her up. Look!" Margaret shook Elizabeth's hand and let it drop on the bed. "You see?"

"But why do you want to wake her?"

"It is almost 8 am. She must need to eat or use the toilet."

Jeffrey sighed, took her by the arm and led her into the other room. "For crying out loud, Margaret! Just let her sleep."

"But...."

"But, nothing! Sleep is the best thing for her now; it will help her build her strength. When she is awake, all she will do is worry over her baby. She will sleep for at least another two hours, then you can feed her all you want."

Margaret sat down heavily on the sofa. "Did you 'do' something to her?"

"She is sleeping, that is all. Let her be. She is fine. Which I see is far better than you are!" Jeffrey said with a smile as he sat next to her. "You look dreadful!"

"Thank you very much." she looked down her nose and then shook her head.

"Oh Lord! Why in heavens name did I drink all that brandy? It is that man, you know, he has always brought out the worst in me."

"By 'that man' do you mean James Whitehall?"

"Yes, of course! He always was impossible to deal with. Now he is an old fart and worse than ever." She pulled a satin pillow over her face. It felt wonderfully cool on her hot skin.

"But you did care about him once, though, didn't you? He was your lover after

all," he said flatly, pulling the pillow down from her face.

"Good Heavens, no!"

"Listen, Margaret. I tried to talk to you about this last night. Things are rapidly coming to a head. You are going to have to tell your son and James the truth, the complete truth about what happened to you after you left the Tabor Estate."

"What is coming to a head? I have no idea what you are talking about, Jeffrey. I have told them the truth."

"The truth with important omissions really is nothing more than a lie. Dangerous times lay ahead of Owen, James, and other people. They will need your help. You have to leave your pride be!"

"There is nothing left for me to tell anyone!" she said firmly but not very convincingly.

"Really? Your mother always knew when you were telling an untruth because you did not move your lips much when lying. She would call them 'tight mouth lies'. Am I right?"

She looked into eyes with amazement. "How did you know that?"

He laughed. "You are the saddest liar I ever saw, my dear. And at a time when truth could mean life or death to your loved ones, you had best remember that."

"Well, I have no time for this. Breakfast needs fixing." She stood suddenly. "Where did you put my shoes?"

"You may turn your face from this now but prepare yourself for what you must do very soon!" He stood facing her, his eyes tender with affection; he shook his head and smiled. "You are not going to go out there like that, are you?" he asked turning her to face the full-length mirror. "You will scare the kiddies."

"Oh dear, I see what you mean!" Her clothes were twisted and terribly wrinkled. Quite a fair deal of her hair had come free from her long braid and stuck out in odd angles.

"Why don't you wear one of the dresses you made?"

"Wear a dress?"

"Why not? They are lovely. You put a lot of work in them so why not show them off?"

"Well, maybe! Go on!" She pushed him gently out of the room. "I am not changing with you in the room!"

When Owen woke the next morning it was to the sound of James and Hanna unlocking his front door. He was groggy and confused from over sleeping.

"It is not like you to be still sleeping in," Hanna said, standing at the foot of his bed. "And what a mess you are too!"

Owen sat up. He wore the same clothes he had worn for three days.

"I had a rough night, bloody night mares!"

"Well, it looks like you did," Hanna agreed. "And when was the last time you washed?"

"I don't know. I have matters that are more important than a bloody bath. Why is she here, James?"

"Hanna wants to cook you breakfast," James said. "It was her idea, not mine!"

"Where is Elizabeth?" Hanna asked, folding her arms over her round belly.

"I told you. She is staying with friends of mine for the next little while. I thought you were going to cook for me?"

"I am but you won't eat a thing until you have washed and changed those clothes! And just look at the mess of this room. My Lord! I am hardly gone a day and everything has gone to Hell in a hand basket. And these curtains should not be open."

"No, leave them!" Owen said as she walked to the window.

"But...."

"Did you come here to feed me or badger me?"

"Suit yourself. Nevertheless, you will not eat a mouthful until you wash. I'll go warm some water for you." She waddled off down the hallway.

"That woman thinks she is my mother!" Owen said and then after a pause.

"Have you given any thought to what I told you yesterday? You should make peace with Mother."

James sighed as he sat down in the desk chair. "You do not know the whole story."

"There is more? Good God, I thought that was already enough for a book!"

"Margaret has told you the truth, or her version of it, but has left out some rather important details. It is not up to me to tell them to you. It is up to her! If she does then we shall decide who needs and deserves to be forgiven."

Owen knew the older man well enough to know that once he made up his mind there was rarely any going back. He told James about his last visit with Mavis Willard.

"Do you know who this Tom Hobson is?" James asked when he had finished.

"One of Soskice cronies. I spoke with him briefly the morning I let them go. Elizabeth has mentioned him to me as some sort of doctor and the impression I got was that he was second in command, so to speak, under Emile."

"And the old bitch has no idea where he lives?"

"So she said. I will be able to trace him at the Land Registry Office in Dover. If he purchased land anywhere in Kent they will have record of it there. I will leave for there as soon as possible. While I am there, I will send a telegram to this Reverend Browne. I need to talk to him as soon as possible."

"There is no sound from the storage room," James said coming back into the Great Room from the stairs. "Should we check on her?"

"Later."

Hanna came in with the warmed water and poured it into the washbasin. "I think that it is far past the time for you to remarry! A good wife would never let her man fall to such a state."

Owen rolled his eyes at the speech that he had heard so many times before.

She went to the wardrobe, pulled out some clean clothes, and tossed them on the bed. "I shall probably have to burn those socks!" she said with disgust.

"When you are finished here, Hanna, I want you to go back to the Hall and tell Hastings that Mavis Willard won't around and that I want you and Daisy to stay with Ivy, alright?"

She nodded. "Now, you wash and put on those clean clothes or you'll not get a mouthful of food!" she added sternly as she left the room.

"What would you do without her?" James laughed as he bent down to pick something up off the floor.

"Live in hungry, messy peace!" Owen answered, removing his soiled clothes.

"Here!" James said as he handed Owen what he had picked up off the floor.

"These no doubt belong to Elizabeth."

With absolute amazement, Owen looked at the two silver ribbons in his hand.

"What's wrong? You look like you have just seen a ghost!"

"I have!" Owen said. He looked for a moment at the circle of colored light on the floor and shook his head.

"What?"

"Nothing! Strange dreams can leave one feeling a little out of focus." He put the ribbons in his dresser drawer.

When Owen had washed and dressed, they ate a hearty breakfast. As they were returning to Owen's study, James noticed the Soskice dagger still in the wall where Owen had thrown it.

"A nasty tool!" he said as he pulled it from the wood. "Did you know this was there?"

Owen nodded. "I found a case of them in the Soskice wagons. Thought they might come in handy. It should fit rather neatly into your boot, James." After wrapping the blade in a handkerchief he slid it into his boot. "I may give another to Edmond, if he has sobered up enough to be trusted with it."

"Excuse me!" Hanna interrupted, stepping in the doorway. She had pulled on her shawl, tucked it into her apron and was obviously about to return to the Hall. "Mr. Billings is up from the gate. He says there is a Reverend Browne who insists on seeing you! What should I tell him?"

"Reverend Browne is here; to see me? Yes, of course, I will see him right away! Just a minute, Hanna," he added as she turned to leave. "Don't mention to anyone about him coming here. I would rather we keep that to ourselves for the time being."

"How the bloody Hell did he know to come here?" James asked as they waited outside for their unexpected visitor.

"An interesting question, James. We shall have to find the answer for it."

Whatever manner of man they had thought might be approaching in the large and imposing carriage it was not the man who climbed down to greet them. His hair, cropped close and thin at the top was snowy white. Great whiskers and side burns, joined as one, still had a dark brown color. Bright blue eyes glittered in the morning sunlight. He was taller than Owen was and very wide around the middle. Everything about the man was larger than life, including his smile.

"Reverend Browne? I am Owen Tabor," Owen offered his hand. "This is James Whitehall, the Estate Manager."

"How do you do, gentlemen? First, I feel I must apologize for my uninvited visit. I am not usually of such an impetuous nature, but as events that I will explain unfolded last night, I felt I must come to see you right away." He spoke with the deep, well-modulated voice of someone well used to public speaking.

"A surprise visit, yes, but a timely one, Reverend Browne. James and I were just discussing how best I should contact you," Owen could not help but smile at the man, feeling quickly at ease with this stranger.

"Were you really?" the Reverend asked as he opened the door of his carriage and pulled out a large metal trunk. Several padlocks and chains secured it. While it must



have been very heavy, he held it under his arm as though it were a featherweight.

"There is no doubt then, that there is a wiser hand that guides us and I am much relieved at that. May we please speak of this matter inside your home? One never knows who or what may be listening!" he added with an uncertain look around the garden.

"Yes, of course!" Owen answered motioning for the reverend to go ahead of them through the doorway. He turned and took a quick look at James. James only shrugged with his own curiosity.

"A whiskey?" Owen asked as they settled in the study.

"What better oil to ease the passages!" The guest took the offered glass, savored a large mouthful, and was very aware of the puzzled thoughts of the two men. "Now, Mr. Tabor, I must get to the point. I understand that you have under your care and protection my goddaughter, Elizabeth Delacourt; is that correct?"

"I do," Owen answered feeling much less pride on the matter than he displayed.

"Thank the Lord!" Reverend Browne exclaimed. "And she is well? I have good reason to ask that."

Owen knew just how closely James was watching him as he spoke then.

"Elizabeth has been ill but she is recovering at the home of trusted friends. I understand that she and you are very close. I can arrange it for you to meet with her if you wish."

"Yes, of course. That would be wonderful!"

"But first, I shall have to ask you how you came to know about Elizabeth being in my home? She had recently escaped from the men that held her captive and her presence here was, I thought, a secret."

"And you are well right to wonder that. If you will clear a space on your desk, Mr. Tabor, I will bring out of my trunk a most remarkable book."

Owen cleared the cluttered desktop by knocking most things out of the way and onto the floor with his arm. He and James watched as their guest went through the process of opening the many locks until he finally pulled back the lid. From inside he took out a very large book covered in a folded piece of black velvet.

"You two are the first people to see this book since I took possession of it!" Reverend Browne said as he pulled the velvet away. The book was over two feet square and eight inches deep. "As you can see it is a lovely thing to look at. The binding is made of some kind of solid golden thread, woven in such an intricate pattern and inlaid with diamonds and rubies."

James ran his fingers across it. "I have never seen anything like it!"

"And thank God if you never do again! Now, you see this design on the front, beautiful isn't it. Watch, it will show its true character as I hold it up to reflect the light," he leaned the heavy book slightly on its side. What had seemed to be a random pattern then jumped out at them in a twisted and fearsome face that for a second seemed all too real.

"That is amazing!" Owen said as he stood and stepped forward slowly, not taking his eyes off the bizarre image. As Reverend Browne lowered the book back to the table, it was once again just a pattern. He opened the heavy cover and turned over the first few pages. Each page was in double columns; written by pen in a neat, even hand, some in English and some in an unfamiliar language. "But what is it about and how does it have anything to do with this situation?"

"It is a chronicle of the life, for lack of a better word, of a demon known by his

peers as One Wing. It tells of his evil purposes and deeds. His children and there have been many, some even half human. One of them is Emile Soskice, the miserable captor of my dear Elizabeth!"

As he listened to the unexpected guest speak, Owen turned the pages. Every so often, there were detailed drawings of the creatures written of and they were the things of nightmares.

"Good Lord!" Owen said with growing interest. "And you have read every word? There must be over two thousand pages?"

"It took many months to do the translation of the parts that are written in ancient Aramaic but I have read it all. As of this day there are 2,031 pages!"

"As of this day?"

"It is, shall we say, growing! At first 1,995 pages, now there are there are 2,031 pages. But these additions are not at the end as you might expect but throughout the book, here and there wherever needed to complete a scenario or add a fact."

"You do realize how impossible this all sounds?" James asked. "I am not a skeptic by any means but even for me..."

"Of course it is only natural for you to question. I certainly did and I did all I could not to have any belief in this!" He turned to a place that he had book marked with a ribbon. "My home is three hundred years old. In my sleeping chamber, hidden under a narrow set of stairs, leading to a balcony, I found a priest's hole." He paused and laughed. "Although I have to say that had I ever needed to hide there very little of me would be hidden! I keep the book locked, in chains, as you saw it and in that place. I am absolutely sure that no one else alive knows of the secret compartment."

"Last night I fell asleep in my chair. The book locked away. I am not a light sleeper but should have woken with what must have happened then. I did not. I woke just before midnight and found a table moved from its place near the doorway. The trunk open, empty and the book at this place marked with this ribbon. Mr. Tabor, I found this new verse last night. Would you be so kind as to read it out loud?"

Frowning Owen looked at the place Ted indicated and began to read, "June 15, 1890, Tabor Estate, Kent. After the death of his son Jack, by murder on the land of his sworn enemy, Wilmot Tabor, Emile Soskice placed a curse on the Tabor family. Soskice refused to recall the curse. Tabor ordered him placed in chains in the abandoned castle. Except for Elizabeth, victim of the Soskice family and her father John Delacourt, and her child, the rest of the clan found themselves locked in Tabor cells. Elizabeth and her son did not manage to complete their escape from the evil family. She fell under the dubious protection of Owen Tabor," Owen paused briefly. "Early on this day Elizabeth was poisoned and her son, Richard was taken from her back to the Soskice family." Owen looked at James then back to Ted. "Every word of this is true!" he said quietly, running his hands through his hair he returned to his seat.

"And that, sirs, is why I knew to come here."

"You have no idea how that was written in there?" James asked.

"None what so ever! And I assure you that it was not there before last night."

"Is there much information in here on Soskice? I need to know all I can in order to return the child to his mother. I have learned they took the baby to the farm of a man called Hobson, Tomas Hobson. Have you seen any mention of this man or his farm?"

"Hobson is mentioned, as is his farm but not its location, sadly. As far as

Soskice goes this thing is a wealth of information. I have also gathered a fair bit in my own research. If you grant me the time I will relate to you my side of this sad story and perhaps you will find out all you need to know of the matter.”

“Go ahead!” Owen said eagerly.

After taking a time to light his pipe their guest began to speak. “I am of a nature to be blunt but rather long winded so you will have to bear with me. I shall relate to you both the absolute truth in every detail.” He paused very briefly here looking at Owen and then continued. “I knew Jane Delacourt for thirty years and it was my unfortunate duty to marry her to her husband. We were close friends since that time. We were lovers as well as being very much in love. I tell you this because I believe that in this matter honesty will only help to serve us and so you will understand that there is very little about the Delacourt family that I do not know. As I never married, I have no children and Jane’s daughter became as if she was of my own. Her father was at best ignorant of her and at worst brutal to her.”

“When Elizabeth disappeared Jane was broken hearted. There was no doubt that John Delacourt was behind the tragedy but we had no proof. The authorities made meager efforts to search for the young woman but Delacourt had his cohorts put the lid on that quick enough. Jane and I hired Dr. Deepak Singh who, while retired from the medical profession, had taken up private detection as a hobby. He was expensive but so well connected that Jane decided, rightly to put her money and faith on him.”

“First, he began to follow Delacourt. Because of his race, he easily hid amongst the lower masses at the brothels, gambling and opium houses frequented by Delacourt and his like. These activities were not a surprise to us. Unfortunately, more than a few of our so-called noble men frequent these places. Some of these men had ‘tastes’ not easily met by regular brothel managers, especially when the scandal would bring ruin.”

“It is here where we first heard the name of Emile Soskice. The evil but clever man formed these people into a secret group that went under the name of the ‘Black Claw’. This organization originally formed fifty years ago and has grown to dozens of members from all over Europe. They would meet several times a year at various places around the country. There Soskice would supply the drugs and deviant sex or what else they required. In return, Soskice earned protection from the law or whatever agency he might cross in his other endeavors.”

“It was rumored in that under world of vice he was also occasionally offered daughters or wives of the men in his snare.” he paused, took a deep breath. “That is no doubt what Delacourt did with Elizabeth. Well addicted to their vices these men would be easy blackmail victims as well and Soskice became very well off. Hard to believe of a man who lives in rags and wagons but that is the truth of it.”

He stopped here looking from Owen to James and saw that they were engrossed in his story. He held up his whiskey glass for a refill. “I am not supposed to drink this lovely potion under my doctor's orders. He has also sworn me off sex and smoking as well. It seems he wants me to live a long and extremely boring life. I prefer a short, happier one and hopefully still in the saddle!”

His companions smiled in agreement and he continued.

“For several months Singh seemed to always be just a few steps behind Soskice. He did not stay in one place for long, leaving his family clan for weeks on end. To make a long story as short as possible three months of hard search never seemed to bring

us any closer to the man we believed had taken our Elizabeth. It was at that time when Singh received the first threat on his life. A scrap of paper pushed under his door one night with the words, 'Leave the gypsies be or pay with your life'. We thought it was foolish and hardly worth any notice. We continued as before."

"The second warning came two weeks later; this time a paper wrapped around a rock was thrown through his office window. On it, in what appeared to be blood was a circle with an inverted cross in the middle."

"Jane and I urged Singh to stop at this point but he would not hear of it. He had learned of so much evil and pain left in the wake of Soskice; he was like a driven man to try to stop him. Jane and I were very worried about him and with just cause because just a few days after he received the second warning his body was found in the river! He had not drowned. They had disposed of his body there but he had died when they cut out his heart. Because of this honorable man's terrible death I have three goals, to see to the happiness and safety of my dear goddaughter and to avenge the deaths of Lee Singh and Jane Delacourt!"

"So you are of a mind that Lady Delacourt did not commit suicide?" Owen asked.

"I have no doubt about it. I was the unhappy man who found her body. Shall I explain?"

"Please do, Reverend Browne!"

"May we use first names? I am far from a formal man!" They agreed with him. "It was four months after Elizabeth vanished and the day that Jane had planned to leave the Delacourt home for the last time. She knew from family connections that her husband would face arrest as soon as he returned from a trip to France. He was to return the following day. It was our plan that I was to pick her up at three in the afternoon as she was to journey to her brothers' house in Scotland on the four o'clock train from Victoria station."

"So that she might leave the house in privacy, she had given all of her household staff the day off. I was not surprised when I did not get an answer at the front door. I went around to the back of the house and asked a groom if she was home. He told me that he had seen her less than an hour before when she had asked him to post a letter. I went inside the unlocked back door." He stopped briefly here and took a deep breath. "I found Jane dead. She lay face down on her bedroom floor. She had a gun in her hand and there was a very large hole in the side of her head."

"But doesn't that point to a suicide?" Owen asked quietly.

"The gun was in her right hand and Jane was left handed. Even that I did not notice until I thought about the scene much later. My first impression was then that she had killed herself but that changed quickly when I rolled her over onto her back. Lord knows why I did that, shock, I guess! Her body torn open, ribs were broken and her heart removed. That sight is a living nightmare for me every minute of every day!"

"Good Lord!" James exclaimed. "So how in Hells name could they ever come to the conclusion that she had killed herself?"

"That is a question that I asked so many men I lost track. The coroner either is a moron or paid well for this decision, both most likely. His report stated that she had shot herself in the head and then some mad man who just happened to wander in the house and on a whim of madness brutalized her body and stole her heart!"

"What a load of cods wallop!" James said.

"Never for one moment did I think that any man other than John Delacourt was behind her murder."

"Why take the heart?" Owen asked.

"Ah yes...that is the question, isn't it? But first I would like to tell you about how I came to be in possession of this book." Ted turned slightly in his chair so that he could face both men. "Before I continue I must warn you that I now come to the place of occult and areas of the supernatural so if you are men of disbelief in these matters, as I was before all this happened, I ask you to withhold your suspicions."

Owen and James exchanged glances, fascinated by the story they were hearing.

"I will not go into detail on how the death of my Jane affected me, I am sure you can imagine. They arrested Delacourt for the other crimes and so unhappily, for me he was out of my reach. I took a leave from my church. I needed to get away from all that reminded me of what I saw as my bitter failure to protect the woman who trusted me."

These words hit home for Owen more than he cared to face.

"I rented a small cottage in the North Country and told no one of its location other than my faithful housekeeper. She was only to use it if some word came of Elizabeth. I had been there for one week, wallowing in misery and self-pity when a package came in the mail. Inside the package, along with a letter I found the two white leather Bibles. I had purchased them as a gift for Jane and her daughter on the event of Elizabeth's confirmation into the Church of England. I was able to retrieve the Bibles from Jane's possessions and on the day of her funeral, I put them in her casket. I never left the side of the casket throughout the day. I am absolutely sure they were not removed."

"And you are sure these are the same books?" James asked.

"Yes, without a doubt. I wrote inside of them and had their names engraved in gold on the inside covers. As unbelievable as that might be, it is nothing when compared to the letter that was placed inside Jane's bible." He took a pale green paper from inside his habit and unfolded it.

'My dearest Teddy,

Do not grieve for me, my love, as I am in a far better place. Do not abandon your faith as it is in your head to do. Above all, do not abandon your promise to rescue my Elizabeth. I love and need you now more than ever.

Eternally yours, Jane.'

"She called me Teddy, as a kind of pet name. The only other person who knew that was Elizabeth. Without a doubt, this is the handwriting of Jane Delacourt. He handed the letter to Owen and James. Owen also recognized the small, neat handwriting from the letters Jane Delacourt had written to Isabelle."

"I examined the wrapping paper that the parcel came in. There was no return address, but that is not surprising. The cottage address was not in Jane's handwriting. I was later to find that it was the same elaborate handwriting as is in the chronicle."

"Deeply touched and stunned as I was over this, there was more shock to come and that just two days later. I have never been a man who could sleep well and at that time, as you can imagine, sleep was rare, short and aided by whiskey. It was in the wee

hours when I woke. Instantly I was aware that all was not as it should be and I took up my pistol that I had kept close since the death of Singh.”

“From my bed I could see into the sitting room. Silhouetted in front of a window was a large stuffed chair, over the top of which I could clearly see the outline of a human head. With my gun at the ready I crept from my bed and I thought, soundlessly, went to the doorway.”

“It is alright, I am a friend!” a male voice called out to me. “You do not need your weapon.”

“Who are you?” I demanded as I stepped into the room still with my gun pointed at the area of the chair. It was very dark in the room but I could clearly see the man shape of a man sitting in the chair.”

“My name does not matter. Lower your gun!” I did not and raised it further pointing it at what I believed must be the head area of this person. Some unseen thing knocked the gun from my hand with such force that it flew across the room. I suppose I froze in fear then. It is not a comfortable feeling to be unarmed in the dark with a stranger in my locked house.”

“The stranger spoke then with a more forceful tone, ‘Will you sit, Reverend Browne and talk with me. You have the Bibles. It was I who sent them to you at the request of Jane Delacourt.’”

“I sat! What else could I do? I cannot clearly explain all the feelings I had then. I must limit my words so just understand that somehow I knew I was in the presence of something, someone other worldly. ‘How did you get the Bibles?’ I asked.”

“Jane gave them to me as I said, so that you would accept and listen to me.”

“Talk then, I am listening!” I said or words like that.”

“You have been chosen as a part of an important mission. That is an honor of the highest order. You will need all your wits, so leave the whiskey bottles and gather your strength. To aide you I will leave with you a book. Study it. It is early days yet. You will receive a sign when to take action. Then go where it leads you.”

“What is this mission? To find Elizabeth?” I asked.”

“That is a part of it, Thaddeus, but only a small part. I shall leave you now. But we will meet again!” Then he stood but still I could not see anything of him but his outline. He seemed raise his hand and that is all I remember.”

“When I woke a few hours later I was in my bed, my pistol back under my pillow. It had all been a dream, I thought, until I went into the sitting room and found this!” Ted pointed down at the book. He stopped talking for a moment, cleared his throat and continued.

“I cannot tell you how happy I am to find that what is written here about Elizabeth being free and alive, Owen. However would you please explain to me why the writer of this thing refers to your protection as ‘dubious’? I assume it has to do with the poisoning and the loss of the child,” He folded his large arms over his belly and looking evenly into the Owen's face.

He had already planned just how much of the real events he would share with the man. He began with Lord John Delacourts betrayal of his daughter to Emile and Jack Soskice, the forced marriage to Jack and the sexual abuse she had endured from both of these men. He spoke of her escape attempts, the brutal punishments they had inflicted on her and the birth of the baby Richard. All the while Reverend Browne sat stone

faced, unmoving and grim. The happy sparkle in his eyes was gone and replaced with something dark.

Owen paused as he came to the place where he entered into Elizabeth's life and the terrible ways he had let her down. He had finished his glass and so refilled it and topped off the other two glasses. He spoke then of Wilmot's birthday fiasco that led to Elizabeth's third and successful escape attempt. He covered the area of Jack's death, Emile's curse on the family and the imprisonment by his father of all the gypsies and pointed out how correct the strange book was.

Here Reverend Browne spoke for the first time since Owen had started his tale. "Are you certain Soskice is still there? No one has ever been able to hold him in one place for very long."

"He is. And he can stay where he sits for all anyone cares unless I decided to blow his brains away!" Owen answered.

"Soskice is still here, well chained and locked in an impossible place to escape from!" James agreed firmly.

"I see, well, that is good then! Please continue."

Owen spoke then of finding Elizabeth and her child in the abandoned church, how she had fainted, injuring her head on a rock and that he had brought her back to Hock House to rest and recover.

"This is where I come to my failure on the part of Elizabeth." Owen continued after lighting another cigarette. "Because of my father's irrational behavior towards the gypsies I kept her presence in my home a secret from all but a very few people. When she had recovered enough, she informed me that she and the baby were not safe, as Soskice's family would certainly be after them. She insisted that I bring her back to her mother's home. She had no idea that her mother was deceased."

"When I felt she was well enough to handle the truth I informed her that her mother had passed away and that her father was in prison. I convinced her that it would be best for her to stay at Hock House until I could bring her to the safety of my friends, where she could fully recover and make her plans with a clear head. On the very morning we had set for our departure I woke to find that the child was gone and that Elizabeth was very seriously ill."

As Owen paused for breath, Reverend Browne leaned forward in his chair.

"As you can see every window in Hock House is barred. I keep armed guards at the front and back of my house and at Tabor Manor day and night. Yet, somehow, someone got in and stole the baby. As to Elizabeth's illness, she is now in the best of care and recovering from the attempt to poison her. So you see that it all falls on my head that she has suffered this new injury and lost her child!"

Ted stood and walked to the window and studied the bars. "You should not blame yourself for the evil actions of others, Owen! If we were to take that blame on ourselves at every turn, then life would be a heavy burden indeed. Your house is as you say, well fortified and with Soskice locked away you had every reason to believe that Elizabeth and Richard were safe."

"But still that does not change that fact that I failed to do for Elizabeth as I promised her I would do. Now it is my duty to restore her child to her. It is a shame that your book does not mention the location of the Hobson farm. Then again I have no reason to believe the bitch who gave me that information."

"Who is this 'bitch'?" Ted asked.

James spoke, giving Owen a chance to think. "Her name is Mavis Willard. She has lived on the estate with her son for many years. We thought her to be a healer of sorts, a mid wife and the like. Foolishly, we trusted her. Miss Delacourt has terrible scars on her body from the hands of the Soskice men some of which were still rather raw and unhealed. She also has a wound on her head from her recent fall. She was poisoned from a salve that Mavis made up of Monks Hood', a type of lethal flower!"

Ted stood. "Mavis Willard is one of Emile's first shifters. There is a great deal written about her in the chronicle. I think we should speak with this female!" He rubbed his hands together eagerly.

"If she is still alive! While James and I were questioning Mavis last night, she cut her hand, an accident, of course! To teach her the error of her ways I applied some of that same salve to the wound." A dark cloud seemed to settle over Owen as he spoke. He voice deep, flat and cold. "I have reason to believe that three years ago Mavis used the same poison to kill my wife and new born daughter. So that she might think and taste her own medicine, I locked her in my storeroom. If she is not dead, she will be soon. Shall we go and check on the dear old soul?"

Ted and James followed Owen up the stairs. The room was in a worse mess than it had been the night before but there was no sign of Mavis Willard.

"This is impossible!" Owen exclaimed in anger. "There is no bloody way she could have left this room, none what so ever!"

"This is not surprising, Owen. When a shifter dies, they just vanish. They have had no claim to a real human or animal body so it is gone when they die," Ted explained to his startled companions.

"Fucking Hell!" Owen yelled, kicking some of the rubbish across the room. "I cannot accept this insanity!"

"And so you should not, not on just face value. Still we must deal with the facts as they are and work from there. May we return to the comfort of your study? I have more to say."

"More witch craft and magic will not help me find that child!"

"I wouldn't be too sure on that, Owen!" James placed his hand on Owen's shoulder. "We can do nothing more right now but listen to Ted. No matter how much you insist on closing your mind you cannot afford to let any chances fall away!"

Back in the study, Ted continued with his story. "I think it would be best here for me to explain what it takes for a creature like Soskice to make a shape shifter. This I also found in our 'book'. You will find it awful but very interesting for our cause, especially since these recent murders."

"They need three human hearts connected by love or blood, one evil human heart; such as a man who has committed murder or some other unforgivable sin. They need a dead human infant, the sex of which will determine the sex of the shape shifter. Finally, they need a young version of whatever animal or bird they want for their shifter. When they have acquired all these...ingredients, for lack of a better word, they are all placed together over a low fire and allowed to burn down for the entire length of the full moon." He paused to let the effect of what he was saying sink in. Owen sat still and silent.

"What is left of this mixture has to be eaten by the one who will be the 'master' of the shifter. He has sex with a female demon and in twenty four hours, she will give



birth to the shifter. I know how insane this all sounds but that is what we have.” Ted sighed and shook his head. “I have no doubt that Soskice has a shifter working for him at this time.”

“Think back to when Jane Delacourt died! Her body did not have a heart. Three days later her very close friend, Isabelle Tabor died in a mysterious fall. I am sure if you check you will find that her body has also been mutilated!”

“You said they needed three human hearts connected by love and a baby!” Owen said, his voice so heavy with hate it was hardly recognizable. “Tell me the rest!”

Nervously Ted cleared his throat. “Not too long after the deaths of Jane and Isabelle, Nora Tabor and her child died. You are right, Owen. They were murdered for their cause to create a new shifter for Soskice.”

Owen took a deep breath. “So my wife and child were murdered to make this so-called shape shifter that now attacks us?”

“Yes, Owen, I am sorry but that very much seems so. I have no doubt, that should you view the bodies of your loved ones, you will find their hearts missing. But unfortunately I have yet to learn who the shifter is when in human form.”

“But if they only need a dead child; Richard might not be alive now?” James asked.

“Not necessarily! For what I believe they have in mind they will need to keep the child well until the ceremony. Now that I have heard of the recent deaths you have had here I am fairly certain that it is that shifter who is responsible.” he paused, thought for a moment and added. “But give us time, gentlemen; we will win over this evil.”

“Then what is it that you think they have in mind?”

“Well, Owen. I am not sure but there is reference in this dark book about how when the conditions are right, a child of One Wing can change his or her body for a new body. To complete the evil ceremony they need a live baby. This child must share blood with the one who wants a new body. This new body would be the adult body that this child would have become.”

For a while, the three men sat in sickened, stunned silence.

“Does the book tell where these ceremonies are conducted?” Owen broke the quiet.

“Only that they are held in One Wings’ grotto.”

“Fuck, it does not tell us much then, does it!”

“Not yet but who knows what will show up soon.”

“Tell me all you know about the ‘Black Claw.’ for a few moments forget the black arts!” Owen demanded just barely controlling his frustration.

“They meet as a whole group twice a year; otherwise they meet in small groups with Soskice wherever he is at the time.” Ted went to the book, turned several pages ahead. “Here is a list of the members, dating back almost forty years. There were doctors, lawyers, politicians and noble men, some with very recognizable names. Those with black smudges after the names are deceased. Those with the letter ‘A’ I believe must be still active. The one name of interest to our cause is that of Lord Wilmot Tabor!”

Owen stood and went to the desk. His face was white and his hand shook as he turned the book to face him.

“And,” Ted continued. “Not only was, or perhaps is, Lord Tabor a member, he

is a founding member, second in command under Emile and then under him we find John Delacourt."

"That pig is a part of this? A part of the murders of my family?" Owen's voice was a dark threat that seemed to vibrate in the air around him. Quietly James stood and moved in front of the doorway.

"It certainly looks that way. I am sorry, Owen but we..." Ted placed a restraining hand firmly on Owen's arm. Owen wrenched away and moved quickly to the doorway.

"Get out of my way!" he shouted to James.

"Think before you act, Owen!" Ted said following him. "Whatever action we take now we must think of the baby."

"Move!" Owen yelled. James held his ground.

"Stop and think! For once in your life, listen to someone!" James said quietly but with deadly certainty.

"So, what do you suggest, James? I do nothing to avenge the deaths of my wife and child?"

"I suggest that a few more moments of careful thought will only help us. That time will not cost you anything!"

Ted stepped beside Owen. "Your wife and child will be avenged, as I will be for Jane. A rash move now could prove to be deadly for Elizabeth's baby. We must and will get the child back but with one step at a time. Exposing what we know to Tabor now will not help us!"

"He is right, Owen!" James said. "And you know it! You did not think before. What did that cost you? A great deal! Now sit!" Owen glared at James, then backed down and went stiffly to a chair. It was very clear to Ted he had little time to make his point with the impetuous, enraged young man.

"So they have the hearts and the child. What are they waiting for?" James asked.

"Soskice, no doubt!" Owen snarled. "If I kill him they cannot do their blasted ceremony, can they?"

"Yes, that is true. However, if Emile dies they will have no reason to keep the baby alive, will they? Whatever you decide to do now, you must not let them know that we are on to them. Their false sense of security could be all that keeps the child alive."

"The final chapter tells of various events of the calendar year that these people celebrate. It seems the most important are the winter and summer solstice times. This time is most important as the solstice falls on a full moon. It is only then when someone as well bred to the dark side as Emile Soskice will have the opportunity to renew his body. This summer solstice falls on a full moon this Sunday. I am sure, gentlemen that we had better get that baby away from them before that night," Ted turned to another marked page in the book. "This is a drawing of Soskice. Is he as decrepit as the drawing shows?" Ted asked.

"Worse!" James answered. "He is as near to the end of his days as anyone can be."

"In more ways than one!" Owen muttered.

James was keeping a close eye on Owen. Over his head, he spoke to Ted. "We need to find out who this shifter is. Tell us all you can about them. What form of

animal do they take?"

"Any. It depends on what animal they used in the ceremony. I do not know how complete the information in there is but it seems that all of the Soskice shifters have been birds."

"Really?" Owen pulled the dagger from his boot and held it up. "I took this and five others from the gypsy caravan."

"A crow?" James asked.

"No!" Ted said taking the knife and looking at it closely. "A raven, most certainly!"

"A bird that can turn at will into a human!" Owen said thoughtfully. "That could easily be how Edward was killed. And," he added growing more animated as some of the pieces began to fall into place. "James, remember how Mavis told us that her half blind horse could find its own way home in the heavy fog? Hasting saw a cart and horse going through the fog towards the village at about the time when Edward's body was taken."

"Yes, and that old bitch was in and out of Tabor Hall all the time, she could have easily had keys to any lock in the place." James agreed.

"When I came back here after taking Elizabeth to St Francis I found some black feathers and soot on the floor in front of the kitchen fireplace. So, the shifter came down the chimney, took the baby and left through the back door where the guard was drunk and asleep."

Owen stopped talking and walked to the window. He was thinking of that morning after Jack Soskice was murdered and the large raven that had been watching him from the wall. "I have always hated those bloody black birds. I shot at one the other day and I think I hit it but not too badly. And, Jesus, I saw a raven in the cell with Soskice!"

"Then I suggest gentlemen that our first action should be to find out who this creature is when in human form!" Ted said rubbing his large hands together eagerly. "That is of course, if you trust me enough to enlist my help?"

"I don't see why not. I am sure Miss Delacourt would vouch for you. Can you use a gun?" James asked.

Ted patted the pistol he had tucked under his hassock and grinned. "She's my best friend and I go no place without her. It is amazing the amount of sins that can be hidden under this religious garment."

"You'll do!" Owen said. "Now, there are a few things I want to see with my own eyes."

"Do you have an adequate place for me to hide this thing?" Ted asked as he rewrapped his strange book, locked and bound it in chains again. "When all this is over I am going to dig a deep hole some place miles from anywhere and bury it. Then I shall probably spend the rest of my life trying to forget about it." Ted said as he followed James and Owen into the Great Room.

At the far end of the room, Owen pushed open the curtains. "Help me pull this thing!" He and James took a corner of a carpet that lay under a piano and pulled it out of the way. Owen crouched on the floor and ran his hands over the smooth wood until a small square pushed free. He stood back and lifted a large door.

"My mother thought she and I might need a place to hide," Owen said as he went

down the half dozen steps to the small room below. James and Ted passed him the trunk and he dropped it behind the stairs.

"Lady Tabor requested I build this shortly after she and Owen moved in here," James added to Ted as they closed the door, replaced the wooden slats and pulled the piano back into place.

"Your book should be safe in there Ted." Owen said.

"To be perfectly honest with you I wish it would disappear. However, you are right, not until we have seen this matter to a close. Goodness knows what will be written in it next that might help us find the child," Ted answered as he turned and looked up at the stained glass window. "How remarkably beautiful! I have never seen the like of it." He looked around at the rest of the mismatched and out of place furniture. "If I may ask is this your bedroom?"

"Yes, it is now, but that is a long story. I have had more than enough talk for one day!" Owen said with impatience as he opened a cupboard well hidden in the wooden wall paneling. "We will use your carriage, Ted, as it is ready! Are your horses fast?"

"Fairly so! Then I take it that you gentlemen have a plan?" he asked as he helped Owen with the guns.

"Of course!" Owen answered.

"We have?" James asked. "That is news to me. You will get used to that, Ted. Owen is rarely forthcoming with what is in his mind."

"Ted and I are going to the Tabor Crypt," Owen said as he crossed to the front door. "James I want you to go back to the Hall. Stay with Ivy as much as possible and keep your eye on the rest of that crew. I will deal with Wilmot later."

They were loading the guns into Ted's coach when James spotted the back of Edmond's clip winding down the roadway towards the front gate. "There goes Edmond now. It looks as though he has the Crawford female with him. They will be late getting to Dover."

"Edmond is my half brother," Owen explained to Ted. "At least that will keep them out of our hair for the time being!" Owen took the driver's seat, with Ted beside him, and stirred the horses forward.

They stopped first at a tool shed. When Owen came back to the carriage, he was carrying a large box of tools.

They traveled across the village road to the shoreline and then headed north. Ted stayed silent, sensing Owen's need for thought.

"My great grandfather had the crypt built as far away from his home as possible. It is on the northern most boundaries of the Estate," Owen began as Tabor Hall, Hock House faded behind them, and they reached their destination. "He was a superstitious old fart and had the thing made to look like the head of some kind of devil. He thought that would scare away any grave robbers and the like. Now, time has covered the thing with mould and brush has grown up all around it. We can no longer get the gardeners to come anywhere near the place so it has all grown to hell!"

"I can't say that I blame them!" Ted said as they came to a stop. A huge tangled mess of thorn vines and foliage was only recognizable as some sort of structure by the gaping hole in the front and the dim outline of a wooden door beyond. Dark clouds had covered the sky and a light rain had begun to fall as they stepped out of the carriage.

There was not a sound, no bird or rustling in the trees. "Rather a fearsome place!" Ted helped Owen lift down the toolbox.

"It is hard to believe that we used to play in there as children. We were not allowed to so that made it all the more entertaining."

"There is no lock on the door?" Ted noticed as they cleared away some bushes that stood in their path.

"No, just in case any that might be buried prematurely would want to get out again!" Owen lit the lanterns and pushed the door open. It moved silently on its hinges. There was not a sound but their voices and the fall of light rain.

"Ah, yes!" Ted agreed. "Rather a good idea, I suppose!"

"Breathe through your mouth, Ted. The stench is disgusting."

Owen was first to enter holding the lanterns. Ted followed with the tools. The steps down were narrow and slippery with mould.

"There is nothing like the smell of the dead to put the fear of God in a man!" Ted mumbled staying as close as possible to Owen so that he could share the light from the lanterns in the pitch black of the place.

At the bottom of the steps, they stopped in a small circular room with three doorways leading from it. "To the right are the females, straight ahead the children and to the left the males," Owen said and walked through the middle door. "This one here," he motioned for Ted to hold up the lanterns. They stood beside a small marble coffin. Carved in stone on the wall above, 'Alexis Margaret Tabor Born December 19 1887, Died December 22, 1887'.

"My daughter," Owen said quietly. He took a crowbar from the tool chest. They began the gruesome task of prying off the stone lid. When finally it came loose, it fell with a terrible crash to the stone floor behind.

"That's enough to wake the dead!" Ted said and immediately wished he had not. He stepped closer with his lamp as Owen lifted the small coffin lid. The satin lined box was empty.

"Bloody Hell!" Owen cursed as he closed the lid. The rage he felt seemed to reach out and cut into the stifling air. They lifted the impossibly heavy marble cover back into place.

"Do you need to see more?" Ted asked.

"Yes, I do."

Ted followed Owen to the Ladies Chamber. "These two here," Owen pointed to the two newest marble structures. The first plaque on the wall read: 'Lady Isabelle Tabor; Rest in Peace, Born November 15 1831, and Died Dec 21, 1887'.

This time they moved the marble lid only as far necessary to be able to open the coffin and look inside. Ted said a prayer as he again held the lanterns for Owen. The body of Lady Tabor was now a pile of bones dressed in rotting blue silk. There was no mistaking the large hole and broken rib bones that stuck out through the dress fabric. Someone had stolen the heart.

Owen said nothing this time. Words could never express the anguish for he knew what he was about to see. The next plaque they came to read; 'Nora Marianne Tabor nee Fitzpatrick, Beloved wife of Owen, mother of Alexis, Born March 10, 1863, Died December 18 1887'. Here they repeated the same procedure. Before Owen could lift the coffin lid Ted spoke, "Are you sure? You already know what you are

going to see!”

Owen did not answer but nodded at him.

The body of Nora Tabor lay before them. Her hair bound in braids and tied with silver ribbons. What was once a lovely young face was then just a skull with a gaping grin. The wedding dress, once beaded with pearls and covered with white Irish lace was yellowed and tattered. The hands that Owen had placed lovingly across her chest at the time of her burial, now just bones lay by her sides. Only a black hole was where her heart had been.

Owen stayed silent. When they had the stone back in place Ted quietly gathered the tools, one lantern and left Owen alone in the crypt. Several moments passed before Owen came slowly up the steps. His face was ashen but his voice was calm when he spoke, “I think I will have that door bricked up. Rather late, I know, but I don’t want anyone to ever go down there again!” He brushed his hands against his trousers and took a deep breath. “Now Ted, I want to see the grave of Jack Soskice. It should be just over the rise there.”

Ted followed Owen to the hilltop. Just ahead of them and under a cluster of wild bushes. A crudely made wooden cross had been shoved into the ground and beside it a large empty pit. “Well, all that answers a few questions!” Owen said.

“I am afraid so, Owen! The Soskice Clan murdered Jane Delacourt, Isabelle Tabor, Nora and Alexis Tabor and the prostitute, Rachael. With the hearts of the adults and the body of the enfant they created a new shifter.”

Owen continued when Ted paused. “Now they have the hearts of Edward, Tom, Jack and most likely Henry. They have the baby Richard as well. They either are planning to make a new shifter or as you said a new body for Emile.”

“It all points to that impossible conclusion, does it not? I will eat that damned book if it is not a new body for the old man. We have until midnight Sunday to get Richard safely back into the arms of his mother. So where to now?”

“We will pay a visit to the Willard cottage.” Owen said as they climbed up onto the coach.

“Mavis won’t be there.” Ted said. “I am sure she is gone for good.”

“Nonetheless, I want a look around to be sure. Her son will be there. Perhaps he has a story to tell us! Maybe he can tell us about the most recent shifter. And if they have keys to Hock House or Tabor Manor, I want them.”

They road in silence, then walked across the fields and came to the back of Mavis Willard’s cottage. Owen went in through the front door, Ted through the back door and each with his gun in hand.

“Bob!” Owen called out as they stepped into the kitchen area. The usually neat room was scattered with dirty dishes and uneaten food.

“Who is it?” a muffled voice answered from a back room.

“It’s Owen, Bob! Come out here!”

Bob Willard was a short, fat young man of twenty with the mind of a child. His legs were severely bowed, his shoulders too broad and his arms too short. He had a small baldhead with a blubbery face and tiny, pig like eyes peered out from behind very thick spectacles. His thick tongue did not fit well into his mouth, making it difficult to understand what he said. He came out of his bedroom looking nervously at Owen and Ted.

"I want to see your mother, is she about?" Owen asked.

"No!" Bob answered twisting his fingers together. "Ma never came home all night. She ain't never done that before!"

Ted moved behind Bob and into the two small bedrooms. Mavis's bed was tidy, her slippers by the door. Her personal belongings were still in the drawers and a few simple dresses hung in the wardrobe. He pulled a shoebox from the bottom of the wardrobe and opened it. He smiled and brought it out to Owen.

"It looks as though her things are still here!" Ted said as he returned to the kitchen. "Along with this box of at least two dozen labeled household keys!"

Owen examined a few of the keys and mumbled a curse under his breath.

"Sit down, Bob!" Owen kicked out a chair and sat across from the frightened young man. "I have a few questions I need to ask you."

"Where is my Ma?"

"I don't know, Bob! But if you answer my questions maybe I can find her."

Bob nodded hopefully.

"Does your mother have any friends or family off the Estate?"

"Just my father!"

"I am not referring to your step-father. I know that he is dead." Owen said. "I am talking about living people."

"My pa is not dead! Mr. Tabor, where is my mother?" Bob had begun to cry, tears rolling down his fat cheeks. He knocked off his glasses and ran the backs of his hands roughly across his eyes.

"Your mother...!" Owen stopped in mid sentence grabbed Bob off his chair, pulled him to the window, and looked closely into his face. "Jesus Christ! Bob, who the bloody Hell is your father?" he demanded roughly. Bob tried to pull away in fear but Owen held him fast. "Tell me who is your father or I will see to it that you never see your mother again!"

Bawling like a baby, Bob nodded in a direction across the Estate. "Papa Soskice! Ma says he is my father!" Bob fell on his backside when Owen dropped him and picked up the box of keys, "Come on, Ted!"

"What is it, Owen? What did you see?" Ted asked when they were outside.

"Silver eyes! He's got fucking silver eyes!" Owen answered.

"I don't see the significance."

"I have to see Soskice, and then I will tell you!"

Back in the carriage, they traveled as close to the tower as they could get. Owen took a heavy hammer from the toolbox and Ted followed him across the fields.

"Soskice is up there," Owen said to Ted when they reached the base of the tower. He nodded to the guard.

"You can't kill him now, Owen!" Ted argued. "Not until we find out where the child is!"

"I will not kill him today, not quite, anyway! Do you want to come with me?"

"Yes I want to see him and do much more, when the time is right!"

"That time is close, my friend. Stay behind me and watch your skirts on the rocks and steps; they are not safe."

"Skirts!" Ted laughed quietly.

Owen made no secret of his approach as he mounted the stairs to Emile's prison.

He unlocked the door and it squealed on rusted hinges. Emile was as always sitting motionless with his back up against the stones. His head, covered in the black veil, hung down to his chest. If it were not for the slight movement of his chest, he would have seemed dead.

Owen stood silently in the doorway looking at the mess before him. In his mind's eye, he saw images of Elizabeth and terrible abuses she had suffered in the control of this monster. He remembered the scars left to last forever on her beautiful body and he thought of how easy it would be to put one bullet in his head and watch as the life drained from him. That would have to wait, at least for just one more day.

Ted stood in the shadows at the turn in the top of the stairs and was equally appalled by the sight and the stench before him. Like Owen, he thought of his beautiful innocent goddaughter and all that she has suffered at the hands of this creature. He swore once again to all he believed in that Soscice would rot in Hell before this was over.

"Soscice!" Owen said as he kicked the old man's boot. "Wake up!" he lowered the lantern so that it was level with the old man.

Slowly Emile raised his head slightly. "I do not sleep. You are not alone. Who is the coward who hides in the dark?"

"My associate and a witness to what is said and done here!"

"Tell me what you want, and then..." he stopped speaking suddenly, raised his clawed hand, hooked the edge of his veil and seemed to sniff the air in the direction of Owen. He extended his blackened tongue and flicked it through the air like a snake. Despite himself, Owen took a step back in disgust.

Emile drew in a deep hissing breath. "You are not a Tabor son! There is not a drop of Tabor blood in you! You are little more than your mother's bastard!"

"Very true, Soscice! Who would know more about bastard children than you?" Owen snarled, took a step closer to Emile and lowered the lantern level with the creature's head. The light from his one silver eye cut a fine shaft through the fetid dimness of his prison.

"Tell me what you want, imposter and then go away!" the old man insisted angrily.

"What I want is to make sure you do not escape!" Owen raised the hammer over his head and brought it down with all his strength on the Emile's brittle knee. It snapped like a dry tree branch. Emile wailed in agony. Again, he brought the hammer down on the other knee with similar effects. "That was for Nora Tabor and Elizabeth Delacourt; the next time you see me they will have their complete revenge!"

With splintered bone and blood spattered over him, Emile screamed in rage and pain. He was still screaming when Owen and Ted reached the daylight again.

"You can ignore that," Owen said to the startled sentry. "It may go on for a while yet."



## Chapter Nine

"Of all the unholy things dragged out of Hell that is by far the worst!" Ted said as they stood at the base of the tower and looking back up the black, broken walls.

Owen wiped the bloody hammer across the long grass. "Would you say this so-called devil's spawn meets your expectations, Ted?"

Ted shook his head. They were on the roadway before Ted spoke. His words halted with a powerful pain so close to overpowering him. "My sweet Jane's daughter was an innocent, Owen!"

Owen closed his eyes against the image. "He is going back to Hell very soon. I guess we can take strength from that."

"God help me, if I have a hand in that it will be my best day's work." After a silence, Ted turned and looked at Owen. "It called you an imposter and you seemed to agree."

"I am not a Tabor son; a fact that Wilmot is blissfully ignorant of, that is until I am ready to tell him. You and I will keep that secret for a while longer. I am sure you understand. I am afraid many more people will meet their ends before this matter is settled."

Ted started to speak but decided silence was best. Over the top of the distant trees, he could see the red roof of Hock House then higher up the hillside the massive cathedral roof of Tabor Manor.

They joined James and Ivy in the nursery. Owen explained in detail all they had just experienced. James sat with his arm around his daughter and her with the babe in her arms.

"So, Reine is the bloody shape shifter." Owen added with vehemence at the end of the strange story.

"You have no doubt?" James asked.

"She is not half as clever as she thinks she is. Yesterday she wanted to impress me with her psychic abilities and all she really did was let me see that she knew things she could not possibly know," he looked at Ted. "Then I was still a sane skeptic and didn't catch on. Now that I have very little of my mind left, I see things differently. While she was busy trying to find out if Elizabeth was still in Hock House I mentioned to her that I found her silver eyes very unusual. The foolish cow told me that she had inherited them from her 'father'. Bob said the same thing. When I saw that Soskice had a silver eye, I simply put two and two together."

"It is certainly a blessing that we know who the shifter is, however, be very wary, Owen. The shifters are very strong, stronger than any human is and fast as well. They are not to be taken lightly."

"I will remember that, Ted," Owen said thoughtfully. "Tell me more about the relationship between the shifters and their masters. If these things are so powerful how are they controlled?"

"That is simple. The masters use fear, plain and simple as that is. The shifters

believe that if their masters die so will they. From what I read that is not a fact. Many have lived on long after their makers have died. They are dedicated to their masters but they are like children and can be easily distracted and have been known to also 'shift' their loyalties. Their creators usually replace them after a few years. There have been cases where the shifter is stripped of their ability to shift and are left permanently in one form or the other. That is most likely what Soskice did with Mavis Willard."

"But what would happen to Reine if Soskice makes this transformation to a new body?" Owen asked. A plan was forming in his mind.

"Well, that is an interesting question!" Ted rubbed his whiskers thoughtfully. "I have not read anything on that matter. I doubt that many shifters are freed. The case of Mavis Willard was very rare indeed. Most likely Soskice stripped her of her animal side and let her live as human here just so he would have an eye on Lord Tabor. If I was a betting man, I'd bet that if Soskice makes a new body his old shifter would have to die."

"Right, then I will use this matter to my advantage."

"If Bob Willard has silver eyes, could he be a shifter?" Ted asked.

"I doubt it. Emile, no doubt fathered him but most likely in the usual way. He was little threat when his mother was around. He will be useless now that she is gone. We will deal with him later. Are you well enough to travel Ivy?"

"Of course."

"Good. I want you to stay with James. He and Ted are going to bring Elizabeth and my mother back to Hock House."

"Your mother?" Ivy looked from Owen to James with confusion.

"I will explain later, Ivy," James said and then to Owen. "Margaret will never come back here again, you know that."

"She most certainly will come here, James. Do whatever you have to and do not take no for an answer. I want both of them at Hock House before nightfall and that is all there is to it. I need them here so I can keep my eye on them."

"What are you going to do while we are away?" James asked when Owen stood and headed for the door.

"Don't worry. I will not go to Wilmot yet. I have a shifter to deal with first."

Abbey was sitting by the window, looking tired and worried when Owen opened her bedroom door. "Owen! There you are! I have been looking all over for you. Where is everybody when you need them?"

"I have no idea, Abbey!" he answered with little interest. She followed him into Reine's room. "What is wrong now?"

"It's Wilmot! He is sick and gone back to his bed. That stubborn old fool will not let me send for his doctor. I cannot talk any sense to him and he might listen to you. What are you doing?" She watched as he picked up the scattered clothing and shook them.

"Well, he has his medicine and knows what to do with it. So it is up to him," he answered, paying her very little attention.

"How can you be so cold, he is your father, after all? What are you looking for?"

"I am searching this bird's nest!" he said looking at her from under his brows. She caught the reference to the bird and decided hopefully that it was just a

co-incidence. "Yes, she is rather messy, isn't she? As I said, what are you looking for?"

"The truth, Abbey! Why not tell me some truth and we will save some time not to mention a few lives along the way? And as far as that old bastard goes, he can rot where he lies for all I care."

"Why is it that every conversation with you is such an unsavory thing?" she asked with growing exasperation and fear.

He pulled the bedding off the bed and laughed. "You are right, I can be rude and crude; but then we must all be just what we are. Unless of course we can change our spots or feathers, that is!"

"That makes no sense at all, Owen," she rubbed her bruised wrists. "So, I take it then that you will not send for his Doctor?"

"No, it does not seem likely, does it? I am afraid that Wilmot is much on his own unless Edmond returns from Dover early. I doubt there is much chance of that. It seems my little brother has an entertaining distraction in his time of grief!"

Abbey sighed.

Owen left the bedding, turned to the dresser drawers, pulling out each one and dropping their contents on the floor. "Tell me, is Reine equally taken with him? Or is she just as she seems and an interesting whore?"

"I am well aware that you are trying to make me angry Owen. I have no idea why but I will not bite your bait."

"Make you angry? Hell, I am trying to put the fear of death into your thick head."

"Oh God!" she sat down heavily on the messed bed.

"So, I will ask again, is she a whore or is she interested in my brother?" he repeated as he examined the top and underneath the wardrobe.

"She is both; that is possible, you know!"

"And no one knows a whore better than you do, am I right?" he asked seeing the break in her resistance.

"You could say that! They are my business after all. I am not the keeper of Reine's morals or lack of them. If she wishes to bed with Edmond then it is up to her."

"So there is a change in your loyalty to her?"

"Loyalty? That is something I save for those who earn it. I suppose that I am just tired of all life's pretense. I am tired of many things; like living my life in fear. But you are a man, strong and secure and would not understand the kind of fear I am talking about."

"What fear is that? The fear of death?" He pulled open the narrow drawer at the bottom of the wardrobe, saw a rise in the paper liner, lifted it and took out the rolled handkerchief.

"There are worse things than death, Owen. But maybe you are too young and immature to know that!" She watched as he opened it and held up the very familiar wedding band.

"Well, well!" he said looking up at Abbey. "What do we have here?"

"A wedding ring?"

"Never seen it before?" He asked handing it to her.

"No, I don't think so! Wait!" she said as he went to take it from her. She

closed her eyes and saw the ring on Olivia's left hand. "This is Olivia Tabor's wedding ring," she said flatly handing it back to him.

"How did it turn up in Reine's bedroom?" he slid the ring into his vest pocket.

"I have no idea. All I saw was a vision of Olivia wearing the ring. But since you refuse to believe in these things...!" She moved her hands in a way that said she gave up on the matter.

"What I believe is not important, Abbey, you should be more afraid of what I know. You see, I know that your friend is a shape sifter. I know she killed Edward and Tom and more than likely Olivia and Henry. I am amazed, Abbey that you are still claiming to be innocent of all this? How long do you think it will be before she kills you," he narrowed his eyes, "or someone else kills you?"

"Lord, what am I going to do?" she asked, shaking her head.

"You need to be stronger. Stronger so you can fight Emile, One Wing and the Black Claw."

This time there was no mistaking or hiding her reaction, so immediate was it. She stood quickly. Stepping back she snagged her heel in the bedclothes and fell onto her backside with a thud. He shook his head and watched as she struggled to her feet.

"It could be that you are luckier than you think, Abbey! Do you remember our last conversation? It is rare when a person in a dangerous corner gets a chance to think clearly through their possibilities before the inevitable happens. I can tell you now that there is still a slim chance you could get away from all this standing....but if you make the wrong choices, you will not leave the Tabor Estate alive. I want three things in this matter; that baby back alive, Edmond left unharmed and Soskice dead; that is all I want, remember that! Anything else will fall down on your head for bringing Reine to this house."

"I have no idea what you a ravaging on about; get out of my way!" she pushed him and ran into her room, slamming and locking her door behind her.

James pulled Ted's coach to a stop at the crest of the hill that looked down on the valley and gardens of their destination. "This is The Orphanage of Saint Francis, Ted. For the last twenty four years this place has been the home and the hiding place of Lady Margaret Tabor," he spoke in a way that told of his own unhappy surprise in the facts.

"But I thought..." Ted paused and shook his head. "It has always been the belief that Lady Tabor died in a suicide. Jane often talked about Isabelle's family; her step-son and it was only natural that the first Lady Tabor would come up."

"That is what we all thought. It seems Sister Meg, as they refer to her down there, fled here from the brutality of her husband. With the exception of Owen, we all thought she was dead."

"But then he found out the truth?"

"And for years he kept the secret very well. I have been closer to him than anyone else has and I had no idea of any of this! I knew that he frequented this place and used his money to keep it running, but I had no idea Margaret was here."

"A remarkable story," Ted smiled at James. "Owen is a fine young man. Well worth his weight and that is not said of many noblemen, currently."

"Yes, he is but the same cannot be said for his mother. She is obviously a foolish and stubborn female. That I tell you so you will be prepared for the trouble she

will make about not coming back to the Estate!" James rolled the horses forward down the hill.

"She must have had good reason to stay away from Wilmot Tabor for all these years; if you will forgive me for saying so! The kind of man who would partner with Emile Soskice would hardly be a suitable husband for any woman."

"That is true, Ted, but all that was a very long time ago and this is the time we must deal with. Wilmot has long since stopped being a threat to her or anyone else for that matter. Owen wants her and Elizabeth at Hock House until this matter is over and that is what they will do. Then she can come back here!"

Margaret was sitting with Elizabeth when Father Smith stuck his head around the door. "May I speak with you a moment, Sister?" he asked.

"Of course!" she answered as she smiled at Elizabeth. "I will be back soon with some sweet tea for you to sip on!" Elizabeth returned a weak smile. "Yes, Father?" she asked as she quietly closed the bedroom door behind her.

"Mr. Whitehall is here, with guests!" he whispered.

"James is here again? Is Owen with him?"

Father Smith shook his head.

"James! Why are you here? Where is Owen? Is he alright?" she asked as she rushed into the kitchen. She was vaguely aware of the surprise on James' face when he saw her attire.

"Owen is fine. Margaret, this is Father Thaddeus Browne. This young lady," James put his arm around Ivy, "is my daughter Ivy O'Conner. The baby is my granddaughter, Alice. I brought my family with me because I did not feel it was safe to leave them at the Estate."

A raw pain spread through Margaret. A pain she had hoped was long dead. Ivy was the spitting image of her mother, Alice.

"This," James continued, "is Lady Margaret Tabor."

"Pleased to meet you both!" Margaret said and nodded at the new faces.

"Reverend Browne is Elizabeth's Godfather! He has been searching for her for the three years she has been missing."

"Well then, Reverend Browne, you are just what the doctor ordered!" Margaret smiled, took Ted by the arm and led him down the hallway. "You are the pleasant surprise Elizabeth is in need of now," she opened the door to her sitting room.

Jeffrey was standing at the window watching one of the younger Brothers playing a rough game of football with some of the children. "Jeffrey! I am glad you are here. That Whitehall man is back again but look who he has brought with him!" She introduced the two men.

"Hello!" Jeffrey said looking the large man up and down and offering his hand.

"Elizabeth's Godfather! She will be happy to see you, no doubt!"

"Jeffrey Slocomb? Don't I know you?" Ted asked pulling his whiskers thoughtfully with his free hand.

"I am not sure," Jeffrey said. "But then I have that kind of face. People often say that to me."

"I did too, didn't I, Jeffrey? Elizabeth is resting in my bedroom, Reverend Browne." Margaret nodded across the room. "Go on!" Margaret said as she gave the big man a slight push.

"Do you think you should tell her that I am here?" he asked unsure if such a surprise would be a good thing.

"No, not at all." She gave him a reassuring smile. "A familiar, loving face is just what she needs right now."

Ted opened the door, quietly crossed the room and sat on the chair next to the bed. Elizabeth was sleeping with one arm across her face. Gently he took her hand and moved her arm back onto the bed. It was wonderful to see her face again. But she was no longer the young innocent child of the woman he had so loved. She was an adult, a woman somewhat worn with her suffering and illness and much like her mother.

"Elizabeth!" he said softly.

She opened her eyes and turned her head in his direction. She seemed to be trying to focus her eyes on him then closed her eyes again and turned her head away.

"Elizabeth! I am here. You are not dreaming!" he said touching her face.

"Uncle Teddy? Is that really you?" she asked turning back to him.

"Yes, my dear! I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you again!"

"Uncle Teddy?"

He nodded and smiled as she began to laugh and cry at the same time. "You will be safe from now on, Elizabeth." He pulled her into his arms.

"How ever did you find him?" Margaret asked when she and Jeffrey joined the others in the kitchen.

"That is a long story Margaret. There will be a time for that later," James answered gruffly. He introduced Jeffrey to Ivy.

"Is there any news on the child?" Margaret asked.

"We have some clues, yes. However, there are still some things to learn yet. But that is not what I want to talk to you about right now, Maggie."

"Perhaps I should leave you?" Father Smith offered.

"No, stay, and you as well, Slocumb! I may need your voices of reason! Margaret, I want you to get your things together. You and Elizabeth are coming back to Hock House."

She looked at James as though he was insane. "You know that that is impossible! How can you even ask me such a thing?"

"I am not asking you; I am telling you!" James said. His voice was stern and anger not too far below the surface. "You have hidden here for long enough now and it well past the time for you to face life again."

"You above all other people know why I had to leave my husband and find sanctuary here...."

"Yes and with what Owen and I have learned this day shows that Elizabeth and you are not safe here. That is no offense to you Father."

"I take no offense, Mr. Whitehall. Perhaps you should tell Sister Meg what it is that you learned that has led you to believe that she is in danger. We should sit," he motioned to the long table lined with church pews, "and have a quiet talk. I have a large pot of strong, honey tea ready."

They did as the Father suggested and waited as he arranged the teacups, teapot, sugar and cream on the table. He poured the tea, sat folded his hands and nodded at James.

"We anticipated that you would balk at this. For once, will you please listen to

others? In the past few days Jack Soskice, Edward Tabor, Henry Tabor and Ivy's husband Tom O'Connor, also a Tabor relation were murdered. Not a witness to any of it will talk. Yesterday Olivia Tabor, Edmond Tabor's wife, supposedly committed suicide. Owen and I believe that she was most likely murdered. It is obvious that any Tabor, either a blood Tabor or a Tabor through marriage is in grave danger. And as you know, an attempt to murder Elizabeth was very nearly successful." James paused and softened his tone. "Margaret, Owen loves and needs his mother. If anything happened to you, after all that he has been through, I think it might break him. Come back to his home so he can protect you. That is the very least you can do for him."

Ivy leaned forward and placed her hand on Margaret's arm. "All of that is very true, Lady Tabor. Owen has so much he has to see to and it is all so difficult. It would ease his worry if you were nearby."

Margaret sat back in the seat and sighed.

"Do as he says, Sister Meg. Perhaps it is time for you to face your nightmares. Come along, I will help you pack your things." Father Smith said and took her by the hand.

She turned her face to Jeffrey. "Will you come with us?" she asked. To James she added, "I will only go if Jeffrey comes as well."

"Bring the whole bloody place if you wish. Just know you are coming home today!"

Margaret gave James a long, pained look as she left the room but saw no comfort in his hard eyes.

The Brothers prepared a type of platform bed for Elizabeth by laying wood planks across the seats in the carriage and padding it with blankets and pillows. When Margaret was ready James carried Elizabeth out and placed her as comfortably as possible on the make shift bed.

Jeffrey borrowed a saddle from the orphanage stables for his horse and prepared to follow the coach to the Tabor Estate. Ted and Ivy sat beside Elizabeth.

"Tell the children I have gone to visit friends, please Father Smith," Margaret said as she climbed up next to James.

"Yes, of course!" he smiled up at her. "God go with you all!"

James flicked the reins and they moved off down the roadway.

"There really is no need for you to be frightened, Margaret," James said after they rode for a while in silence.

"It is not easy to face up to ones mistakes, is it, James?"

"So you admit that it was a mistake to leave the Estate?"

She nodded her head slowly. "I have felt that way for a very long time but what can you do when so much time has gone by? There is no going back is there?"

"Going back? No, we cannot go back but at some point, we should try to repair the damage we have caused. You have no need to fear Wilmot; he is pathetic at the best of times and drunken at the rest. He has not left the hall or its terraces for two years now. I doubt he will even know that you are at Hock House." He smiled and added, "Maybe you could float across the yard like some avenging spirit and scare what is left of the life out of him!"

She laughed. "That might be worth going to the Estate for!"

As they traveled along James told her about Ted's book and the shifter who called

herself Reine Crawford. After an hour, it began to rain so Margaret slid in beside Ivy.

Owen arrived at the Dover Inn in mid-afternoon. Luck was with him as he spotted Reine alone at a table in the tearoom. He watched her for a few moments before approaching her. With her beautiful clothes and perfectly styled hair, she had the looks of a rich and spoiled noble woman. It was a fact that she was a remarkably lovely female. He thought that would only be so for those who did not know just what she was. To him the long nose, slanted eyes looked too much like the raven.

"Owen!" she said in surprise as she looked up and saw him standing beside her table. She smiled but there was no joy in the smile. "I did not know that you were coming to Dover as well!"

"Well, there is no reason why you should know my business, is there? Mind if I join you for a moment?" he asked, but he was already sitting. "What have you done with Edmond?" he asked with a much less friendly tone.

"What have I done with him? What a strange way of speaking you have!"

"As I have been told! But I prefer to think of it as being frank and getting quickly to the point."

"If you are asking me where Edmond is, that would make more sense. He has gone to arrange with the funeral parlor. Then he is going to see Inspector Caruthers. Or perhaps it is the other way around," she shrugged and motioned for the waitress. "He thought I would be bored if I went with him." She picked up her purse and asked for her bill.

"No, not yet!" Owen put in firmly. "We will have another pot of tea, Miss! I have had a long, dry ride and I do have some important things to discuss with you, Reine!"

"Very well!" she sighed. "I suppose I do have a few moments to give you."

"How generous!" he handed her one of his business cards. "Are you able to read?"

"Of course I can read!"

"Well, I am new to all this shape shifter business."

Reine did not move or respond but let the card drop to the table. He picked it up and put it back in her hand. "You will need this. It is the address of my studio here in Dover. I will be there until nine this evening but not a moment longer. You will come and visit me there as soon as you can get away from Edmond."

"Are you completely insane? I gave you your opportunity to make love to me. It is too late for you."

"Am I insane? I am not now but I probably will be by the time I am finished with you and Soskice! And as far as the rest I would not fuck with you if I had not had a woman in ten years!"

The server brought a fresh pot of tea and poured two steaming cups before leaving them. They did not speak and kept their eyes locked in deadly challenge.

"What do you want?" she finally broke the silence. "Tell me now because I have no intention of visiting you later."

"You will," he said flatly, taking Olivia's wedding band from his pocket and holding it up where she could see it. "You will need to explain to me how this came to be in your bedroom."



"I have no idea," she said. There was not even a flicker of change in her face. She is good, Owen thought, but not as good as she needs to be. She had let a weakness take hold in her life and he would use it against her.

"Alright, I suppose then I shall have to ask my brother. I am sure he will be equally interested in how it got where it was. Like me, he is not too inclined in having sex with animals or freaks of nature. I don't think he will be best pleased with you, my dear!" he put the ring back in his pocket. "Or have you changed your mind and will visit me after all?"

She said nothing but slipped the card into her purse. Owen swallowed the last of his tea, threw some coins on the table and left the Inn.

"Well, it would have to rain, wouldn't it? How are you feeling, Elizabeth?" Margaret asked when she settled beside Ivy and they were under way again.

"Much better, but I can't seem to stay awake," she smiled and held tightly to her Godfather's hand. "Uncle Ted told me that you are Owen's mother."

Margaret nodded. "My son is a good, strong man. He will not let you down....again. You can rest assured on that."

Elizabeth looked at her with doubtful, sad eyes. "I met Owen six years ago when my parents brought me to the Estate. It seems like a lifetime now!"

"I have always thought that time is a sneak thief. So much time just disappears almost unnoticed and then of course it is gone forever...." Margaret's voice trailed away.

For most of the ride, Margaret sat with her head resting on the window and her eyes closed. She was lost in happier memories of the time when life still held many lovely possibilities. The dark rain clouds brought an early nightfall. Eventually Margaret and Elizabeth fell asleep. The sound of the wheels on the courtyard flagstones stirred her and she sat up looking around nervously.

"Everything will be alright, Lady Tabor," Ted said trying to sound reassuring. "In the long run!"

She gave him a small smile. "Please call me Margaret and you as well, Ivy and Elizabeth! I have not been Lady Tabor for a very long time, if I ever was. It is the time before the long run that worries me, Ted. Do you really believe this nightmare will end well or are you just trying to make me feel better?"

"I do believe that, very much! In my experience, the truly difficult things we face are usually for the best. It must have been dreadfully difficult for you when you last left here; but it was what you had to do. Now it is no doubt even harder for you to return but it is equally what you must do."

"Then I suppose I am about to put your theory to the test," she said as James pulled the horses to a stop as close to the back steps as he could. "I pray that you are right!"

"I am." Ted said firmly. They heard as Jeffrey's horse came across the courtyard and came to a stop beside them.

James, drenched to the skin, opened the carriage door and woke Elizabeth. "Are we there?" she asked sleepily.

"Yes, we are," Ted answered. He pulled the blankets to shield her head from the rain as James gently picked her up and headed up the back steps. Ivy followed close behind.

Through the rain, Margaret could see the warm glow from the kitchen as Daisy held the door open for James.

"Owen is in love with your Elizabeth," she said to Ted.

"He is? Did he tell you that?"

"No, of course not! He has yet to realize it himself but he will; as you say, in the long run!"

"Please don't put me in Owen's bed!" Elizabeth said quietly to Hanna as James carried her down the hallway.

"No, of course not, my dear," the older woman nodded knowingly.

Following Hanna, James took Elizabeth to the upstairs room that Hanna had prepared for her. Hanna and Daisy made their usual fuss to be certain that she was as comfortable as possible.

"Is Owen here?" Elizabeth asked Hanna.

Hanna shook her head. "Do you want me to tell him to come and see you when he gets back?"

"No, I don't want to see him. I have nothing to say to him!" Elizabeth turned away and curled into a ball under the covers.

When they were back in the kitchen, James was surprised to see that Jeffrey, Ted and Margaret were still out in the carriage. "Why are they not inside yet?" he asked.

"Is someone else with you?" Hanna asked trying to peer through the window at the carriage.

"You didn't tell her?" James asked Ivy.

She shook her head.

"You had better prepare yourself for a shock, Hanna!" James turned her from the window to face him. "There are three people with me. One is Elizabeth's Godfather, the other a young man who will help us here, I hope! And the other is Margaret Tabor."

After a slight pause she said, "Pardon?"

"You heard me!" James snapped. He had so much on his mind and was shorter of temper than usual.

"But...I do not understand!" she stammered.

"Well, Hanna, then you may join the unhappy group of the confused. There's a great deal we all need to understand," James said bitterly.

"Oh dear!" Hanna muttered as Daisy helped her sit in a chair.

After a few more moments Ted, Jeffrey Margaret came into the kitchen.

"Hanna! How wonderful it is to see you again!" Margaret said stepping up to her.

"Lady Tabor? Is it really you?"

Margaret smiled and the two women hugged.

After Owen and Ted left the Willard cottage Bobby was in a panic. Like a caged animal, he paced back and forth in the small kitchen. Sometimes moaning, crying and hitting himself in the head with his fists.

When night fell, he began to wander throughout the tenant village, completely oblivious to the pouring rain. A pathetic sight, he went from door to door asking if anyone had seen his 'Ma'. No one was able to help him.

He made his way to Tabor Manor and spotted by the sentry as only a shadow in

the deluge. "Stop! Who is it?" the sentry called out. "Answer or I will shoot!"

"It's Bobby!" he said moving closer.

"Jesus Murphy! Bob! Why are you sneaking around here at this time of night? Do you want to get killed?"

"I gotta find ma!" Bob said with tears streaming down his rain soaked face. He turned and headed for the stairs.

"Wait, Bob! You cannot just go knocking on the door! It is more than my job is worth to let you do that!"

"But I..."

"No, you wait here and I will go and ask if anyone's seen Mavis." He went up the stairs and knocked loudly. After a brief conversation with Hastings, he returned to the scared young man. "No one has seen hide nor hair of her! Bob, how long has she been missing?"

"I dunno!" he sputtered through his tears. Bob did not understand time and the passage of it. To him all was now and now he was frantic for his mother.

"You go back to your home and stay there. I am sure she will turn up. Maybe she is just waiting for the rain to stop. She'll come home, you'll see!"

Bob turned and walked back into the dark. The sentry could hear him slipping and sliding on the wet grass, "Poor sod!" he muttered.

Reine put the problem with Owen in the back of her mind for the rest of that afternoon. She wanted to enjoy the time with Edmond and would deal with him later.

She held his arm as they walked for a while on the boardwalk and as they sheltered in a gazebo from the rain, she told him a story of her sad and lonely upbringing with an aunt and uncle who just barely tolerated her. How happy she had finally become to fall under the wing of Abbey Pritchard. She shared with Edmond the heartbreak of a secret romance with a young soldier who had tragically died in South Africa. By the time they had settled in a local inn for their evening meal, every place and imaginary person had become completely real to her.

"I think you should book two rooms for us tonight, Edmond!" Reine suggested as they finished their supper.

"Why?" he asked with surprise. "I have no intention of sleeping alone!"

"I know that," she smiled at him coyly. "But, well, I just think it would look better that is all."

"I don't give a damn about what anyone thinks."

"But I do about myself and you do have your family name to think of."

At this Edmond laughed. "Good God, Reine! The Tabors are known throughout England as thieves, drunkards, layabouts, and just about anything else unsavory. Do you really think that any of that matters so late in the game?"

"Please, for my peace of mind?"

He nodded and smiled. "I will book two rooms only if they have an adjoining door."

"Thank you, Edmond."

At eight that evening Reine told Edmond that she had one of her headaches and needed some time of her own in her room. "I am sorry," she said sweetly. "You aren't mad at me are you?"

"No, of course not. Why would I be mad? You go and have a nice rest for a few hours then return to me here."

She kissed him and said, "You are too good to me."

"Nonsense! You will make it up to me when you are feeling better after your nap," he added. "When I am finished you will be far too exhausted to leave my bed!"

Owen's studio was a large loft room over a carpentry shop not too far from the Dover Inn. With windows on three sides it had perfect lighting for an artist but with no stove or fire place he rarely used it in the winter months and less and less since the death of Nora. That spring day it was hot and stuffy so he opened some windows and looked around.

The last pieces he had been working on were still scattered on the table where he had left them months before. He looked at them and dissatisfied he tossed them back onto the table. They were flat, lifeless and uninspired pieces, he thought, like all he had done for a long while. Like so much in his life, the joy he had known from his talent was no longer there for him. Was that the effect of Nora's tragic and unexpected death or something else? Could it be that there was a different need deep inside of him, something that nagged at him, something left unfinished. Often when it was his turn to be the brunt of Olivia's criticism for his sloppy, unkempt ways she would ask him why he forever looked like a man waiting for something bad to happen.

The thought of Olivia reminded him of the ring in his vest pocket. He took it out and turned it over in his hands. Wilmot had had it made for Isabelle. A beautiful ring, there was no doubt, but both of the women who had worn it to symbolize their marriage had died terrible, premature deaths. In time, he would return it to Edmond and if he were wise, he would destroy it or at the very least never let another woman wear it.

For the time being, he would hide it carefully. He did not intend to let Reine get her hands on it again but it was always best to be certain. He pulled some dust-covered boxes out from under the table. In the bottom of one box were several tins of powdered paint. He pried the lid up on one, pushed the ring into the powder, and placed everything back as he had found it.

The bird would come; he decided that there was no doubt about it. She could not take the chance to let this meeting with him slide, especially after he had mentioned 'shape shifter' and shown her the ring. He had enjoyed toying with her that afternoon and was looking forward to this next meeting.

To pass the time he took up a pad of paper and some charcoal and began to draw; just lines at first with no plan or thought behind his movements. His hand moved over the paper smoothly, quickly and with confidence. Lines, curves, dark, lights; a shadow here and there; a smudge done with his forefinger and in moments he was done. He was surprised and pleased with the effect. It was a young woman dancing by a fire and was undoubtedly Elizabeth. Owen smiled at the memory of that night not so long ago when she had danced for him alone, or so it had seemed at the time, even though they were in a crowd of people.

She had set a fire in him that night. He had gone to great lengths to satisfy that lust. Now the very thought of her gave new spark to that fire but not far behind was the face of the tiny baby boy she had so loved and he had caused her to lose. It was during those thoughts that he heard the sound of Reine coming up the steps and her firm knock

on the door.

"Come!" he called to her. "It is not locked."

She stepped into the room, her attitude one of lofty disdain as she looked around. "Is that where you lay your Dover whores?" she asked when she spotted a cot in the corner.

Owen sat in a chair by the window, his hand on the revolver in his coat pocket. "I am surprised you asked that, Reine. How did I fail to make you understand that I was not interested in your offerings?"

"You would change your mind if I was persistent enough. Nevertheless, I am pleased enough in that way with Edmond. I have no need of you!"

"Good then we understand each other and can get down to business."

"I have no business with you. Except for maybe one day, I will write a book on the musings of an insane nobleman. You have given me much food for thought on that." She sat across the room, ignoring the chairs nearer to him.

"And I could write a book as well. It could detail the ways to make a shape shifter! Do you think that might be interesting to you? Or do you know these things already?"

"I have no such knowledge," she shrugged.

"I see! Then perhaps I should fill you in on how Soskice created you. It was certainly of great interest to me," he pulled the revolver from his pocket and held it on his lap. "First Emile needed the heart of an evil woman. They took this from an unpopular prostitute, by the name of Rachel Crawford. Hobson murdered her. It was her luggage you brought to the Hall."

"They need the hearts of three women connected by love and/or blood and the body of a female infant. They obtained these hearts after the murders of Lady Jane Delacourt, Lady Isabelle Tabor, Mrs. Nora Tabor and her newborn child Alexis Tabor. The latter two were, as I am sure this will be of interest to you, my wife and child!" as he spoke the last few words, he raised the gun and aimed it directly at Reine's head.

Now there was a very distinct change in the shifter's body language. Her shoulders were a little less square, she sat lower in her chair and her impatient foot stopped swinging. For the first time she understood just what a formidable foe she had before her. He hated her and with good reason and hate was a human emotion she understood completely. She sat still and did not speak. There was more to come, she was sure of that and wanted to hear all of it.

After a moment, he lowered the gun and continued talking. "I found out first hand that when a shifter dies they just vanish, no telltale body and no explanations need be made. Handy, don't you agree?"

When she still did not speak, he continued.

"Another fact that I am sure you did not know is that up until the time you were created Wilmot Tabor and Emile Soskice were partners in the wide spread black mailing organization known as the 'Black Claw'. They may have had a falling out, the reason for that is not important here but it was bad enough to make them bitter enemies. Unknown to Wilmot, the gypsy troop hired to entertain the villagers on his birthday festival was none other than his old foe."

"On the day that you slaughtered Edward he told me and several other people, including Edmond that he had been paid by Emile Soskice to pick a fight with Jack

Soskice so that he could kill him in some sort of claim of self-defense.”

“I did not kill Edward,” Reine spoke quietly, her silver eyes narrowed with defiance.

“You did. Anyway, the idiot Edward killed Jack and that gave Soskice the opportunity to set into motion the events as we find ourselves in right now. However, two things went wrong for Soskice, two things he could not have foreseen at the time. Elizabeth and her son escaped and you switched your loyalties from him to Edmond Tabor.”

Reine sighed and looked at her watch in a feeble attempt to look detached.

“As a powerful shape shifter it was easy enough for you to corner and kill Edward, throw his body over the side of the house and no doubt bring his head back to Emile as some kind of trophy or proof of his death.”

“You must have over heard Wilmot’s plans to fetch his old friend Abbey Pritchard for help. I am sure that must have been a laugh for Soskice. That could not have fallen into his hands better if he had planned it. You pushed yourself back into Abbey’s life and then into the actual Tabor household.”

“Sometime around then you killed Tom O’Conner but you mistakenly used Abbey’s gun that I found at the murder site. I say mistakenly because the use of the gun pointed directly to her and then to you. Emile told you to kill Tom because of some reason or other but I am fairly certain that you did not know that he was a cousin on their mother’s side to Edmond, Edward and Henry; that making them blood relatives.”

“Then Henry was killed but not by you, by Mavis Willard or her son perhaps. I am sure that must have been a surprise for you but no doubt Soskice fobbed it off to you saying he had no part in the matter. He would not want you to get suspicious of his true intent and as far as I can see he was successful in that.”

“Earlier today I saw that the body of Jack Soskice has been removed from his grave in the Tabor cemetery. So, you see a pattern here, do you? Three male hearts connected by blood, one male heart of an evil man, as was Jack Soskice or Edward for that matter! Now as we speak all four of these bodies are missing.”

“Then you stole the baby Richard from right under my roof. That must have been a proud moment for you, but maybe I can take the shine off that. Probably Soskice told you that he wanted the child so that he and the rest of his clan could raise him. Foolishly, you believed him. The truth of the matter is that the old bastard is near the end of his physical lifetime. He is all too near to the true Hell and must have a new body,” he paused to let the words hit home and lit a cigarette, never taking his eyes of her.

Fear and rage, as hot as molten lava began to spread through Reine’s body. Sweat rolled down her neck and between her breasts as she sat riveted to his every word.

“Sunday night is a full moon and the night of the summer solstice and the one chance Soskice will have to create a new, young body to inhabit. To do this he must sacrifice his current body, a live blood relative that being the child Richard and his current shifter and that is you! Of course, I should not forget that he would also have to have the hearts of the dead men at the ceremony. He has everything all set and ready. You helped him with that, too, didn’t you?” Owen laughed. “Poor Reine! Haven’t you been made to look a fool?”

Now they both sat in absolute silence. He waited as the reality of all that he had

told her set in fully. Reine being many unhappy things was not stupid and saw the pattern completely but still pride gave her one last argument. "I don't believe you!" she said finally. "Emile would never betray me that way."

Even though he knew the truth of what she was, it was still shocking to him to hear her admit it. Now it was his turn to shrug and say nothing.

"Why have you warned me of this?" she asked. Her voice shaken and her ivory face ashen.

"That is simple. I want Elizabeth's child back safely. Bring me the child safe and sound and I will not tell what you are."

"And then you will simply kill me! You hate me because of your wife and child!"

"Perhaps and perhaps not. That remains to be seen."

"I am not afraid of you!" she leaned across the table picked up a heavy wooden hammer, held it in both hands and snapped it like it was merely a matchstick. "How do you know that I will not just kill you?" she sneered at him.

Owen smiled at her. "Impressive, I will remember that. It would be best if you did not underestimate me, my dear! I am no fool! If anything happens to me, Edmond will have all the facts as I have laid them out to you, along with Olivia's wedding ring. Edmond will know what you are and what you did."

She was defeated and she knew it.

"You need not just take my word on the issue. Go and see Soskice and find out for yourself. A few well placed questions and you should get all the proof you need. However, remember .... there are only a few days left until the summer solstice, so do not waste any time. And it goes without saying that nothing unsavory had better happen to Edmond!"

For a brief time she glared at him. Her silver eyes were full of murderous hatred. He gave her time for it all to sink in then asked, "Where is the Hobson farm?"

"That does not matter. The child is not there any longer. They have taken him to the grotto." Her voice was then a harsh guttural sound.

"Then where is this grotto?"

"I have no idea. I have never been welcome there."

"Then I suggest you find out and quickly tell me or there will be one less bloody black bird flying around my land!"

She stood and Owen again raised his gun pointing it at her. Ignoring him, she raised her hands over her head and squatted on her feet. With amazement and horror, he watched as her clothing vanished, the tips of her fingers changed to black feathers. Her arms turned to wings, her body to the torso of a bird and then last her face to the head of a raven. With a loud cry of rage, she leapt onto the windowsill and flew out into the night sky.

When Hanna and Daisy had dinner ready at Hock House, they helped Margaret set up a table at Elizabeth's bedside; the men settled in the kitchen. Ivy and Alice were sleeping and they decided to leave them to wake up on their own.

Determined to feed herself Elizabeth sat with pillows piled behind her.

"You must eat all you can, my dear," Margaret encouraged her. "You need to rebuild your strength."

After a few moments Elizabeth asked, "Why did Owen tell me that you were dead?"

"He told that to everyone. It was my wish."

"I am sorry, I shouldn't have asked. I don't mean to pry," Elizabeth sipped from her bowl of chicken stew with shaking hands.

"You are not prying; it is natural for you to be curious. I left here to end my unhappy marriage. I do not mind talking about it. I do not have any secrets, well, at least not any longer, that is!"

"Is it terribly difficult for you to be back again?"

"Strangely enough, it isn't! Up until today I swore I would never set foot on this property again but now that I am here, it is almost as though I never left."

"But what if Lord Tabor finds out that you are here?" Elizabeth asked remembering not so long before when she had hidden in Hock House.

"Then he will have quite the surprise; won't he? I was afraid of him when I left here but that was a very great time ago. I have no fear of him now. He is an old man, his body broken and in a wheel chair. I can face him with my head held high."

"You are very brave. I was terrified the whole time I was here."

"No, I am not all that brave! A brave woman would have never run away in the first place! I was immature and selfish and now I have to try and repair what I have done." Silently she added, "God help me if Jeffrey is correct."

Edmond was exhausted and drunk when Reine was finished with him. Hours of lovemaking, several bottles of Champagne along with emotion strain of the previous days left him more than ready for peace and sleep.

"Are you going to go to sleep now?" she asked in a disappointed tone as he fell onto his belly and buried his head in the pillows.

"I hope so," he sighed.

"But I don't want to sleep. Can't we stay up all night and watch the sun rise?"

"Oh, Lord Reine! I am bloody tired, you watch the sun rise if you want but I need to sleep!"

"I am too happy to sleep. I shall keep you awake if I want to!" She laughed as she jumped onto his back and began to kiss his neck.

Edmond moaned into the pillow. "Just a few hours sleep. You can wake me up for the sunrise if you wish, just let me have a little rest."

"Oh, blast!" she said falling back down off him onto the bed. "I am bothering you, I am sorry!"

"You are not bothering me; I enjoy being with you immensely. Please, just go in your room for a few hours!" He lifted his head, smiled and kissed her.

She returned the smile and went to her room. She locked the door very quietly and left all thoughts of Edmond behind as she transformed and flew in the direction of the old tower.

As she traveled, her thoughts were about all that she had done for Emile. She had existed only to please him. Had he decided to turn on her and kill her? She did not intend to die for him. She would find out the truth that night, there was no other way around it.

Strong winds coming in from the channel aided her flight back to the Estate.



The clouds and rain of earlier that day were gone. The moon, near to full, was bright. She circled the tower a few times and then could faintly hear Emile calling for her. Something was very wrong. She landed on the rumble, looked inside before entering. Emile was lying motionless on the floor in the place where he had fallen after Owen's attack. She could smell his blood. When she was certain that there was no one else in the dark shadows of the prison room she hopped down on the stone floor and transformed.

She took the old man by the shoulder, rolled him onto his back, and saw the terrible wounds to both of his knees. With his one good hand, he grabbed her arm, digging into her flesh with his strong boney fingers. "Fuck, bird. Where have you been?" he hissed at her angrily.

She twisted her arm, breaking his grip. "If you need help why didn't you call for me?"

"I did. Where were you?" his voice was angry and weak.

"In Dover with Edmond. I have to get back to him quickly before he sees I am gone. Who did this to you?" she asked with innocent concern.

"Owen Tabor! Kill him! I want him dead, do you understand me?"

"I understand!" she answered. She would not tell him that for once she found a man that she was afraid of and that was Owen.

"But first, go to Bob Willard. That is the last house at the end of the village lane."

"Bob Willard?"

He moaned. "Just do what I tell you. He is the useless son of Mavis Willard."

"The old woman I saw at Tabor Hall?" she asked. "She's a changeling, isn't she?"

Ignoring her question he continued, "She's dead. Kill Bob, and bring me proof you have done that. He knows too much and without his mother around to control him he is a loose end I cannot afford. They have Laudanum, find it and bring it to me."

"But why don't you just heal your wounds? You can do that!"

"Because I am in too much pain!" he growled at her. "Hurry up!" He pushed her when she hesitated.

I will do your little errands for the time being, old man, she thought as she flew towards the village, but I will also find out what you have in mind for me.

Reine found Bob sleeping on the front steps of his home where he had sat for hours waiting for his mother to return. She studied him for a moment. When she was sure that he was not armed, she nudged his leg with her foot.

"Willard! Wake up!"

"Huh?" he sat up rubbing his eyes.

"Come inside!" she whispered as she passed him going up the stairs.

Confused as usual, he followed her into his house. "Who are you?" he asked.

"That does not matter. Emile has sent me."

"My Papa?"

"Yes!" she sighed and rolled her eyes. "Papa!" She suspected that Mavis had been one of Emile's shifters. Often he had made children with them. They always turned out like this one; deformed and mentally unfit.

"Have you seen my Ma? I can't find her anyplace!" he asked tearing up again.

She thought for a second and took the lever he offered her. "Yes, I have seen her. I have just come from her. She sent me to get some laudanum."

"Where is she? Is she coming home?"

"Yes! First, she has to care for Papa and cannot leave him until he is well again. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Where does she keep the laudanum?" Reine asked growing more and more impatient to get back to Edmond.

Grinning inanely, Bob jumped to action. Pushing some of the kitchen chairs out of the way, he reached under the table and pulled out a wooden box. He dropped off the lid and inside was six large bottles. "Laudanum!" he nodded at the box proudly.

"Good. Bob, your Ma will be pleased." She was rolling three of the bottles in the tablecloth when an idea came to her. It might be worth her while to spend a few minutes talking to Bob to see what, if anything, he might know about Emile's plans. "Mavis has told me that you have been a big help to her in these important plans for the ceremony!"

He beamed at her.

"Are you going to be at the ceremony on Sunday?"

"I don't think so. Ma says that I did my share but I have to stay here."

"But still it is a great honor to be trusted to help in any way. What did you do?"

"That is a secret. Ma told me to forget about what I did!" he clapped his hands over his mouth for a moment, then added, "Or I'll get a real whipping!"

"Don't worry, Bob! You can tell me all about it. Your Ma just told me so because she is so very proud of you. I said you could not have done all that much but she insists that you did. If you tell me you will prove your Ma was right and a smart young man like you must have such a clear memory." She smiled and stepped very close to him.

He nodded at her.

Reine took his hands in hers. His left hand with only a small palm had two, large, fleshy claw like fingers. "So you should tell me so I will be proud of you too. You do want me to be proud of you, don't you?"

Bob nodded again, his face a bright red.

She dropped his hands and slid hers up to his shoulders. "Then tell me what you did for Pa."

"I went to Dover, all by myself," he whispered.

"And what did you do there?"

"Well..." He thought for a moment, little beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead. "I killed Mr. Henry like my Ma said Pa wanted me to. I rolled him in a carpet and put him in my wagon."

"I see! Then what did you do?" she asked, her heart racing.

"I came back here to get Ma and the two bodies she had in the cellar."

"Do you know who these bodies were?"

"One was Mr. Edward but he didn't have his head no more and the other one I never seen before."

"Did that one have lots of curly black hair?" Reine asked, sliding her hands to his neck and rubbing gently the sides of his face.

"Yes!"

"What did you and Ma do with these bodies?"

"We took them to the grotto so they would be ready for the ceremony."

"So you have been to the grotto. How wonderful for you! Is it far away?"

"No! Just down there!" he pointed the ground beneath them. "We went to the beach and some men took the bodies inside the cave. Ma told them that there was going to be another body. Some copper was going to bring that one."

"So we get to the grotto through caves at the beach under the cliffs?" Reine asked hiding her excitement and her rage at Emile.

"Yes! But I couldn't go in there."

"I can see why you would want to go to the ceremony. It must be really wonderful." Reine purred moving even closer to him.

"And Papa will have a new body when it is all done. Maybe one day he will give me a new body too!"

"Maybe! Mavis was right, you have been a great help to Emile. You do have reason to be proud," she leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Thank you, Bob. You have also been a great help to me!" Reine said and with a jerk of his head snapped his neck. The still smiling but very dead young man fell to the floor with a thump.

So Owen was telling her the truth, she thought as she searched through the kitchen drawers. Emile was going to shift into a new body and she would have to be part of the sacrifice. Well, the old bastard was in for a great disappointment. He had met his match when he decided to cross her.

She found a large butcher knife and with one strong chop cut off Bob's left hand. She opened a nearby door and saw the dark stairs that led to a small dirt cellar. She picked up the body, threw it down and closed the door. She wiped her hands and rolled the severed limb into a towel. This and the bottles she wrapped in the tablecloth tied a knot in it and placed it on the porch. Grabbing it with her powerful claws, the raven carried the bundle and laid it at the feet of Emile.

Reine leaned over the old man. He had not moved at all since she had left him. Could he be dead? But if he was, wouldn't she be as well? She shook his shoulder and he jumped.

"I am not dead!" he hissed at her. "Get me the laudanum."

"I know you are not dead, Papa!" She looked at him with loving concern; a hot heat of hatred rolled in her veins. She untied the blanket, uncorked one of the bottles and handed it to him.

He snatched it from her, drank half of it and fell back onto the stones to wait for the relief he so needed.

"Here is proof that poor Bob is dead," she held up the bloodied hand for him to see.

"Good," he nodded. "I see that even in your fine clothes you have not lost your wiser side."

"Don't you like my dress?"

"You insult me coming to me in human clothes. Take it off!" he said as he rose up on his elbows and slid back to his usual spot with his back against the wall. The powerful narcotic was setting in and the agony of his injuries melted away.

Hiding her repulsion under her seductive smile, she slowly opened the buttons down the front of the dress and let it fall the floor. Under it, she was naked.

"That is more like it!" he said, taking another drink from the bottle.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Much." He rolled up his pant legs to see the injuries that Owen had given him. Both kneecaps were broken and the right one had a bone protruding through the skin.

"I don't understand. I have seen you heal other wounds, why not these?"

"I told you, I was in too much pain, too old to overcome it without my old friend here!" He smiled his lopsided smile back at her, held up the bottle and took another swallow. "But watch and be impressed!" He ran his clawed hand down over his wounds and then back up again and as he did so, the wounds vanished and his legs were as they had been. "There. Perhaps I am not that old after all."

"You are not old, Papa! In my eyes you are wonderful!"

"It is not your eyes I am interested in, raven," he said as he unbuttoned his filthy trousers. "Come here!"

When he was done, she rolled the hand back into the blanket and asked him "What are you going to do with the bottles? The guard will see them when he brings your food in the morning."

He laughed. "Those idiots are scared of Emile. They open the door, slide the plate in and run like rats! They haven't even the courage to look at me."

"Well, Papa, that is the way it should be." She patted the side of his face lovingly, thinking of how easy it would be just to snap the fragile old neck as she had done so many times before.

He crackled with his strange laughter; his tongue loosened by the drug. "You have no idea the great glory that is ahead of me so very soon. Just think of all that I will do when I am young and strong again. More than just England will shudder with fear at the name of Emile Soskice."

"If you take a new body, will I get one as well? What will happen to me?"

Emile laughed. It was a nasty, threatening sound. "So many questions, my nosey raven! It does not matter what happens to you. You are nothing. Remember that! Go now, back to your Tabor bed and leave me to dream. But bring me the head of Owen Tabor by the next sunset."

She knew then. It took every ounce of her will power not to lash out at him, not to see him suffer the surprise and horror he so deserved for betraying her loyalty. She smiled sweetly, kissed his hand then transformed.

She took the blanket and Bobs' hand and dropped it into the fast running waters of the channel before flying back down to the cliffs where Bob had told her she would find the cave that led to the grotto.

At first, she could not find the opening, hidden as it was behind several freestanding, huge rocks. The cave entrance was not very big, a tall man would have to stoop to enter but once she flew inside she was in a long, wide tunnel. From somewhere down the tunnel came the smell of wood smoke. Without a source of light, it was pitch-blackness but as the raven, she used her strong sense of smell to guide her. On her return, she could use the smell of the beach to find her way.

She came to an open space with a high ceiling. Lit lanterns hung from several long poles. On the farthest wall, two rope ladders hung down from a large opening.

The smell of the smoke was stronger, as well as the acrid aroma of opium. She could hear faint voices from beyond the opening.

She landed on the wall and from the black shadows surveyed the surroundings. Before her was a grotto so vast she could barely see the other side. The roof, dotted with huge stalactites was at least thirty feet from the ground. In the center of that was pit that burned with a bright red, smokeless and silent fire. Back from this fire, in a semi circle were the five Soskice caravans. There were three small campfires. A half a dozen or so men milled about, speaking in hushed tones and occasionally she heard a faint laugh or two, but they seemed all to be in a state of drugged reverence. She could not see or hear any children, females or babies.

She flew in and staying in the darkness of the crags and crevices, she moved a quarter of the way into the grotto. Now she could distinguish from the fire and opium smoke the stench of decaying human flesh. Moving in closer and behind the fire pit, she came across six large stones slabs. Four of the slabs held what appeared to be human forms covered in black satin sheets. She wondered as she flew over if the two empty stones were for her and the baby.

She took note of a large tunnel, big enough to bring in the wagons, directly across from the rope ladders. When she had seen all that she could she left as she had come and flew back to her room at the Dover Inn.

Once everyone had assigned bedrooms and the younger females settled in their beds, Margaret began the long and anxious wait for Owen's return. James had told her only that he was away on business. If it was business on this matter of the Black Claw, she knew he could be in grave danger. From the window seat in the study, she could see across the gardens and down the winding road that lead up from the gates. As she watched for him she thought of the times so long ago when she had sat just where she was then and watched him as a child playing in the gardens. It felt as though that had been yesterday. She wondered why she felt so instantly at home.

Lost in memories of those times an hour passed before James entered the study. Ignoring her, he stretched out on the lounge with his long legs still on the floor and placed his hat over his face.

"You aren't thinking of going to sleep?" Margaret asked him.

"That was my plan!" he said from under his hat.

"Aren't you even the slightest bit worried about Owen?"

"No."

"I have no idea how you could have let him go off like that alone. How could a caring father remain so calm?"

He lifted his hat and turned his head to face her. His look was hard and cold. "Because I did not abandon him I have been with him every day of his life. I have seen him at his best and his worst. He will be fine!" he glared at her until she turned her face from him.

"Pompous ass!" she muttered quietly. His words had hit her hard and she knew he was right. All those years ago, running away from her problems had seemed like the only way out of her heartache and fear. Now with a heart full of true regrets she felt the full force of her weakness. "I don't suppose that it matters much nor changes anything, Jamie, but as I told you earlier, I know now that I was wrong not to do as you wanted.

We should have taken our son and started a new life together. I was a coward and could not face the world with my adultery!" she fought to hold back the tears.

"You are right in one thing, Maggie! Your feelings on the matter now do not change anything. Be quiet and let me be," he pulled his hat over his face one more time and sighed wearily.

"Ivy is a lovely young woman," she continued stubbornly to talk.

"Thank you."

"She is very pretty. Much like her mother! You must be very proud of her."

He sat up, squashed his hat down hard on his head. "I am very proud of both of my children," he said his eyes bright and locked on hers he walked across the room and pulled her to her feet. "Is it wrong for me to ask you to give me finally the gift of my own son?"

"James! I cannot tell him. Why can't you see that? I would rather die than lose his respect!"

"Well, then it is true, Lady Tabor, you are a coward. This is Owen's study and you have no business being here. Go to your room!"

Furious she glared back at him, reached up and knocked away his hat. "A gentleman does not wear his hat in the house! Have you forgotten this is my house? I will be where I please."

"I know it is hard for a simple female brain," his face only inches from hers. "But please try to realize this. You gave up your rights to this house and your family when you pretended to kill yourself all those years ago. You have no claim to any of this now!" he paused for breath but continued before she could respond. "How do you think I felt all these years believing that the woman I loved so very much committed suicide because I rejected her?"

"But you did not love me. If you did, how could you have married Alice Morgan?" she demanded, losing the fight against her tears.

"Easily! I wanted my own wife. You may not realize this but it was not at all pleasing to have to borrow another man's wife when I wanted a woman. Do you think it filled me with pride as I waited night after night, alone in my house, while you let Wilmot Tabor do as he wanted with you just so that you could hang on to your claim of title and fortune for my son?" She turned from him but he took her arm and pulled her back to face him. "You may have had a bitter and empty life all these years but rest assured I did not. I was a happy man the day I brought 'my' wife back to my home!"

"How nice for you, James! I guess then you had a pleasant life and my death had little effect on you after all! You had all you wanted."

"What I wanted was my son to have my name and to call me father and to have you as my wife; because with all my heart I loved you. That would have been simple for you but you denied me both."

"You...!" she began but stopped as a firm hand knocked on the door. Ted opened it and stuck his head inside. "Sorry for interrupting, but I thought you would want to know that I just saw Owen bringing his horse into the stables."

"He's back! Thank God!" Margaret said brushing the tears from her face she rushed by the men and down the hallway to the back door.

James, his face red with anger, retrieved his hat pulling it firmly onto his head. "That bloody woman would drive a saint to drink!"

"I couldn't help but overhear."

"I am afraid I can get a little loud but that is my nature and those bloody females can be trying at times. Even now she refuses to see what is so obvious."

"I had a rather similar situation in my own life as I told you and Owen earlier. It is a long and lonely road to love another man's woman."

"Did she refuse to leave him as well?"

"Well, the sad thing for me is that it was not until she had been murdered that I realized I had never asked her to leave her marriage to be with me. Oh, she knew I loved her and I encouraged her to leave him but I never had the sense to tell her all that was in my heart," he shook his head sadly. "Why is it so much easier to say things to hurt each other than it is open our hearts?"

James said nothing to that and the men followed Margaret to the kitchen. She was slicing a loaf of bread and covering each in thick slabs of butter. "Owen will be hungry," she said to Ted. "Could you fill some mugs from the cask of beer? James makes the best for miles." She was trying hard to sound cheerful and hide the fact that she had been crying.

As he ate and drank, he filled them in on the events in Dover. "I waited for Reine in my studio. When she showed up, she was as bold and cocky as ever but nervous as well. I told the facts. It was when I told her that some of the victims sacrificed to make her were my wife and daughter that I got her full attention. She did not say much; listened mostly.

I told her that if she brought me the child back and healthy then I would make sure that her secret was kept from Edmond."

"And she believed you?" Margaret asked.

"I think she did but I have only her actions to speak to that fact. When I finished speaking, she stood. At first I thought she was going to try and fight me but she changed, then and there before my eyes!"

"She shifted?" Ted asked and when Owen nodded, he continued. "God Lord! In all the research I have done on the matter I have never heard of a shifter changing willingly in front of a human."

Owen nodded. "She was rattled to the bone and more. I have no doubt that she went to Soskice to try to find out the truth of what I told her. If she has any sense and strangely enough I think she does, I will hear back from her at some point early today."

"Then we had all better get some sleep," James spoke. "I, for one, have had enough of this day!"

When they were alone Owen took his mother's hand. "Thank you for coming home, Mother. I know it must have been difficult for you but you can see now why I wanted you and Elizabeth at Hock House. I have to keep the both of you safe."

"Actually, it was not as hard as I thought it might be. In some ways it seemed as though I never left, as though the clock has stopped."

"And with James? Have you two stopped quarreling or whatever it is that you are doing?" he smiled at her.

She looked surprised and slightly indignant. "We are not quarreling, why would we be?"

"Lovers who part in strife rarely forget their grievances or at least that has been my experience."

"He told you?" her face went bright red.

"No, Mother, you did."

"I did no such thing."

"You did. Every time I mentioned anything to do with James over these last years. I saw it in your eyes. Even the day when I told you that Alice had died. I saw the faint hope that you tried so hard to hide."

"You think you know so much! I am going to bed and you should as well! I thought you would not mind that I took my old room. And Elizabeth is in the room beside me so I can keep my eye on her," then remembering she turned back to him. "Oh yes, I should tell you that I brought Jeffrey here as well."

"Slocomb? Why?" He had had little time to decide how he felt about the man and was none too pleased to hear he was in his home.

"Because he is my friend and I want him with me! So you be polite to him, Owen." She gave him a warning look as she left the room.

When the house was quiet and Owen sure that all was securely locked and bolted he went up the stairs and stepped quietly inside Elizabeth's bedroom. A lantern burned dimly by her bedside. He was about to turn and go when she spoke.

"Who is it?" she asked sleepily and with a little fear.

"Owen!" he whispered as he came and sat on the bedside. "Did I wake you?"

"How could you dare to show your face to me?" She tried to sit and Owen saw that Margaret had tightly bound her swollen breasts. "Oh Hell, I am so useless. I am even too weak to sit. Go away!" She lay back down in frustration.

"No, I will talk with you," he said taking her hand in his. "Do you know about the solstice ceremony?"

"Of course I know! Why do you think I wanted so badly to be away from here? I told you time and time again that we were in danger, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did and I was a fool not to listen to you. How did you find out about Soskice's intentions? Surely it must have been a secret from you?"

"It was a secret, but Jack told me that Emile wanted a new body. To do this he would have to kill him and Richard. Jack thought his father would never kill him. What a fool he was!"

"Why didn't you tell me the details?"

"Would you have believed any of this?" she asked, breathless from the effort of talking. "You would not even hear of the curse, let alone shape shifters. Uncle Ted used to tell me that a closed mind is a dangerous thing."

Owen sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "I am so sorry, Elizabeth. I know that these are very small and useless words but I must say them."

"They are not as useless as you might think," she said quietly.

"I was wrong to keep you here," he reached over and cupped her face in his hand.

Her confused and pained mind raced. Oh, Lord, she thought, please do not touch me like that. Do not be nice to me. Make me hate you! "Is that why you kept me here, just for the sex?"

"No, not 'just' for the sex. I saw a beautiful woman whom I wanted very much to make love to and like a fool; I let that passion rule out reason. I swear to you I will get your son back safe and sound," he leaned his face close to hers and in the dimness of the moonlight; she could see he spoke the truth. She knew then that she would be



forever hopelessly in love with Owen Tabor. Her eyes filled with tears and she turned her face away.

"What are you thinking?" he asked his breath hot on her face. "Tell me!" he tried to pull her face back to his but she pushed his hand away.

"Nothing!" she said as she began to cry. "Nothing that you need to know, Owen."

"Lizzie, why are you crying?" he asked just as Margaret opened the adjoining door and stepped into the room.

"Owen! What are you doing to Elizabeth?"

"I am not doing anything. I just wanted to see how she was feeling," he stood and moved from the bed.

"You have no right sulking around in the dead of night frightening your guests."

"I was not frightening her!"

"Then why is she crying?"

"How the bloody Hell should I know?"

"Go to your room and back to your own bed," she opened the door to the hallway.

"I do not appreciate being spoken to as though I was a child," he responded trying to find a measure of dignity in his embarrassment.

"Well, that is simple then, my dear. Do not act like one!" she closed the door behind him and turned the key in the lock

"Females!" he complained loudly as he went down the stairs.

Reine slipped as quietly as possible back into Edmond's bed. It was only two hours to dawn. She was cold and very tired. However, not too tired to think before falling asleep of what this new day might bring. If she played things right it could mean freedom from Emile and the dreadful life she had had with him. If she made a mistake she would either die or be lost forever draped inside the body of the raven.

She had to get the ring away from Owen and thought of how wrong she had been to take it in the first place. Above all else, she had to get that child back; there was no way around that.

Owen stripped off his clothes and washed. He positioned the revolver and the pistol under his pillow. His boots, still with the Soskice dagger inside, nearby where he could easily get it if needed. Then he collapsed onto his bed, more exhausted than he had ever known.

Almost immediately, he fell into a deep sleep and began to dream of black feathers, climbing slippery steps and watchful bright silver eyes. The dream began to tell story and take form. He was with Elizabeth in the valley beside the abandoned church. It was night and a bright shaft of moon light lit only them, casting all else into blackness.

Now with his body relaxed his mind in dream state, Owen's energy radiated across the floor of the large room. From her place of eternal wait, Nora began to feel the warmth from his energy. She stirred from her trance. Drawn to him with an instinct as powerful as any in nature she rose from the floor, floated still for a moment and then began to slide towards bed. She rose up the side and hovered directly above him, her face only inches from his. Gently she pressed her forehead against his and his

vision revealed to her. She saw her man and the woman in the moonlight and could not stay away. She slipped into his mind and stepped into the dark of the valley of his dream.

"I want you!" Owen was saying, his hand parted her cloak and pushed it back and she was naked. "I always take what I need."

"Isn't it more than want or need? Do you not understand that you love me?" Elizabeth asked in a teasing whisper.

"I cannot love you!" he whispered, held her shoulders and slid his hands down to her breasts. "If it is love that you want then you must go from my home. I can never see you in that light. It is wrong."

"Right or wrong, you cannot deny it, Owen!" she stepped closer to him, with her eyes and body daring him to take her.

"Then I will have nothing to do with you," Owen said with anger but his actions betrayed his words. He pulled the cloak from her and threw it on the ground. "You will leave my home!"

"I cannot go without my child," she said wrapping her arms around him. "Bring me my baby and you will be free of me!"

Roughly, Owen pulled her hard against him and kissed her. In a rage of jealousy, Nora ran from the darkness, threw herself into the embrace and slid inside of Elizabeth, taking over the dream.

"Owen. I love you so!" Nora said as they parted.

"Nora?" he asked with confusion as he looked down on her.

In the dream as in her strange reality, Nora let the wedding dress fall from her. She ran her hands down his chest. Her frozen fingers seared against his burning skin.

"I need you!" she sighed and reached up and kissed his lips, running her tongue across his teeth.

Another bloody odd dream, Owen thought as he pulled her into his arms and passionately returned her kiss.

Now in control of the dream the spirit in Owen's room had slowly pushed the blanket down and off his body. She ran her hands down the length of him as her long stifled passion grew. "Let me ride you, my love. You did so love it when I did that!" she whispered in his ear. She floated now so close to him that her breasts touched his chest. She kissed his neck and ran her tongue along his shoulder as she had so often done in a time so much happier than this.

In the dream, she pleaded, "Tell me you love me, Owen! It has been so long since you told me that. Please tell me." She held his head in her hands and lowered him to her breasts.

"This is only a dream, Nora!" his hot breath turned to steam as it touched her skin.

"Tell me...." she insisted pushing her body against his.

"I love you. We will never be parted," he gasped giving into his passion. He lifted and she wrapped her legs around him. In one smooth, urgent movement, he was inside of her. "I have missed you, Nora!" He lowered to his knees and then on the wet, soft grass.

In the Great Room, Nora caressed him and rubbed the length of her body against his. As he took her in his dream, she lowered herself on him, spread her legs on either side and slid him inside of her. She rode him as she had so often done before.

"Just a dream!" he said over and over but was completely lost in his needs.

In the dream and in strange reality, as she had done so many times in life, she brought them to the explosion of their passions. It was not until Nora rolled off him that Owen finally woke. For a very brief time, seconds of confusion he thought he was still dreaming. When reality hit him, it was with a wave of fear and adrenalin.

"Fucking hell!" he cried as he rolled from his bed. Instinctively he pulled his revolver with him but left it hang uselessly at his side as he stood motionless staring at the glowing apparition that had once been the woman that he loved. She lay motionless on her belly. Fear and shock were quickly replaced with anger as he stirred himself to action. Quickly he pulled on his trousers, pushed his revolver into his belt and then kicked the bedside hard. "Get out of my bed!" he said fiercely.

Unable to sleep Margaret had gone to the study to look for something to read when she heard Owen yell. She took her lamp and rushed across the hallway. First, she saw Owen, followed his angry glare to the bed, and saw the glowing, pale figure on it.

"Owen?" she gasped and took a few steps back. The air was so cold she could see it as she spoke. "What is it? Is she real?"

"No, of course not!" he answered taking the lamp from his mother's hand and held it over the bed. "Does that look real to you?"

"Is it Nora?"

"Yes, for God's sakes, Mother! Yes. Should I introduce you to my long dead wife?" he answered with anger and frustration.

"Sweet Jesus!" Margaret exclaimed, crossing herself. "How long has she been there?"

"I have no idea, but she was there when I woke just now!" he leaned forward grabbed the spirit by her feet and dragged her across the bed.

"No, Owen, don't be so rough with her!" Margaret said pulling him back from the shade. She took the frozen shoulder and gently rolled her over. She moved closer to the dead woman's face. "Nora! Nora Tabor....wake up!" she put her hands on either side of the face as she spoke. "Nora, please try to hear me. You must not stay here. You have to understand that you are dead and must go to the light of God. You must go to your home in Heaven!"

Then Nora opened her eyes and smiled at Margaret. "I am not dead! Not dead, ask my husband!" She smiled at Owen, stood, picked up her wedding dress and floated across the room dragging it behind her. She stopped in the center of light and then melted into the floor.

"There you are, Mother! There is your so-called Heaven, there in the floor of her home! There was no more kind or loving female than she was. Is that what your God allows for his children? To be murdered in life and left behind in death?" he demanded visibly shaken.

She came to his side. "I am so very sorry, Owen but there is something we can do to send her home, there must be. We can free her from..." she stopped. "What do you mean; murdered? You told me that she died in child birth!"

He ran his hands through his hair, took a long drink from a whiskey bottle.

"That is what I thought until yesterday. God, I have been such a fool!"

"We have to talk, Owen, but not in here." The atmosphere still charged with their

fear and cold enough to see their breath. "I have a fire going in the study. Come along, hurry up!"

Owen followed her as she wanted but he was not in the mood for talk. It seemed to him that all he had done the last few days was talk and it was long past the time for action. However, Margaret was very much in the mood to talk and she would have her way.

"Tell me why you believe that Nora was murdered?" she asked when they settled near the fire.

"The labor was long, two days but on the second night my daughter was born. Other than being very tired, Nora seemed well enough and the child was perfect. Sometime during that Nora developed a fever and was in terrible pain. I stayed with her, along with the female who was supposed to be caring for her. Nora seemed to know that she was dying and tried to tell me so but I would not hear it. I fell asleep beside her in the bed and when I woke she was gone!"

"But, Owen that can happen."

"I have not finished yet. Mavis Willard was the mid wife, the same person who poisoned Elizabeth. Nora's symptoms seemed to be the same as the ones I saw in Elizabeth, the sudden high fever; the strange color of the skin....and that terrible smell of the Monks Hood."

"And the baby?"

A long moment passed before he answered. "As I said she was fine but I was not very involved with her in the hours after Nora died. At some point, Mavis brought her to me and told me that she was dead. The birth had been too much for her heart, Mavis told me and like a fool I believed her." With shaking hands, he lit a cigarette and told her about the stained nightshirt and the end of Mavis Willard.

Margaret stood and walked to the window. The sun was starting to rise and in her heart she could feel the beginning of a very powerful day, the dawning of the truth for all of them.

"Today is the last day I will face as a fool, though; that Mother, is a fact!"

"Good," she said firmly making her final decision. "And the same for me! Owen, wait here. I will be right back!" She went to the bedroom shared by Ivy and James and quietly woke James.

"What is it?" James asked as he pulled on his trousers.

"Shh!" she said looking in the direction of the sleeping Ivy. "Nothing is wrong, Jamie! At least nothing new, that is. I am going to do what you wish!"

## Chapter Ten

James took Margaret gently by her arm and looked closely into her face. "Are you sure that is what you want? Do not do this just to placate me."

"I have no need whatsoever to placate you. It is simply the correct thing for me to do. It is time for me to face the truth and, no doubt, for all of us!" She put her hand over his for a brief moment and smiled at him. "Perhaps there will never be any peace between you and me but we can give a measure of it to our son."

From his room at the back of the second floor Jeffrey heard the muffled anxious voices. Disheveled, sleepy and holding his pistol he stepped out into the hallway.

"Jeffrey!" Margaret whispered, smiling at him. "I have decided that you are absolutely right. I..."

"He's right? What has he got to do with this?" James demanded.

"No, James! He is very much the reason why I finally have the strength to do this."

Jeffrey smiled at her; they paid little attention to James at that moment. "Will you be alright? Would you like me to be with you?"

"No, Jeffrey, I will be..."

"Young man, you would be best advised to mind your own business. Go back to your bed!" James demanded, leading her down the stairs. "Is there something going on between you two that I should know about?" James whispered angrily.

"My private life is not your business, James." She looked down her nose at him as she spoke and seemed to be enjoying herself. They joined Owen and she closed the door.

"Can we get on with this?" Owen said with thinly stretched control.

"Yes, Owen. Please sit, both of you, this could take a while."

"I don't see why. It is all very straightforward...isn't it?" James asked.

"It depends on how often you interrupt me! Owen, this is something I should have told you a very long time ago, but I was a coward and selfish. Wilmot Tabor is not your father; James Whitehall is! There is no doubt about it."

Even though he had so long suspected this to hear her speak the words was a shock. He looked at her and saw no trace of shame on her face, just pride and love. He looked at James and saw very much the same thing. After a long moment of silence, he cleared his throat and said, "Yes, you should have told me a very long time ago. But I can understand why you were not ready," he looked to James. "To be perfectly honest with the both of you I have long since known that. I may be a fool but still I have eyes to see! I am very much like my father, aren't I?"

"You are indeed!" James smiled at him. To Margaret he said "Thank you, Maggie!"

"But there is more I have to tell you both, much more! It is about Wilmot and his connections with Emile Soskice and the Black Claw."

"We learned of that from Ted's book." Owen ran his hands through his hair. His

parents could feel the tension and the dark rage that had been building in him these last few days. It flowed from him with force.

"Well, now you will learn even more. I was only fourteen when I learned of the organization called the 'Black Claw' and laid eyes on Wilmot Tabor for the first time. I was an orphan and lived with my Uncle. On the night that was to be the beginning of a lifelong nightmare, he brought me to a meeting of the 'Black Claw'. There was a dozen or so men there and about half as many females of the same age and innocence of myself. I was under the impression that they had also been brought there by family members."

Owen stood and began to pace, cursing under his breath.

"I think I was at some point of the evening drugged because, mercifully, I have little memory of the next hours. When I woke the next morning, I was in Wilmot Tabor's bed at Tabor Manor. He showed me a marriage license that I had signed, as had my Uncle as a witness. I took it to be legal. Now, I am not sure." She stopped briefly, sighed and brushed the front of her dressing gown of some unseen mess. "If you look you will see on the back of Wilmot's right shoulder the tattoo motto of the Black Claw. It is a black circle with an inverted cross."

"At first Wilmot kept me more or less under lock and key. I did manage to sneak a few letters out to my Uncle, pleading for help. I never knew if he got them. No one ever came to help me. To be frank and that is what you both want, when I would not comply with Wilmot's depravities he would beat me and then when that began to be too much effort he just tied me to his bed and would rape me. Night after night, weeks that turned to months and years and that was my life!"

"My God, Maggie! You told me that you married him for the status and the money! Why did you lie to me?" James demanded.

"To save face and pride, why else? Would it have made any difference? Would you have loved me more and not married another woman?" she asked, fighting back the pain, shame and heartache of her tortured youth. She waved her hand at him to be quiet.

"Wilmot brought a young woman into the house. She was his mistress or one of them. Her name was Chloe, she was the same age as I was, but I never did find out anything else about her. She was to be my companion but it was more as if she was my guard. For a year she was by my side day and night," Margaret lowered her eyes and sighed. "She was there even when Wilmot raped me."

"I suppose in time Wilmot saw how well trapped I was and began to let me function as a member of the household and then as his wife openly. There was not a moment when I did not wish my husband dead!"

"It was around that time when James came to work here. I was completely taken with him at first sight," she smiled at James. "I was only just seventeen. I was very young and very pretty. Despite the fact that I was the wife of his employer James was more than interested in me. In a couple of months we were very passionate lovers."

"Right, Margaret!" James put in quickly. "I do not think Owen needs to hear all the details. Please get on with your story."

"Yes, James! Well, Wilmot wanted me to become 'comfortable' with his organization so he brought me to a meeting....a different sort from the first. He told me that they were a group of like-minded individuals who studied matters of spiritualism and the occult, but that was all he told me. I had little choice but to go with him. They met

in a cave, a huge place so far across that I could hardly see the other side. In the center was a large, red smokeless fire.”

“The men wore masks or hoods. There were women; I think that they were for the most part prostitutes. I am sure that you both can imagine the terrible things that I was witness to that night. I never went back again, no matter how much force Wilmot placed on me. I told him I would rather be dead than a part of that world. I begged him to leave the ‘Black Claw’, but he would not. I insisted that he build a house for me to live in apart from him and to my surprise, he built this house. That was the only time he gave me what I wanted.”

“I am sorry for never telling you about any of this before, Owen. But I could never foresee any of this happening,” she paused, shaking head sadly.

Owen sat next to her, took her hand and looked into her eyes. “I understand more than you think. What I need right now is for you to remember anything you can that will give us some idea of where you went for this meeting?”

“Well, as I said, I was hooded and tied in such a way that I could not reach the closed carriage curtains. We traveled for what seemed to be a very long time but as I remember it now it was probably less than an hour. I have no idea where we were when we stopped. I was not allowed to remove my hood until I was inside the cave.”

“However, if it is some help, it was terribly windy, very cold even for a fall night and I could hear rolling waves. Wilmot did something I thought was odd even for him. He picked me up and carried me the rest of the way. We seemed to be in long hallways, with lots of twists and turns. I have told you this because you must know that Wilmot is far from an innocent victim in all this matter. He is a monstrous murderer!”

Owen stood and looked down at James “Do you agree that it is time for us to pay the old man a visit?”

James nodded and followed Owen to the door.

“Wait!” Margaret exclaimed. “I want to come with you!”

“No! It could be dangerous....”

“Owen, I will come with you! After what I have told you, don’t you think I deserve some satisfaction? I need to face him and tell him that he is not your father. I must do that or I will never have any peace!”

“Let her come, Owen! We can take care of her and she is right, if any woman ever deserved to face her tormentor it is your mother!”

“Fine then!” he said with exasperation. “But be prepared Mother. I will show no pity on him because a female is there!”

“Owen you are so old fashioned,” she sighed, smiled and kissed his cheek.

Margaret dressed quickly. She checked to see that Elizabeth was sleeping soundly and returned to the study. James and Owen were telling Ted their plans. She gave him some last minute instructions as to what to do should Elizabeth wake before she returned. “Elizabeth has a bell and will ring it when she wakes.”

“I want to speak to you for one minute!” James said taking her arm and leading over to the far side of the room. She stood close to him looking up into his worried eyes. “You do not have to do this, Maggie! All I wanted was for you to tell the truth to Owen. I do not expect you to have to face Wilmot.”

“You have not changed one bit, have you? What I did just now was not for you or about you, Jamie. I did this for Owen and for myself. And for other reasons that

you have no knowledge of." She turned to walk away from him but he held her back.

He leaned down and whispered in her ear. "We have more to say to each other. This matter between us is far from over."

"I don't think so!" she replied and he let her go. "It is over, finally! I have done what you so long wanted. You have your son, your daughter and new granddaughter. You have the memories of your happy marriage; what more do you want?"

This time he let her walk away. She is right, he thought, what more do I want?

Margaret held Owen's arm as they walked the roadway to Tabor Hall. James walked a few paces behind. The heavy morning mist rose around their feet. Thick, gray clouds parted long enough to send a shaft of morning light across the face of the ancient mansion.

"What an ugly thing it is!" Margaret said as she stopped at the bottom of the steps and looked up. "I used to think that Tabor Manor, sprawled across the hill like that, was like an old and abandoned mistress and Hollyhock House her beautiful rival waiting in the wings. Romantic, don't you agree?"

Neither of the men answered her; they each lost in their own ideas of what the next few minutes would bring. Only Margaret was calm and completely sure of the outcome.

Lying in her lonely prison, Nora was smiling. Elated by her recent experiences with Owen she gained strength and courage by the second. He had finally seen her and she had comforted him in their bed, just as she had so often done. Only one thing darkened her happiness and she was ready to remove that problem. She could feel and smell the presence of Elizabeth. Fueled with burning jealousy she knew she had to get that woman away from her husband.

Nora had heard the muffled conversation coming from the study. Then suddenly Hock House fell quiet. She began to move, staying under the floor and inside wall. She followed the scent until she was in the room where Elizabeth lay asleep and unaware of the danger so near.

Elizabeth began to dream. She was lying in a field of summer wild flowers. The sun was warm and bright in the cloudless sky. It was wonderfully soothing. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she became aware of the danger and a nagging need to wake up. With little effort, Nora slid into the unaware dreamer's body.

Elizabeth sat up swung her feet onto the floor and slowly stood up. Now in complete possession of the body Nora opened her eyes, gasped and choked as she realized the need to breathe again. The body felt heavy and awkward as she took a few tentative steps.

She opened the door, checked to be certain there was no one in the hallway and went quickly into the room she had once shared with Owen. In a far corner, she found several flat clothing storage boxes and scattered the contents across the floor. As quickly as she could with stiff and unfamiliar limbs, she dressed in what had been her favorite riding suit. It was too tight and too long for Elizabeth's rounder, shorter body but she rolled up the skirt and left a few buttons open and it was good enough. She pulled on riding boots that were far too big but she had little interest or time to waste. At the dresser, she brushed and braided the hair. "Now," Nora whispered as she looked



in the mirror, "you will go back where you belong!"

Aware that she could reach the kitchen and back doorway unseen on the servants' stairs she moved silently down the hallway, stairs and into the kitchen. Hanna was nowhere in sight. She could hear Daisy in the laundry room. She took a handful of sugar cubes, stepped out the back door, and went with confidence down the steps.

She smiled at the guard who looked at her with confusion but because of her dress and bearing did not challenge her. He knew not to let anyone into the house, but no one had said anything about keeping everyone inside.

"I will take Majesty for his ride this morning," she told the groom. "Please, prepare him for me!" While he did so, she talked gently to the horse, offered him the sugar and made him comfortable with her. She rubbed his ears as she remembered he liked. The horse relaxed and accepted Nora eagerly as she climbed up on his back. She headed out across the back of Tabor manor, through the hob fields and to the North West road that would take her to the Hobson farm.

At the Manor, Owen tried his key but the door bolted from the inside. He knocked loudly and in a few seconds a small female voice called "Who is it?"

"Owen Tabor!" he answered with a slight pause before saying the second name.

"Sorry, sir!" the nervous maid said with an awkward curtsy as they entered. Hastings was coming quickly down the hallway buttoning up his coat.

"Mr. Owen! I did...." Hastings stopped in his steps and his words when he saw Margaret.

"Hello Hastings!" she smiled at him. "Please don't look so dismayed. I am not a ghost."

"Lady Tabor?" Hastings asked in utter confusion.

"We have come to see Wilmot. Is he still in his bed?" Owen asked.

"Yes sir! He was very unwell yesterday and I am sure he will want to sleep in today!"

"Well, that is too bad for him. We shall have to disturb him. Where is his valet?" James asked.

"I believe he is having breakfast in the servants' hall."

"Good. Get the rest of the staff and keep them down there, until you hear from me again."

Hastings nodded and turned to leave when Margaret stopped him.

"My son is going to show the Lord a new gun he has bought for him, so if you hear a shot or two please do not worry. It is only them trying the gun."

"Oh dear!" Hastings muttered to himself as he went to see about Owen's orders.

"Listen," Owen whispered to Margaret with some urgency. "What have you got in mind?"

"Don't worry, Owen. I am not going to kill Wilmot. I will leave him to your hands."

"Just as long as you understand that for the time being nothing matters more to me than getting my hands on Richard!"

"I am not a fool, Owen, I know that!"

"Alright then," Owen said. "Wait here for one minute."

Wilmot's room was awful with the stench of sickness and the mould of the old

and ill. Owen crossed the floor, stepped over the sleeping Belle who stirred only long enough to smell Owen's trousers. He threw back the curtains and opened the windows. Wilmot woke and quickly sat up. "Lord Sakes, Owen!" he exclaimed.

"You reek, when did you last bathe?" Owen asked as he pulled open the night table drawer and removed the revolver.

"If you had cared enough to be around yesterday you would know that I am not well! What are you doing?" he asked as he watched Owen take another gun from the box under the bed.

"These guns will need cleaning, no doubt!" Owen said. He ran his hand under the old man's pillows and between the mattresses, finding no weapons. "Where are the rest of your guns?"

Wilmot sighed pulled the pillows behind him and leaned back. "There is one in my dresser drawer and one in the holster under my coat," he pointed to a coat that hung on his wheelchair.

"That is it then? All of them?" Owen asked when he had gathered the guns and was unloading them.

"Yes! There is one more in my study desk. Where did you go yesterday?" Wilmot asked, oblivious to the danger.

"I was 'truth gathering'!"

"What is that supposed to mean? As my oldest son, you should be with me in these difficult times. I have told you that. I hope you are not going to give me any more grief."

"An odd word for you to use. Grief! Something you have shown little of since the deaths of two of your sons," Owen said, his tone turning darkly.

"I am a man who holds his emotions closely, as you should do. It is manlier."

"I am wondering; what was it that ended the partnership between you and Emile Soskice," Owen asked in a flat, matter of fact manner. He stepped closer to the old man, pushed him forward and pulled down his nightgown, the Black Claw tattoo was on his back just as Margaret had said it was.

"What?" Wilmot pushed Owen away.

"You heard me!" Owen said taking his gun from his holster and leveling at the suddenly frightened old man.

"Is that what you mean by 'truth gathering'? You have been prying into my affairs."

"I believe that the murder of my wife and child are very much my business and before this day is over I will have my revenge!"

Whatever color was still in the sick man's face drained away completely but he was not moved from his stubborn stand. "I have no idea what you are going on about. Get out of my room!" he ordered but with no force in his words.

"I will leave when I am ready," Owen said as he opened the bedroom door. James stepped in, followed by Margaret. She walked directly to the foot of the bed with her companions on either side of her, each with their guns drawn.

Wilmot looked at her, wiped his eyes and reached for his glasses. When he had them on his jaw dropped and he sat up straight.

"Well, Wilmot, you have not fared well these last twenty odd years, have you?" she asked. She stepped behind Owen and to the right side of the bed, her hand on the

pistol in her pocket. Wilmot said nothing, shocked beyond words.

"But, I see that Belle is doing wonderfully well. Hardly looks like a dog that must be 33 years old, don't you think, Owen?" Reality hit the old man hard but it was too late! As he called out the dog's name Margaret leaned over, placed the pistol on the sleeping dog's head and pulled the trigger. Bits of the dog flew up to the covers of the bed and landed on the old man.

Owen grabbed his mother's hand, pulled her back and took the gun from her. "Look!" she cried, pointing at the carcass. As they watched the remains of Belle began to disappear and in seconds were completely gone. "You see, that is why I know of shifters!"

Wilmot fell back further onto his bed and moaned like a frightened child.

"Jesus!" Owen exclaimed. "Belle.... a fucking shifter?"

"Did it never occur to you that a dog should never live this long and be in such good health?" Margaret demanded. "No, I can see not! Shall I tell them who Belle was, old man? Who she was when she was human and mine? Or would you like to confess your sins yourself?"

"She is insane!" Wilmot whined weakly, looking from Owen to James.

"Fine then, I will tell them. In the first year of our so-called marriage, I gave birth to a child. Dear Wilmot was not at all pleased when I presented him with a daughter, were you?"

"Lies, she is...."

"Shut up!" Owen yelled at him, leveling his gun at his head.

"She was a beautiful child and I named her Belle!" Relief and rage flowed from her as she released such a long held living nightmare.

"Bloody Hell!" James muttered as the sense of what she was about to tell them set in.

"When Belle was four months old she disappeared, as did her nanny. Wilmot told all who dared to question him about her that the child was taken by the nanny and would most likely return her for money. But that never happened, did it?" she turned and looked up at Owen. "In an effort; he said, to make me feel better, he brought into the house a damn dog! A dog to replace my baby!" She walked up to the bedside, her body shaking with rage. With powerful hatred she slapped Wilmot across the head, sending the weak old man falling backwards.

"Owen!" he yelled. "Get this crazy woman away from me!"

"Don't turn to me for help. From this time on you are on your own and it is long over time that you get what is coming to you."

"You are my son, you must...."

"He is not your son!" Margaret spat at him and she moved to stand beside James. "This man is his father and every day since he was conceived, I have thanked the Lord for that blessing!"

"Liar!" Wilmot glared at her and then at James. "James would never betray me!"

James nodded his head and smiled. "If that is what you believe then you are a bigger fool than I have ever known. Maggie was mine for years and right under your roof."

"How can a man with seeing eyes be so blind?" Margaret asked in general.

"Look at them. They are more alike than any two men could be!"

"Owen?" Wilmot looked at him with pleading eyes. "You know that is not true. Tell me that you do not believe them."

Owen moved his gun slightly and pulled the trigger. The bullet entered the wall only inches from the Wilmot's head. He threw his arms up over his face. His breath was coming in harsh gasps.

"Tell me where Soskice has hidden the baby!" Owen demanded in the stunned silence that followed the shot.

"What baby?" Wilmot groaned and slid down onto his back. "I was a part of the Claw, I admit that much, but not any longer, Owen! Not since they killed Nora and your child. That is the reason why I ended my connection with them. I knew about their plans for Jane and Isabelle but not about your wife. I would never have stood for that, I swear it!" He pleaded, peering over the blanket top.

"Tell me where that child is or the next shot will have better aim."

"I don't know what you are talking about! Why would I know? I have had no dealings with them for almost four years."

"Where is the Hobson farm?" Owen demanded stepping closer.

"I have no idea. Go ahead and kill me, if you have it in you. If you are that man's bastard you are no more use to me!"

Owen took a step forward leveled the gun once again pulling the trigger. This time the bullet grazed Wilmot's ear. Blood poured from the wound. Feathers and bed stuffing flew through the air and stuck to the blood.

Abbey woke at the sound of the shot that killed the dog but she was not sure what it was that she had heard. She decided to check on Wilmot. He had been so weak and ill the day before she was worried about him. She dressed quickly and heard the second gunshot as she stepped out into the upstairs hallway. This time she knew exactly what it was that she heard.

"Lord!" she exclaimed rushing back into her room and pulling open her suitcase. The pistol that she had hidden in it was gone. "Damn! That bloody bird must have taken it!" She looked around Reins room briefly but there was no sign of the gun. She gave up and rushed down the stairs.

"Where the Hell is everybody?" she called down the empty hallway just as Owen wounded Wilmot. She opened the door. James grabbed her arm and pulled her in the room before she could flee. "What is going on in here?" she asked as the scene before her registered in her mind.

"Abbey!" Wilmot cried at her. "Help me!" Blood poured from his wound.

Margaret took a few steps closer to Abbey. "It's you!" she exclaimed. "Owen, this woman is Chloe!"

"Margaret?" Abbey asked in shock. "I thought you were dead!"

"Chloe?" Owen asked smiling. "Well, well! Don't we have an interesting turn of events?"

"Let me out of here!" Abbey demanded as James blocked her way to the door.

"Get on the bed!" Owen yelled at her. "Now!"

Shaken and terrified, Abbey did as Owen told her. She pulled Wilmot's hands from his head and tried to wipe away the blood with the bed sheets. "Owen! You have shot him. You have to send for a doctor!"

"It is just a scratch!" Owen said with a shrug. "Would you rather I put him out of his misery?"

"No! It is your duty to get him a doctor!" Abbey pleaded with him.

"You think so?" Owen asked with sarcasm as he sat down in a nearby chair. "I think I will just sit here and watch him die and have another chat with you, Chloe!"

"Owen you can't let him die. He is your father; no matter what he has done."

Owen made a sound that was something like a laugh. "Come and sit with me here, Mother!" he said as he pulled a chair near to him. "This could take some time! I don't think Abbey has realized just yet the danger that she is in."

"But what have I done against any of you?" Abbey asked as she applied pressure to stop the bleeding. "Yes, I admit that I worked as a companion for Margaret Tabor when she was a very young bride..."

"I was never his 'bride'. I was his victim! And you were my jailer!" Margaret interrupted her with force.

"But I was never unfair to you, Margaret. I brought you food when Wilmot withheld it as a punishment. When he would leave the Estate and ordered you be kept under lock and key in his bedroom; I let you free. And I provided an outlet for his demands that you did not want."

"If you mean did you fornicate with him when I wouldn't; yes that is true and all the rest is true as well. I do not know if you assisted him stealing my daughter or if you were a part of the evil workings that ended her short life but I do know that you were well aware of what the 'dog' was after Wilmot brought her to the house!"

"No, I did not. Years passed before I even knew there was such a thing as a shape shifter!"

"Then how do you know that we are even talking about shape shifters? No one has even mentioned the word to you?" Owen asked.

"But....what else could you mean?" Abbey stuttered as she tried to find her words. "I know now what they are, but I did not know then how Wilmot 'made' his shifter. I swear I did not know that he had anything to do with the disappearance of your daughter."

"I was curious why Wilmot had to have that dog with him so much. Why he even took it with him when he went away," Margaret said loudly in order to quiet Owen and Abbey. "He said he bought the mutt to keep me happy but I never had a single moment alone with her. One night when Wilmot and the dog were in your bedroom, I watched from the transom! You really should have had the sense to close the damn thing. I saw the dog transform in a young female and watched as she climbed into the bed with you and that man," she took a deep breath and shook her head as though to shed an awful memory. "Years passed before I was to realize that my beautiful child had been sacrificed to make that thing."

"And that is the same for me!" Abbey pleaded. "Please you must believe me. Wilmot, tell them! Tell them I had no involvement when you killed the baby..."

With the little strength the old man still had, he dug his fingers into her fleshy arm. "Shut your fucking mouth, Abbey! I am warning you!" he hissed at her and to the others added. "Get out of my house, all of you!"

"Anyway, Abbey, it is pointless for you to continue in this manner! You may as well know now that I had a visit from Emile's latest pet last night. Your delightful

Reine has filled me in on your plan.” Owen said in a tired matter of fact way.

Wilmot looked genuinely surprised, his eyes narrowed and he looked back at Abbey, “Reine? She’s a bloody shifter?”

“That is a surprise to you, is it Wilmot?” Owen asked with a smile. “It seems Abbey’s pretty protégé only masquerades as a human and spends most of her time as another of the Soskice ravens! Seems she has grown tired of all that and wants her freedom from him and from Abbey.”

“Me?” Abbey’s voice cracked with frustration.

“Give it up, Abbey! She told me everything about how when Wilmot came to you for help you decided it was the perfect time for your revenge against him,” Owen lied again to cause a rift between Abbey and the old man. “Certainly Reine could have eventually killed all the Tabors without you being here, but you wanted to be here and see the misery with your own eyes! So, with Soskice and the raven, you made the quick plan to come here and wreck havoc on this family. Reine also told me of the falling out that tore the Soskice-Tabor partnership about. That she also learned from Abbey!”

“No! That is not the way it was! No! If she said that she is lying! I do not know anything about you and Emile, nothing! She came to me, sent by Emile when they heard that Wilmot was coming to me for help. I could not refuse her; not and see another day. Wilmot that is the truth! I did not wish for any of this to happen to you. Time and time I have tried to talk her out of any more killing.”

Wilmot lunged for her; taking her neck in his vice like grip. Owen motioned to James to do nothing. “I’ll kill you, you bloody cow!” Wilmot growled at her. “If it is the last thing I do!”

In shock and fear for a moment Abbey did nothing, and then in one swift movement she raised her legs and kicked her feet hard against his chest. He fell over backwards, lost his grip on her neck and cracked his head on the table as he fell on the floor. He scrambled through the mess of broken glass to his feet, took a step back to the bed, and then stopped. For the briefest moment he turned and looked at Owen; anger turned to fear and to agony as he held his chest and fell to his face on the floor. He twisted and cried out once and then fell still.

Owen stood and picked up the old man by the hair and felt for a pulse. “He’s dead.” He said and let him drop to the floor. Margaret, looking ashen and shaken, made the sign of the cross, pulled a blanket from the bed and laid it over the body. Abbey crawled off the bed and backed into a corner of the room.

“Are you alright?” Owen asked placing his arm around Margaret.

“I think so!” she answered doubtfully.

“Well, we’ve finished in here. James, bring the bitch, will you?”

James took Abbey roughly by the arm and pulled her after him. “Come on! We aren’t finished with you yet.”

“Keep your eye on Abbey!” Owen said to James when he had Margaret settled in a parlor chair. “And get Mother a brandy. I’ll speak to Hastings and be right back.”

He told the household staff heads of the death of Lord Tabor.

“Send for that quack from Dover to bring a death certificate.”

“But what happened?” Hastings asked.

“He was examining his new gun when he tripped and fell; the gun went off and grazed his ear. This no doubt caused his heart to give out.” Owen shrugged, showing

how little he cared. "When is Edmond due back?"

"Soon ... in the morning he told me!"

"So much death!" Cook said as tears began to fall. "When is it all going to end?"

Owen smiled down at the woman he had known all his life and his heart went out to her. He put his arm around her and said. "Pull yourself together, old girl. I need you and Hastings to be strong and keep this place going for me. Can I count on you?"

She sniffed into her hanky and nodded her head. "Please be very careful!"

"You can be sure of that."

"Just one minute, sir," Hastings added as Owen went to turn away. "While you were....in there a young man came to the back door. Says his name is Slocomb and he wants to see Lady Tabor!"

"What the bloody Hell is he doing here? Shit, alright send him into the parlor."

James brought Abbey to a far corner of the room and prepared the drink for Margaret. Bright morning sun streamed in through the lace curtains. The room was warm and lovely and a vast contrast to the terrible scene they had just witnessed. Margaret closed her eyes and tried to calm her shaking body.

"It seems your young man wants to see you," Owen said to his mother with sarcasm as he joined them. "I think you had better send him about his business. We have no need for strangers here right now."

"Lord Tabor is dead?" Jeffrey asked coming up to Margaret.

"Yes," she looked up at him, tears brimming in her eyes. He sat next to her and took her hands in his.

"Do you need to rest for awhile?" he asked and ignored the other men watching them closely.

"Thank you, but no! I am feeling very well. God forgive me but a great weight has been lifted from my heart!"

"Really? I am surprised."

"But, Jeffrey, this is what you wanted me to do; to tell James and Owen the truth? Why are you angry?"

"Do I seem angry?"

"Well, yes. Now what have I done wrong?" Margaret was exasperated.

"Listen here, Slocomb!" James spoke with controlled anger. "This is none of your business. I suggest you go back to Hock House."

Jeffrey let go of Margaret's hands and stood. "You are right, Mr. Whitehall, I should not intrude on such important family matters." Before he left the room, he turned back to Margaret and pointed across the valley to the horizon and the dark tower.

"Soskice is a threat to the men you love, my dear, and we all know that but there is a far deeper evil that lurks not too far behind him. If you do not tell them the complete truth their fate will fall down to you and there will be no second chances in that."

"But I do not have any idea what you are talking about!" she argued, her voice rising slightly.

"You may lie to me if you are that weak but can you really convince yourself?" He turned from her and headed for the doorway. To all he said. "I need some air. I am going for a walk."

The sun had faded behind a cloud. Margaret was suddenly cold and again very

frightened.

"What the Hell was all that about?" Owen asked but she did not answer or look his way.

"Suit yourself!" Owen said with a shrug and turned his attention to Abby. He took a chair and sat directly in front of her. She had the look of a frightened animal, her eyes wide and dark and her hands holding tightly onto the arms of the chair. James leaned against a wall with his revolver still in his hand and pointed at Abbey.

"Do you remember how I told you to think clearly?"

"Of course I do! Surely, you do not believe what Reine told you. How could anybody believe anything such a creature says?" she asked looking from him to James and back again.

"Then why don't you tell us your side of the story. It is safe to say that this is your last chance to do so."

Abbey took a deep breath and began. "I was Wilmot's mistress for years, from the time I was little more than a girl, and until the time when Isabelle found us together. I was devastated when he ended our relationship but he had bought for me the 'Turtle Dove' so for that I was grateful and had no feelings of revenge against him or his family."

"I am not the slightest bit interested by what you are telling me now, Abbey! I am not one to sit bored for long, perhaps you should get to places that are more relevant to the problem we face right now!"

"But this is all part of the whole, Owen. I knew about the 'Black Claw' their purposes and activities. Wilmot did not want me be a part of the meetings because of my psychic abilities, or that is what he told me. That was just as well, because I had no interest in it. Through Wilmot, I met Emile Soskice and his family. Eventually he came to rent some land from me where he could camp his family and they stayed there off and on for several years. It was through him that I learned how the shape shifters were created and only then understood what had probably happened to the baby Belle," she paused for a minute looking at Margaret.

"It was four years ago this coming summer when Wilmot and Emile began their falling out. The matter was simple; Emile wanted complete control of the Black Claw as Wilmot had promised him years before. Wilmot was not inclined to keep his promise. I do not know why because I had no contact with him at that time. Emile threatened Wilmot with a curse and when Wilmot would still not relent, Emile placed the first curse on Wilmot. Take the curse business how you want but it was just at that time when Wilmot had his second and most serious stroke! Is that correct?" she asked.

When no one answered, she continued. Her voice was shaking with fear.

"It was followed by two smaller ones in a few weeks just as Emile told me would happen and those left him in his wheelchair. Then events began to happen quickly...."

"Quicker than you are telling them, no doubt!" Owen interrupted with growing impatience.

"Emile seemed to forget about Wilmot and formed a new partnership with a man I met once; a John Delacourt, but I know nothing else about him."

"One of my girls had come up pregnant and Tom Hobson, one of Emile's men claimed to be a doctor and said he would take care of the matter for us. One thing I did not know at the time was that Emile had grown tired of the shifter he had then and



decided it was time to make another. The unfortunate prostitute, Rachel Crawford was her name, died and I am certain Tom killed her. By the time a few more weeks had gone by Emile had his new shifter; the one I had to bring here."

"And to that end they murdered Jane Delacourt, Isabelle Tabor, Nora Tabor and her new born; is that correct?" James asked.

Owen took the Soskice dagger from his boot and ran it through his fingers as they spoke.

"Oh, God!" Abbey moaned. "I had nothing to do with that....none of it! I swear it. When I found that out I ended my business with Emile and they left my land. He put the curse on me to make me lose my talents and my beauty, leaving me as you see me now. I had no further contact with Emile or any of his family until the raven showed up at my place the other day!"

"So I am expected to believe that you are little more than an innocent victim in all this?" Owen asked after a moment of silence.

"It is obvious that you will believe what you want! I cannot help that. The raven had overheard Wilmot's plans to come to me for help, told Emile and he ordered her to come to me and insist that she be brought to the Manor as my student."

"And what was in this for you?" James asked.

"She told me that when all was done that Emile would take the curse off of me. I gave her the name Reine, the dead prostitutes' luggage and we came here. I know that she has killed and many times. I believe that Emile has also told her to kill Edmond but she is in love with him and will not do it! I have no idea what the plans were for Wilmot or for you, Owen! That is it, what more can I tell you?" she pleaded with Owen.

"What do you know of Mavis Willard?"

"I don't know anyone by the name Willard. Emile did tell me once about a shifter he had made a long time ago who had taken on the name of Mavis! He said that he had stripped her of her ability to shift and had left her on the property of someone he did not trust."

"Where is the Hobson farm?" Owen asked getting to the important aspect for him.

"I told you before. I do not know."

Owen moved a little closer to her in the silence that followed. He picked up the hem of her skirt and slid the edge of the very sharp knife through the stiff silk as though it was butter.

"Maybe you should try a little harder, Abbey!" James encouraged, his voice flat and menacing.

"Oh, Bloody Hell, listen to me! Emile told me little of what went on with his family when they were away from the land I rented to them. I do not know of any farm. Don't you think I would tell you if I did know? I have nothing to lose to tell you."

"Leave her be for now, Owen!" Margaret said suddenly. "She may be of use to you when the shifter returns."

"Yes!" Abbey eagerly agreed. "She knows where the child is! She took him there. I can help you with her."

"Perhaps!" Owen asked looking up at her from the shreds he was making in her skirt.

He stood, slid the knife back into his boot. "If you want to see another dawn, Abbey,

you had better be a great help to me! We are going back to Hock House.”

“Do you want me to lock Abbey in the cellar?” James asked.

“Oh, for God’s Sake, James, I am not going to try and escape. Do you think I want to live the rest of life in fear of you and Owen as well as Emile Soskice? I want this matter cleared up once and for all!”

“No, James. I want her where I can get at her quickly should I feel the need.”

Daisy had finished with her last load of wash and dragged the heavy basket of damp sheets out on to the back porch to hang on the drying line. “Hello, Mr. Wiggs! Could you help me down with this thing?” she called to the sentry. “Last time I had to slide it down and almost broke my neck!”

“Glad for a chance to do something, Daisy! It is awful boring standing out here for six hours at a shot!”

“I guess it is!” Daisy said as he placed the basket on the ground where she indicated. “But then, it is time you barracks men has something to do to earn your keep!”

“I’ll have you know that Mr. Whitehall keeps us busy, have no fear on that! I’ve picked more hops in my day than any two men!” Wiggs winked at her.

She crossed to the stables and retrieved the stool she needed to stand on to reach the line. “So Mr. Tabor has come back and taken out Majesty?” she asked when she returned.

“Not Mr. Tabor. One of his young ladies, I think.”

“What’d you mean one of his young ladies? He ain’t had one of them around in a long time!” Daisy chided as she climbed up on the stool and Wiggs handed her up a sheet.

“I don’t know about that but I do know that a pretty young lady came out of there about an hour ago, told the stable boy to prepare the horse and then road off in that direction,” He nodded towards the Manor.

“Well, there is Miss Elizabeth but she is far too sick for that.” Daisy argued.

“You must have been seeing things. And Mr. Tabor is going to want to know where his horse is!”

“Hey, Dick! Get out here a minute, will you!” Wiggs yelled into the stable. When the freckle faced boy showed up he added, “Dick, tell Daisy who took Majesty will you, She don’t believe me!”

“No!” Owen said as he stepped out from behind a sheet. “You tell me!”

James holding on to Abbey with Margaret on his other side was coming down the hill behind him.

“Where is my horse?” he asked looking from Wiggs to Dick.

“Young lady took him, Mr. Tabor!” Dick said nervously.

“It wasn’t Elizabeth; she is far too weak still. I doubt she can stand, let alone walk and ride!” Margaret said.

“What did she look like?” Owen demanded. “Was she tall with long dark hair?”

“Just the opposite, sir!” Wiggs answered when the frightened groom seemed to freeze. “She is kind of short, like Daisy with brownish red hair. Pretty lady, but a little on the pale side. And she has a bruise on her face, though.”

“God damn!” Owen exclaimed, running up the steps and into the house. Ted, still reading in the study heard the commotion; stepped into the hallway in time to run

into James dragging Abbey behind him.

"What is it? What's happening?"

James stopped. "Have you seen Elizabeth this morning?"

"Well, no. I just asked Daisy to make a tray to take up to her and I was going to wake her." Ted answered eyeing Abbey curiously.

"The stable boy and the sentry say she has taken a horse and left the Estate!"

"But that is not possible. I have been in the study the whole time. I would have seen her pass by."

"Not if she took the servants stairs!" James said as he pulled Abbey up the stairs, with Ted close behind.

Owen and Margaret saw the empty bed and the crumbled wedding dress on the floor.

Owen cursed profusely in dumfounded anger.

"Is that the same dress?" Margaret asked picking it up off the floor. "It isn't it? It is Nora's dress!" She pulled Owen closer to face her and whispered at him. "This morning before you woke up, were you dreaming about Nora?"

"What difference does that make?" Owen asked in exasperation.

"I do not want details; just tell me if she was in your dream? It is important."

"Yes, for what it matters, I did dream about her!"

"Sweet Jesus! She can transport!" Margaret exclaimed as James, Ted and Abbey joined them. Ivy came out of her room and stood watching from the hallway.

"Elizabeth?" Ted called loudly back into the house.

"Don't bother." Margaret said to him. "She's gone!"

"What the Hell does it mean, she can transport?" Owen demanded.

"Nora! She can take possession of a human body. She must have taken over Elizabeth; that is how she would have had the strength to leave." Abbey answered.

"Good God!" Ted said shaking his head with worry. "What will happen to Elizabeth if Nora leaves her? Will she fall sick again?"

"I am not an expert of the matter, well, who could be? But I am afraid so."

"I have had about enough of all this madness I can take. First of all as a sane person I did not believe in ghosts and the like and now they are running my life!" Owen shook his head and ran his hands roughly through his hair.

"Let me have the dress." Abbey took and held it against her body. "I may be able to get something from it."

"I will be back in one minute." Margaret left the room and went into the master bedroom.

"I am starting to agree with Owen. A ghost maybe one thing, but now we are talking of possession. Perhaps we are letting our imaginations get the better of us," James said to Ted.

"You are right, to a degree, James. Surely, we cannot deny that what we have seen with our own eyes! Elizabeth is very weak and ill; how else could she have found the strength to leave here alone?"

"I told you to watch her, Ted!" Owen said to him angrily. "Why the Hell weren't you doing that?"

"That is not important now Owen!" Margaret said as she returned holding the nightgown she had put on Elizabeth the night before. "This was in the clothes cupboard.

Nora must have dressed Elizabeth in some of her old clothes.”

“She has taken Elizabeth to that farm to give her to the Soskice family!” Abbey exclaimed.

“But if none of us know where this farm is how the bloody Hell could Nora know? She was most certainly never there.” James demanded.

“Well, somehow now she does because that is where they have gone!” Abbey said flatly.

“Do you know where the farm is?” Ted asked Abbey.

“No, I don’t and I wish I did! Reine does! It was she who took the child in the first place.”

“Then the bitch will take us there. She told me last night that they had moved the child from there but maybe she was lying. She will take me there today! You can be sure of that if nothing else!” Owen said taking the dress from Abbey and throwing it on the bed. “Ted, you see to these women, and for God’s sake do it properly this time! Do not let Abbey out of your sight and be prepared to shoot her if you need too! James and I are going back to the Manor and wait for Edmond and that fucking bird!”

With intuition and instinct, Nora followed the fields and roadways as Reine had done when she brought the baby to the Hobson farm.

She pulled Majesty to a halt and tied him in a cluster of trees and bushes that ran the back of the property. From her vantage point, there was no sign of life. The gypsy wagons that had filled the back yard were gone. Peeking around the rundown barn she saw a wagon and horse in the front yard. Her only plan was to get Elizabeth in the house, in the hands of anyone who was there. Then she would go back to her home.

She moved quickly across the yard and slid under the back porch. She listened then moved up the steps, opened the door and slipped into the house. Standing for a while in the kitchen she waited for her eyes to become used to the dim light. She could hear a rough, rasping sound coming from a room across the hallway.

Following the sounds into a sitting room, she found Mama Soskice snoring in a chair. She did not hear Hobson as he came up behind her. He brought the barrel of his gun down across the back of Elizabeth’s head. As she fell unconscious to the floor, Nora left Elizabeth’s body and snapped back to her lonely waiting place like the crack of a whip.

“Well, well! Look who we have here!” Hobson mumbled as he rolled Elizabeth onto her back. He picked her up, threw her over his shoulder and took her to the cellar and the same prison room that held her before. She moaned slightly as he laid her on the stone floor. “Don’t worry!” he smiled down at her. “You won’t be here for that long, this time.”

Upstairs Mama Soskice was standing at the doorway. “Tom, what do you want? I told you that I was not going to leave here. What is going on?”

“Richard’s mother has paid a visit. I have her locked up for the time being.” Tom answered.

“How did she find us?”

“Hell if I know! But Emile will be more than happy to have her again.”

“Kill her!” The old woman squealed at him. He shoved her hard and she fell back onto the floor. “Kill her! Do what I tell you!” she demanded struggling to get to

her feet. "She will only want the boy back. Emile doesn't need her anymore!"

Tom narrowed his eyes and leveled his gun at her chest.

"No!" Mama squealed. Tom fired once, the bullet grazing her head and knocking her back to the floor.

"Emile is done with you, old woman!" he said and shot again, this bullet ripped into her chest and he had accomplished what he had come for....or he thought he had!

In not too much time Tom had Elizabeth tied and under a blanket in the back of his wagon and headed off down the road.

Back in Wilmot's bedroom James and Owen placed Wilmot's guns back in their usual places and lifted the body onto the bed. Owen pulled the nightshirt down and showed James the tattoo.

"Only an idiot brands himself with the proof of his crimes," James said.

"So do you understand more clearly now why my mother had to do what she did?" Owen asked.

"I understand that she had to be away from him but not why she chose your inheritance over me."

"Well, we all make mistakes. She has learned her lesson, I am sure and now it is time for you to forgive her."

"That is not for you to say, Owen! But she has done as I wanted, finally, and told my son who his father is so I can at least try to forgive her," James said as they left the room.

"That is all I ask."

It was decided that Ivy and Margaret would help with the morning meal, more to keep busy than anything else. Ted took Abbey into the Great Room and sat her directly across from him, not taking his eyes off her.

"I don't think we have been introduced," she said with a sigh, giving up on tidying her hair. "I am Abbey Pritchard. I am....well, was a friend the Tabor family."

Ted nodded. "I am Reverend Thaddeus Browne," he said, his mood bleak and hardly able to comprehend that Elizabeth was gone again; and this time from right under his nose.

"You know, when Owen told you not to take your eyes off me I do not think that he meant it literally. Could you please stop staring at me? I do not intend to try to escape. I mean, Hell's bells, how far do you think I would get?"

"I am trying to figure you out. I have met a few so-called psychics, mediums over the years but found very few worth their words. But I have to admit that little act you did with the wedding dress was very impressive," Ted said with a slight sarcasm to his voice.

"I see! Well, it was not an act. Nora Tabor has taken Elizabeth's body, but it is no difference to me whether you or anybody else believe me or not. You will find out in the long run, like everyone does," she stood. "I need to move a bit! Something does not feel right! Can I just walk a bit in here?"

He nodded but never took his eyes or his pistol off her as she walked the length of the long room. Beside the long table, she looked down at the black velvet covered book, turned and seemed about to say something but then changed her mind and moved on. She circled the room once then moved to the center, stopped and looked up at the stained

glass window.

"Lovely, isn't it?" she asked quietly.

Ted grunted.

Suddenly a responding crack vibrated across the room and seemed to stop in the center of the room. Ted jumped to his feet and Abbey got to her knees in the colored circle of light. She ran her hands across the shining, smooth floorboards. "Oh dear!" she said looking over her shoulder at Ted. "You had better start your prayers, Reverend! The shade is back and your Elizabeth is now again in the hands of her enemies."

"What are you doing?" Reine asked when she woke that morning and saw Edmond sorting through Olivia's belongings.

"Dying, I wouldn't be surprised. I am going to have to cut down on the drinking," he answered, rubbing his forehead.

"Oh!" she smiled at him sleepily. "I mean what are you doing with those things?"

"It's not here! Damn it to Hell, somebody's nicked the bloody thing," Edmond answered in frustration.

"What?"

"The wedding band. I have the suitcase she brought to the hospital and the package with her personal effects that were taken from her body and the ring is not here. What kind of person steals a wedding ring off a dead person?"

"Was it valuable?" she asked. That uncomfortable and unfamiliar feeling of having made a mistake crawled back into her mind.

"Yes, but more than that, it was my mother's wedding band. She left it to me in her will and I mean to get it back!" he said as he slammed shut the suitcase. "Get up and dress. I am going to file a report at the police station before we return home."

Why did I take the damned thing? Reine wondered as she dressed and threw the scattered clothing into her bag. What was I thinking? Now Owen had a tool and a weapon to use against her. She would have to do what he wanted, at least for the time being. He wanted the baby; she wanted to be free of Emile and now the ring back. They could make a deal and a fair trade, the baby for the ring! That could work!

Jeffrey walked for a while aimlessly through the spring gardens then crossed down the hillside. To the far side of the field he could see several children playing with two small puppies. A few adults stood nearby laughing. That was the life, he thought. The honest pleasures of a hard day's work. Laughing, well fed children with a pretty female by your side. How lucky these people were if they but knew it! He thought of Elizabeth. He would be a happy man as well with a woman like that by his side. Could it be, he wondered as he followed almost exactly the footsteps she had taken to the abandoned church, that he could he win her heart. It was not written that way, he already knew that, but he also knew nothing was down in stone and all could change.

"We shall see!" he said aloud with a smile as he stepped up to the heavy carved doors. A sign over head read 'For God we Strive.' He pulled open the squealing doors. Well, he thought as he walked down the rubbish-strewn aisle, no one has strived in any way in here for a very long time. He cranked open one of the fifthly stain glass windows, straightened an over turned pew and sat down. Sunlight laid a path across the

gloom for the dust to fall and settle in. It was dark, quiet and cool; a good place to think and Jeffrey needed to think.

He knew then that he had been wrong thinking that a few well placed words, simple and subtle suggestions would trigger Margaret to tell Owen and James all they must know. Had she truly forgotten or placed it with other nightmares to the furthest places of her mind? No matter how much affection he had for Margaret, he had no choice now but to make her face the reality of the situation. The reality of what had truly happened to her that night she left Wilmot Tabor's home for the last time.

After a few moments, he stood to leave. He leaned outside to close the window when a nearby movement caught his eye. He stepped back into the shadows and searched the tree line that ran along the side of the cliffs up to the old tower. He had sensed more than saw anything but now watching carefully, he saw tree branches move in a way that said something powerful was moving through them. He could not see anything, but it was there, he was sure of that. He could feel cold ripples of its evil presence cutting like shards of glass through the atmosphere.

Staying as much as possible in the darkness Jeffrey moved to get a better look and followed the shapeless force as it moved through the tree and towards the tower turret. As though looking at water ripple down a mirror he watched as the thing jumped from the tallest treetop and into the broken wall at the turret top. As much as he knew it was there he was sure, it could just as easily be aware of him.

As he turned to leave the church, he took a last look at the silver cross that alone in the rubble of the interior still stood. He wanted so much to say a prayer for help and right direction but the shame of his bloodline kept him from that.

He found Ivy at the front door of Hock House. She looked worried and her eyes red rimmed with recent tears.

"You have heard about Lord Tabor?" he asked.

She nodded. "When will it end? Now Elizabeth is gone!"

He stooped in his tracks and turned to her. "What? She can't be!"

"Not dead, Jeffrey!" Margaret said from the doorway of the Great Room. "She is missing. While we were at the Manor it seems she dressed, took Owen's horse and left the Estate."

"But she could not even walk! How is that possible?" Jeffrey asked Ted. He was sitting at the long table, searching the Chronicle; closed it and covered it with the velvet as Jeffrey approached.

"Ask the Abbey bloody Pritchard, not me....she has all the answers," Ted snapped at him.

"It is not your fault, Ted! No one is to blame," Margaret said to him.

"What the Hell happened?" Jeffrey turned to Abbey. She sat on the bed, leaning heavily against the bedpost.

"Nora Tabor possessed her body. I think she has taken her back to the gypsies!" Abbey answered.

"Nora is....was Owen's wife. She has been dead for more than three years," Margaret added.

"Christ!" Jeffrey exclaimed in anger. "Are you sure and who the Hell are you anyway?" he asked Abbey.

"I was a friend of the family and I am sure because I am a seer. I can see where

she has taken her. A farm, but not where it is." Abbey sighed, rubbing her hand across her head. "I don't feel well," she said to Margaret. "My heart is not strong," she took a deep breath. "Please, may I lie down some place in the quiet and dark? I promise I have no intention of escaping."

"She is not going to leave my sight not even for one minute!" Ted said firmly.

"Then take her to my room and stay with her, Ted." Margaret insisted.

"Not bloody likely! I will not baby sit an old trollop!"

"Ted!" Margaret said angrily. "We might need her; think of that. She might be a valuable help with the shifter and God knows what else."

"Right!" Ted stood quickly, taking his gun from his belt. "Come on, get up! One hour, that is all. So you had better recover fast!"

Jeffrey waited until he heard Ted close the upstairs bedroom door before he spoke again. "I want to apologize for my behavior earlier. I had no right to speak with you that way!"

"I understand, Jeffrey. We are all over wrought! I wish I understood what it is that you want me to tell Owen and James. But really, there is nothing. I have lived a quiet, solitary life caring for the children and monks at St. Francis. My only connection with the world has been my visits from Owen," she sighed and added. "You know how much I love my son; don't you think that if I knew anything that would help him here I would tell him?"

"I do, yes!"

"Well then...what is it you want me to say to him?"

He shook his head, sat quietly for a moment, and then slid the cover off the large gold bound book. She watched as he ran his fingers over the filigree and precious stones.

"Beautiful, isn't it? I asked Ted what it was but he did not answer me. Poor man, he is beside himself with worry of Elizabeth. I think maybe it is a Bible," Margaret said happy to change the subject.

"Beautiful? Yes, I suppose it is, but it is not a Bible."

"Most of it is in a strange language. I wonder what that says?" she asked watching as he pulled his fingers across the title.

"It is ancient Aramaic and loosely translated into English is says 'Chronicle'."

"How do you know that?"

"I am a fountain of knowledge, Margaret!" he laughed quietly. "I am an English teacher after all!"

"Oh yes, I forgot" she smiled up at him. "But what is it a chronicle of?"

"A demon," he answered, the smile fading from his face. "He is a lesser demon by the standards of his peers but still a mighty foe for the likes of normal people. The book tells of his deeds, misdeeds, his children, for lack of a better word and their actions. Emile Soskice is one of his offspring."

He paused looked at Margaret. Her face had gone deadly pale, her eyes large with fear.

"He has had many children, my dear, with so many human females I have lost count. He killed the women after their offspring were born. For the most part they have been whores and to his mind their loss has made no difference."

Margaret sunk down further into the chair and placed her hands over her face.



"He is called 'One Wing'. On one occasion he took a noble woman...." he stopped talking; these last words hung in the air and seemed to isolate them from the rest of the world.

"No!" she cried, left her seat and went to run from the room. He pulled her to him. "No!" she struggled to be free of him. "It was not real, it was a nightmare!" she insisted, tears streaming down her face.

"It was a nightmare, Margaret, but it was all very real and that is what you must face and tell your men."

"I can't!"

He turned from her and left Hock House.

Owen and James waited for Edmond and Reine to return in the parlor at Tabor Manor. From there they could see down the roadway to Hock House. As they waited, they made their plans to separate the two of them so Owen could get her alone. It was near to noon by the time they saw Edmond's clip winding its way up the road and Owen was more than anxious to get his hands on Reine.

They watched the carriage come to a stop and Edmond help Reine down. For a moment they talked and Reine turned and walked away, heading down into the lower gardens. Edmond walked up the steps to the front door. "Where the Hell is she going?" James asked.

"I don't know, but I am going to find out." Owen said moving to the connecting door to the dining room. "Keep him out of my way!"

"You look rather like I feel." Edmond said to James when they met at the doorway.

"Got a moment?" James asked nodding to the parlor. "I have to speak with you."

"Oh God, do not tell me someone else is dead?" Edmond said in a rather flippant way but lost the smile when he saw the look on the other man's face. He sat down heavily in the nearest chair. "Not the old man?"

"Just a few hours ago. We have sent for his Doctor but I was there when it happened and there is no doubt but that it was his heart."

Edmond said nothing for a few minutes and looked around him as though he had never seen the room before. "I need a drink!" he said finally.

"I'll get it." James offered placing his back between the drinks tray and Edmond. He poured a healthy share of rye-whiskey and topped it off with two of the packets of strong sleeping powders that Edmond used on Olivia. He stirred it well and poured a cup of strong black tea handing both of them to Edmond. "If you have a hangover, as I'd say from the looks of you; drink the whiskey fast and then the tea. The faster the better!"

With no reason to do other than trust James, Edmond quickly drank down the liquor and then the tea. The latter somewhat dulling the bitter taste of the sleeping powder. Edmond shuttered as he handed the glass and mug back to James. "So that is it then. First Edward, then Henry, my stupid wife and now my father. Seems like we are dropping like flies doesn't it?" he said with bitter sarcasm.

"You saw Caruthers?" James asked sitting across from the young man waiting for the effects of the fast acting drug to set in.

Edmond nodded. "The man is an idiot. I do not think we will see much in the way of results from his 'investigation'. Where is Owen? Now the old man is dead I think we should turn Soskice over to the authorities and be rid of him once and for all."

"He is around someplace. He will show up soon, no doubt. What about Olivia? No doubt it was suicide?"

"Hardly. The hospital had her locked in her room. She threw herself out the window. And to top it off, somebody has stolen my mother's wedding ring."

"What?"

"You know the thing. Big gold T, with diamonds and the like. Mother left it to me and I used it when Olivia and I married."

"Was she wearing it when you took her to the hospital?"

"Of course. She never took it off."

"Most likely someone at the coroner's office stole it."

"You can be damned sure I will get it back!" Edmond yawned. "Look, I am dog tired. I am going up and have a rest."

"And your companion? Where is she?" James asked.

"Reine has gone for a walk. If you see her please tell her I am resting? Can't think why I am so bloody tired."

James nodded and watched as Edmond went slowly up the stairs and heard as he shut and locked his bedroom door behind him.

Owen watched from the dining room as Reine moved quickly and with purpose across the garden pathway and disappeared beyond the lower terrace. He followed her in time to see the flash of her skirts as she turned into the maze. Moving quietly along the outside hedges he slipped into the next maze entrance and with exact knowledge of the winding tunnels was soon at the maze center. He thought that she might have come in there to shift. He kept watch on the skies as well as the shrubbery around him.

"Reine!" he whispered harshly, with his hand on his revolver. "I know you are in here...." was all he managed to say before she was on him.

She grabbed his shoulder spinning him around and pulling the gun from his hand and with one hard shove threw him backwards onto the gravel pathway. As he gathered his wits and his breath, she took a step closer, pointing his gun at him.

"Why are you following me?" she demanded.

Furious, ignoring her question Owen pulled himself to his feet. "Don't move!" she ordered but with little force. Without hesitation, he went directly to her, took the gun and twisted her arm behind her back.

"If you ever lay your hands on me, in any way again, I will pluck all your fucking feathers, do you understand?" he demanded, as he spun her around, took her face in one powerful hand and squeezed it. "Well...do you?" He shook her when she did not answer right away.

She nodded; he released her and pushed her away from him. "Well, you are certainly in a bad mood, Owen! I just wanted to know why you were following me," she gasped in a much more humble voice.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her after him heading out of the maze.

"Let me go!" she whined, tripping over her skirts. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the farm!" he answered as she struggled free of his hold.

"What?"

"You heard me!" he moved to take her arm again.

"Then..." she said backing away. "I can walk with you and not be pulled like a rag doll! Can we not reserve at least some dignity?"

Despite his anger, Owen had to smile at the ludicrousness of the situation. "If you want to be treated like a lady instead of some ugly old crow, perhaps you should try and act like one," he motioned for her to walk ahead of him. "To the courtyard, my lady, our carriage is waiting!"

"What if Edmond is watching?" she asked nervously looking up at the many windows above them.

"Edmond is having a well deserved rest. Go!" he said giving her shoulder a gentle push.

When they settled in the carriage, he pulled her forward in her seat and began to run his hands down her body. Angrily she pushed him away. "How dare you? I gave you your chance and you were not interested!"

"Believe me, bird, I am still not interested. I am looking for a weapon," he moved closer to her, pushed her arms away and felt every inch of her upper body. Then he lifted her skirts. "I see you have taken to wearing under clothing? The bird is changing her feathers, isn't she?" he smiled with sarcasm. When he was sure she was not armed, he

took a paper and pencil from under the seat and handed it to her. "Draw a map to get to the farm."

"By that I assume you mean Tom Hobson's farm?"

"If that is where you took Richard, yes!"

"I did, but it is pointless. I told you, he is no longer there," she said flatly. "Emile ordered them to leave there. Anyway, I want that ring back before I do anything for you."

He studied her for a moment; his eyes narrow slits of danger. "You may be fast and bloody strong but you are not too bright, are you?"

She shrugged and looked out the window. "Your insults will not change my mind!"

"No? Well then, maybe facts will. I thought I had explained it all to you last night but I will try to be clearer this time. If you don't 'help me' as you call it I will only suffer loss of pride but you will be doomed one way or the other in a few very short hours."

"I have no intention of going with Emile to the grotto. Without me they cannot complete the transformation and Emile will die an old man as he is!"

"And with the kindness of his evil heart you think he will just cut you free to live as you please? If you think that then you are a fool! You need someone to kill him before Sunday night. If you kill him you will only drop dead right along side of him. You have no choice but to do as I want on the slight chance that I might kill him for you."

She sighed, drummed her fingers on the paper then took up the pencil and began to draw the map. "As I said it is pointless, he is no longer there! You are only wasting time."

"Do you know where Richard is?"

"No!"

"Then we shall go to the farm."

James joined them as she drew the map. He had with him several rifles and boxes of ammunition. When she had finished the map, she explained it to them. "If these are fast horses we can be there in less than an hour!" James took the map and the driver's seat and they rolled away from the Estate.

"I hope that map is accurate, shifter, I have no patience now for any games!" Owen said after a few miles had passed.

"Don't call me that! My name is Reine."

"After what I saw last night it is rather hard to see you as anything else!"

Her face went bright red. "When all this is done with I will never do that again! So I am only what you see now."

"Do you really believe that you can live a life as a human?" he asked, amazed at her naivety.

"Mavis Willard did it, so why shouldn't I?"

"But then very few people seem to have known what she was. Many people know all about you. How many people have you killed?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Owen just raised his eyebrows and moved his hands through the air as though it was obvious.

She sighed. "I have killed as many as you know of and more. I will do it again if I am forced to and have no remorse; they were all only fools!"

Owen shook his head, thought for a moment, then asked. "Do you think that you are in love with Edmond?"

"I do not think it, I know it! Since you are so personal with me then I can ask you; are you in love with Elizabeth? I know she is your lover, I saw her in your bed when I took the child!" Her silver eyes sparkled in the sun light that flickered through the trees they passed. "Is that why you are so driven to get the child back to her?"

Owen could not help but flinch slightly at her words. Up until that moment, he had not given any thought to his feelings for Elizabeth, holding them carefully in check and focusing only on Richard. He did not answer the question. They rode for sometime in silence. Owen thought of the woman he had let down so terribly and had twice failed to protect from Emile Soskice.

"Did you go to Soskice last night?" he asked when he had cleared his mind of thoughts too hard to face then.

"Of course!"

"And?"

"All that you said is true. I have no false pride and can admit that. But he will fall far short in his plans; the old bastard has met his match against you and me."

"So we are a team then?" Owen smiled ironically at the thought. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"You could put it that way. I know where they have their meetings. They meet in a grotto and I know where it is!" she said and pleased at the surprised look he gave her.

"What? Where?"

"I suppose you know that there are tunnels under your land?" she asked feeling rather smug in knowing something so important to him.

"Yes, the old smugglers tunnels." he exclaimed. "Good Lord, it is down there?"

Under the bloody Estate?"

She nodded and gave him her strange broad smile. "Right under your nose, Owen Tabor! I went there last night and without me you will never find it."

"Did Soskice tell you where it was?"

"No. Bob Willard. A very strange fellow!"

"Then, that must be where they have Richard."

"No, I do not think so! They have their wagons, tents and a few men but no children of any age. I guess they have him some other place. Just the same, he may have been inside one of the wagons. He is not at the farm so you are wasting time but you obviously don't want to take my word for that."

"It is rather hard to take the word of a cold blooded murderess....Reine!"

They stopped just beyond a turn in the road leading to the old farmhouse. With their rifles in hand, they crossed the same field that Nora, in possession of Elizabeth's body, had done earlier that morning. They soon came across Majesty.

"Is this your horse?" Reine asked Owen. "But how did he get here?" When neither man answered her, she added in frustration. "I can understand why you do not trust me and frankly I don't care but how can I help you in your fight against Emile effectively if you don't answer my questions?"

"Keep walking and be quiet," Owen demanded, pushing her ahead of them.

They stopped at the tree line to survey the scene. "You see!" she said. "No horses or wagons! There is no one there!"

Owen and James climbed the fence and headed across the yard towards the house. Reine hesitated, looking around and decided it would be best to stay with the men and quickly followed them. Owen kicked in the side door and they moved quickly into the kitchen area. There were signs of recent life, including still smoldering embers in the stove.

"There is a small cellar area down there!" Reine said pointing to a doorway. Owen took a lantern, lit it and went down the creaking steps. He found two small rooms with a dirt floors. One held shelves of jarred goods and the other a small dirty cot. A small window near the ceiling looking out onto brushes and a brick wall and an opening under the wooden door of about four inches made it clear to him that this was the room that had once been used as Elizabeth's prison.

They searched the rest of the house, finding signs that at least one baby had been kept there but little else of any value until they stopped in the front room. "I told you that we were wasting...." Reine stopped and cocked her head in the strange bird like way towards the sofa. She pointed to a blood trail across the floor. Owen and James raised their rifles in that direction. She soundlessly crossed the floor, reached behind the furniture and lifted Mama Soskice up by her hair. The old woman squealed and swung her arms wildly at Reine.

Reine laughed as she dropped the old woman, pushed her onto her face down on the floor and sat on her. "Emile's old bitch!" she said to the watching men.

"Do you speak English?" Owen asked.

In reply, she lifted her head and spat at Owen. Reine took the woman's head in either hands and slammed her face hard into the floor. "Answer him!" Reine demanded.

"Christ, bird! Don't you ever think before you act?" Owen yelled at Reine as he pushed her away from her latest victim.

"Don't call me 'bird'! You know my name. Do you know how many times she hit me and Emile would not let me to anything to her? He was always protecting her." Reine crawled back and hissed at Mama. "He's not here now, is he?"

"Sit over there!" Owen demanded pointing to a nearby chair as he lifted the old woman's head. A huge lump had already grown in the center of her forehead, a trickle of blood ran down from her nose but unseen to them, as she lay on her face, was the huge bloodstain across her chest. "Move!" he demanded. When Reine still sat defiantly, James grabbed her arm and pulled her into the chair.

"Let go of me!" Reine wriggled free of James. "Do as you please, but she will not tell you anything. She would rather die than betray Emile."

Owen rolled the old woman onto her back. "Shit! She has been shot!"

Mama began to moan and her eyes fluttered as Owen searched her for a weapon. He found a small handgun in her apron and handed it to James. She muttered something and closed her eyes again. "You don't have much time, your wound is fatal!" he said with urgency and slapped her face a few times. She moaned again and sputtered on the blood that was then running into her mouth and finally opened her eyes.

"Where is Richard Delacourt?" He demanded shaking her. She opened her eyes and tried to focus on him.

"Richard Soskice!" she said. "No business of yours!" She made a movement as to spit at Owen again but her eyes rolled back into her head and she coughed up more blood.

"Wake up!" Owen yelled in her ear. "Tell me where the child is. If you don't then Emile will kill him at the turn of the summer Solstice."

"Let her die; she will not help you!" Reine said, her voice trailing off under the look of her two companions.

"No!" Mama mumbled. "He would not hurt the boy!"

"How many of your children has he already killed? He paid my brother to kill Jack so why would he not hurt his own grandson?" Owen again pulled her to face him, shook her gently until she opened her eyes. "Who shot you?"

"Tom!" she answered and even in her dying state, her voice rang with hatred.

"And under orders from your husband. It is clear. He is finished with you now. He will have a new, young body on the sacrifice of Richard, so why would he keep an old wife? Tell me where the boy is and I will get him to safety."

She raised her arm weakly and pointed to the doorway. "Elizabeth!" she whispered.

"She was here, I know that. Where is she now?"

"Tom...has her!"

"Don't tell me you let the gypsies get Elizabeth again?" Reine threw up her hands and shook her head.

"Tell me where they have taken the child....are they at the grotto?" Owen asked.

"No!" she gasped and added, "dead souls marching!"

"What the Hell does that mean?" Owen asked. Both men were too busy watching the old woman to see the slight smile on the shifters face.

"The baby! Elizabeth! Dead souls marching!" The old woman gasped once and died.

"Fuck!" Owen exclaimed, dropping the woman's head to the floor angrily. "The

bitch is dead. Does that business about dead souls marching mean anything to you, Reine?"

"No!" she answered innocently. "Nothing at all!"

Owen stepped up to her menacingly and she sat up taller in the chair looking at him defiantly. "Are you lying again?"

"For crying out loud; why would I? I want you to get that child, don't I?"

"I wouldn't trust her, Owen!" James said.

"Who asked you?" Reine snapped at James. "I think your servants should learn to keep their place!" she added to Owen.

Owen looked at her from under his eyebrows and turned to James. "She thinks you need to be kept in your place; isn't that interesting?"

James stepped up to her, slapped one hand roughly over her mouth and with the other holding her by the dress; he lifted her off the chair. "This is one hole you should learn to keep shut! And," he added as she tried to lash out at him. "I think household pets should be kept out of their master's bedrooms and sleep in the barn with the other cows!"

Whatever reaction he had expected to the insults he did not get as she stopped her struggle suddenly and leaned her head closer to him. He dropped her to the floor. On her feet again she walked up to Owen, running her face across his chest then getting on her toes put her face neck to his neck.

Warily he pushed her back. "Now what the Hell are you doing?" he asked.

"Smelling you!" she said as she stepped back, placed her hands on her hips and smiled looking from one man to the other. "It seems that I am not the only liar around here?" she said smugly. "You are not a Tabor! You are his son!"

"Well, well!" Owen smiled back at her. "It seems that Edmond's pet bitch has the nose of a helpful hound dog. She may be of some use to us after all!"

"Perhaps!" James agreed with sarcasm.

"Well, I have enough of this and your insults," she said walking towards the door. "We are wasting time. I want to go back to the Estate!"

"We'll go when I am good and ready!" Owen answered as he gathered several oil lamps and lit them. "I thought gypsies liked to live on the highways in their caravans?"

"We .... they do!" she answered, tapping her foot restlessly.

"Then what did they need this place for?"

"Just as a meeting place when for some reason Emile would get separated from the rest of the group. Why?"

"Then they won't be in need of it any more, will they?" Owen said taking one of the lamps and going half way up the stairs he threw it down the hallway. Fire rolled across the polished wood floor and up the old, dry curtains. One more lamp he tossed across the sitting room and the last in the kitchen.

They collected Owen's horse and tied him to the back of the carriage. "James, you sit with Reine! She can tell you all that she told me on the way." Owen said as he climbed up to the drivers' bench. As they pulled away down the lonely country road Reine took one last look at the old building. Flames flickered inside the windows.

The ride back to the Tabor Estate was a troubling and uncomfortable time for Reine. She told James all that had happened the night before even admitting to killing Bobby Willard but got little reaction from the man. Even more than Owen this man was

an enigma to her. This tall and silent shadow to Owen seemed to have no interest in her or what she said. She was greatly relieved when they finally pulled to a stop in the courtyard of Tabor Hall and quickly climbed out of the carriage and headed towards the back door.

"Where do you think that you are going?" Owen asked, stopping her.

"I have to see Edmond. It has been hours and he will be wondering what has happened to me!" she answered in exasperation.

"How many sleeping powders did you give him?" Owen asked James as he joined them.

"Two! I think he will be out for hours yet!"

"You drugged him? How could you do such a thing?"

"As opposed to some of your deeds, my dear, that is hardly worth noting. Now just be quiet and do as you are told, no more and no less."

"You really are too much, Owen! I am not a woman to be told what to do easily and I will not be quiet, no matter how many times you say it!"

"Is that right?" Owen took her firmly by her arm, up the stairs and into the butler's pantry before she had a chance to say another word. He pushed Reine up against the wall, his arm resting on the wall above her head and the inside thigh of one leg against hers. In standing this way, he knew that she could easily get at his revolver. He had emptied it during the ride back when he decided to see what reaction he would get if Reine felt cornered by him.

"I am tired of arguing with you, Reine! It would be easier if you come to terms with the fact that I am in charge here and you will do as I say," he whispered with his face close to hers. He drew his fingers down her soft cheek.

She held his glare and did not flinch or speak.

"Why don't you tell me what the old woman meant by dead souls marching?" he asked leaning his body against hers.

"I told you that I have no idea whatsoever," she finally answered after a long silence.

"Hmm!" he said running his hand down to her shoulder, sliding the fabric of her dress open slightly. "You have made up your mind on that, have you?"

She smiled and nodded.

"I have also made up my mind about you! I couldn't care less about all the others you have killed but if you in any way harm Edmond I will make sure you are very sorry for it for the rest of your short life."

She slid her hands under his coat and onto his sides. He stiffened ready to react if she meant to attack him. "Then, Owen, we can come to a certain understanding," she pushed him firmly away from her. "I kill only the useless and my enemies. You can be certain that I will not hurt Edmond. If it is so important to your male ego I will let you boss me around but only until this matter is done. Then you will have that woman and her child back with you, Emile will be dead and you will leave me alone," she straightened her clothes and asked, "May I leave you now?"

"Feel free," he nodded and she opened the door stepping out into the kitchen with Owen close behind her. "Just remember to do only what I tell you to do and nothing else! Right now go to your room and wait until you hear from me again."

"Do this, do not do that! I am really growing weary of pompous, empty headed



males trying to give me orders,” she complained bitterly as they passed through the kitchen and into the hallway. She stopped long enough to give the waiting doctor a very harsh look, “Who are you?” she snapped at the man.

“Dr. Bradley, Miss!” he answered looking down his long nose at her and then over her head to Owen. “Good afternoon, Owen! So sorry about your father! I will have to get you to sign these papers before I move the body.”

“Tabor's dead?” she looked at Owen with surprise.

Owen nodded. “His heart, too much strain lately.” He could see her mind moving quickly as she wondered how this might help her, found nothing of interest, she shrugged and went up the stairs.

“I will be in my room but I don't know for how long.” she snapped back at Owen.

“She is having a bad day!” Owen said to the stuffy man as he led him in the direction of Wilmot's study.

## Chapter Eleven

In a semi-conscious haze, Elizabeth listened to the far off sound of laughing, talking and some singing. That seemed odd to her since Hock House was usually such a quiet and peaceful place.

Since the poisoning, her pain had been a general weakness and sickness of her whole body. Now with the gradual return of her senses she became aware of a brutal ache in the back of her head. She opened her eyes. Something covered her face. Along with this new discomfort, she now became aware of the familiar and unpleasant feeling of leather cuffs around her ankles and wrists.

"Margaret!" she called out weakly.

She could smell unwashed body and rotting flesh. Something was wrong, very wrong! Fingers of hot fear spread through her.

"Margaret?" this time she called out much louder. Not too far from her she heard a small chuckle, a harsh rasping sound, one she had prayed never to hear again. She struggled and stretched until the blanket slipped off her face.

Focusing in the dimness, she saw the all too familiar interior of Jack's wagon and then just feet from her sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall was Emile Soskice. He was watching her and smiling from under his black veil. "Welcome home, Elizabeth!" his voice dripped with anger and sarcasm.

"No! No!" Elizabeth cried. She pulled on the cuffs and chains that held her to the bed. "This cannot be real! How in God's name did I get here?"

"I don't think God had much to do with it. This is something you brought on yourself by sticking your nose where it doesn't belong or maybe you just missed your Papa Emile!" The old man said as he got off the floor and sat on the side of the pallet bed. Elizabeth backed as far away from him as she possibly could. "You should not strain yourself. I understand that you have not been feeling too well these last few days. Do you see what terrible things happen when you are not in my care?"

"Where is Richard? I know you have him. Give me my child!" she hissed at him. Anger quickly overcame the fear, pain and weakness of her body.

"Your child? Did you forget that he is also my son?" Emile asked as he ran his clawed hand down the side of her face, hooking it in her hair and pulling it slightly.

"Richard is not your son. He was Jack's son!"

"Well, we were never too sure of that, were we, Elizabeth? It tells me a lot that for all his efforts Jack made no other children and I have made many sons. Son or grandson, either way it makes no difference; he is still very much my blood. It would be best for you to remember that."

"And you should remember this, Soskice! I hate you with a passion stronger than any you have ever known. One day soon I will cut your throat and that will be the best day of my life!"

He froze for a few seconds, his single bright eye narrowed. "I think that perhaps that you are not too happy to see me." He pulled his claw down her neck, ripping away

the buttons of the riding jacket and pushing the sides open. "You have had to bind your breasts! What a shame! All that lovely, sweet mother's milk going to waste."

"Don't touch me!" Elizabeth yelled at him.

Emile shook his head. He pulled a knife from his pocket and flicked it open.

"No!" she wiggled down and back under the blanket.

He pulled her body closer to him and leaned on her belly. "Stay still, sweetness or I might cut you." He ran the razor sharp knife under and across the linen strips. "I am an old man, as you know and this hand shakes. I would hate to make you bleed unnecessarily. I only want to look at you. Is that wrong?"

Elizabeth moaned, closed her eyes and lay still.

Emile pulled the linen away. "Ah! How I have missed these beauties! And now with no baby to suckle your tits are so full and hard!" he ran his black tongue around a nipple. "How would you like Emile to suck them and relieve you? I will suck them dry and you will do the same for me. It is only fair," he gave her his lopsided grin.

She raised her head and narrowed her eyes. "Go ahead, Emile. My milk will be loaded with Mavis Willard's fucking poison for another day or two. Help yourself!"

He laughed and sat back on the bed. "What an amazing little bitch you are. I have always admired your spirit. You do not cower and cry like the others. And you had the sense to give your husband and me exactly what we wanted...."

"I didn't give you anything, you stinking, pathetic bastard, you took it. You are far too ugly and insane to get a woman any other way!" Lurching her hips, she pushed the frail man to the floor.

He laughed and stayed on the floor. "It is a wonder that Jack and I were not able to break your spirit. That is a good thing. I would hate it if you bored me. As I think about it now perhaps, I could have treated you better! A true beauty is rare, yes; I should have taken you from Jack and kept you for myself."

"You are disgusting. You make me want to vomit!"

"Do I? You mean to tell me that you did not enjoy all those lovely fucks I gave you?" he laughed again. "However, what you say is true. I am not now the handsome man that you would like to have in your bed. But soon, very soon you will be better pleased to have me!"

"No! I would rather die first!"

"That may be that way it ends, daughter-in-law. That is up to you!"

"Fuck you!" she snarled at him.

He stood slowly, leaning heavily on his stick and walked across to the wagon door. "For now, I have decided that you will serve my purpose in other ways. Somehow, you survived Mavis's poison and found your way to the farm, so I have underestimated you. Should you still be alive when I have completed my transfer then you will be my wife."

"You are a fool as well as demented. The Tabor's will rescue me, you can be sure of that!"

"Rescue you? Owen Tabor? As I see it, he has not done too well by you. Hasn't he cost you your precious son? Has he been able to hold this old man in his weak jail? He has no idea where you are but should he come for you I will have my men waiting for him."

"Where is my child? Bring me my baby!"

He rubbed his chin, looking at her sideways. "You could see him, I suppose, one last time. I see no reason not to allow that!" he pushed open the door and called out, "Hobson! Bring the child so his mother can say good bye to him."

"You can't do this Emile!" Elizabeth lost the battle against her tears. "Please don't hurt Richard. I will do anything you want but please do not hurt my baby!"

Emile laughed. "A moment ago you wanted to slice my throat. You are confused, aren't you?" The door opened and his daughter stood there, holding Richard in her arms.

"Richard! Give him to me!" Elizabeth pleaded as the tiny, frightened face turned in her direction and began to cry.

"Go!" Emile said angrily and waved away his daughter. "Don't worry too much! I will put him to good use. The next time you see him he will be a young man. Imagine that, my dear. A wonderful, healthy groom for you!" he laughed. "Now I will take him to a safer place and you can lie here waiting for your new husband." He gave her a slow, mean smile and disappeared out of the wagon.

"Abbey?" Reine called into the woman's bedroom. "Where the Hell is she?"

She sat for a while on the side of her bed, looking at the mess Owen had made of her room earlier when he had found the ring. "Well, I am not cleaning this up! And if he thinks I am going to sit around here all day waiting for his beck and call he is mistaken!"

She crossed to Edmond's door and knocked lightly. Getting no answer she tried the handle and found the door locked. She gave the doorknob a sharp turn breaking the lock works, opened the door and stepped in the room.

"There, let's see if you can beat that, Owen Bloody Tabor!" she muttered under her breath.

Edmond woke and rolled over. "Reine? Is that you?"

"Yes," she smiled as she sat on the bed beside him and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Just tired now. I cannot seem to stay awake."

"Maybe I am too much for you?"

"Not flipping likely! Now be quiet and sleep with me for a while!" he reached out and pulled her down beside him on the bed.

She waited until she was sure that he was asleep again and went to her bedroom.

"I think you may be mistaken to trust that crow," James said to Owen as they crossed the lawns back towards Hock House.

"I don't trust her, James, but for now I need her. She knows that if she is not a very great help I will tell Edmond what she is. That should put some salt on her tail for a while yet."

"I hope you are right. But I wouldn't turn your back on her if I were you."

Owen laughed. "I am not a fool." His laugh was hollow, his voice less confident than before.

Back in her disheveled bedroom, Reine was irritated and anxious. She fidgeted and paced. At first, she blamed her foul mood on Owen's pompous behavior and her own stupidity over the ring. As the moments passed a heavier pall fell on her. She began to sense that something else had gone wrong, something dangerous and that

something had to do with Emile.

From cautious habit, the raven circled the tower a few times before landing on the broken tower wall. She peered into the darkness on the far side where Emile always sat. She could smell him but now there other scents. She could smell charred flesh, smoke and another stench, something living but not animal or human.

Her heart pounded. She remembered Abbey's warning that Emile could only kill her when she was in human form. She hopped down into the room. As her eyes became accustomed to the shadows, fear grew to terror when she saw that Emile was gone.

Amid the scattered debris, she found the rusted cuffs that had held him to his chains torn like paper. The heavy iron door was open. Where the lock had been was now a huge gaping hole, the lock itself hanging on a twisted ribbon of melted metal. On the turning, slippery steps lay the blackened, burned body of the towers' sentry.

She called out in anger and fear, took up one of the broken collars in her beak and flew off in the direction of Hock House, landing on the back porch. The guard, facing the courtyard did not see as Reine stood and began to bang on the locked door.

The hours of waiting for Owen and James to return from the Hobson farm had been very difficult for all at Hock House. Each lost in worries and fears. Silence and gloom fell over the house.

Jeffrey was sitting on the front steps as Owen and James approached. Despite his doubts, he had hoped they would return with Elizabeth. He was not surprised to see they had not. They all gathered in the Great Room and listened as Owen filled them in on what had occurred at the farm.

"So," Owen concluded, pushing his hand through his hair. "Elizabeth was there and Hobson has her now. Since the old witch was still alive we must have missed them by only minutes."

"As insane as it sounds Nora must have been aware when the shifter took the child; probably she went along with them." Ted offered. He still kept a close eye on Abbey.

"I think so." Abbey agreed.

"Owen! You can't tell me you believe any of that?" Ivy asked. "Ghosts, possession, shape shifters; it is insane. Not to mention a waste of time."

"Ivy, over these last few days I have had my eyes and mind jerked wide open."

"That is ridiculous. Just do what you should have done in the first place. Turn Soskice over to the police. They will force the truth from him!" Ivy insisted.

"Not the Kent police!" Abbey shook her head. "Most of them are up to their eye balls with Emile and his cronies."

"So the old woman told you nothing of importance before she died?" Ted asked.

"Dead souls marching!" James said under his breath.

"What did you say?" Abbey asked him sitting upright in her chair.

"That was what the old woman said just before she died. She mumbled something about dead souls marching....hallucinating, no doubt!"

"No!" Abbey exclaimed. "She was not hallucinating, James! Good Lord, she was telling you where Elizabeth is. She was not saying dead souls marching she was saying 'Dead Soul Marsh!'"

"Dead Soul Marsh! Yes, of course!" Margaret exclaimed, excitedly. "I have heard of that place. You remember it, Owen. It is north of St Francis, on the coastal highway where the original town of St Ives stood a hundred years ago. It was on unstable ground and because of landslides into the channel they moved the town further south but left their cemetery where they had built it around the St Ives inlet!"

"That's right!" Abbey added. "That is where Emile's clan used to camp before they came to rent my land. Mama told me all about it. It is a dreadful place, full of quicksand and mire. The trees have long since died and with the graves, are slowly slipping down the valley to the water's edge. It is a fog locked place where no sun ever shines. The locals say it is infested with ghosts and monsters and the like and they will not go anywhere near it. It was a perfect hiding place for the gypsies."

"Then gentlemen I think we should be off to the Dead Soul Marsh," Ted said standing from the table.

"Wait for night fall," Abbey said.

"No!" Ted argued. "We have waited long enough."

"Think about it! They have been using this place for years. They will know this area like the back of their hands. They will also be very much on the lookout for your lot. You'll never be able to sneak up on them in the day time!" Abbey insisted.

"As much as I hate to admit it, Ted, Abbey is right!" James said. "What do you think Owen?"

As though waking from a trance Owen looked up. "We'll wait until dark!"

The commotion started in the kitchen and moved into the hallway.

"Owen! Where are you?" Reine called out as she pushed Hanna away.

Discreetly, Jeffrey slipped out of sight behind the heavy drapery.

"What is going on?" Owen demanded as he moved into the hall with his gun drawn.

"Will you please tell your woman to keep her hands off me? I have to speak with you right away!" Reine said with frustrated anger.

"I am sorry, Owen! I tried to tell her that I had to inform you before anyone entered the house," Hanna called from behind Reine.

"And I never saw her! She got right by me, somehow!" the harried sentry explained.

"It's alright!" Owen said sending his staff away and pulling Reine into the Great Room behind him. "What the Hell is the matter with you?"

"Don't do that!" she exclaimed backing away from him. "You are always pulling me around..." she stopped in mid sentence when she saw Ted standing by the table. He had covered the book once again with the velvet cloth. "I know who you are!" she squinted at him. "You are that nosey priest, aren't you?"

"And you are the crow, no doubt," Ted said meeting her gaze evenly. "I believe ladies and gentlemen, what we have here is the Soskice shape shifter."

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Ivy said in exasperation.

"I am Reine Crawford," she said flatly.

"What is it?" Owen said turning her to face him.

"God Damn you, Owen Tabor! Why didn't you kill him when you had the chance?"

"Soskice?" Owen asked.

"Yes, Soskice, who else? He is gone! He's not in your blasted tower!" she cried shoving the torn cuff into his hand.

"What?" Owen asked taking a step closer to her. "That is impossible; unless you let him out!"

"Don't be an idiot! I want him dead, not free to do as he pleases. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"Ted...!" Owen started to speak.

"I know, I know. I am to stay with the females while you and James go to the tower."

"And you stay here!" Owen said to Reine and to Ted he added, "Don't let her out of your sight even for one second!"

"Wait!" Reine called as Owen and James headed for the door. "I could have torn the cuffs yes, but I could never have melted that bloody door! It must have been one of One Wings minions. They are powerful things, Owen. More than you could ever imagine. You have to bring me with you!"

"You will wait here!" Owen yelled at her. He and James were out the door.

"Sit!" Ted ordered her pointing to a chair with his pistol. He watched as she placed herself in the chair and looked down her nose at him. "I never thought I would set my eyes on such a creature as you!"

"I hope you are not planning on preaching to me! I am not in the mood for it....or you!"

"I would not waste my time."

"Good! Then leave me be. I have a lot on my mind!"

"I want your opinion on this," he said as he pulled the cover off the book.

She looked at it without a change in attitude or any interest. "It is a large, ugly book. Probably it is worth a lot of money. But what has it to do with me?" Reine pointed to the tower. "Why are you just standing there, Holy Man? Those two are going to die up there!"

Ted opened the cover and flipped to the pages he had just been reading. "This book was given to me to aid in my search for Elizabeth Delacourt. It is a chronicle of the life of One Wing and his off spring. There is a great deal about Emile Soskice whom I believe is your master."

Reine grunted, stamping her foot on the floor. "All you are doing is wasting time. I have no master and no interest in your book."

"No? Well, I thought that you might. After all you are mentioned in some detail and in fresh words just added this morning," he moved to this place in the book and pointed it out to her but Reine did not look or move from her position. "You are referred to as the 'Raven Changeling' and as Emile Soskice's latest shifter....and the 'Betrayed'!"

Now Reine stood, stepping slowly up to the book and looked where Ted pointed. "It would seem, Miss Crawford, that your cohorts are now wise to you. Perhaps you made a mistake freeing Soskice."

"I did not do it! Why would I? I want him dead. I would have killed him myself, if I could."

"Then I guess you should have because I am sure now that your days, if not hours are very limited."

"So what do you care what happens to me now? Let me go so I can protect Owen," Reine turned to Abbey. "Tell them, will you? You know what I can do and what Owen and James are up against. Why are you just standing there.... help me!"

"Maybe you should let her go, Ted! There is some sense to what she says," Abbey said looking from him to Margaret.

"And of course we should trust you, Abbey Pritchard! Aren't you the one who brought her this creature onto the Estate? We will do what Owen says, the shifter stays put."

"My son is a brave and strong man...." Margaret started to say.

"Your son?" Reine turned to Margaret. "Brave and strong will do him no good here and neither will your pride. That is not a shifter but a demon that freed Emile. Shit! Can't you see that I know what is happening here? I have to go to them," she stepped backwards towards the doorway.

"Ted, let her go!" Margaret stepped up to him.

"She is not going any place!" Ted stepped forward, leveling his pistol at Reine's head.

"Then shoot me now, Thaddeus Browne. I would rather die now than sit by idly and see Emile Soskice win," she said as she raised her pointed chin and cocked her head in the strange bird like angle.

"I think you had better let her go, Ted!" Jeffrey said stepping out from the curtain.

Reine had no chance to prepare or hide her reaction. She looked at Jeffrey and took two steps backwards and hit the wall. "You!" she exclaimed. "What...."

"Abbey, come here!" Jeffrey interrupted Reine. With his back to the others, his eyes flashed a bright silver light into hers and the words froze on her lips. He took Abbey's hand and placed it on Reine. "What do you feel?"

"I don't sense any deception." Abbey said to Ted after a few seconds.

"What a lot of balderdash!" Ivy exclaimed. "She is just trying to escape."

"Well?" Reine challenged Ted. "You are wasting precious time!"

"Are you sure, Margaret?" Ted asked.

"Yes, please, let her go, Ted."

Ted lowered the gun.

"Abbey, you are worth your weight after all!" Reine said as she pulled the transom on the upper window where there would be enough space for her to fly between the iron bars. She crouched down on her heels, raised her hands over head and looked quickly at Ivy. "Live and learn, little woman!" she said with a small smile.

They watched the flesh and clothing from her hands and arms melted into black feathers. The body was briefly naked then layered with shinning black feathers. The pretty human had turned into the raven. With a loud cry, she was gone out the window.

Ivy gasped, took up her baby and ran up the stairs, slamming and locking her bedroom door.

Margaret crossed herself and held tightly onto Ted's arm. "Abbey, are they going to be alright?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't know," she answered shaking her head slowly and they watched as the raven flew out of sight towards the tower. "But they certainly have a much better chance with Reine by their side!"



Keeping their eyes watchfully on their surroundings Owen and James made their way to the tower, past the awful body and into the empty prison room. They inspected the iron door.

"It looks like as though the metal was melted," James said feeling the charred lock. "It is still warm. How the flipping heck did the bird manage that?"

"I doubt she did it, James! Obviously Soskice has other help."

"You believe the shifter?" James asked with growing frustration.

"I am keeping an open mind!" Owen smiled slightly and picked up one of the empty laudanum bottles. "I have seen the same as this in the Willard cottage."

"Someone from there brought it to him, is that what you are thinking? But who? Mavis and Bob are dead. Maybe we should go there and have a look around."

"I agree, James and no better time than right now."

They left the tower and headed in the direction of the Willard cottage. A frightful thing followed them from the treetops and kept well out of sight. Neither it nor the men saw the raven circling high above.

They searched the front room and kitchen of the Willard cottage and apart from bottles of brandy and whiskey, silver plate and crystal plate stolen from Tabor Manor; they found nothing of interest. They moved down the back hall into Mavis's bedroom.

Hidden from view, the raven watched the thing crouching in the shadows under the front porch. She knew what it was and what it would do to Owen and James unless she could stop it. Moving to the back of the cottage, she went down the chimney landing with a quiet thump in the cold fire pit. From there she saw the creature slide in through the open doorway and slip behind a large front room chair. Reine knew he would not stay there long, only long enough to be sure where the men were before he began his attack. It was her only chance then to move by him unseen so she took it and flew as quickly and quietly as possible up the stairs.

She would have to transform front of Owen and James and hoped they did not shoot her on sight. The quickest way was to begin the transformation while still in flight but that would mean an uncontrolled landing. She landed huddled in a naked ball just inside the doorway and both men had their guns pointed at her. She scrambled to her feet and motioned for them to see she was unarmed and for them to be quiet.

"What the Hell...?" Owen started to say as he stepped up to her.

"Shh!" she whispered her silver eyes bright with action and fear. "It is here, downstairs! Give me the dagger!" she demanded reaching for Owen's right boot but he pushed her away. "The fucking minion! It is here! Give me that knife. It is the only thing that can kill him!" She did not have time to say anything more. She heard what Owen and James could not hear, the minion moving slowly up the steps. "It's coming!" she said as she rushed past Owen to hide between the bed and the wall.

"What...?" Owen began to ask but stopped when they saw the thing in the doorway. It had a body similar to that of a huge cat but covered with scales rather than fur. It had powerful short arms and hands like that of a human and a huge horned head with a long horse like face. It took a firm stand in the doorway.

"Jesus! What is that?" James exclaimed. The horrible thing turned towards James and growled; a stream of fire came flowed from its mouth. James backed from the flame further into the corner and fired the first shot, followed quickly by two from

Owen. All the bullets hit their mark, entered the beast's head but apart from stunning him they had little effect. It stepped from the hallway into the room, upright now, swinging its head from side to side, roaring with anger. With each roar, a new ball of fire flew across the room. Owen fired again, this time the bullet hit the creature in the belly, and blood rolled down from the wound but did not stop him.

Backing from the spreading fire Owen stepped closer to the bed. Reine took the opportunity to grab the knife from his boot. With it in her hand and screaming something in an unknown language, she jumped onto the bed. As soon as the creature saw Reine, he turned on her, sending a circle of fire in her direction.

The flames had James completely trapped in the corner. "Run!" she screamed at them throwing a blanket across the quickly spreading fire. "Fucking Hell, go!" she yelled again, when they did not move. They ran through the flames and out into the hallway, the creature turned towards them and Reine took her chance. She jumped from the bed

landing on his back, straddling him with her arms and legs. It howled in rage and took two more bullets from Owen as he tried to shake her off.

With one brutal and incredibly quick motion, she pulled the knife across its neck. The minion froze for the briefest moment and then fell into the flames dead. Reine screamed with rage as she wrenched the dagger from the creature's almost severed head. Owen pulled the carpet from the hall floor, threw it across the flames and ran into the burning bedroom. He swept Reine up into his arms. They ran into the kitchen.

"Put me down. I am alright!" Reine said as she wriggled free from Owen.

"What the bloody Hell was that?" James demanded, slapping his hat against the wall to put out a flame.

"That was one of One Wing's minions. It was he who freed Emile!" she answered defiantly. "Now maybe you will listen to me."

"Is there any more of them here?" Owen asked.

"No. I can smell them. He was alone."

"Where is Bob's body?"

"Why? He is in the cellar!"

"I want this house to burn to the ground," Owen replied as he opened the door and threw the lamp down the stairs. "Like the farm, no evidence!" He pulled off his coat and tried to hand it to her. "Put this on!"

"I don't need it!" she said as she opened the door and squatted, raising her arms.

"No, you don't!" James pulled her to her feet.

"Tell him to leave me alone!"

"Let her go!" Owen lit another lamp and tossed it into the front room.

"Where is she going?" James asked. Standing outside the cottage they watched as the large raven flew north.

"To the Dead Soul Marshes, unless I am mistaken, and I don't think I am. And we will not be too far behind her! But we will need horses and better weapons than these!"

Margaret and the others saw them coming up the hill to the house. They were waiting for them at the open door.

"Owen! James! Are you alright?" Margaret asked as she saw the burnt and charred condition of their clothing.

"We are fine, I think! Thanks to the bird! Ted, I don't know why you let her go but I am damned glad you did."

"Then Soskice is free?" Ted asked anxiously.

"Hell yes! Emile is definitely gone and I think it is fair to say that that Reine saved our lives." From the distance in the village valley, they could hear the ringing of the fire alarm bell.

Margaret rushed to the window and saw the black smoke rising from back in the trees. "Owen, what happened? What is burning?" she asked coming back to Owen and trying to check him for burns.

"The Willard cottage. The village men can handle it!"

"Owen! For heaven's sake!" Margaret said losing her usual patience as she followed Owen into his study. "What happened?"

Owen sighed, shook his head and took the Soskice daggers from his desk drawer. "I suppose one could say, in line with all this madness we had battle with a dragon. Is that what you would say, James?" he asked as he handed one of the daggers to Ted and one to Jeffery.

James just nodded. "I'll get the horses and some rifles!" he turned the burned brim of his hat towards the back of his head and left through the back door.

"You," Owen said to Jeffrey "I will want to speak to as soon as I get back. But for now just remember bullets will do no good against those things; use the knives and go for the neck if you are attacked."

"But where are you going now?" Ted asked.

"To the Dead Soul Marsh. Fuck waiting for dark!"

"That's a sweet piece of goods you've got locked up in there!" one of the four men left to watch over Elizabeth said to Tom as they sat around their small cooking fire.

"Now that's a fact!" a companion agreed. "She could make up for spending the night in this stinking place."

Tom spat into the fire. "You keep your place, the three of you. She belongs to Soskice now and you know damned well what would happen to you if you cross him!"

"Jesus, Tom, we are just having a laugh, is all! He'd have our ears for his garters...we know that much!" the youngest of the three men patted Tom heartily on the back as he spoke. "And a thought and a laugh never hurt nobody!"

"There you go, Tom. She is calling for you again. You'd better go in and get yours while you can!" all but Tom laughed nervously.

Tom emptied his cup, refilled it with water, and went inside the caravan.

"You've got to help me Tom!" Elizabeth cried as he closed and locked the door behind him. "Please let me go! I have to find my baby!"

"Here!" he said lifting her head gently and holding the cup to her mouth. She drank thirstily. "You had better be quiet or I will have to gag you and I am serious in that."

"But won't you help me? You are the only one of Emile's people who has ever shown me any kindness. You must let me go!"

"Don't mistake my few acts of kindness as foolhardiness, Elizabeth," he said sternly, looking down at her with a coolness that surprised her. "You will have to realize, as I have, that we come to a time when it is too late to fight and we have nothing

left to do but accept the inevitable.”

“Accept it? You expect me to accept it that my child will die in order for Emile to become a young man!”

“Yes and accept that he has chosen you to be his new wife.”

“He can’t marry me. He already has a wife.”

“Mama is dead. And that I know because it was on Soskice’s orders that I shot her today!”

“You killed Mama?” Elizabeth closed her eyes, fighting back the tears. “God, help me!” she muttered. She looked so pathetic and weak that his heart softened slightly towards her. He sat next to her on the bed.

“Why in all that is reasonable did you come to my farm? Alone and unarmed, on top of it! What were you thinking?”

“But I didn’t, Tom! I do not know where your bloody farm is!”

“You don’t remember?”

“No! I have been sick; Mavis Willard poisoned me. The last I knew I was resting at Hock House. When I woke up I was here.” She let the tears fall.

“Well, I have no idea how you got to the farm either,” he sighed and shook his head. “Maybe it would have been better for you if Mavis’s poison had worked. Now you have nothing you can do but take whatever Emile has in place for you.”

“Take whatever he wants? Just like you?” she cried at him angrily. “Give up all hope and my soul to a monster like that. You may be a coward but I am not. I would rather die than become his wife!”

“Then that is probably what will happen to you. You could be right though, death would be far better than a life fastened to Emile Soskice!” With that, he left her, relocking the door behind him.

Elizabeth continued to struggle with her binds simply because she could not bear to just lie there thinking.

“I am not going to spend the whole night sitting around this stinkin’ place!” Tom said as he rejoined the men and climbed on his horse. “I am going into St. Ivy for awhile.”

“Must be nice!” one of the three complained. “And we have to sit here with the spooks and whatever!”

“That is what you are being paid for!” Tom snapped.

“I thought that Soskice said we were all supposed to stay here and stay sober!” the younger and bolder of the three said bitterly.

“I am the boss when he is away and you would be better off to remember that! And if any one of you touches that female in there I will personally cut out his kidneys and feed them to Emile!” He rode up the winding road that led out of the marshland.

Tom had not been away for more than a few minutes when the young thug rushed to a clump of bushes and pulled out a sack. He brought out two bottles of cheap and strong whiskey.

“Cor! That is a sight for sore eyes!”

“That will take the edge of this bloody place! I hid it before when I heard the way the wind was blowing, if you catch my drift. Thought that old bugger would do a bunk on us!”

“And more power to him!” the older man laughed, pulled the corks from the

bottles.

Reine knew that Owen and James had misunderstood what Mama had said to them just before she died. She understood and knew where the place was. Ninety minutes passed before she arrived at the inlet marshland. Even for a shape shifter, this valley of dead trees and broken coffins, making their slow ride down to the water's edge, was a fearsome place.

She found two of the familiar gypsy wagons at the bottom of the valley at the water's edge. Perching in the nearby trees she saw Emile's wagon and the guards and knew they had been drinking. But for one of them, they were drunk and asleep.

The younger one, the fellow who had brought the whiskey, drank very little of it. When he was certain that his companions were sufficiently unaware he stood and circled the wagon, finding the door and windows locked. He crossed back to the far side, took a pocketknife from his jacket and began to pick at the window. Too busy with his purpose he did not see the tall female, dressed in black men's clothes approach from the tangle of mangled trees.

He was sliding the knife back and forth between the window and the wall frame as Reine reached him. She took him with one hand tightly around the neck, pulled him back closer to her and knocked the knife from his hand. In the startled fellow's ear, she whispered harshly, "Going in for an unwanted jab, are you? Let's see how much you enjoy it!" With speed and incredible strength, she spun him around and thrust the Sorskice dagger into his belly, dragging it all the way up to his neck. "Not to your liking, I see!" she snarled at him as his face went from surprise, fear, agony and then to death.

Still holding him by the neck and moving quietly across the pebbled beach, she carried him to the bend in the inlet and dropped the body into the shallow shore water. Then she stopped and washed the blood off her hands and the knife. "Nasty shitting stuff!" She cursed under her breath as she dried her hands on her trousers.

She listened for a few seconds to be sure that all was how it should be. All she could hear in that awful still place was the rasping sound of someone snoring from the other side of the wagon.

Rather a shame, she thought as she looked down at her hapless and oblivious opponents, I would have preferred more of a challenge. Oh well, must not complain on easy work. She pulled the razor sharp knife across the hapless guard's neck. He jerked, made a sound rather like a giggle and then fell limp, blood rolled down his chest and dropping with a hiss into the fire.

It was the older man who was snoring. "You must be a damned awful pain in the ass to your wife, old man!" she whispered, holding up his head by his beard and in a second, he was as silent as his companions were. After stripping these two of their weapons, and putting their pistols into her jacket pockets, she dumped their bodies in a heap on the shoreline. Again, she cleaned the knife and her hands and slid the knife back into her belt.

She broke the door of the padlock with one quick pull and stepped inside. Elizabeth squinted at her in the dim light.

"Who are you?" she demanded angrily. "Where is Tom?"

Reine stepped closer to the bed. "You don't know who I am?" she asked as she tore the metal cuffs off Elizabeth's wrists and ankles. "That is probably just as well. I

am going to take you back to the Tabor Estate.”

“But what about the guards?”

“They are dead. Was Tom here?”

“Yes! I heard him tell the guards that he was going into St. Ives for a while.”

“When was that?”

“Hell, maybe an hour ago! He could be back at any time. You are letting me go?” Elizabeth asked with confusion, rubbing her bruised ankles.

“No! I am rescuing you for Owen Tabor! Remember that! Can you ride?” Reine asked helping Elizabeth to her feet, then picking her up after she collapsed to the floor. “That answers that question. I will hitch the horse to the wagon. Do you know how to use a pistol?”

“Yes, of course.” Elizabeth answered and took the offered gun.

“You stay on the bed. But if Tom does catch us and manages to get passed me, shoot the bloody bastard! You cannot trust him. He will never betray Soskice.”

Elizabeth nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. She no longer knew whom she could trust. All she could do was go along with this strange female in male clothing.

As quickly as possible, Reine hitched a nervous horse to the wagon and started up the narrow winding road out of the Dead Souls Marsh.

Owen and James traveled fast and hard, stopping just outside the town of Saint Ives in a wayside Inn and inquired for directions to the abandoned cemetery.

“Why in Heavens name would two such gentlemen as you want that place?” the barmaid smiled at them as she poured their beers. “There’s no one but those rotten gypsies that goes to that place.”

“It’s business!” James said as he slid some coins, much more than the required amount across the bar top. His voice said that it was not of a friendly business nature.

“Ah, well, then! It is far past time for that! Those buggers ain’t no use to us at St. Ives,” she winked at James. “There are two ways you can get there. Take this same road you came in on and carry on for a quarter-mile and you will come to a large boulder on the roadside. You cannot miss it; as big as this building it is. We call it ‘Devils Door’ and the only road in or out of the place is just beside it. Mind you though, it is a nasty place; quick sand and sink holes all the way down so you’d best go slow.”

“And the other route?” Owen asked.

She nodded. “Best way if you want to sneak up on them like. Just go straight here to the shoreline and follow it straight to the point. No one lives down there and you’ll see the point almost right away. Round side of that is where you’ll find that crew!”

“You are a charm, my dear!” James smiled and handed her some more coins.

“But if you had been here five minutes earlier you would have seen one of them right where your sat.”

Owen looked and James and back at the bar keep. “What did he look like?”

“Tall, thin and blond hair, what little he had! He does not look like most gypsies though. White skinned and a sharper dresser if you know what I mean!”

“Hobson!” Owen said to James. They were quickly on their horses.

Owen took the shore road and James the Highway.

As the barmaid said, it was not too long before Owen saw the point of land ahead

of him along the rocky coastline. He moved further back to the tree line and followed it down to the point, going as quickly and as quietly as possible. He came across what he thought at first was a grouping of large rocks at the water's edge and saw that it was the bodies of three dead men. He pulled out his revolver and peered through the strange, murky haze that surrounded him.

'Reine has been here, no doubt. Handy little bitch!' he smiled as he rounded the point and came to the flat land where the gypsies usually had their camp. He saw the still burning fire with their dinner remains drenched in their blood and then the wagons tracks in the soft ground leading to the narrow path that led up into the fog-shrouded valley.

Reine was half way up the treacherous winding roadway when she felt the approaching danger. It heightened her senses and tightened her body. She pulled her horse to a halt. Then she caught the smell of Tom Hobson in the stagnant air. She heard the steady dull thud of horses' hooves and she saw movement in the thicket that rounded the bend in the road just ahead of her. She raised her pistol and shot. The bullet tore through the bushes.

She heard the screech of a horse and knew she had missed her mark. Her own horse panicked, jerked and tried to bolt. Reine had to pull him hard to keep him still. She knew she had hit Tom's horse and could hear him coming down the slippery road towards the bend just ahead of her but holding the horse still wasted precious seconds. The last thing she saw as she shifted was Hobson as he rounded the corner and fired at her.

Owen heard the first shot, riding low on Majesty he headed quickly up the road. The second shot rang into the mist and Owen caught sight of the raven fluttering into the dead trees above. Now with no one to control him, the terrified gypsy horse bolted and reared. The animal and wagon fell sideways down the embankment and began to slide down backwards through the mire.

Owen caught sight of Tom, with James coming up behind him. A third shot ran out, this one from James. It slammed into Toms shoulder, sending him spinning and his gun flying into the mud. Owen took aim and fired, his bullet hitting Tom in the chest knocking him through the air and tumbling down the ditch and into the sandy mire.

James jumped down from his horse and ran up to Owen, firing one more shot into Tom. His body jerked and fell limp.

"He's dead!" James said as he and Owen ran after the wagon. It had come to a precarious stop against a tombstone and was rapidly sinking into a batch of quick sand.

"Keep your eyes open for more of them!" Owen called back to him. "Lizzie, are you in there?" He banged on the side of the wagon. The thrashing of the wild-eyed horse was causing the wagon to fall further into the mire. A single bullet from James put the animal down as he disappeared under the mud.

"Get away from the window!" Owen yelled through the glass as he caught sight of Elizabeth. With the barrel of his gun, he smashed the glass, knocking as much of it away as he could. Reaching in he pulled Elizabeth up and out, holding her they fell onto the roadway just as the last of the wagon sunk under the sand.

He sat her upright, saw the torn jacket and her naked body. "Oh, Christ, are you alright? Did they....?"

"No!" she answered quickly, pulling the jacket closed as much as she could. "I

am fine, Owen.”

He took off his coat and helped her into it. “There are three dead men down by the water!” Owen said to James as he got to his feet, picking up Elizabeth. “Do you have any idea how many men were here?”

“No! But Emile has escaped. He was here with Richard. They left hours ago.”

“We had best get out of this God forsaken place!” James said as he brought Majesty up to them and went for his own horse.

Owen climbed on his horse with Elizabeth in his lap. “Where is that woman?” she asked.

“What?”

“She was dressed in black, like a man? I think she killed the guards. Didn’t she come with you?”

“That was Reine. You did not recognize her?”

“No! Who is she?”

“I believe a friend, if a strange one!” Owen answered as they reached the roadway and Owen stopped by the boulder. “Reine!” he called out down the valley. Then after a silence, he called again. His words fell like dull thuds into the gloom of the place. There was no reply.

“Hobson got a shot off before I got to him,” James said with a tone of doubt in his voice.

“Who is she?” Elizabeth asked again.

“I will tell you about her later, Elizabeth.” Owen said and they began the long ride back to the Tabor Estate.

“Excuse me, Mr. Edmond!” Mrs. Hastings asked, gently touching the foot of Edmond’s bed. “Your door was not shut so I thought I would just come in. You see, Cook wants to retire and us as like, but we thought you might want something to eat?”

“What time is it?” Edmond asked looking sleepily up from under the covers. It seemed very dark to him and yet it could not have been any later than mid afternoon.

“Almost eight in the evening, sir,” she answered lighting a lamp on his bedside table.

“What? Bloody Hell” He sat up and looked at his watch. He had been asleep for seven hours. “What is wrong with me?” Then he noticed for the first time that the usually locked top drawer of the night table was open. A new box of sleeping powders lay on the tabletop and two of the small envelopes were missing.

“Has anyone been in here today?” he asked.

“Not sure, sir! But the lock on your door is broken.”

Edmond thought for a brief moment and remembered the strange tasting whiskey and tea that James had given him that morning.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” he cursed as he pulled on his boots and pushed his revolver into his belt. “Where is Whitehall?”

“Not here, you are the only one here. Not even Miss Crawford or Miss Pritchard! But there is a lot of activity at Hollyhock House....”

“Oh, is there? Well, there is soon to be a hell of a lot more!” he cursed, slammed out of the room and out of the house.



"Well, I guess that means we can all go to bed!" the butler said to his wife when she joined him.

"Why Robert? So we can all be killed in our sleep?"

"Now, don't you be a silly old dear, Emma! It is only the Tabors what's getting killed; they don't want any of us!" Hastings said as he carefully locked their bedroom door behind them.

Thick Fog was sliding up from the channel as Edmond crossed the way to Owen's house. As the housekeeper had told him, the house was a blaze with light from many windows. It was not until Edmond had reached the line of trees that ran alongside the length of Hock House that he saw the still white form in the shadows. He pulled out his pistol and approached slowly until he could make out the naked form of his new mistress lying still on her side.

"Reine?" he called to her as he rolled her over onto her back and saw the bullet hole in her right shoulder. "Reine!" he shook her gently.

She opened her eyes, saw Edmond and moaned.

Aware of Edmond's presence the back sentry stood around from the corner of the house. "Who is it?" he asked raising his rifle.

"Tabor!" Edmond answered, standing as he picked up the wounded woman. "Did you do this?" he asked angrily.

"No, sir!" the guard said in surprise. "I didn't even know anybody was there!"

"Fat lot of fucking good you are then, aren't you?" Edmond called back at him over his shoulder as he went up the back steps of Hock House. He kicked the door several times with his boot until the startled Daisy opened the door. "Get Hanna!" he said as he continued down the hallway and into the Great Room.

Edmond glanced at the strange faces who watched as he laid Reine on a lounge.

Abbey was the only one who approached. "Good God! What has happened?"

"She's been shot! What the flipping Hell are you and she doing over here this late and what is she doing naked and...." Edmond was in a tirade but stopped as Margaret gently moved him aside to examine Reine.

Carefully she studied the wound; saw that the bullet had gone clean through. She pulled a blanket over the naked woman. "If we keep away infection she will be alright. The bullet has passed out the back and not near any vital organs. But she will have pain!" She went to the doorway and called to Hanna to bring plenty of hot water and clean towels.

If it had not been such a serious moment, the next few seconds might have been comical; in fact, Margaret could not help but smile at the changes of expression that passed across the young man's face. Edmond's anger and confusion melted to surprise and wonder, then to stunned shock as he looked at the woman whom he had long thought dead, his father's first wife.

"You are....?" he gaped at her.

"Margaret Tabor! I assume that you are Edmond Tabor?" She smiled, offering him her hand.

It was a moment before he moved or said anything. "You're not dead?" he asked stupidly. His mind was still a blur from the alcohol the night before and the drugs of that day.

"Obviously not, young man! Now what has happened to Miss Crawford? Do

you know?" Margaret sat next to Reine who was now awake and watching the situation.

"No, I do not and I wish I did."

Reine took Margaret's arm, pulled her down and whispered in her ear. "Please don't tell him."

"I heard that! Don't tell me what?" Edmond glared at Reine.

"Not now Mr. Tabor. You must not upset her," Margaret said reassuringly as she took a towel from Hanna and slipped it under her wounded shoulder. "You have to relax, my dear! There will be plenty of time for discussion later! Right, Hanna I will need some disinfectant and some bandages. Do you have these things?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Hanna said bustling off again with the ever-flustered Daisy following close behind her.

"Reine! Who did this to you?" Edmond asked angrily looking over Margaret.

"Tell him the truth!" Margaret mouthed at Reine.

"Tom Hobson!" Reine answered weakly.

"One of Emile's thugs!" Abbey explained.

"They are back?" he asked. "I'll fire the lot of those damned guards!"

"Perhaps you should wait until Owen gets back, Edmond!" Abbey said. "There is a very great deal you do not know!"

At that, Reine started to cry.

"Are you sure she is going to be all right?" Edmond asked Margaret. "Do you have some medical training?"

"Enough to know she will heal if given the chance. However, she is in a great deal of pain. She could use some laudanum!"

"I have some," Abbey said. "In my bag at the Hall. That is if Owen hasn't gotten rid of it!"

"Why would Owen be in your things?" Edmond demanded, this confusion adding a rough edge to his quick temper.

"Be a help and go and get it for us, will you, Mr. Tabor?" Margaret asked him sweetly. "She is in a lot of pain!"

"Oh..." they could hear him cursing until he was out of the house.

"I am going to go and see what kind of bandages Hanna has!" Margaret said and left the room.

"Abbey! You have to see to it that no one tells anything to Edmond! You promised me you would not cross me!" Reine pleaded.

"I did not promise you anything, Reine! My only plan is to get out of this mess alive. As long as I see that you are helping Owen then I will have nothing to say to Edmond. I doubt you can say the same about the rest of the people who know what you are. You did make quite a show of yourself earlier!"

"I was only trying to help Owen and James!"

"So that they will kill Emile and free you, that is why! Don't forget, you may have changed in these last few days but I have seen you at your worst."

"Oh God!" Reine tried to sit and fell back. "I have to talk to the rest of those who saw me shift! Where are they?"

"Ivy is in her room upstairs and I doubt she will ever leave it again. Rev Browne is right there." Ted stepped out of the shadows at the far end of the room.

"The other one...?" Reine gasped. "Where is he?"

"You mean Jeffery Slocomb? I have no idea."

"Jeffrey Slocomb? That is not his name! Get them, all of them, Abbey! I have to talk to them before Edmond gets back. They have to know what I will do if they tell him...."

"Shut up, shifter!" Ted hissed at her.

"And I don't take orders from you any more, Reine!" Abbey folded her arms over her belly. "Anyway, I thought you had changed," she added with sarcasm.

Despite her obvious discomfort, Reine rose onto one elbow and narrowed her silver glare at Abbey, all of her tears now shed. "Maybe I haven't changed all that much Abbey!" She reached up and took a pewter mug from off the nearby desktop. Holding it in between her thumb and forefinger, she folded it flat. She did not see Margaret as she watched from the doorway.

"Well then!" Margaret said as she crossed back to the bed. "I also know just what manner of creature you are Miss Crawford and you do not sit too well in my books either. To be honest," she continued as she cleaned and dressed the bullet wounds, "this is a Christian household and you will conduct yourself accordingly or even helping my son will not protect you. Do you understand me?"

"Shit. I suppose I do."

"Good! Now, have you seen Owen and James? They went to the Dead Souls Marsh." Margaret asked.

"Yes! When I last looked, Owen had shot Tom. I think he is dead."

"Well, that is one thing anyway. No meaner bastard next to Emile!" Abbey said as she leaned across the desk and looked out the window. "Here comes Edmond!" she said stepping back.

"Please!" Reine took Margaret's hand. "I love him; he is my only chance to live a normal life. Don't tell him who I am!"

"Love?" Ted made a sound like a laugh.

"Be quiet, Ted and Abbey!" Margaret glared at them. "And you behave yourself, continue to help my son and we will see what the future holds for you."

Edmond tossed a bundle of clothes on the table, sat next to Reine and took one of Abbey's laudanum bottles from his pocket. "I brought you some clothes, Reine. Here take a small sip of this," he said as he lifted her head to the rim of the green bottle.

"Just a small amount!" Margaret said. "We will need her mind clear."

"May I ask why?" Edmond asked with no small amount of frustration.

Margaret was about to answer when they first heard the sound of horses coming towards Hock House. "They are back! Thank God!" Margaret said and rushed off towards the kitchen with Abbey close behind her.

"Reine!" Edmond said looking sternly at her. "I will not press the matter with you right now but soon you will have to tell me what is going on!"

"But you know that I came here to help fight against Emile Soskice and help your family. That is what we are doing! Nothing more!"

He leaned forward kissed her cheek and whispered in her ear. "It seems that some around here take me for a fool but they are mistaken, remember that."

James was first in the great room followed by Ted carrying Elizabeth, then Owen and Margaret behind. Jeffrey wandered in not too far behind them. He moved to a distant dark corner.

"Lay Elizabeth on Owen's bed," Margaret said to Ted. "Are you alright, love?"

"I do not need to lie down," Elizabeth insisted. "I will just sit. I am fine."

Ted frowned and placed her on the side of the bed. "You really should lie down, Elizabeth. You look very pale"

"I said that I am fine," she snapped with frustration.

"Whitehall! I want a word with you!" Edmond walked up to James.

"What?" James sighed as he fell into a chair.

"You're fired! Owen I want this man off the property!" Edmond said firmly with his hands on his hips.

"For Christ's sake Edmond. You cannot fire him! I thought you'd be out of the way until tomorrow morning!"

"You know that he drugged me?"

"Hello there!" Owen smiled down at Reine. "I didn't think we had seen the last of you." He moved the blanket down slightly to see her bandages. "Got you, did he?"

"Is he dead?" Reine smiled back at him, already feeling the effects of the powerful drug.

Owen nodded.

"It is just a flesh wound!" Margaret said. "She will heal but she has lost a fair amount of blood, I imagine."

"I asked you if you knew that James had drugged me!" Edmond said again stepping in front of Owen.

"Yes, of course! It was my idea! But I guess we should have used three instead of two!"

"Why the ...." Edmond, furious now began but stopped suddenly as Owen took him roughly by the shoulders and moved him aside.

"Not too much fun, is it, little brother, to be drugged when someone wants you out of the way for a while? Does your own medicine have a bitter taste in your mouth?" Owen asked. The message was not lost on Edmond.

"Who are these people?" Edmond demanded with a little less force, looking at the several unfamiliar faces.

"This is Margaret Tabor, my mother, but I am sure you have already guessed that. This is Jeffrey Slocomb.... a friend of my mother's," he paused here and looked at Jeffrey as if to say more but changed his mind. "This gentleman is Rev. Thaddeus Browne, expert on the matter of Emile Soskice and the young lady is Elizabeth Delacourt, his goddaughter and until recently a captive of Emile and his cohorts!"

"Very recently!" Elizabeth said with bitterness in her voice. "How long before they find me again?"

Owen ignored her and went on with his introductions. "This is Edmond Tabor, my last remaining brother. He is confused and understandably upset! Mother would you be so kind as to take Edmond to the kitchen and perhaps give him some warm milk...."

"I don't want any bloody milk, I want answers!" Edmond demanded.

"Maybe," Margaret took him by the arm and led him back to sit with Reine, "if you will just give us time, it will all be clear to you, Edmond. We have all had a very difficult day."

"Somebody had better tell me something very soon," Edmond leaned back on the

lounge and glared at Owen.

"You are the woman who rescued me!" Elizabeth said as she focused on Reine across from her.

"I tried to! I guess I am not as clever as I think!" Reine grinned at her. Her pain was gone. She was drugged and blissfully sleepy.

"I am sorry that you were wounded," Elizabeth said shaking her head. "Who are you?"

"This is Reine Crawford, my protégé." Abbey said quickly stepping forward and falling onto the familiar story. "We have come to help in this matter of Emile Soskice. Reine is also working to get your child back to you. As she was trying to do tonight!"

"It is not your place to get my child back to me. It is his!" she pointed to Owen. "If you had let me leave when I wanted to, none of this would have happened to me and I would have my baby!"

"I will get him back to you, Elizabeth!" Owen said coming up to her. "I have told you that!"

"Then why haven't you done so already?" she began to cry getting shakily to her feet. "You won't get him away from Emile. No one can. Why don't you tell them all why you insisted in keeping me here? Why don't you tell them what you wanted that has cost so much?"

"Stop it! Get a hold on yourself! You will make yourself sick again." Owen tried to put his arm around her.

"Don't you touch me! I hate you!" she pushed at him, lost her balance and fell back on the bed.

"It is alright, Elizabeth," Margaret sat on the bed beside her. "What we all need to do right now is get some rest. Ted, please carry Elizabeth up to my room. She will sleep with me from now on."

"That is a good idea," Ted agreed, picked up Elizabeth and disappeared up the stairs.

James noticed the stunned look on Owen's face at Elizabeth's sharp rebuke. He motioned for Owen to follow him into the study.

"I think Elizabeth is over wrought," Owen said as he poured two glasses of whiskey and handed one to James. "I can't say that I blame her for her temper."

"Temper? Hell, Owen, it is a bit more than that! What did you think she would feel about you? She is very young and has had a terrible life but she is not stupid. You will have to walk a fine line to get into her good books again, if that is what you want."

Owen looked at first as though he would argue but after a moment's thought he only nodded and sat heavily into his chair. "Have Edmond move Reine out of my room. I want to sleep!"

Margaret wrapped Reine in the blanket. She helped Edmond arrange an upstairs bedroom for him and Reine. Reine was asleep almost as soon as Edmond laid her in the bed.

"We can have a chat now, if you'd like, Edmond," Margaret offered as they left the bedroom.

"Yes. I would like that, Mrs. Tabor. I apologize for my rudeness...." he stopped lost for words.

"Please call me Margaret and there is no need to apologize. Under the circumstances, I think you handled yourself very well. Come along. We will go to the kitchen."

Looking worried and tired, Hanna and Daisy were sitting at the kitchen table.

"Oh, I had forgotten all about you two!" Margaret said when she and Edmond joined them. "Everyone is fine so you can go to bed. We have a house full of people who will be hungry in the morning. We have to be up all the earlier to prepare a full, hot breakfast."

When Daisy and Hanna were gone, Margaret poured milk, honey and a thick slab of butter into a pot and put it on the stove to heat.

"I don't want any milk," Edmond said sulkily. "I am not a child!"

"Why is it that men always say that when they most act childlike?" Margaret asked as she stirred the milk.

"Oh, I see! I am acting childish. Let me see why! Maybe it is because two of my brothers, a cousin, my father and my wife are dead. My .... friend has been shot and left naked in the grass. Owen and his lackey have had me drugged to keep me out of the way. And yes, I must not forget. You are still alive so that makes me along with being an orphan, a bastard! Yes, I guess I am over reacting!"

Margaret blanched slightly at the word 'bastard' and sighed as she poured the warm milk into two cups and sat down next to Edmond. "You have reason to be upset; that is true, but give us time and all will make sense to you, if any of this can make sense!" She wanted to hold his hand but thought better of it. In a quiet and soothing voice she continued. "Over the years Owen has told me a great deal about Isabelle Tabor. She was a good and kind woman. Was she also a good mother?"

"Of course!" Edmond answered as he swallowed some of his milk.

"Wilmot and she truly believed I was dead. In their eyes, the eyes of God and the law they truly believed they were married. You are not some unwanted child conceived on the wrong side of the blanket!" she reassured him. "All you can do now is be proud of the Tabor name and live your life to the fullest!"

"Thank you. I can see that you are trying to be kind but I still intend on finding out why I was drugged and what they did with Reine!"

"I should think that would be obvious. Did you not know that Emile escaped?" she asked knowing that he could not.

"What? When?"

"At some point today."

"I was otherwise engaged; taking a nap!" Edmond said sarcastically.

"Well, he's gone. Elizabeth and her child had been staying here in Hock House since Wilmot's birthday but somehow the Soskice family was able to get at them again," she decided not to get into the 'how' of it just then. "Owen and James went to get her back and I guess to look for Emile and Reine felt because of her 'powers' she had to be with them. I am sure they felt that you would not approve and might get in the way. But I do not agree with what they did to you and I am sure that it will not happen again."

"You can be damned sure on that one. I still do not understand why Owen put Reine in so much danger. He does not believe in her so-called 'powers'"

To her relief James joined them. "Reine is up and looking for you," he said to Edmond. "She is still naked! Would one of you two put some clothes on her?"

Edmond stood. "I'll go. I left her clothes in the Great Room," he turned to James. "You can be damned sure that whatever goes on around here tomorrow, Whitehall, I will be a part of it!"

"As you say!" James said.

Edmond said nothing more and went down the hallway.

Taking a closer look at his muddied, burnt and torn clothing Margaret asked him, "Are you sure that you are all right, Jamie?"

"Just beat to the core. Not the man I was twenty five years ago, Maggie!" he took removed his ever-present, now burnt hat, tossed it on the table and ran his long fingers through his bushy gray hair.

"You look the same to me!" she smiled at him. "And still a stubborn coot to boot!"

He smiled back at her. "Well, at least the important traits remain. You still have a fine body, Margaret. It is a bloody shame that you kept it hidden under monks' robes all these years. What a waste!"

"That is none of your business! I have led a full and wonderful life. There is more than sex that makes life worthwhile," she said with mock anger.

"If I was a younger man I would drag you to my bed and prove you wrong in that!" he said leaning slightly across the table and looking deeply into her eyes.

She did not flinch or blush as he had expected. "And if you were a younger man I would already be in your bed waiting for you!" she said not breaking his stare.

He laughed long and hard and it was a wonderful, familiar sound to her. "Oh God, I needed that!" In a more serious tone he added, "You belong in this house, Margaret. I will not let you go back to those shriveled up old men!"

"That is my decision, James!" she said after a slight silence.

"It was your decision before. Were you right then?"

She ignored the question that hurt too much to deal with then. She reached up and placed her hand on his face. "Tomorrow there will be more danger. Please look after our son, he is all I have!"

"I will," he nodded at her. "I always have!"

Edmond took the pile of clothes from the Great Room and ignored Owen who watched him from his bed. He found Reine, loosely wrapped in a sheet, leaning against the wall outside their assigned bedroom. She had the bottle of laudanum in her hand.

"There you are, lovely man!" she smiled at him and slurred her words. "I have been looking for you."

"Good Lord. You have not had more of this stuff, have you?"

"Just a smidgen, Eddie! It is rather good, you know. Do you want some?"

"No! I have had all the drugs I need for one day!" he took the bottle from her, brought her into the bedroom and locked the door behind him. "Come on, you are going to bed to stay, this time."

"Oh, I do like the sound of that. But this room is all wrong. Look," she pointed at the two single beds, "tell Owen we need a room with one bed....one big bed!"

"This is fine for tonight. I brought your clothes. There are a couple of dresses. Which do you want to wear?"

"Now don't be silly Edmond. I do not need clothes in bed. I am fine as I am," she dropped the sheet. Blood was staining her bandages.

"Look, you are still bleeding," he pushed her gently into the bed, tucked the covers around her and sat on the bedside. "This time, stay put, Reine!"

She yawned and ran her hand up his thigh. "Don't you want to make love to me?"

"Not tonight Reine! It is the drugs talking. You need to rest."

"But I want you to!" she laughed and smiled at him, raising her hand further.

"No!" he said firmly moving her hand. He lay down on the bed next to her. "I am not the least bit tired, I will never sleep."

After a few moments, she turned her head in his direction. "Edmond?" she said softly. "I have to tell you something!"

"Yes?" he mumbled.

"There is a great deal I have to tell you! I am not who you think I am," she sighed sadly. "If I do not tell you, one of the others will and they are so stupid they will mess it all up!" Her courage buoyed by the laudanum. She waited for his response and when none came, she spoke again. "Edmond?"

Her only answer was the sound of his deep breathing and knew he was fast asleep. Oh well, she thought, at least I tried.

There was some discussion between Ted and Margaret as he insisted on sleeping in her room with her and Elizabeth.

"You will have to agree with me, Margaret. I will not rest away from Elizabeth until this matter is complete. I will sleep right here on the floor!" he said pointing to the floor in front of the door to the hallway. "No one will get in or out of here without my knowledge!"

"Right! Then do as you please! There is just no sense with some men!" Margaret said as she watched him move the heavy wardrobe in front of the French doors. Then he pushed the bed so that the door leading to the next-door nursery would not open. "You can sleep hanging from the rafters like a bat for all I care but for now go so I can change and bathe Elizabeth!" she insisted.

"I will wait in the hall!" he said stepping out and leaning against the closed door.

"Oh God, this is such a mess. I am sorry for being so much trouble, Margaret!" Elizabeth said letting the older woman remove Nora's boots.

"Nonsense! We are doing what must be done. It is not your fault. That all falls to others but none to you," Margaret said with a calming tone. She slipped off Owen's coat and the remains of the riding jacket. She saw the breast bindings were gone but said nothing about it. "Owen has placed several more men around the house and two in the main floor hallway. I am sure we will all sleep safely tonight." She helped Elizabeth out of the rest of the clothing.

"Will you please tell me what happened to me? Whose clothes are they? How did Emile get me?"

Margaret said nothing for a moment. Leading Elizabeth, now naked to sit in a chair by a washbasin, she decided that Elizabeth was right. It would not give her peace of mind to have so many impossible questions.

"Those are....were Nora Tabor's clothes! She must have put them on you!"

"Owen's wife? But she is dead. Isn't she?"

"Dead in body but her spirit still clings to some form of life in this house! She



no doubt still sees herself as Owen's wife and this house as hers."

"Oh God!" Elizabeth murmured. Margaret knew what she was thinking. At least one time Elizabeth and Owen had had sexual relations and most likely Nora had been aware of that.

"Some spirits can, with time and confidence, possess a person. She most likely saw you as a threat to her marriage and took over your body. Your weakened state would have made that very easy."

"But how did she know to take me to Emile? That does not make any sense."

"If you are looking for things to make sense then you will be even more confused. She did not take you to Emile but to Tom Hobson's farm. He found you there and it was he who took you to Emile!"

"How do you know this?"

"Reine took Owen and James to the farm this morning, using her psychic powers!" Margaret lied. This was not the time for Elizabeth to know the truth about Reine. "There they found Emile's wife dying. Hobson had shot her and she told them where they would find you!" Elizabeth silent now, sat as though in a trance. Margaret washed and dried her and pulled a nightgown over her head.

"My head is spinning. God, I wish I could think clearly!" the young woman said as Margaret tucked her into the bed.

"Do not even try to think. Just rest!"

It was then that they heard the sound of raised voices coming from the hallway.

"Now what?" Margaret asked with frustration as she stepped out of the room to see Owen and Ted eye to eye and in angry words.

"I want to see Elizabeth!" Owen said without taking his eyes off Ted. "And I will see her!"

"She does not want to see you," Ted said. "She has had enough, don't you think?"

"Did she say that she doesn't want to see me?" Owen turned to his mother.

"No, she didn't. Ted, give him one minute. We will wait right here." She took Ted's arm and smiled at him. "Maybe he will put her fears at rest!"

"I doubt that," Ted sighed, and then added. "I guess I am over wrought. One minute only, Owen, please, she needs her rest now more than anything else."

Owen nodded and quietly closed the door behind him.

"Go away!" Elizabeth said when she saw Owen and pulled the covers over her head. "Please go away!"

He pulled the cover down, placed his hands gently on her sides and pulled her to a kneeling position on the bed. She turned her head, closing her eyes. "No!" she whispered weakly trying to push him away.

"Look at me!" he demanded taking her head in his hands and forcing her head up to his.

In her eyes, he found what he was looking for and needed. He kissed her with more passion than he had ever known. Her moment of resistance was short. She fell against his body returning his passion with all the force of the love she felt for him. When he finally moved his head back from hers he continued to look into her eyes but said nothing.

"Why?" she asked him quietly. "Why are you doing this to me? Can't you see

how much I love you? You have cost me my child. Haven't you hurt me enough? Must you break my heart....again?"

He shook his head slowly. "Please be patient, I will fix what I have broken," he said as he laid her carefully back onto the bed. Then he left the room.

"Well, does she feel any better?" Ted asked as he stepped out.

"No, I doubt it!" Owen said as he descended the stairs to his room. "But I do!"

Ted frowned at Margaret. "You need a few well placed words with your son, before I do!"

"I am sorry, Ted! Owen can be arrogant at times. I am afraid he gets that and some other unhappy traits from his father."

"Really?" Ted could not help but smile. "And what does he get from you?"

She thought for a few seconds and then smiling, she answered, "His good looks, of course!"

They both laughed. "How can we laugh with all this mayhem around us?" Margaret asked shaking her head.

"I have found that humor is sometimes the only safe guard against complete insanity," Ted answered opening the door to the bedroom.

"I have to see with Jeffrey for a few moments. You go ahead; I will not be too long. I will speak with Owen in the morning. I doubt very much he is in the mood for a mother to son talk tonight!"

Jeffrey was writing in a notebook; his door open a few inches. Before she had a chance to knock he called out softly for her to come in. Quietly she closed the door behind her and stood looking at him sternly.

"How is Elizabeth?" he asked.

"I do not think they managed to do any more harm to her."

"That is good. Then we can all get some much needed rest."

"I am surprised at how calm you are, Jeffrey!" she interrupted with an unhappy tone.

He closed the notebook. "You are angry at me for the way I spoke to you earlier and you are right to be so. I can be rough at times and, as I said, I do apologize."

"You confuse me, Jeffery. You wanted that I tell Owen the absolute truth and I did that. I told him that James is his father and I told that to Wilmot before he died. Now you insist I must tell them about my foolish nightmares. Perhaps it is just that I should tell them about you."

He sighed, swung his feet off the bed and patted it for her to sit beside him. She sat in a nearby chair, instead.

"That is up to you, but how does my being able to occasionally help the sick have anything to do with One Wing and Emile Soskice?"

"Help the sick? Good Lord, it was far more than that and you know it. Elizabeth was very near to death! You took that on yourself and she lived. Do not forget I saw it all with my own eyes. That is not the ability of a normal human! I need to know just 'what' you are, Jeffrey Slocomb!"

"What I am? I do not understand."

"Good or evil, it is as simple as that? You must satisfy my mind or I will take what I do know to Owen."

"If I am evil, aren't you taking a serious chance cornering me this way?"

Margaret leaned back in her chair, pulling her hand from the pocket of her skirt and he saw the small pistol that she pointed in his direction. "Not right at this moment. And at all costs I must protect my son!"

"I see!" he sighed, turned his eyes away from her. "So then, would an evil man go through what I did to help Elizabeth?"

"That is a large part of my worries. If she were a stranger to you, why would you have put your own life at risk like that? You were desperate to keep her alive and I demand to know why?"

He stood and went to the window, ignoring the gun she held on him. "It could be that I have underestimated you, Margaret!"

"Just tell me what I want to know!"

"Very well. I had to keep Elizabeth Delacourt alive so Owen would not turn his back on all that he must do!"

"But what is it that he must do and what does it have to do with you?" she asked. After a pause when he did not answer she continued. "And you will have to explain to me what passed between you and Reine earlier. I do not think that any of the others noticed it but I did. That woman, creature or whatever she is, most certainly knows you and is afraid of you and I want to know why! In all fairness, Jeffrey you owe it to me."

He turned around to face her. "You put me in a very difficult position, Margaret!"

"As do you by insisting I bare my nightmare!" she said with flat determination.

"I have met that shifter before and she has reason to fear and respect me, but the cause of that is of no bearing to the issues facing Owen with One Wing!"

"That is not good enough, not at all! As far as I can see the issues with One Wing, as you call them, have nothing to do with my son. He has 'issues' with Emile Soscice and must get that child back to his mother. Unless you can set my mind at ease I shall have to tell Owen what I saw pass between you and Reine today!"

"You won't trust me otherwise?"

"No!" she sighed and stood. "There is no connection between One Wing and Owen. And I have to tell him that you somehow know the shape shifter!"

"Wait!" he took her gently by the arm to the bedside. "Sit and put your gun away, you will not hurt me, you know that; as I would never hurt you!" She lowered the gun to her lap but did not place it back in her pocket. "I will tell you what I can; it may not be enough to satisfy you but after that it falls down to you." He thought briefly then began to speak. "One Wing was created, how and why is of no importance to you, one thousand years ago. As I told you earlier, One Wing has had many children. One of them is Emile Soscice."

"Most of these children were born deformed and most of them he killed. Unfortunately, he did not kill Emile. Other than their male parent, there was one thing all his children shared and that is silver eyes. Some have constant silver eyes, others have eyes that change color and become silver in times of emotion."

He sat on the end of the bed near to her. "At midnight, as this coming Saturday turns to Sunday, the summer solstice, it will be exactly on thousand years since One Wing was created. It is only at that time, between midnight and the rising of the sun when One Wing is vulnerable. If he does not die then, he will continue as he has done for another thousand years. I think you will agree Margaret that he must be destroyed!"

"Then kill him yourself and leave Owen out of it," she said her voice barely a whisper.

"If I could, I would and without hesitation but I cannot. Only a person who has previously escaped the wraith of One Wing can kill him. As you can imagine such people are few and far between."

"But Owen cannot be one of them, that is not possible!"

"Not Owen, Margaret, but Edmond Tabor!"

"Edmond? Why?"

He took her hand. "Please understand that I cannot tell you more. If you interfere as the pieces fall into place many more people will die, certainly Richard and perhaps Edmond and Owen. One Wing will live another thousand years to do as he pleases and Soskice will have a new life time. So, as I said, now that you have this knowledge it is up to you to be an aide to me or not?"

"But you ask me to trust you and to risk the life of my only son!"

"Are you so determined to maintain that lie?" he asked, anger now gaining a hold in him. "It is that precious lie that could cost you your 'only' son!" She gasped and tried to stand but he put his hands on her shoulders and held her firmly in place.

"Margaret, for God's sake, you must face the truth once and for all!"

"No!" she tried in vain to turn away from him.

"Look at me!" he insisted.

She shook her head. He raised her face to his and she saw then the shining silver eyes of his father and the gentle, loving smile of his mother.

"Oh, sweet Jesus....no!" she began to cry. He pulled her to the bed and held her.

"You have a second son and you have always known that. However, you have nothing to fear from me. I have long since chosen the light side. It is my consuming desire that One Wing and his world be destroyed."

She pulled back and looked at him. "But how did you get away from him?"

"That is not important now. You need to rest. Go to your bed and be prepared for what you must do first thing in the morning. If you do not tell them then I will have to do so and I think you will agree it would be better for all if it came from you!"

## Chapter Twelve

Jeffrey waited for the silence that fell on a house in repose. He moved quietly down the passageway and stepped into the room where Reine and Edmond lay sleeping in their separate beds.

He smiled slightly as he looked down on the sleeping man. He lowered his right hand over the back of Edmond's head. After a few seconds, he turned to the object of his visit.

Reine, still under the effects of the narcotic, lay sprawled naked onto top of the bed covers. He pushed her roughly by the hips and sat down beside her.

She moaned slightly, opened her eyes and looked up at the silhouette before her. "Eddie?" she whispered reaching up to him.

Jeffrey leaned closer to her so she could see the silver fire glow of his eyes. In one movement, she jumped up and flattened against the wall. Terror woke her dulled senses.

"Edmond!" she called again and louder.

Jeffrey took her by the neck and pulled her back to him so their faces were only inches apart. He placed one hand hard across her mouth. "Be quiet!" he ordered in a voice, different, dark and menacing. Wild eyed with fear, Reine was unable to move in any way. With his eyes locked into her mind, he searched her recent memories. He saw the drunken, foolish face of Edward in the seconds before his death, the lurid face of Tom O'Connor, the twisted broken neck of the innocent farmer, the hateful and terrified face of Olivia Tabor and the confused, flushed face of Bob Willard.

"You are a murderous bitch, aren't you?" he hissed at her. He had known many shape shifters over his years and loathed them intensely. "Do you know who I am? You remember me?" he asked, relaxing his hold on her neck and removing his hand from her mouth.

Reine did not speak, managed only to nod. So many times he had knocked her away from the spirits of her victims.

"Good! Then you will also know that in the snap of my fingers you will die or worse and be stuck for ever as the unholy animal that you are!"

"I know what you can do!" Reine whispered. Her eyes filled with tears.

"A crying shifter!" He roughly ran his fingers across her eyes. "Interesting! Are you hoping to turn from the dark side?" He dropped her back onto her pillows, knowing that he had completely subdued her. "You will not find it easy...if you find it at all. And you will kill no one else, unless to protect that man." He pointed to the still oblivious Edmond. "No harm will fall down onto anyone else in this house or family. Do you understand?" He stood from the bed and looked across her naked body.

"Yes!" she said, pulling up the covers and holding them tight around her.

"You needn't worry about that; I don't lay with animals! You have flown with your last victim, raven!" He turned and the gentle, handsome Jeffrey returned to his room.

Unable to sleep and aware of the restless spirit of Nora Abbey left her bed. She sat at the bottom of the stairs and watched the broken doorway of the Great Room.

Owen slept the deep, black sleep of the exhausted for several hours. Even before he was fully awake, he was aware of Nora's stifling frozen presence. A biting and painful cold spread over his bed and seeped through the covers. He felt the mattress move as Nora crawled onto the foot of his bed. More from reflex than from logic, he slid his hand under his pillow and pulled out his revolver, rolled onto his back and sat up.

As always, she wore her wedding gown. She sat crossed legged and smiled radiantly at him. Her head and shoulders glowed with a silver, blue light but the lower half of her body was still in the darkness. She winked at him in the way she had always done in much happier days.

Fear, anger and longing fought for Owen's senses. "Nora! For God's sake, please understand that this is not your home any longer!" his voice cracked in his dry mouth. It had little force.

"Why have you brought that female back here? I am your wife. There is no place for her here. This is my home, not hers, and always will be! Please tell me that you have not stopped loving me?" the shade said softly, her face not losing the happy smile.

"You are dead, Nora; you must know that even if you will not believe it. You stopped being my wife the moment you died."

She just shook her pretty head.

"Think if you can! Remember how sick you were after the baby was born. Remember how I lay with you that night...."

"I remember you told me that I would not die; that we would not ever be parted. That is what I remember," the smile finally faded and tears filled her eyes.

His heart began to ache for her, for her confusion, her pain and the way he must reject her. He fought the urge to hold her, as he had so loved to do. "Yes, then I fell asleep and I think you did too, but when I woke again, you were cold. Cold like you are now and dead! You have another home and our baby is waiting there for you. You remember the baby, don't you? Our beautiful daughter, she needs her mother." Owen had lost all fear then and was far too sad for anger. Obsessed with the apparition that sat only inches from him he was unaware of Abbey as she came into his room and stood silently watching beside the bed.

Tears rolled down Nora's cheeks and as they landed, the lower half of her body began to glow. "She isn't waiting for me, Owen, she is with me and we are waiting for you!" In her arms, she held a small child, a female of about three years old. She had the dark curly hair of her mother and bright eyes of her father. The child raised her arms and reached for Owen.

The pain and longing for these two beings that he had loved so much was more than he could bear. All logic drained from him. Had Abbey not been there he would have taken his baby.

"No, Owen, you can't accept her." Abbey whispered harshly at him, pushing his arms back to the bed. "This is wrong and you know that!"

Ignoring Abbey, Nora hugged the child to her chest, her tears falling harder and spilled down the baby's face. "Owen, please come with us? We need you. I am so

lonely without you. Don't you love us?"

Owen turned then and looked at Abbey. His face ashen and shocked and not too far from tears himself. "Tell her!" Abbey insisted, shaking him. "Tell her how you really feel! You have to!"

"No, Nora!" he said his voice stronger than he felt. "I cannot love you any longer. You and Alexis will always live in my heart but only there. We no longer share this world. I must and will live the rest of my life without you!"

The baby vanished. Nora's face quickly filled with rage. She closed her eyes and rose into the air, spreading out flat above them and turned to the ceiling, slid along and down the wall across the floor then disappeared into the darkness.

"Jesus! Abbey, what am I going to do?" Owen demanded from Abbey as she sat and took his hand. He looked frightened and stunned and reminded her of the young boy he had been when she had first known him.

"I don't know Owen. Perhaps all you can do is keep talking to her this way, pray for her and one day she will leave!"

"One day! One bloody day! I have to live like this until then. For God's sake, they were so real. I could have reached out and touched them. And Lord help me; that is what I wanted to do!"

"You must not....!" Abbey started to say but he jumped from the bed so quickly she almost fell off the bed.

"Hell! Abbey! That is it! Touch them! How could I be so thick? Hurry up, get dressed! We have things to do!" he threw back the covers without thought that he was naked. She turned her head.

"I am dressed, Owen."

"Are you? Oh yes!" he said as though looking at her for the first time and pulled on the torn and dirty trousers from the day before. "Where are my bloody boots?"

"Where are we going?"

"Sh! I don't want the rest of them to wake up!"

"Well, it is you who is making all the noise!"

"Shut up, Abbey!" He pulled on his shirt and his shoulder holster. He reached across the bed, picked up the revolver and pushed that one into his belt.

Abbey stood, firmly crossing her arms across her large bosom. "I am not going any place with you until you tell me where we are going, Owen Tabor!"

"Yes you bloody well are! Now you can put proof to your claims of help."

"Hell! Then you had better leave a note, don't you think. Otherwise your mother will be worried sick!"

"Right!" He scribbled a few words on a paper and left it on his pillow. He took two lanterns, lit them and they left the house.

The back yard sentry stood and as the approached.

"Everything is all right. At least I think it is. Keep your eyes and ears open. I should not be too long."

"Yes, sir!"

"Can you ride?" Owen asked her as they approached the Tabor stables.

"Not well. It has been a long time," she answered, shivering in the pre-dawn chill.

"Here!" he pulled over his coat and gave it to her. "Put it on. We will take

Edmond's clip and horse. She's a good, fast mare and I don't want to waste any more time."

Owen took the crow bar that was still in Ted's coach and soon, with the help of a sleepy eyed stable hand, they were off along the road through the Estate village and across the hop fields towards the Tabor cemetery.

"When they created Reine did they do it in the grotto?" Owen asked as they moved over the narrow field roads quickly.

"I assume so. I was not there, of course. By the time they had killed Rachel and taken her heart I had wanted nothing more to do with any of them. Only the gypsies loyal to Emile go to the shifter ceremonies. From what I gathered, that is where they have all their so-called religious gatherings. We are going to the Crypt, aren't we?"

He said nothing but she already knew the answer. "Dear God!" she muttered.

"Have you ever been here before?" Owen asked as they finally pulled to a stop alongside the grotesque monument and helped Abbey down from her seat.

"Now why would Wilmot have brought me here, Owen?" Rarely scared by the supernatural, she was then. "God, this is an awful place!" she added standing closer to Owen.

He took one of the lanterns and gave her one. "Hold my arm and we will go slowly. These stairs are treacherous!" He pushed open the heavy, metal lined door. He led her into the room on the right where the bodies of the females lay.

"I know what you want me to do, Owen. But, these people are dead, how can I read anything from them?" she asked as he struggled with the crow bar to push the stone cover over Nora's coffin away. "This is insane!"

"I agree with that, Abbey. However, it is no more insane than anything else we have had to do around here lately. Now be quiet and help me move this thing."

This time he let the stone lid fall to the ground with no thoughts of replacing it. He opened the coffin, reached in and found the skeleton fingers of his wife. "Here!" he said hiding his revulsion. He placed the cold bones into Abbey's hands and kept his fingers tightly wrapped over her hands.

Even in the dim lantern light, he could see Abbey grow very pale. "You will not faint, Abbey. I have no time for any of that foolishness."

"I am fine! Now you be quiet and let me concentrate!"

Several eerie moments of silence followed. Owen had never known a place so utterly quiet. It seemed as though they had stepped into another world, gray, and waiting. It was difficult to breathe. He could hear Abbey struggle with each breath but he could not let any concern interrupt what they must do here.

After a moment, Abbey looked up at him and shook her head. "Nothing! I cannot reach her but then she is not at rest, is she? She is an Earth bound spirit. If I get anything it will be from Isabelle," she looked around nervously. The feeble light from their lanterns did little to push back the terrible darkness around them. "In fact, I think I can feel her presence. Someone is here with us."

"Fine. Then Isabelle it is!" He moved her over to the coffin of Isabelle Tabor and in time, her mutilated body lay exposed before them. He moved to take her hand but Abbey pushed him away.

"No! I can do it. I do not need your help!" she reached inside the coffin, found the dead woman's hand and held it.



Almost immediately, Owen saw a change come over Abbey. She stood straighter, squared her shoulders and raised her head; looking much taller than Abbey's usual squat self. The furrows of worry and fat seemed to smooth away, her jaw firmer and more defined.

Isabelle had never lost any of her regal manners and then as she took over possession of Abbey's body even the tilt of her head spoke of that lineage. Then the one thing that Owen would never have imagined, even in this nightmare world he was now in, happened. All traces of Abbey vanished. Isabelle Tabor stood in her place.

Now in the cold and damp of that putrid place he could see his breath. Numbed still with shock and fear he tried in vain to move and reach for his gun; even though he knew the familiar comfort of it would do nothing for him in this place. As cold as it was, he could feel streams of sweat rolling down his shoulder blades. Somewhere in the small part his mind that still functioned, he heard a voice telling him to flee from that place as fast as he could and never look back.

"Owen!" the specter spoke in the familiar Spanish accent he had known well. She smiled at him with the broad confident smile of a beautiful woman. She no longer even slightly resembled the tired and worn Abbey Pritchard.

"Isabelle?" he whispered.

She nodded her head slightly. "I have long since wanted to speak with you, Owen, but you would not see me."

"I have learned a lot in these last days."

"But not all you need, that is why you are here. Am I right? Do you know that I did not die as an accident? I was murdered!"

"I suspected that." His mouth dry and his heart pounding so loud he could barely hear his words. "Wilmot?"

"No, but it could have easily been him. It was Edward who pushed me."

"Edward?" his voice was harsh, his lips stuck to his teeth. "Why?"

"Emile Soskice paid him...with money and drugs!" She looked and sounded so unbelievably sad the fear of her began to slip from Owen. "But that is over and Edward is sleeping now, as is Wilmot and they will be so for a long time to come. They are dark souls, my husband and son. Henry is with me, though and we are happy!"

"Then you know all that has happened?"

"We know everything, Owen!"

"Then you will know why I need your help. From the Soskice shifter I know that there is a way from the beach to the grotto but I need to know all the entrances so they cannot escape. I want Soskice and his clan dead and must have that child safely back to his mother!"

"I will tell you but first you must tell me why this matter of Richard is of such importance to you?"

"For God's sake, Isabelle, I am running out of time. Why do you have to know that?" he asked with frustration taking the final edge of his fear.

"If you are wise you have all the time you need. Tell me what I want to know and then I will help you."

"What do you want me to tell you? I don't understand!"

"I want to know what is in your heart for Elizabeth. Are you only trying to prove yourself to her or is it more?"

"It is not wrong for a man to prove his worth to the woman he...." he said quickly then stopped as the last of his words came into his head.

"Continue," she urged.

"To the woman he so terribly let down and the woman he loves?" Finally letting this to his conscious thought was as much of a shock to him as all he had seen and been through in the last few days.

Isabelle smiled again. "Then I will help you!"

He sighed with relief wanting only to deal with the matters then and not think of Elizabeth.

"I can tell you the way they traveled when they were here to take our hearts in order to make that shifter you have in your house; that thing you dangerously trust."

"I do not trust her, not in the way it seems but I need her."

"True, as does Edmond, but in different ways. You must tell him the truth of her nature. This I insist that you agree to this before I tell you what you need."

"For God's sake, Isabelle, is that important right now?"

"He is my last living son and you are his brother if only in heart and that is more important to him than you know. To you he has listened and learned more than any other and you know that. Will you tell him?"

He knew she was right. "Lord, yes! I will tell him as soon as I get back to Hock House."

"And there is another in your house you must be wary of." Isabelle continued, ignoring Owen's impatience. "The one who is called Jeffrey Slocomb, why is he there?"

Now she had Owen's complete attention. "My mother insists she trusts him. Why?"

"I do not understand what he wants and why he is with Margaret although somehow I sense he will not hurt her. Just know he is not what he seems. Anything more than that you should find out for yourself. Now as far as the grotto goes, you can get to their evil place through here," she moved her hand around the crypt.

"How?"

"I will show you but first take this vessel back up to your wagon then return to me. Her heart is not strong and this is hard on her." At that Isabelle vanished, Abbey took a step forward and fell into Owen's arms, gasping for breath.

"Come on!" he said as he half supported, half dragged her back up to the wagon. The cool fresh air revived her quickly.

"Owen! What happened?" she asked as he helped her onto the carriage seat. "Was I a help to you?"

"Were you? Hells' bells' Abbey! If you weren't so fat I'd marry you myself!"

"Oh lovely! That is not much of a compliment, but I will take what I can get," she tried to smile back at him.

"Now listen!" he said to her deadly serious then. "I have to go back down there for a while. I think I have found a way to the grotto from here. Wait for me here!"

"Alone?" she asked. "God no, Please!"

Ignoring her, he continued, "If I am not back here in thirty minutes go and get James. Tell him I have gone through here to the grotto and that Reine can lead him to the beach tunnel. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." she answered quietly and looking at her watch.

He found the room where he had left Isabelle empty and the coffin lids back into place.

"Isabelle?" he whispered into the dark silence. He saw a light glow from under the doorway into the Lord's chamber. The door creaked on its hinges and slowly opened. He took a deep breath and stepped into the room.

Isabelle stood there, as she had been when he first met her in the months before Edmond was born. She was vibrant, young and lovely, dressed in yellow silk with white flowers in her dark hair. Even with all the urges that pushed him then he could not fail to notice how beautiful she was and had a quick thought that Wilmot Tabor had been more of a fool than he had ever thought.

Smiling at him and aware of his thoughts, she pointed to two gargoyles carved into the stonewalls. Hanging from the gruesome faces were two metal rings. "Pull them!" she said to him as she walked across the floor. She was so real that he could hear the clip of her slippers on the stone floor.

Taking a ring in each hand, he pulled hard and then with all his strength but nothing happened. He turned and looked at her. She gave her small child like laugh. "Let me!" He stepped away and she hooked a ring in each of her index fingers she pulled down with little effort and a narrow doorway between slipped back. "Down there, a few hundred yards, no more!"

Owen moved his light as far down as he could and saw narrow black walls and a small stream of water along the center. "I am going down there!" he whispered. "I have to see what we are facing!"

"Then be careful, Owen. Emile is not your only enemy here. It is the Dark One, the one they call 'One Wing' the creator of Emile who is the most danger to you. Now be aware that they are gathering for the ceremony. They are already drunk for the most part and they will take chances!"

"That is all the better for us, then, isn't it? Is Richard there, do you know?" he asked as he sat on the side of the wall and swung his legs over the side.

She nodded. "He is there now. As is Emile! But One Wing will not come until the moment of the ceremony and it is he that must be killed."

"It is the child I want, Isabelle!"

"You will see..." she said as he jumped down and disappeared down the passageway.

Owen moved as quietly and as quickly as possible. Soon he began to smell campfires and hear the sounds of talking and laughter echoing ahead of him. Then a faint light from around a turn and he knew he was near the grotto. He left his lantern on the ground and keeping close to the wall continued to the opening. Ahead of it was a huge stalagmite so large that a man would have to squeeze past to get into the grotto. Staying carefully behind the stalagmite, he surveyed the scene before him.

As Reine had told him, the smokeless red fire blazed in the center pit. Smaller campfires and then a half dozen or so gypsy wagons ringed it. He saw a few men sitting around the fires, some singing and laughing. All seemed to be in various stages of drunkenness.

Owen was wondering which of the wagons might hold Richard when he first noticed Emile. He was sitting, still and as always covered in his veil leaning against a

wheel of the center wagon. He had a rifle between his legs. It was with extreme will that he resisted the urge to shoot him then. The shot would have been clear and easy and the creature would be finished. That would have to wait until he was better prepared and when the child safe.

Across the way up the wall, he saw the opening and the rope ladders that would be in plain sight from all the gypsies. If he and his men came in that way they would be easily picked off.

The gypsies could not have gotten the wagons and horses down the way he had just come so he knew that there had to be another way in. He moved across the back of the stalagmite, scanning the rock walls that circled the grotto. It was impossible to discern much through the shadows until a light flickered and caught his eye. As he watched, it grew brighter and he heard the faint sound of wagon wheels. Soon he saw a large wagon lit by two lanterns and he saw the tunnel behind it. He smiled and thought now all they needed to know was where that tunnel started and Reine would be just what he needed for that.

He turned back but his smile quickly disappeared when he saw that Emile had changed his position and was looking directly towards his location. He pulled his revolver and waited. He knew that it was hardly likely that Emile could see him but he also had learned lately that nothing was ever what it seemed. Seconds, that seemed like hours passed and once again, the old man lowered his head and fell still. Without replacing his gun, he took his lamp where he had left it and headed back the way he had come.

As he moved back to the Crypt he wondered what he would do should he find the stone door closed but it was still as he had left it. He put his revolver back in his belt; he climbed out of the tunnel and back into the Lord's chamber.

"So?" Isabelle asked. "Did you see what you needed to see?"

"I know where the main tunnel ends. Now I have to find out where it starts," he paused looked around at the gray, bleak walls and cold wet floor. "Do you...stay down here all the time?"

"Why would I do that when I have such a wonderful home in the Lord's heaven? I felt it as Abbey tried to connect with me so I came. I only come in visitation and I am not grounded as your poor Nora is! What are you going to do to help her?"

"Me? I have told her that she is dead but she will not hear it. Can you communicate with her and take her over?"

"It is not me who holds her earth bound, Owen, it is you. Only you can set her free. She stays because she feels she is still your wife and has a promise to keep to you. You must set her free from this promise."

"Oh, God!" he whispered quietly remembering their final conversation when he had made her promise him that she would stay with him forever.

"I have two things I want you to give to my son," she handed him a small gold cross and chain. The touch of her fingers on his hand was like ice. "He has one the same and had this one buried with me. Tell him I said that I am in his heart forever and he is in my mine. And...!" she said as extending her other hand and gave him the wedding band. "Give this to Edmond; he should have it! Tell him only that I gave it to you!"

"I left that hidden in my studio! How?" Owen looked so confused she could not

help but smile at him.

"Years from now, when all is said and done and complete in your mind you will look back on all these as a very valuable learning experience."

"No doubt, but Isabelle, with so many people dead and the life of an innocent baby in jeopardy it would seem this is hardly the time for teaching me life's miserable lessons!" He turned his back on her and started up the stairs towards the morning light that was then very welcoming to him.

"Owen!" she called him. He stopped but did not turn around. "You must bring Edmond to me. There is more you and he must know."

"Then speak with him!" Owen said letting his back lean up against the wall for support.

"I have tried, many times, but he won't see me just as you wouldn't until now. I was there with you when you took Jane's letters from my room at the Hall. I cleaned up after you. You always were so messy."

He nodded slowly, remembering the creeping sense of fear he had felt while he was in her old apartment.

"Bring Edmond there later on today; towards dusk. But Edmond will not see me unless you bring a vessel with you."

"Abbey?"

"No, she is not well. Bring Elizabeth, Edmond and James only. I have a lot to tell you; things you must know if you are to succeed in this matter," with that, she faded quickly. As he closed the outer crypt door behind him he heard the grind of stone on stone as the secret door slid into place.

The unpleasant wait for Owen eased somewhat for Abbey when she found the whiskey flask that he kept in his jacket. It was half-empty by the time she saw him approaching the wagon.

"About bloody time!" she said to him looking at her watch. "Twenty five minutes!"

"I hope you have saved some of that for me." Owen complained as he climbed up beside her.

"Oh my, you are pale," she slurred as she tried to focus on him. "You look as though you have seen a ghost!" That she found rather amusing and enjoyed a laugh. "I can be such a card at times, don't you think?" she slapped him on the shoulder. He turned the carriage around and headed for the road back to Hock House.

"I think that like most people who drink too much you are making a fool of yourself," he said flatly. He had little time for energy for wasting thought on her and wished she would just be quiet.

"And I think you are a tight-assed old prig, Owen! Beyond me, why women always drop at your feet. I like man who can make me laugh!"

He turned his head and glared at her.

She cleared her throat. "Sorry! Please tell me what happened when we were in that awful place. The last thing I remember is reaching into Isabelle's coffin!" She shuddered and wiped her hands on her skirt.

"What do you think happened?" he snapped at her. "Be quiet, Abbey!" By the time they pulled up back of Hock House Abbey had sobered up somewhat but had developed a terrible case of the hiccups.

It was just after seven and Margaret and Ivy were preparing breakfast. Ivy, James and Edmond sat at the table. Owen's thoughtful mood was broken the second his mother laid eyes on him.

With her hands on her hips, standing directly in front of him and with uncharacteristic anger, she demanded, "Where the flippin' heck have you been! We have all been worried sick! James was just about to go out and look for you!"

"I left a note on my pillow, didn't you see it?" Owen asked stepping around her and sitting at the table. He had eaten very little the day before and was famished.

"A note!" she exclaimed pulling the piece of paper from her pocket and unfolding it. "'Gone out! Will be back.' Is that supposed to tell us anything?"

Abbey laughed and then hiccupped several times. "Sorry!" she said falling down into a chair.

"Is she drunk?" Margaret looked down at Abbey and frowned at Owen.

"She got into my pocket!" Owen explained loading his plate with fried bread and sausages. "God, I am hungry!" he exclaimed pouring a cup of strong coffee and handing it to Abbey.

"I give up!" Margaret threw up her arms.

"Good!" Owen said to her. "Then be quiet!" Then turning to Edmond with a mouth full of eggs he said, "It is you I have to speak to! This is important."

"Do you want us to leave, Owen?" Ivy asked.

"No, you're all a part of this so you best hear it all." He had already decided just how much he would share with Edmond then. The business about the wedding band would wait until he could use it to his advantage. If Reine saw Edmond with the ring in the mean time, she would most likely think that Owen had betrayed her and he could not afford that. "Where is Ted?" he asked before continuing. "He should know this too!"

"You will have to tell him later. Elizabeth is still sleeping and he refuses to leave her side!" Margaret said, obviously still angry.

Owen nodded, turned and looked again at Edmond, wiping his face with the back of his shirtsleeve. "You will find this insane, but I can't help that. I have just come from having a conversation at the Tabor crypt with Isabelle!"

Edmond pushed his chair back and looked at Owen from under his eyebrows. "Have you been drinking too?"

Owen shoved more eggs into his mouth and shook his head. "No, stone cold sober but I plan on changing that very soon. Here!" he said as he took the chain and cross from his pocket and handed it to Edmond.

"How did you get this?" he asked turning it over in his hands. "I had her maid sew it into her burial clothes, so nobody would steal it!"

"Does not seem to have worked!" laughed Abbey and as five sets of angry eyes fell on her, she asked. "Does anybody mind if I go to my room? Think I need a nap," she did not wait for any answer and left the room.

"Anyway!" continued Owen. "She gave it to me and told me to give it to you and so you would believe it was from her. She told me to tell you...let me see...how did it go? You are always in her heart and she is always in yours, that way you are always together. Does that help you to believe me?"

It certainly did, but Edmond would not admit to it, he still had not gotten over his treatment the day before. He opened the catch on the chain and placed the cross around

his neck. "So what did you learn from my mother's ghost?" he asked sarcastically.

Owen looked at James. "She showed me the way from the crypt to the Soskice grotto!"

"From the crypt?" James asked in surprise.

"In the Lord's chamber there is a stone wall that falls out of place if the gargoyle rings are pulled. A tunnel leads to an opening in the grotto. I saw the place and it was just as Reine told me. Emile is there now and the baby, as well."

"But that cannot be how they get their wagons and the like in there," James said.

"Not to mention that the entrance of that tunnel into the grotto is almost blocked by a huge stalagmite. There is only enough room on either side to for a person to squeeze through. I did see them bringing a horse and cart into the place, so I have an approximate idea of where the main tunnel begins. If my plan is to succeed, I will need to know exactly where that entrance is! That is where Reine comes into the picture," Owen turned back to Edmond.

"What? No! What ever she did for you last night was more than bloody enough. What is the matter with you Owen? Do you need a woman to do your rough work?"

Normally this would have angered Owen but then he could clearly understand Edmond's frustration. "I don't need a normal female, no, but I need your female, Edmond. I think you will find that she has greatly healed over that last few hours!"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You will find that Reine has something she should tell you, Edmond!" Margaret said in quiet and soothing tone. She had finished preparing a tray of warm water and clean bandages.

"Here!" Owen said, taking the tray and handing it to Edmond. "Go and change her bandages. That may loosen her tongue!"

"Yes, of course, I will but as for the rest of it, you are on your own, Owen," he stood left the room.

"We will see about that!" Owen mumbled.

"Did you really see Isabelle?" Ivy asked looking around nervously and wrapping Alice tighter in her shawl.

Owen nodded and stood heading for the hallway. "Now where are you going?" Margaret asked.

"To listen at the doorway, where else? I have to keep that shifter in one piece at least for the time being! Not to mention what she might do to Edmond if he does not think before speaking."

Reine was still sleeping when Edmond entered the room. She was lying naked on her stomach and the blankets had fallen away. Quietly he closed the door and placed the tray on the bed table. He stood for a while looking at her. He could smell the unusual aroma of her skin, sweet and musky. He wanted nothing more then but to lie with her and give her what his body demanded but there had been seriousness to Owen words and his eyes that Edmond knew from experience he should not ignore.

He leaned forward and gently touched her shoulder. In an instant, so fast he barely saw her move she spun around and backed away from him. "Oh, Lord! Edmond, its' you!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"I am sorry, Reine," he smiled. "I did not mean to startle you."

"What time is it?" she asked sliding back down under the covers.

"Almost eight. Margaret wants me to change your bandages before you dress."

"No!" She pulled away from him slightly and covered her shoulder with the blanket. "I can change them myself. I would prefer it!" There was something then in the quick panic in her eyes that did not sit well with Edmond.

"Don't be silly! You cannot reach your back."

"No, I don't need your help!" she snapped and she pushed him away.

"Reine!" he said with a flat voice, on the edge of anger. "I will do it and I will do it now!" He took both of her hands in one of his and although she could so easily have pushed him aside, she just lowered her head and waited. With one sharp movement, he pulled away the tape and gauze. Her shoulder was without wound, mark or bruise. The terrible bloodied wounds he had seen so clearly just hours before had completely healed.

He took her shoulders and tried to get her look at him. "What the Hell is going on here?" when she still looked away, he shook her. "Talk to me Reine! Or you can be damned sure that someone else will!"

"I don't understand?" she spoke quietly, still keeping her face down.

"You don't understand? Are you going to tell me that you heal quickly? Is that it? What kind of a fool do you take me for?"

Outside the door, Owen stood listening with his hand on his gun.

"I am sorry!" she still could not bear to look at him. "I tried to tell you last night. Do you remember? But you fell asleep!"

He glanced at the bed he had slept in, thought for a moment and did remember her trying to talk to him. "Then tell me now!" he said controlling his temper then the best he could. He moved from the bed, pulled out a chair and sat down on it backwards.

"Well, sometimes, when I want to and only when I want to, and believe me, I don't want to any more, I can change!"

"What are you talking about?"

"When I want I can turn into a bird, a raven. I am called a changeling."

A moment passed before he spoke. His voice was thick with growing anger.

"You are trying to tell me that you are a bloody shape shifter? You expect me to believe that?"

"It is true and I don't like the term shape shifter. I am, no I was a changeling. But that is over for me now."

"You are insane. This complete bloody household is insane! Is there something wrong with the fucking water, for Christ's sake?" He held tightly onto the back of the chair as though that would keep his temper in check.

"It is true. Emile sent me here with Abbey. We were to help him, or that is what he told me, to get revenge on the Tabor family for the death of Jack. He told me to kill Edward, so I did. Then he told me to kill Tom O'Connor and I did. But I did not kill Henry! Someone else did that." She was shaking now, fighting her own temper and trying desperately to hold back her tears.

"Fucking Hell! Did he also tell you to seduce me and drive my wife to suicide?"

"If you will remember it was not much of a challenge for me to seduce you, Edmond Tabor. Just a little more than a smile and you removed your trousers! You did not care in the slightest about your wife's feelings then, did you! And you couldn't



wait to get rid of her!"

He narrowed his eyes and for the briefest moment could think of nothing to say. "I don't believe you," he said finally. "You are lying."

"Why would I lie about such a thing?"

"Then shift, show me that I am as insane as you are!"

She climbed onto her heels and without ever taking her eyes off his face then, she transformed.

Trapped by his words and shocked beyond movement Edmond froze as she flew once around the room, tipping her wing to hit him in the side of the head as she went by and then she landed back on the bed. In an instant she was sitting, now in her familiar simple black dress with her long, shining black hair reaching across the bed behind her.

"There!" she said as she stood. "Are you satisfied now? I suppose you will not believe this either but I love you, Edmond. It is up to you, though, just tell me and I will leave your land if that is what you want!"

"And go where?" he asked his voice deep and nasty. "To the London Zoo?"

Once again, she moved before he could see it. She slapped his face and sent him flying out of the chair across the bed and onto the floor. Owen heard the noise and knew he had better intervene.

"Alright, that is enough!" Owen said as he pushed Reine back onto her bed and helped Edmond off the floor.

"What did you do that for?" Edmond yelled at Reine.

"Because you are not being fair with me, Edmond!"

"Be quiet both of you!" Owen demanded sternly. "Listen to me, Edmond, yesterday she saved James and me from some sort of monster and certain death. She could have easily let that thing kill us. Then two less would have known her secret. Without her help,

we cannot be sure we would have rescued Elizabeth. She put herself in danger for us and took a bullet. That should be worth something to you."

"Maybe if I hadn't been drugged into a stupor and told of the events I might not be so bloody mad!" Edmond insisted. "Have I no value in this matter?"

"You are right in that, perhaps we should have included you. Do you think you should have told him sooner?" Owen asked Reine.

"I suppose so," she agreed after a short silence. "But, Edmond, I love you! I do not want to lose you. Am I not all the woman you could ever need to keep you happy?"

"I need time to think, Reine." Edmond answered. In truth, he knew that he did not want to lose her. These few days of happiness with her were the only ones he had had in a very long time.

"Right!" Owen said firmly. "You both need time to think but right now I have no time and I need your help." Standing so that Reine could see what he was doing he reached into his pocket and pulled out the wedding band that Isabelle had given him. "Here!" he said handing it to Edmond. "Isabelle gave it to me with the chain and cross." He did not look at Reine but could feel her eyes intently on him.

"But how the Hell did she get it? Olivia was wearing it when she died!" Edmond asked looking at the ring in amazement.

"Don't ask me! I have no idea what the dead can or cannot do; but I am starting

to learn. Somehow she knew it was stolen and retrieved it for you; that much is at least obvious." He turned his back on Edmond, blocking his view of Reine.

"Now are you two ready to help me?" he asked. She quickly mouthed the words "thank you" before saying. "I am more than ready. That is what I am here for!" She stood and looked at Edmond.

"I will help, Owen, of course, but there is a great deal you have to explain to me first."

"The first thing you need to know Edmond is that you had better be more polite to this lady. She is stronger and faster than any ten men I know!"

Edmond put his hand up to his eye and shrugged. He had a large purple bruise across his cheek and his eye was rapidly turning black.

"Reine, what can you tell me, if anything about Jeffrey Slocomb?"

"Nothing!" she said far too quickly. "Why should I?"

"Reine?" He sat down beside her and repeated his question with a more serious tone.

She sighed. "He will kill me if I tell you!"

"And what will happen if you don't tell us?" Edmond asked before Owen had a chance to speak.

"You will protect me from him?" she asked Owen and ignored Edmond.

"Of course, Reine! Tell us what you know about him."

"Well, I hardly know where to begin and Emile told me a great deal about him but he is a liar."

"Just tell us what you know and leave us to find out what is the truth. What did Soskice tell you?"

"Right!" she took a deep breath and whispered. "He told me that Jeffrey was something 'new', that there was only one like him and that I was in great danger when he was around," she glanced nervously around the room. "He is a hunter! He hunts shifters and kills them."

Owen frowned, looking at her from the corner of his eyes. "Then why has he not killed you?"

"I don't know! He has had several opportunities over the last few years. He hates me though; I can see it in his eyes."

"What do you mean he has had several opportunities? Have you had contact with him before?"

"Yes. I saw him before," she paused and straightened her skirt. She decided not to tell them about those times when she would fly with her victims and Jeffrey would knock her back into her human body. "I saw him with Emile. It was about 3 years ago, maybe more, but it was right after Emile made me. I am not good with time. Emile and I had been away from the family for a while. Most of the time when Emile was away I would have to stay as the raven and watch the family, especially Elizabeth, but this time Emile brought me with him."

"When Jeffrey showed up that day, I was terrified. I thought he was there to kill me but it seemed he had other things in his mind. Emile seemed surprised and unhappy to see him and almost immediately, they began to argue. Some of it was in English and some in the language that Emile and Jack spoke. I do not understand it."

Owen and Edmond exchanged glances. "Do you have any idea at all what were

they arguing about?" Owen asked.

"From what I could understand Jeffrey wanted Emile to release Elizabeth and send her back to Reverend Browne. Emile laughed at him and called him a traitor. He also said that he would tell One Wing that Jeffery was still alive and back in England. Jeffrey said he had made his choice and that was all there was to it."

Owen stood. With his hand on his pistol, he said to Edmond, "I think it is time for a few words with him!"

"Wait!" Reine called after him as he went to the doorway. "There is more!"

"Well?" Owen asked when she did not speak right away.

"After a few hours they stopped fighting and Emile seemed to fall asleep. However, he often did that, he was just pretending. Jeffrey got on his horse and moved up the hillside. Emile took his gun and shot him in the back. I know the bullet hit him and I think in the head or the back of his neck. He fell off his horse. Then he stood, walked back to us. His face was changed, like that of a demon and it was the only time I ever saw Emile show any fear."

"Emile shot him in the chest. Again, I saw the bullet hit him but it had no effect. Jeffrey simply raised his arm. Emile flew through the air and hit a tree with such force he blacked out. Jeffrey was not close enough to hit Emile, but just the same, he did! I went to Emile, maybe a few seconds passed, no more and when I looked back, Jeffrey and his horse were gone! There was no way he could have made it up the steep hillside and out of sight that quickly but he did!"

"Do you want me to come with you?" Edmond asked as Owen opened the door.

"No! You stay with Reine, get James and Ted and wait for me in the study. Mother and Ivy can stay with Elizabeth. Tell Ted that I want him to explain to you about his book and anything else you need to know about all this!"

"Owen, please be careful. Whatever he is, he very is dangerous!" Reine said taking his arm.

"Just stay together and wait for me. I won't be long!"

Owen opened Jeffrey's door and entered without knocking. The younger man was writing in a notebook, closed the book and pushed it aside as he saw Owen.

"Is something wrong?" Jeffrey asked Owen, noting that Owen held his gun but that it was not pointed at him.

Owen closed the door, pulled a chair in front of it and sat down. "Tell me, Slocomb, have you ever had a conversation with a ghost?"

"Well, Owen, I don't know that one way or the other. I do not usually ask the people I speak with if they are dead or alive. Perhaps I have; have you?" Jeffrey turned his chair to face Owen.

"Yes, strangely enough, I have. Just this morning in fact I spoke with Isabelle Tabor. Have you heard of her?"

Jeffrey nodded. "Margaret has mentioned her to me. She was Wilmot Tabor's second wife."

"Yes, she was. Can you tell me why she warned me about you? I would be interested in hearing why you think she did that?" Owen rested his gun on his lap. From what Reine had told him it would be of little use to him but it would give a message to Jeffrey.

"Fuck!" Jeffrey rolled his eyes and shook his head. "She is confused, that is all.

I come here as a friend, Owen!"

"And you expect me to just accept that? No, I think you should be a little more forth right. Either that or you should get your things and leave. Why are you here?"

"You will have to accept what I tell you; although I understand that will not be easy. Of course, I will leave if you insist. That will not change what I have to do. We can be allies or enemies, it is up to you," Owen was silent, so he continued. "I have been trying to talk Margaret into telling you about what really happened to her during her first year away from this Estate."

"She was at St. Francis!" Owen said flatly.

"Check with Father Smith if you must. There was a full year from the time she left here to the time she was taken in by them."

"Then where was she and what does that have to do with you?"

"That is what she must tell you. Information you must have if you are to bring this matter of One Wing and Emile Soscice to a successful conclusion."

"I have no interest in this 'One Wing' whatever the Hell he is! My only concern is to kill Soscice and get the child back."

"Well, you should have interest in him. He is the force behind all this and it will never end unless he dies as Soscice does." Jeffrey stood and walked towards Owen, sat at the foot of the bed and leaned forward on his elbows. Owen felt no threat but a strange peace that seemed to always flow from Jeffrey. "When you first looked at me the other day you felt that my face was familiar to you, am I right?"

"Yes, but that often happens! How does that matter? I still need to know why Isabelle warned me about you."

"I used to envy you, Owen for all you had, this wealth, the power and a very loving, loyal mother. Now I can see that even with all that you are not a happy man. When your wife died you lost your purpose in life and without purpose a man has little."

"You know nothing about me." Owen said softly, puzzled by his own lack of anger at this stranger's intrusion into his life.

"I, on the other hand, grew up without a mother, without money or education. I grew up in a place of misery far too unbelievable to share with you now, but someday I may. I have very little of material value but a purpose so powerful nothing else matters, so that way I am rich. Does that make any sense to you?" Jeffrey asked his eyes firmly locked into Owen's.

"It does to a certain extent. We come from different worlds, but you still have to answer my question. Why should I trust you?"

"Because, Owen we have one very important person in common. Margaret. She is the one person I love and will protect as you would. She is my mother and you are my half brother."

With that, Owen snapped from his trance. "That is a ridiculous lie!"

"Ask her Owen! Ask her to tell you about One Wing! But for God's sake be gentle with her; this part of her life is a nightmare that she has still yet to face."

Owen stood; anger finally taking hold. He pointed the gun at Jeffrey. "Take your things and leave my land."

"If that is what you wish. But I will not be far away," Jeffrey said. "I will not abandon Margaret or you, for that matter."

"You will stay away from my mother!"

Jeffrey shook his head sadly. "I suppose it was more than I should have expected that you would believe me, since there is so little I can really tell you. I will go. Save your anger for those who deserve it and that is not me. In your heart right now you know that what I say is truth but it is your human logic you must deal with and that is a weak tool."

Owen watched him pack and followed him out to the stables, thankful they did not run into Margaret on the way.

"This is not my saddle," Jeffrey said as he climbed up on his horse. "I will return it to the orphanage as soon as possible."

"Keep it! Stay away from St Francis and my mother; do you understand?" Owen said with much less force than he had hoped.

"Do I understand? No, not completely but then neither do you? A much complicated and powerful creator guides us, so it is not for us to decipher, Owen. Maybe one day it will be clear to both of us. Who can say? God be with you, brother!"

Owen followed behind as Jeffrey road off across the courtyard and headed for the road out of the estate. He was more unsettled than before and stood for a while watching until Jeffrey was out of sight. Trying to shake the feeling that he had just made yet another mistake he joined the others where they waited for him in his study.

"Where are Ivy, Elizabeth and my mother?" Owen asked as he closed the door. James, Edmond and Ted sat at the desk. Reine, looking bored sat in the window seat. "They are preparing to bring Elizabeth down to the Great Room. Margaret has sent for one of Wilmot's wheel chairs. I don't think that fits too well with Elizabeth." Ted answered. "We have shown Edmond the Chronicle and filled him in on what we know so far."

"Good! As I think of it, Ted is there any reference at all in that thing about Jeffrey?"

"No, not yet. However, who can say what will be there next time I look? Why do you ask?"

"It does not matter. He is gone and will not be back," Owen paused and rubbed his whiskers. "If any of you see him about, I want to know about it right away."

"As far as I am concerned," Reine left her seat and looked around the male faces, "it is a good thing we are rid of him."

Owen explained to Ted what he had learned that morning from Isabelle. He described all that he saw in the grotto and the three entranceways.

"What I want you to do, Reine is get back into the grotto and find out which of the wagons they have Richard in and where the main tunnel begins." Owen said to her when he had finished with Ted.

"Don't you think that might be just a little dangerous? They will certainly see her." Edmond asked.

"Not necessarily Edmond. When I was in there before I stayed high in the shadows where it is most dark. I can do this easily enough," she said flatly.

"Oh, yes! Right! I forgot you are a shape shifter!" Edmond said bitterly. Margaret had given him a cold cloth that he was holding over his injured eye.

"Changeling!" she snapped back at him.

"Go!" Owen said to her firmly and he pulled open a window. "You can argue

the matter at a better time!"

"I will be back as soon as I am able!" Reine said to Owen as she assumed her shifting position.

Edmond did not move the cloth from his face until after he heard Owen closing the window. Owen could not help but feel sorry for him. In a very short time, he had lost two of his brothers, his father, faced a life of guilt over the death of his wife and now had a woman who was not human.

"Edmond, it was the truth what I told you about her saving James and me yesterday," Owen said and poured him a large whiskey.

"She killed Edward, for Christ's sake! Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Owen sighed and sat across from Edmond. "It was Edward who killed your mother. That Isabelle told me and no one should know better than she."

"Edward killed her? The coroner said it was an accidental fall down the stairs. Why would he kill her?"

"Emile paid him to do it. Edward would do anything for money. That much you know for sure." Owen realized then just how much they had kept from Edmond and how they might have been wrong to do so. "There is an evil organization called the Black Claw. Soskice runs it and for a long time in partnership with Wilmot."

"What?" Edmond asked.

"It is true!" Ted added. "Soskice wanted complete control. I suppose that did not sit too well with Tabor. For that or some other reason, they had a falling out. About three and a half years ago Soskice decided to create a new shifter and then eventually began his plan for revenge on Tabor."

"That shifter was Reine?" Edmond asked.

"Yes! I am afraid so. To that end, Soskice had Edward kill Isabelle. Had Tom Hobson kill Elizabeth's mother, Jane Delacourt and a prostitute that worked for Abbey. Her name was Rachel Crawford. And he had Mavis Willard kill my wife and child! Mavis was also one of his shifters." Owen added.

"So then you must hate Reine!"

"She had no control of the events that happened before she was made. I have no hatred for Reine and for the time being I greatly need her. I have made a deal with her. She will get the child back and I will see to it that Soskice takes his last breath."

Edmond shook his head slowly. "Elizabeth was being held captive by the Soskice clan? Did she stay here with you to hide from them?"

"In a manner of speaking. At first, she hid her identity from me. When I found out who she was, I realized she had no family left to return to so I kept her here. I have to admit now that was a mistake. Reine became aware of her being here, took the boy Richard, and brought him to the Soskice clan. Mavis tried to kill Elizabeth with poison," Owen answered. "I took her to my mother for help."

"Then all of this falls down on Reine!"

"No more than she was a puppet under the control of Soskice. Now she is breaking those ties so we shall see what she will do."

"Aren't you placing too much reliance on her? Shouldn't we be doing something other than sitting here?"

"Yes, Ed, I intend to take action, you can be sure of that. Emile will die at my hands in the next few hours but first we will get the baby away from him. When Emile

is dead then Reine will be free to live as a human if she chooses. I doubt very much that it would ever be possible in a court of law to prove that she did anything to anyone. As far as I am concerned Reine can live as she pleases but it is up to you if you keep her in your life."

Ted continued, "With what Emile has been able to gather, the bodies and his grandson, it is my belief that he plans a special ceremony this weekend. With the help of the demon, One Wing, he will sacrifice the baby," Ted paused, "I will not go into the details but if they complete this ceremony Emile will be reborn in the body of the young man that Richard would have become."

Edmond swallowed the last of his whiskey in one mouthful. "And what if Emile doesn't die? What will happen to Reine if he gets this 'new body'?"

"From what I have been able to gather she will drop dead in whatever form she is and then as with what happened to Mavis she will just vanish as though she never was!" Ted answered.

"I presume speaking from man to man, Edmond, that there are some ways that Reine makes you happy?" Owen asked.

"Of course! The same way she no doubt pleases many others!" Edmond answered looking at the faces of the three men that watched him.

"I wouldn't be too sure on that. I tried that on myself yesterday and she was none too interested."

"You did what?" Edmond asked angrily.

"Relax!" Owen said, finding it hard to hide his smile. "I was just testing her and believe me; she was not at all welcoming! She has certainly changed her feathers in a very short time. She could not wait to get away from me."

"Well, that is something at least! Maybe you are just not her type," Edmond smiled then winced from the pain the smile caused.

James laughed. "It had to happen one day! After all, no one can keep his manly looks forever. Look at what has happened to me!"

All this was lost on Owen, especially the humor of it. "We are wasting time with all this foolishness," Owen simply said flatly. "We have important issues to discuss explosives, dynamite in particular!"

"Dynamite?" Edmond asked, looking at Owen.

"I want that bloody grotto, all traces of it washed off the face of the world. For that, we will need explosives and lots of them. Any ideas?" Owen asked looking from man to man.

"I do!" Edmond said throwing aside the cloth. He sat up and showing for the first time an interest in action rather than sulking anger. "If we were at the Manor we would be sitting over a room full of the stuff."

"Go on!" Owen encouraged.

"Well, it was Edward, who else! I am surprised that Father did not tell you Owen! You remember the robbery about six weeks ago at the Chart Gunpowder Mills?"

"Don't tell me that was Edward's doing?"

"The Hell it was! He and some of his cronies! I caught them sneaking the stuff into the Manor in the middle of the night. There are cases and cases of dynamite right now in the cellars under the kitchen!"

"Well, what do you know?" Owen laughed. "The little pig finally did something right for a change. But what the Hell was he going to do with it, I hate to ask?"

"Blow himself up, probably!" James put in.

"No doubt," Edmond agreed. "That would have most likely been the end of it. But when I finally got the truth out of him after a thumping, something I learned from Owen, he told me that he was going to blow up St. James College."

"Good Lord!" Ted exclaimed. "Why?"

"That was the last school that he was expelled from; just before this last Christmas. He said he wanted to get even."

"Thank God he had a change of heart," Ted said.

"He did not have a change of heart. I told Father and took away the blasting caps. The old man was going to get rid of the stuff but I know he never got around to it. It is still there as we speak."

"Do you think it is still good?" Ted asked.

"If it is dry and hasn't been frozen, yes," James answered.

"Each of the cases is wrapped in sacking and seemed as though it had been ready for shipping. We haven't had a freeze up since the stuff got here," Edmond added.

"We did some blasting to some boulders in the north fields last summer," James said to Ted. "It is easy to use and safe if you know what you are doing. Do you still have the blasting caps?"

"Yes, in my apartment."

"Can you tell just by looking at it if it is still good?" Owen asked James.

James stood and motioned for Edmond to come with him. "Yes! We'll be back in a short while!" James said and they left the room.

"That is good!" Owen said, rubbing his hands together. "That'll get the little fart in a better fighting mood!"

"Did you and James really drug him yesterday?" Ted asked after a moment of silence.

"Yes."

"I think I would be mad, as well."

"We didn't want him to get in the way of our crow. He had no idea what she was and I did not want to waste the time waiting to get his permission."

"I take it that the shifter is his mistress?" Ted asked.

"She is!" Owen said looking at Ted. "I agree. She would be a tasty dish, if one has the liking for that flavor."

"Lord! And she still wants to stay with him?"

"Yes, she does. I do not think she is the type to give up easily on what she wants and she very much wants Edmond. No doubt he is a far better catch than she has had in the past!"

Ted shook his head, thoughtfully. "What would you do if you were him?" he asked. "As a woman she is well, interesting! I wouldn't find it easy to turn my back on those tits!"

Owen roared with laughter. "Well, priest, you are a dirty old man, after all!"

Ted laughed as well and added, "The dirty old man comes with the body and mind and the priest comes with the soul. Neither can be ignored."

"Listen, Ted. I feel I should apologize for my behavior last night, when I



insisted on seeing Elizabeth. I may have been over stepping my bounds.”

Ted cleared his throat; leaning forward in his chair. “I suppose it has gone beyond the point of my asking you if your intentions are honorable as far as my goddaughter is concerned, in the manner of speaking as my father would have.”

“My intentions?” Owen stood and went to the window. “They are to see Elizabeth, happy and safe again with her son. Would you say that is honorable, Ted?”

“That is, yes. But I would prefer to hear what is really in your mind and your heart!”

“Alright then, Ted! I admit that at first I had things other than just her care in mind. She is a remarkably enticing female and my plan was....”

“Please spare me the details!” Ted said quickly.

“I have no intention of giving you details. When she became ill from the poisoning and the child went missing I was driven, I thought, by not wanting to have this burden on my conscience for the rest of my life.”

“Understandable.”

“Not that I have had too much time for thinking but when Elizabeth disappeared it occurred to me that what I had felt as a want for her was becoming a need.”

Ted stood and went to stand beside Owen looking across the gardens, down the valley he could just make out the grove of trees around the abandoned church. “Then I should do some more thinking, Owen, if I were you. The road that takes a man from want to need makes a sharp and unexpected turn at love if one is not careful.”

Owen turned his head looking at the wizened, kind face. “Do you think so?”

“I know that. I loved Jane Delacourt for a long time before I realized it and the fool that I was I did nothing about it. I thought only about my damned career and myself. If I was seen as the cause behind the Delacourt divorce I would be stuck forever in the Highgate parish.”

“Then you chose your job over your woman. That is done and not always wrong.”

“I made no choice, Owen! I just sat by, enjoyed Jane when I could and waited for the day to come that she would end her marriage on her own. My want had grown to need and then to love and I was too stupid to notice. Now I live only with the memory of the last time I saw her, dead and mutilated!” A moment of silence passed, then Ted continued. “You will have to do something about your shade.”

“My shade?”

“The ghost of Nora Tabor. I prefer the word shade because that is what they are; only shades of the person they used to be! She is still your responsibility and you will have to end that matter before another woman can safely come into your heart.”

“How do I do that, Ted? I have told her that she is dead and does not belong here any longer. What more can I do?”

“Much more than that! I have only known you a few days but in that time I have yet to hear you refer to her as your late wife, deceased wife or as yourself as a widower. I think she is here because you have not let her go! Why do you still wear your wedding ring?”

Owen looked at the ring, turning it in his fingers. He slid it off, looking at the inscription in side. ‘Nora and Owen Tabor. Never parted.’ “It has never occurred to me to remove it. I guess I am just used to wearing it. The evening that Nora died I

laid with her on our bed and made her promise me that she would not die and that she would live up to the pledge inside our rings and we would never be parted. I was desperate with fear and could not bear to think anything else."

"So that last thing she did in this world was to promise you that she would never leave you?" Ted asked feeling such sympathy for the young man beside him.

Owen nodded. "She never broke a promise to me."

"Just as she is doing now! You shall have to set her free of that promise, Owen! For her sake as well as yours. Before you continue down that road we just spoke of."

As distressing as Edmond's anger and insults were Reine was not at all disheartened. She knew instinctively that his anger was fueled by his powerful passion for her and with the right words at the right time; she would most likely turn his heart towards her again. If not, then for awhile she would hurt but as she always did she would quickly heal and move on into her life as a human. One way or the other she faced that day with a renewed sense of confidence and power.

Staying high within the tunnel and across the grotto, only a few bats noticed and complained of her presence. She found a safe perch of a rocky ledge high above Emile's wagons. She knew that if she got too close to Emile he would be able to sense her. He had not called for her once since his escape. That worried her to some extent but she knew him well. Blinded by his own light, he saw as his own greatness and may have made the mistake of thinking that she would only sit by and hope for the best.

For a long while, she surveyed the scene beneath her. Along with the fire smoke, she could also smell then the bitter, acrid aroma of opium. That is well, old man, she thought as she watched Emile leaning against the wagon wheel drug yourself into a stupor. That will make it so much easier for Owen to cut your throat.

She saw Rose step down from the center wagon and stand beside her father. She was holding a child wrapped in a red blanket. All that the raven could see of the child was the top of curly dark hair and knew she had found Richard. With the exception of the victims, women and children never attended the important ceremonies. Rose was there to care for Richard.

Having established the whereabouts of the child, she flew in the direction of where Owen had told her the main tunnel entered the grotto. Once across the high ceiling she found the opening easily.

Compared to the narrow confines of the beach tunnel this one was more than large enough to accommodate horse and wagons. The floor had been lined with boards for easy passage and lanterns hung every so often from poles stuck into the ground. Cautiously she moved through the tunnel, staying aware for any sounds or scents that meant someone or something was coming her way. She had faced and fought the dark side at the Willard cottage and knew that anything could be waiting for her at any corner.

Just as she had expected thick wooden doors blocked the end of this tunnel. Faint light showed through small cracks in the wood, but not much light for that time of morning. She could hear talking and the sound of children playing on the other side of the doors.

She moved higher up into the dark creases of rock above her. Soon she came to the scent of fresh air and a draft that she followed a short distance back towards the grotto. A flicker of light caught her eye and she found the source of the draft, a small opening in

the rocks. It was only a few inches across. She was a large raven and knew it would be a tight fit but she had no other choice. She pushed her head through the opening, checked to be sure that no one looked that way and gave one hard thrust. Some of the rocks gave away; she fell out of the hole and landed on the ground.

She flew quickly up into the treetops, staying downwind, so Emile's ever present dogs would not catch her scent. Then she saw the reason for the dim light around the cave entrance. They had built a ramshackle shed around it as a means of disguise. Outside of it were three tents, several Soskice females and a few children. Two armed men sat at the shed door playing cards and two bullmastiffs slept in the warm sunshine. Across the clearing and almost covered by foliage was what appeared to be the ruins of a large, burnt out building. This was all very helpful but still she needed to know exactly where she was.

Back into the air, she found the nearest roadway and followed it for a short distance until she came to a clearing and a freshly painted yellow church with a bright red roof. She circled it a few times and spotted an old man high up on a ladder, cleaning windows.

"Excuse me, Sir!" Reine called out to the fellow, a few moments later. "I wonder if I may ask you for directions."

Startled as one who believes he is alone would be, the man lost his footing, dropped his bucket and fell off his ladder. His feet did not touch the ground before Reine had him by the collar and belt and pulled him up right.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" she exclaimed trying to put right his clothing. "I did not mean to surprise you. Are you alright?"

Surprise was hardly the word for it, the priest thought as he tried to reclaim what he had left of his dignity. "No! I am fine, I think!" he said tugging his shirt back into his trousers. "I didn't hear you coming."

"I have a habit of doing that! Perhaps I should learn to make more noise," she gave him her dazzling smile and gently pushed the collar of his coat back into place.

"No! Truly, I am fine! Did I hear you say that you were in need of directions?"

"Well, yes," Reine looked around innocently. "I have left my horse and cart just around the bend there. I am afraid that I am totally lost without my husband with me and he will be so cross if I do not show up on time," she blushed and leaned forward closer to him. "Can you please tell me where in Heavens name I am?"

He cleared his throat. "St. Paul's, Church of England!" he answered motioning to the engraving above the doorway.

"Yes, but where are we. What county? You see, I am so completely lost!"

"Oh my yes, well, this is Waltham County. Town of Waltham is just down the road a mile that way."

"Waltham! Yes, that is exactly the place I am looking for. I was wondering, back there a small bit I passed a burnt ruin, looks as though it might have been a school or some such thing, do you know what it was?"

"That will be the old Fairchild Furniture Company. It burned down about ten years ago."

"And no one owns it now?" she asked.

"No! I believe it is abandoned. Several poor souls died in the fire and no one wanted to go back to the place again. Once in a while some gypsies camp there, though."

"Thank you Father ..."

"Murphy!" he smiled at her as she pulled a pound note out of her glove. "No, my dear, help is always free."

"For your church plate, I insist!" Reine said holding his hand in hers and pressing the money gently into his fingers. She turned and walked away and old Father Murphy never forgot the beautiful, strong woman with silver eyes.

Margaret had slept little that night. Her mind raced with the fact that she must finally accept the dreadful, impossible nightmares that had tormented her for years as a reality. She would have to share with the two men she so loved that she did have another child. This child was Jeffrey Slocomb and his father was the demon, One Wing.

Exhausted when she finally rose in the morning she was distracted to find Owen not at home. As she prepared the morning meal, she used her worry over him to keep anything else at the back of her mind. When she and Ivy brought Elizabeth downstairs later that morning she still had no idea that Owen made Jeffrey leave the estate.

"Good God! I do not need a wheel chair. I am not old or an invalid!" Elizabeth argued as Margaret placed her into it.

"But just for the time being it might be easier all around," Margaret said firmly as she opened all the curtains and upper windows of the Great Room. Sunlight and fresh air streamed in on the warm late spring breezes. Even with that, there was a definite chill in the room.

"I don't think I like being in this room anymore!" Ivy said nervously taking a seat nearest the door directly across from the study where she could hear the rumble of male voices. "One never knows what is going to fly in or out of the window!"

Margaret looked at her in a way that told her to be quiet on the matter. Elizabeth did not know that the shifter who had actually taken her child from her was now a large part of solving the problem. She most certainly did not know this creature was the woman they called Reine. Margaret was not at all sure as to the best way to handle that issue. She had decided to discuss the matter first with Owen.

Elizabeth finally and reluctantly took to the chair rolled it purposefully to the center of the room sitting in the warmth of the sunlight and the dazzling stained glass reflection. "Did you design the house?" she asked Margaret, thankful for anything that would even briefly take her mind off her misery.

"Design it? Well, perhaps! Wilnot hired architects, the best money could buy, or so he told me, and I just told them my ideas. I never felt comfortable in Tabor Manor. It was so big and so cold. I loved Hollyhock House."

"Hollyhock House? But I thought it was just Hock House," Elizabeth asked.

"That was Owen's idea," Ivy said. "He dropped the Holly part; said it was too feminine."

"Was he born here?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, in my room upstairs." The older woman answered for a brief moment letting her memories of that happy day come back to her. So much better than the

memories Jeffery insisted she deal with.

"It must have been so heart breaking for you to have to leave him and his father behind?" Elizabeth asked.

Margaret stood quickly and cleared her throat. "I think I will go and see if there is any lemonade or perhaps some iced tea for us!" she said quickly leaving the room.

"I think I have said something I shouldn't! I hope I have not offended her!"

Elizabeth looked at Ivy.

"You couldn't know; it is not your fault," she paused, placing the bundle of Alice into the cradle and moved closer to Elizabeth. "Lord Tabor was not....well, not a good man to his wife. Actually and I do not care if he is dead, he was a terrible man and so much the worse when he was a younger man! And he was not Owen's father!" she said flatly and was glad to say the words aloud.

Elizabeth looked at her, stunned. "Not his father?" Then after a short silence, she saw in her mind's eye the tall, grizzled man who was always by his side. "James?"

Ivy smiled and nodded.

"My Lord! Yes, they are so much alike. Then you and Owen are brother and sister?"

"Half!" Ivy corrected. "My father married my mother when Owen was about five years old or so and I was born the following year."

"And Owen knows?"

"He does now. I think he suspected that for some years! My father told me about it when I was just a girl. He was a little worried when he saw what the Romeo Owen was becoming!" Ivy smiled at Elizabeth. "Father thought I should know just to keep him at arm's length, if you know what I mean!"

"I think that was very wise of him but it must have been very difficult for you to keep the secret from Owen!"

"No, not really. In a way, it was fun to keep him hanging like that. I guess I was a shameless tease but I did like the attention and since I was about the only female who would not fall into his arms it drove him half way insane. I was flattered and saw myself so much above all the others. It was silly, I suppose!"

"No, I do not think you were being silly, Ivy. Just so terribly feminine and I am sure the jolt to his ego was a healthy thing," Elizabeth said and pushed back into her mind the wonderful moment when she had fallen into his arms and his bed.

"Well..." Ivy sighed, "that all changed very quickly when he met Nora Fitzpatrick. All the rest of the females he had ever known hardly mattered to him. I truly think he fell madly in love with her the first moment he saw her. Lord, I was jealous of her right from the start when she would come with her mother and stay at the Manor. When she was here Owen had barely a word for me."

"Oh dear!" Elizabeth smiled and rolled the chair to the far wall and the portraits Owen had painted of his wife. "It was she who took me back to the Soskice?" she said more to herself than as a question to Ivy. "What was she like as a person?" she asked looking up at the pretty, pale face framed with thick, black curls. "Did you ever grow to like her?"

"I tried hard not to but in time I gave up and we became friends. It was hard not to like her. She was such a happy person, always singing and she could make everyone laugh. Not some high born bitch like some of Owen's other females. She did not come

from a wealthy family. Well, I think they were once but not any longer. Irish, you know! She loved to cook and was always in the kitchen with Hanna. I think that Hanna was somewhat irked to have her under foot all the time but she got used to it. She had no

choice just as I had no choice but to accept the fact that I would no longer have to fend off Owen's advances. Right from the start his heart and body belonged to Nora."

These words hit Elizabeth with the force of a physical blow. She hid the pain as best she could by keeping her face from Ivy. "How did she die?" she asked what she already knew more to change that part of the conversation.

Ivy sighed. "Not too long after they were married she came up pregnant. Lord, everyone was so happy for them!" Margaret came back into the room with a tray of cool drinks and passed them around. "The baby was born; a girl and everything seemed fine. Then Nora fell so sick and so quickly. In a day or two she died," she pointed over her head to Margaret's room. "In there, where Owen was born! He was devastated, and then the following day the baby died."

"They were murdered," Margaret said as she returned with a tray of cool drinks. "By Mavis Willard, the same woman who poisoned you, Elizabeth. Owen says she is gone for good and we can only guess what that means!"

"Mavis murdered them? In God's name why?" Ivy asked picking up her baby and holding her close to her chest.

"Under orders from Emile Soskice."

"To make a new shape shifter," Elizabeth added.

"Then you know about that?" Margaret asked.

"From what Owen has told me of my mother's death, the death of Isabelle and from the things that I learned from Jack Soskice I have put that much together."

"That shifter?" Ivy asked. "Reine Crawford?" Margaret turned quickly to stop Ivy but it was too late.

"Her! She is the bloody shifter. She is the evil creature who took my baby?" Elizabeth looked with shock from Ivy to Margaret. "God almighty, she is staying right here in this house and she knows where Richard is! Why the Hell isn't Owen forcing her to take him to my baby?" Elizabeth demanded angrily getting to her feet but falling back quickly into the chair. "How long will I be so useless? If I could only walk again I would get my child back myself and to Hell with Owen bloody Tabor."

"I am sorry!" Ivy said to Margaret. "When will I learn to think before I speak?"

"I don't understand!" Elizabeth demanded. "What are you not telling me?" When they did not answer her, she said angrily. "Haven't I been through enough? Don't I have any rights at all?"

Upstairs Abbey woke suddenly from her drunken nap. At first she thought, the shaking she felt was from her own body and that she was about to be sick but quickly knew it was more than that. She sat up and placed her hand on the wall. She could feel the energy rising, the rumbling and shaking of the waking spirit. She threw off her covers and ran into the hallway. From the top of the stairs, she could hear Ivy and Margaret talking in the Great Room. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" Abbey cried as she ran down the stairs.

"Elizabeth is right, Lady Tabor. She should know the truth!" Ivy urged as Abbey came rushing in behind them.

"Don't call me that! Call me Margaret!" she snapped at Ivy, and then gathered herself. "I am sorry, Ivy!" To Elizabeth she said, "You are right Elizabeth! That woman whom you met here last night, the one who tried to save you from the Soskice gypsies; she is the shifter."

"Then she is the one my mother was murdered for? She is the one who took my child?" Elizabeth asked her eyes wide with anger. "Now she is trusted?"

"What is the matter with you two?" Abbey cried at them, looking at Elizabeth. "Can't you hear that? Are you deaf?" To Abbey the room rumbled with the ever-stronger energy of Nora Tabor.

"What is it, Abbey?" Margaret asked holding her by the arm as she rushed towards Elizabeth. "I can't hear anything."

"Let go of me!" Abbey yelled pushing her aside. "It is Nora; she is mad with fury. God, can't you hear her?" She rushed across the room and pulled the blanket off Elizabeth's legs and saw her naked feet on the floor. "No!" she cried. "No, Elizabeth, don't let her into you. Push her away!"

"What is she doing?" Margaret demanded.

"She's pulling Nora into her! Shit, Elizabeth, stop it....now!"

Elizabeth closed her eyes and let her head fall forwards.

Ivy ran to the study door and pounded calling for her father just as James and Edmond returned from their visit to the Hall. Alerted by the yelling Ted and Owen came rushing out of the study, each holding their guns.

Abbey took Elizabeth by the arms, shaking her. "Listen to me! Don't do this!" Elizabeth pushed her with such force that she fell backwards, spilling the drinks tray and crashing to the floor.

"What is going on?" Owen demanded.

"It's Nora!" Abbey answered, scrambling to her feet. "She has got Elizabeth again."

"I am not Nora!" Elizabeth said standing from the chair, her eyes fixed firmly at Owen. "I am Elizabeth!" she spoke with Elizabeth's voice but then it rang with the strong Irish accent that had belonged to Nora. To the astonishment of all, she rose off the floor for several inches and floated across so that her face was only inches from Owen's. "Why have you betrayed me?" she asked and with each word, her face would change from Elizabeth to Nora and back again.

Lost for words Owen stood with his eyes locked on the horrifying sight before him.

"Have you nothing to say? Can't you explain your miserable actions?" the specter demanded. "You have the words and the will to take her into your bed but now you cannot admit that you have betrayed me?"

"Call her out!" Abbey cried, pulling on Owen's arm. "Don't talk to Nora. Call Elizabeth out!" Abbey reached up towards Elizabeth. Elizabeth turned her eyes for the briefest second, looked at Abbey and the look sent the woman back onto the floor. This time Abbey stayed on the floor.

Hanna and Daisy had joined the stunned group. "Take Ivy and Alice upstairs." James demanded of them

"No! I am staying Father," Ivy insisted standing close beside her father.

"How have I betrayed you, Elizabeth?" Owen asked finally catching his wits.

"You had me fuck you and that cost me my child. Now you side with the enemy; that is how!" the voice of Elizabeth screamed at him.

"I am not siding with the enemy. Reine is helping us!" Owen voice was a choked and dry whisper.

"No!" Nora hissed at him. "You are an adulterer and a fool; you shamed our marriage!"

"Stop it!" Margaret looked from Owen to James. "For God's sake, James, do something?"

James held her back. "Leave them!" he whispered at her, holding her with one arm and Ivy with the other.

Owen raised his hands taking the woman before him by the shoulders. His eyes were bright with many emotions. Over her, he caught the look from Ted and took the message. He took a deep breath and moved his hands to her face, gently cupping her cheeks.

"Nora! Please hear me!" he looked deeply in the familiar dark eyes of his long dead wife.

"No! Owen don't talk to her, you only encourage her!" Abbey called from the floor.

"Be quiet, Abbey," Ted said firmly, pulling her off the floor and bringing the others with him, he moved out of the room and closed the door behind them. "He knows what he is doing and they do not need an audience!"

"Are you sure, Ted?" Margaret asked nervously looking back at the study door.

He nodded and they followed to the Great Room.

Ivy was shaking as James placed her into a chair near the fireplace and prepared a fire. "Hanna, some strong hot tea, please!" he said. "We'll wait here for Owen to do what he has to do"

As Owen held her, he saw her eyes begin to fill with tears. His own pain was almost more than he could stand. God, he wondered, how many times will I have to say good-bye to this woman? He locked his eyes into hers and spoke softly; his anger and frustration vanished as he remembered the sad day she died.

"Nora, I did love you and with all my heart. I never broke our vows. Do you remember the hours after our daughter was born and how sick you became?"

She did not answer but he saw in her eyes that she saw the same painful memory as him.

"I was so desperate not to lose you I would not accept the inevitable fact that you were dying. I made you promise me something that you could not possibly do for me. Do you remember that?"

She nodded and cold tears fell onto his hands.

"I made you promise me that you would not die and that we would never be parted. That was wrong and the actions of my breaking heart. We fell asleep; when I woke you were gone and from that time you have existed here in a time of misery; am I right?"

"Yes," she whispered. "But I am your wife. I must stay with you!"

"I release you from that promise, my love! There is a far better place waiting for you and for our child, you must go to it. That is your home now. Can you not see your way there?"



"No! I see only you and my home here."

"Have you looked? Looked beyond this place and deep into your heart?" he asked, his voice sticking in his throat.

She shook her head, looking so terribly lonely and confused.

"Is there no one here who can help this woman?" Owen called into the room around them. "Is there no guide to see her home? Why is she not being helped? Where is this God I hear so much about?"

Nora was sobbing so miserably he could not help but pull her to him and hold her frozen body against his. As he did this, he saw a light begin to form behind her. A small gold ball of fire that grew quickly, expanding and vibrating with energy. He said nothing but watched with amazement as it lifted from the floor, moved to a corner of the room and formed a wide, long tunnel. The walls of it were rolling with colors of violet, gold and silver and some that he had never seen before.

As it formed completely the end of it opened and a brilliant blue sky appeared. Standing in this opening that seemed to be miles away was a beautiful winged being; so far away yet he could see it as clearly, as though it stood directly beside him. He could not tell if he saw a male or a female but he knew the true beauty of the graceful form and loving face.

"Look, Nora!" he said, hardly able to speak as he gently turned her around. "Do you see that?"

As she looked, her face filled with wonder took its place. She wiped away the tears and wide eyed looked back at Owen.

"Yes!" he said and nodded. "That is your home now. For you and our baby! I cannot be with you now but one day I will be there."

"Is this right, Owen?" she asked but the bright light of happiness in her eyes and he did not have to answer her. He did not trust his voice any longer and only nodded at her. He leaned forward and kissed her lips and as he backed away, Elizabeth fell into his arms. Without taking his eyes off the scene before him, he carefully lowered her to the settee and sat beside her, holding her in his arms.

Nora was walking towards the tunnel. Not floating as before but walking with confident steps. She turned back once to Owen and was holding their little girl in her arms. Elizabeth, aware now, saw the vision as well and took his hand. She could feel his body trembling and when she looked in his face, she saw the radiance and the pain of this experience.

Nora smiled; looking at the man she had so loved for a moment then turned and stepped up into the tunnel. As she moved along, the being that waited for her extended a hand. The tunnel then grew smaller and quickly disappeared.

## Chapter Thirteen

Across the hallway, Abbey looked up and took a few steps towards the study door before James stopped her. "She is gone!" She said as she turned back to those waiting with her.

"Are you sure?" Ted asked.

"Oh yes! She and the child. They are home, finally."

"Thank God!" Margaret exclaimed. "We should leave them for a while. When Owen is ready he will come to us!"

"Owen!" Elizabeth looked at him and saw his eyes bright with tears. "It is alright to cry!" she whispered and held him. For the first time since he was a child, he cried.

After a while, he pushed her away and stood turning his back on her. "I am sorry, Lizzie! I am not usually a weak man!"

"Lord, Owen, you are not weak to feel and show pain. It is weakness to deny it. It was you who told me it could never be wrong to feel what is natural. Isn't that what you told me?"

"Are you alright?" he asked clearing his throat and wiping his face with his sleeve.

"I am fine! I am sorry; I should never have done that! I really had no idea what I was doing."

"God! Now what are you talking about?" he asked taking a long mouthful of whiskey from the bottle.

"I let her.... asked her to come into me!" Elizabeth laid her head back on the pillows, suddenly feeling extremely weak.

"And you did that because you found out that it was Reine who took the child? I don't understand. Why in Heavens name?"

"I wasn't thinking. I just wanted to be strong enough to confront you about it. I am so sorry!"

"Well, don't be! What happened here today had to be and believe it or not you have helped me and my late wife greatly. But please, Elizabeth, what we saw, what you heard, that is between us and no one else. No one!"

"I understand!" she said quietly.

"You are not fine, are you?" he asked running his hand across her head. She was pale and hot to the touch.

"I am just tired, that is all. Please, I don't want to go back to bed again!" she pleaded as he picked her up. "I can't stand just lying there doing nothing!"

"Be quiet! You are going back to bed and that is it. Do you think you are any use to me like this? You need to regain your health for your son that is all you have to think about!" He threw open the door and carried her into his bedroom, placed her on his bed; all eyes were on them but no one said a word.

"Mother, please do not let Elizabeth out of bed again! I don't have the time for

dealing with her now!"

"Owen..." Elizabeth started to speak but he raised his hand to stop her.

"Elizabeth..." Owen stopped, shook his head and controlled his temper. "Look you can rest there and still know what is going on."

"Yes, that is a good idea." Margaret agreed and sat on the bed, placing her hand on Elizabeth's shoulder. "You do need to rest, love, and you know that. Owen, don't you and the rest of the men have to finish your conversation in the study?"

Owen nodded. Ted, James and Edmond followed him across the hall.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Ted asked when they settled in the study.

"What I want, Ted is to get flat-assed drunk and find a generous whore, in a good mood, but life is rarely set so that we get what we want! What condition is the dynamite in?" he asked Edmond, determined to bring him more firmly into the plans.

"Dry as a bone and more than enough of it to blow a big hole in the British coastline. I've brought the blasting caps!" Edmond answered, motioned to a large crate on the floor.

"Well, that is some good news, then. Do we have enough knowledge amongst us to handle this stuff properly?" Owen asked.

"James and I do," Edmond answered. "We did those boulders last year."

"Unless I am mistaken, your bird is back, Edmond!" James said standing back from the window as the raven landed on the ledge, squeezed between the bars and hopped onto the floor.

"It is not my bird!" Edmond said, ignored a look from Owen. He was the only one who looked away as she shifted. "Do you have to do that in front of everybody?" Edmond asked angrily as she straightened up and brushed off her dress.

She turned her back on him and looked at Owen. "I have the information you wanted. The baby is in the middle wagon, the one that Emile is guarding. The main tunnel begins about a half a mile south of the town called Waltham. Do you know of this place? It is not all that far north from here."

"I know it well, lived there for some time when a younger man." James said.

"South of the Waltham, a little bit back off the road way there is the Fairchild Furniture Factory. It is just a burnt out shell now. It is a mess and overgrown with foliage. Behind that is a ramshackle barn that Soskice built over the tunnel entrance," she paused and sat on the side of Owen's desk. "There are three male guards, two of Emile's bloody bull mastiffs and various females and children. Emile's daughter, Rose, is in the grotto, to look after the child, no doubt!"

"Well done, Reine," Owen laughed as he slapped her thigh. "Here's a thought, if Edmond is finished with you I'll take you on. Just think of all that we could accomplish!"

"Well I have not finished with her, so you can forget about that!" Edmond said angrily pulling her from the desk and sitting her beside him on the sofa. "She is my woman, or whatever the Hell she is, and I will tell her what to do from now on."

"Not while you act like a sulking child," Reine snapped at him. "Talk to me again when you become a man."

"You will not..." Edmond started but Owen cut him off.

"What you will not do is argue this matter and waste my time. Edmond,

understand this; Reine is now in my house so you will treat her with respect. You can rip each other to pieces if you want when this is all over but for now you will both be quiet and listen to my plans!"

Reine rolled her eyes, curled her legs under her and laid her head back on a pillow. After a moment with Owen glaring at him Edmond nodding his head and said, "You are right. Go on!"

For the next half an hour Owen told them what he had in mind for the following night. They asked a few questions but no one argued with him.

Reine yawned sleepily and stretched. "If you are finished, Owen, I am tired, I would like to go to my room now, if that is alright with you?"

"Yes, of course," Owen smiled at her as she left the room completely ignoring Edmond.

"I'll be jiggered!" Edmond muttered under his breath.

"I think you have been, indeed!" Owen could not help but laugh.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I was just agreeing with you, that is all! James, why don't you and Edmond go and see to Estate business for a while. I am sure that there is a lot that needs seeing to."

"Thank God for that!" James said standing. "All this sitting around is making me stiff! Come along Edmond."

"And you leave her alone!" Edmond said to Owen as they stood to leave.

Reine sat for a while in the window seat of the bedroom, from there she saw as James and Edmond crossed the lawn heading towards the Tabor stables. She saw him turn and look up towards the windows. She smiled slightly, locked her door and crawled under the bed covers feeling very satisfied with how things were going.

When Edmond returned later to Hock House he was not surprised to find the bedroom door locked. He knocked lightly at first then louder when he received no answer. "Reine, it's me. Open the door!" he insisted shaking the doorknob.

"Don't take the door down. I am coming!" Reine cursed under her breath, opened the door and went back to her bed. "Is it always so bloody hard to get a nap in this house?" She complained turning her back on him and covering her head with the covers.

"I've been gone for an hour. I thought you might be awake."

"Well, I wasn't."

"We need to talk," he said firmly and after she did not reply, he added, "you should have told me the truth about yourself."

With a sigh, she rolled to her back and looking at the ceiling spoke with strong sarcasm. "You think that, do you? Let me see; how would I have told you. Perhaps I could have said, "Yes, Edmond I do so find you attractive and can't wait to fornicate with you but before we get at it you should know that sometimes, when I am in the mood, I can turn into a bird!" But do not worry I will try not to let my feathers get in the way!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Oh, is that ridiculous? Then maybe I should have told you that Emile Soskice sent me to kill your brother and help him destroy your family! Would you have found that titillating pillow talk?"

"Stop it, Reine!" he said as he crossed the room, sat beside her and pulled her to face him.

“Well, then, you tell me how I should have told you. I do not have much experience in these things. All I know for sure is that from the first time I saw you I was strongly attracted to you and yes, it did not matter to me that you were married. Especially when I saw how you did not love your wife. I don’t know how or why but very quickly I knew I would never hurt you and wanted nothing more to do with Emile and his world!” she sighed and searched his eyes. “If you had known the truth about me, about what I am, would you have wanted me less? Can you tell me that truthfully?”

Edmond had not expected that question and he had not expected how strongly he felt the answer. “Nothing would have held me back from you, Reine! I wanted you then as much as I do now!”

She nodded, fighting back tears. “Please go and let me rest!” she said rolling away from him.

“If you survive through to the end of this what are your plans?”

“If? Thank you for your confidence. I will survive, Edmond that you can be sure of!”

“And then what will you do?”

“Well, I will certainly not be going to the London Zoo!”

“For God’s sake, Reine! I am being serious here. Tell me what your plans are, if you have any.”

She sighed. “I have no money but I will get some from Abbey. I am sure she will be very glad to pay to have me out of her life. I will use it to settle somewhere and in time, I will find work. I hope that I will marry a kind man, have a few lovely children and forget I ever met you. Just as you will quickly forget about me, I am sure!”

He took her hand. “I won’t easily forget you, Reine! Shit, look at me!” he pulled her back to him. “I don’t want to lose you. I don’t know what tomorrow or the next day will bring, no one does, but I do know right now that I have no intention of letting you leave me.”

She sighed and sat up. “I do love you and want nothing but to stay with you but it is far too late for that. You do not respect me and without that we have nothing!”

“Give me time, Reine. Time so I can just to learn to accept things,” he said softly. “Can’t you just give me more time, is that too much to ask?”

“I suppose so, but you have to stop saying mean things to me,” she looked so sad and hurt Edmond could not help but smile.

“I will stop being ‘mean’ if you will stop sulking. Lying around here is not helping any one. There are things you could be doing, you know!”

“Alright,” she agreed. “What do you want me to do?”

“Abbey has gone over to the hall on her own, why don’t you go and keep an eye on her.”

Reine jumped from the bed like a happy child. “And I can change my clothes,” she beamed at him.

“Good,” he kissed her lightly on the head. “But for God’s sake be careful!”

James joined Margaret in the Great Room. He smiled when he saw Elizabeth and Ivy sleeping together in Owen's large bed.

“Sh!” Margaret whispered to him from across the room where she sat rocking the baby. “Poor Ivy!” she said as he reached her. “The child is so tired, James. She is

doing far too much for someone who has just given birth. She wouldn't sleep alone so I put her with Elizabeth."

He sat across from her, stretching his long legs out as he and his son often did. "Had I known all this was going to happen I would have sent her to stay with my sister, but then this is hardly the kind of thing one can plan for?"

"Well, James, she is under my care now. Ivy is such a lovely young woman!"

"Thank you Margaret. I have been blessed in my life to have some fine females around me."

"Does that include me?" she asked smiling at him.

"Top of the list! I do not intend to apologize to you for my anger these last few days. You are just lucky that we were never really alone!" he smiled back at her but his eyes were deadly serious.

"Because you are as stubborn and as arrogant as an old cow's fart I do not expect you to apologize. I doubt you have ever been sorry over anything you have done," she spoke gently and with humor.

"I would prefer to be thought of as a bull's fart, if that is alright with you!" they both laughed quietly. "But, Maggie, there is one thing that I am sorry for," he leaned forward in his chair and looked deeply into her eyes. A look that she had not seen for so many years but it still stirred her to the core.

"What is that?"

"When our boy was born, no before that; I should have been man enough to take you away from here and not waited for you to come to your senses, which you never did. I should have told Wilmot you were my woman and that Owen was my son. I was weak to let you ruin our lives!"

"But surely your life was not ruined, James! Did you not love your wife and have happy years with her?"

"I am not a man to be happy with second best but then I did think you were dead."

"I have said I am sorry for that, if I could go back I would do things very differently," she said after a silence.

"Would you?"

"Oh yes, I would. I never stopped loving you James, not for one minute!"

"Maggie, I do not want you to go back to those crumbling old men. This is your home and this is where you belong."

"Hollyhock House will belong to Owen and his new bride and I would just get in the way."

"His new bride?" he looked across the room to the two sleeping females. "You mean Elizabeth? I doubt very much that it is marriage that he has in mind."

"Maybe not when she first came here and I doubt that he even knows it now but he loves her. There is no question on that. Do you think he would go through all this just as a matter of pride?"

James thought for a moment and nodded at her. "Maybe you are right, maybe! It is far over the time he found a woman and made some sons!" he paused and looked at the brilliant stained glass window. "Do you believe that Nora has gone?"

"Abbey says so. I suppose she should know. Feel how much warmer it is in here. And it feels more peaceful."

He nodded. "For Owen's sake I hope so."

"Are you hungry? I have had Hanna open the dining room and set out a cold lunch."

"I could eat that old cow you spoke of. Which reminds me, where is Abbey?"

"James, that is not nice! She cannot help the way she looks. She wanted to change her clothes and asked if she could go to the Manor for a while. I told her she could go. I don't think she is a threat any longer, do you?"

"No, probably not. She should be back soon or I will go and get her."

"Go and eat and don't make any noise!" she said as he stood. She watched him walk across the room. His broad shoulders and long gait brought her back to a time and place when she was so young and he was her man.

"Glad to see that you are still locking up tight!" Abbey said to Cook.

"Yes, Miss! Think that is for the best, not that there is anyone left here to protect!" Cook rubbed her floured hands down her apron. "Mr. Edmond and Miss Crawford coming back here today, do you think?"

"Not today. I am going up to my room for awhile," Abbey said as she crossed the kitchen to the hallway.

Two men were dragging out Wilmot's bloodied mattress.

"We are going to burn that thing!" Cook said with disgust. She sniffed and went back to her pastry.

The cavernous, old house was still and the feel of death hung heavy in the air. She shivered as she went up the stairs and remembered when she was there so many years before. The four boys and their various friends and antics gave the place happy purpose. Now what, she wondered, will become of it?

Her head hurt and she felt dreadful. Never get drunk before breakfast; she said to her image in the mirror. It most certainly takes the good edge off my day. She rested for a short while, washed, changed and pinned up her hair. There was no doubt that she had lost some weight in the last few days on the Estate and her psychic abilities were back again. Just something else that made no sense to her.

With strong curiosity and the opportunity to explore the Manor without any Tabors at hand, Abbey left her room and went up to Wilmot's old apartment. Many years had passed since the dreadful day when Isabelle had found them in her bed.

Abbey closed the door and opened the drapes. But for new carpets and linens not much had changed. The same, exquisite, hand carved furniture that the lady of the house had brought with her from Spain sat in the same places as Abbey remembered.

"I would have at least replaced the bed!" she mumbled to herself as she sat on the bedside. Memories of that morning came flooding back to her. It was just before dawn. She and Wilmot were asleep. Abbey woke when Wilmot swore and sat up. Isabelle was standing at the foot of the bed with a pistol in her hand, her coal black eyes glaring in

rage and shock at her husband. She said something in Spanish to Wilmot as he struggled into his trousers. With only a small knowledge of the language Abbey did not understand what she said, but could guess. However, she did understand his reply in Spanish and it shook her to the core. "If you must shoot anyone then shoot her; the whore means nothing to me!"

By that time, she and Wilmot had been lovers for fifteen years. She did not

think he was in love with her but she had felt that he at least cared for her. Without hardly a moment's pause he cold-heartedly dismissed her from his life. In short order she was being driven away from the Manor and back to her London apartment.

She saw Wilmot only one more time after that. He showed up unannounced at her home a few days later. She had been thrilled to see him but he quickly put her in her place. He had with him the deed to the Turtle Dove and it would be hers free and clear if she would stay away from him or any member of his family for good. She had accepted knowing it was that or nothing. She did not see or hear from him again until the day he sat in his wheel chair in her courtyard.

Now he and Isabelle were dead. She did not care much really but she had grown wise enough over the years to know that it had been wrong for her to come to his house and defile his marriage bed. She had paid a very high price to learn that lesson. She crossed back to the windows to close the drapes when she saw a movement through the trees along the road up from the gateway. A second later, she recognized the familiar black police wagon of Inspector Caruthers.

"Oh, shit! Not him, not now!" she exclaimed rushing from the room and down to the main hallway. "Hastings!" she called out loudly once and then twice as he appeared from the servants' stairs pulling on his coat.

"Yes Miss?"

"That bloody copper Caruthers is coming. He is going to want to see Owen and Edmond. I will sit in the study and you bring him to me. Do not, in heavens name, tell him to go to Hock House. He mustn't know that we are up to anything."

Hastings looked at her doubtfully. "Are we up to anything, Miss?"

"Yes, of course. But listen to me! While I distract Caruthers, you go and get Owen and Edmond. Tell them that Caruthers is here and that he is a Claw, there is no doubt about that. I should have told them about that before. That old bastard is as bent as the dogs hind legs!"

"A claw?"

They could hear the carriage wheels on the cobbles outside the main door.

"Yes, a claw and do not forget that part!" she answered as a knock came to the door. "And tell Cook to make some tea, bring it in but do not pour it. I'll do that! Do you understand?"

Hastings pulled his coat into place, assumed his bland, bored butlers face and surprised Abbey by winking at her as he turned to the door. She quickly went into the study, picked up a book and sat relaxed in a chair as though she had been there for hours.

"Inspector Caruthers is here, Miss Pritchard. Should I show him in here to wait for the misters Tabor?"

"Yes, of course!" she said with surprise in her voice.

The dapper police officer handed his hat, gloves, and cane to Hastings, and entered the study. "Abbey, so I see you are still here."

"Well, of course! I cannot abandon the family now. Owen needs a strong female figure around."

"And I have no doubt that you are well aware of Owen Tabor's needs, my dear old Abbey!" he said sitting stiffly across from her. "Aren't you missed at the brothel?"

"The Turtle Dove runs well enough without me for a while. But thank you for your concern." she answered and smiled. "As one of my most frequent customers I



should think you would know that.”

“Not that often!” he said, losing some of his reserve.

“Often enough though, don’t you think? But I am sure you did not come here to speak to me about business.”

“I am simply waiting for Owen and Edmond. And I shall want a word or two with Miss Crawford before I leave.”

“Well, I am sure she could spare a minute or two for you!” Abbey replied as Hastings rolled in a tea tray. “Won’t you join me in a cup and maybe we can thaw some of the chill in the air. After all we are only here with the best wishes of the remaining Tabors at heart!”

He nodded doubtfully as Abbey placed the tray closer to him on the end table. She picked up the teapot and ever so slightly missed the cup as she poured and hot tea spilled onto his sleeve. “I am so clumsy!” she exclaimed, pulling a napkin from the tray.

“Give me that!” he snapped trying to take the linen from her.

“No, look it is on the back of your sleeve!” She took his hand in hers and wiped the sleeve and cuff of his shirt. It only took a few seconds but it was far long enough to see what she needed to see. “There! Good as new!” she said with a smile and went back to pouring the tea.

“Be more careful this time!”

“I suppose you have heard that Lord Tabor has died?”

“I was informed right away; of course.”

“Dreadful thing!” Abbey said shaking her head sadly. “I was there when it happened. But his heart was so weak; it was only a matter of time.”

“If you were there perhaps you can explain to me how he obtained the bullet wound he had on his ear?”

It was then that they heard Owen and Edmond coming down the hallway. Just in the nick of time, Abbey thought as they came in the room.

“Inspector,” Owen said extending his hand, not looking at Abbey.

“Owen, Edmond!” the police officer nodded solemnly to each man. “I hope I have not come at an inopportune time but I wanted to offer my condolences in the death of your father.”

“Thank you!” Owen said as he and Edmond took seats.

“It is sad but not unexpected,” Edmond said.

“I have just come from the coroner’s office and have brought some papers for you to sign,” Caruthers stood placed his briefcase on the table and sorted through some sheets.

Abbey stood and said, “I will leave you gentlemen to your discussion!” She crossed the room in front of Owen, and quickly caught his eye giving a warning look to him and he slightly nodded in return.

“First, I think it is important for me to advise you about that woman,” the Inspector said as he snapped closed his case and looking earnestly at his companions.

“Abbey? I think she is harmless enough,” Owen smiled.

“And an old family friend,” Edmond added.

“Well, far be it from me to tell you who to have in your home but I should keep my eye on her if I were you. I have yet to meet a prostitute worth anyone’s trust.”

"I am sure we will keep that in mind. Now how goes your investigations of our brothers' deaths?" Owen asked.

"Not too much new on that matter, I am afraid. It is, as I told you before, a tricky thing when there are no bodies or witnesses. We have found that Henry had some very unsavory gambling contacts and very high-unpaid debts. I am fairly certain that would be at the root of his death. But as to Edward; with the silence from the staff here I doubt we shall get to the bottom of it."

"So you think that the deaths are not connected, just terrible co-incidences?" Owen asked.

"That seems hardly likely, don't you think?" Edmond asked.

"Unfortunately with matters such as murder there is no normal standard that we can go by. However, we must always tie up loose ends whenever we can. To that I have some questions on the death of Lord Tabor."

"I thought you most likely would," Owen said.

"The coroner, on advice from the doctor, has ruled the death as natural from heart failure but he thought I should ask how he came by the wound to his right ear? Who was there when it happened?"

"James Whitehall, Abbey and myself!"

"I was on my way back from Dover after identifying my wife's body," Edmond added.

"The old man was in his room and I assume cleaning his guns as he did fairly often, when we heard the shot and went into to him. Abbey applied pressure to the wound, seeing that it was only superficial and we tried to calm him. He was more than upset, insisted on standing from his bed. That was when it happened. I think he was most likely dead in seconds."

"I see!" Caruthers said. "I thought it was something along these lines. A most terrible experience for all of you, no doubt! The bodies of both Lord Tabor and Mrs. Tabor are ready for burial. I shall leave that up to you and the funeral director. Unfortunately, as I informed you in the telegram, the body of Tom O'Connor is missing. It is a sad note of our times but there is a high market price on cadavers these days and we are certainly checking into it."

"I am sure you are," Owen nodded. "I have news for you and I don't think you will be all that pleased."

"Yes?"

"Soskice has escaped. Some time yesterday morning."

"I see!" the policeman said after few seconds of silence. "That is bad news, Owen."

"He may have been gone for some time before we found he was free. So there is no telling where he is now," Owen added thinking that Caruthers was if nothing else a good actor.

"I do hope that you two are now taking added protection?" Caruthers asked.

"We are!" Edmond replied.

"Good! Now all I will need is to have you sign this witness paper on the matter of your father's death, Owen!"

"If anyone asks for me," Abbey said to Cook when she was back in the kitchen, "tell them I have gone to find Miss Crawford."

"But she is here in her room, Miss! I was just helping her sort out her clothes and tidy up," Betty said looking up from her pile of laundry.

"Is she? Good!" Abbey rushed off back up the stairs and found Reine standing in her under clothing beside her bed. The clothes, once scattered about were now hanging in the wardrobe and the bed neatly made.

"Hurry up and close the door, Abbey! I am half naked," Reine smiled at Abbey. "Come and help me decide what to wear today. I am not sure if I should wear this skirt and matching jacket or the gray that looks so nice on me."

"Why don't you just shift into something like you usually do?"

"I have a lot of nice clothes right here that will suit me fine. Now which one should I wear to dazzle our weedy Inspector?"

"You know he is here? He wants to talk to you. Don't wear the gray; it makes you look like a slut."

"I saw his carriage coming up the roadway. Yes, I shall wear the gray, you are right," Reine said pulling the dress over her head "Lord only knows how you ever can stand wearing all this stuff!" she said tugging at her corsets. "It pokes and nudges at places that shouldn't be poked and nudged unless one is in the mood."

"What have you got in mind, Reine? You cannot go off and seduce him; that is not the answer for everything. Not to mention what Edmond would do!"

"Of course I am not going to have sex with that old prig. I do have my standards!" Abbey snorted, Reine ignored her. "But it has been my experience that if one stirs the penis, one also numbs the mind! And to that matter I should remove my stockings!" She hitched up her skirts and removed the silk.

"Oh Christ, Reine! What are you going to do? You cannot trust that man. He is a part of the Black Claw."

"Is he really? Well, I am not surprised. Abbey, get your brushes and help me with this mop, will you?" she sat on the bedside as Abbey brushed her hair.

"You know why he is here, don't you? Emile has sent him to find out what we might know here and to see what you are doing. And he wants Ted's book. So you are going to have to be very careful what you say to him."

"How do you know?"

"I managed to touch him and saw it all very clearly."

"Well, have no fear, Abbey, I can handle him. I will let him take the lead and see where we go, that is all!"

Reine knocked lightly on the door and stepped into the study. "I understand that you wish to speak with me, Inspector?" she said as she took a seat offered by Edmond.

"I would prefer to speak with you alone. It is about the case, you see!"

Caruthers said looking from Edmond to Owen, placing the signed papers into his case.

"I see no need for that!" Edmond said flatly.

"It is alright, Edmond." Reine smiled at him. "I am sure I will be fine, won't I, Owen?"

"Without a doubt, Reine!" Owen answered, looking briefly and with meaning to the Inspector, then they left the room.

"Now what can I help you with?" Reine asked. As she spoke, she swung her leg back and forth letting her slipper slide to the end of her foot and dangle from her toes.

"Since I was not even on the estate at the time of the murders of Edward or Tom

O'Conner, I do not see what I can possibly know!"

Caruthers moved from his seat and sat next to Reine. Leaning close to her, he took a deep breath and in a whisper said, "I have always been able to smell a shifter. No matter the amount of soap and perfume they can never be rid of the basic smell of animal!"

She looked at him blankly, resisted the strong urge to slap him or worse and replied. "Well, but for one thing, that makes no sense to me!"

"What thing is that, Reine?"

"I have always been able to smell a bent cop!"

After a few seconds with their eyes locked, he moved back in his chair. He cleared his throat pulled a cigarette from his case and Reine held out her hand for one.

"A lady doesn't smoke!" he said sarcastically.

"Nonetheless!" she took one of the cigarettes and waited as he lit a match for her. "I would, if I was you, get to the point sooner rather than later," she said taking a deep breath. "The Tabors are rather protective over their house guests."

"If you insist! As a Soskice shape shifter you did as instructed, didn't you? Under orders, you killed Edward Tabor and Tom O'Connor. This I know to be fact, my dear. As to Mavis and Bob Willard; they killed Henry and since their house is now a jarred hole and they are missing, you most likely killed them as well."

"Are you drunk or insane?"

"Neither, my dear! Just getting to the point as you say. And you murdered Olivia Tabor, no doubt to further your affair with Edmond Tabor."

"I was here on the Estate when she died, as any number of people will tell you. She took her own life for her own reasons," she said blowing small circles of smoke into the air.

"The one mistake you made was to break her neck before throwing her out the window. She landed on her backside up against a hedge, no doubt, the fall would have killed her but it would not have turned her head almost completely around as it was! I believe that such a manner of killing is your favorite."

"I have never killed anyone and I have never laid eyes on Emile Soskice and it would impossible for you to prove otherwise."

"Oh, I have no intention of trying to prove any of it. In fact I could not care less what you have done," he smiled, reached into his coat, brought out an envelope and showed a thick stack of pound notes inside.

"Then there is no point in this ridiculous conversation is there?" she asked as she glanced at the money.

"There is five hundred pounds in this packet. It is yours now and all you have to do is listen to me. I want Emile Soskice dead. I have no doubt that you want that also. It is long past the time for him to leave this world." He dropped the envelope of money onto her lap.

"Other than the threat that he presents to the Tabors I have no interest or knowledge in that man. But only a fool wouldn't rent their ears for that much money," Reine said as she picked up the envelope and slid it into her corset.

"For years now I have been waiting to take my place as head of the Black Claw. Emile Soskice, John Delacourt and Wilmot Tabor stood in my way. Now Tabor is dead. I have seen to it that Delacourt is in prison for the rest of his natural life and so only

Emile stands in my way. You will help me to this end.”

She shrugged. “I do not see how I can possibly help you! I think I shall have to tell the Mr.’s Tabor of you strange ramblings. They might be more interested than I am.”

“You will not tell them because you do not want them to know what you really are. You also know that if Emile makes this transformation into a new, young body your time will end. You will disappear as though you never existed. Now with your rich and powerful lover, life might be better for you but first we have to kill Emile.”

“I have no connection with Emile. If you want him dead then you kill him. What stops you from doing that?”

“I need more than Emile's death and it is to that matter that I need your help.”

She sighed, again swinging her foot impatiently.

“Somewhere on the Estate, and most likely in Owen's house, is Thaddeus Browne. He has in his possession a very unusual book. I need this book and I will do anything and pay any cost to get it. In it is a list of the names of all the Claw members. If I have power over them, and with Emile dead, then I will have complete control of the organization.”

“I have never been in Hock House. So I have no idea who might be there.”

Ignoring her, he continued, “It will not be easy for you because as I say the book seems to be protected, however as always you will do what needs to be done to get what you want. You will get the book and bring it to me. From what I have learned as the raven, you are more than strong enough to do that. If you do that, I will give you another packet like that. I will kill Emile and you will survive to live as you wish! It could be that you will stay with Edmond or perhaps, with me at head of the Black Claw.”

“I will need a shifter and believe me, Reine, I will treat you far better than Emile Soskice and I am as rich as Edmond Tabor. When this is brought to a successful conclusion I may be even richer!” with his boot, he knocked her shoe from her foot and raised her skirt slightly up her ankle.

“You really should get some help, Inspector! The nightmares you suffer must be truly awful!”

“On the other hand if you do not help me and should somehow survive, I will tell Edmond Tabor just what you are. You would be free of Emile but I doubt you will find a welcome bed in this house. The way I see it, my dear, you have no choice but to aid me.”

She waited a few seconds and when he said nothing more she stood, tossed her cigarette butt into a tray and asked. “Are you done with me?”

He stepped in front of her holding her firmly by her forearm. “Behind the Tabor stables, running parallel with both houses is a steep forested ridge. You have no doubt seen it in your flights over the land,” his whisper was now hoarse and his face red. “Just on the other side of which is the fence bordering the end of the Tabor land and next to that in a cluster of over growth is an abandoned barn. I will be there tonight between midnight and two. I give you that much time because I realize that it may be difficult for you to get your hands on the book. Bring it to me and I will give you another envelope such as this and you can then choose whether to be with me or take your chance for freedom,” holding tighter onto her arm pulling her closer to him, his voice breathless with urgency he added. “Do you understand?”

She shook her head sadly, touched his cheeks gently with her hands and then quickly slid them to his neck. With a start and fear, he pushed her and jumped backwards. "You are in rather a spot, aren't you, Inspector? Because I have absolutely no idea what you are ravaging on about. You may as well leave now; it seems we have little left to say," she shrugged, opened the door and called for Hastings. "The Inspector is leaving, please bring his things!" she pulled the envelope from her clothes and said. "I think you should take this back."

"No! You will change your mind that is if you don't want Edmond Tabor to know just what you are," he whispered to her.

Abbey was coming down the stairs. "Are you leaving Inspector?" she asked as he took his cane and hat from Hastings.

He left without answering her.

"I don't think he's in the best of moods!" Reine smiled at Abbey. "Silly old goat! Where are the men?" she asked Hastings.

"Waiting in the parlor, Miss!"

"Good! Come along Abbey! Look!" she said tossing the envelope of money to Edmond. "Bribery and blackmail from our dirty copper and five hundred pounds for just listening; quite a productive day for me!" she laughed and clapped her hands.

"What?" Edmond asked opening the envelope and counting the money.

"And, he says he has another five hundred for me if I bring him Ted's book tonight. He wants the list of names in it to help him take over the Black Claw."

"Really?" Owen asked. "And if you don't bring him the book?"

"He will tell everyone that I am a changeling, with special note to Edmond!"

"And you took the money?" Edmond asked, "Why?"

"I told him I had no idea what he was going on about, that I could not help him and I offered him the money back but he refused. He said it was a gift!" Reine answered with a slight tone of defensiveness in her voice. She took the envelope and pushed it back into her clothes. "Anyway, the money belongs to me now!"

"How did you know that Caruthers was a Claw member?" Owen turned to Abbey.

"God, he and Emile were as thick as thieves while Emile was camped at the Turtle Dove. Caruthers was always around, drinking, gambling and partaking of the whores. Apart from that, Jack told me. He was an idiot when in his cups and that was most times and told me far too much too please his father. It is a wonder to me how he managed to live as long as he did!"

"Well, the old inspector is in for a rather nasty surprise, isn't he? Abbey, we had better go back to Hock House and tell this to Ted and James. Reine and Edmond will stay here until they have worked out their problems. Which will not take very long, will it Edmond?" he added looking sternly at Edmond. Taking Abbey by the arm, he stopped at the doorway and turned to both of them. "And when you come back I want a smile on her face and his mind on more important matters!"

"Oh dear!" Reine smiled and slid up onto the side of the desk. "Didn't you tell him that we have already made a sort of peace?" she kicked off her slippers and tugged on the front of her dress. "I think I have rather gotten used to wearing clothes, just! And I might even be able to handle these bloody corset things, but never stockings," she giggled as she stretched her legs and showed him her bare feet. "I like the feel of the air on my toes."

He stepped up to her, pressed against her leg and kissed her as he slid his hand up along her thigh. "Come upstairs, Reine and we will air out some more of your body parts."

"What and give you one last roll?"

"I never said it would be the last time, did I? Reine, I told you I needed time to understand what was going on inside of me. Won't you try to understand that? I never said we were finished. I do not think that I have ever really been in love and perhaps I am falling in love with you. I am not sure of that. I do know that I do not want to lose you. When this matter is resolved you will stay here at Tabor Manor with me and we will get to know each other properly."

"We will see!"

"No we will not see; that is the way it will be. I cannot promise you marriage yet but I can promise you that I need you with me."

"Marriage! I do not want to belong to another man ever again."

"And we will see about that, as well," his smile faded then and he lifted her face to his. "But I have to ask you one question, Reine and you must tell me the truth!"

"Go on!" she urged, feeling a sinking in her belly.

"Did you have anything to do with the death of Olivia?"

"No, Edmond, I did not!" for the first time she felt the shame of a lie and the very personal pain of deceiving the man she loved. "I swear it."

"Good. Now can we go upstairs?"

She laughed and pushed him aside. "No sex for you until Owen is happy again! Come along I want to get back to Hock House and see what the plans are!"

After James left, Margaret dozed in the warmth of the sun light streaming in through the window. When she woke Jeffery was sitting across from her.

"I am sorry," he said. "I did not mean to wake you. You looked so peaceful."

She yawned. "Here!" she gave the sleeping baby to him. "My arm is numb," she stretched and smiled at him.

"I have never held a baby before," he said doubtfully.

"Really? Well, you should, the scene suits you wonderfully. Just support her neck and you will be fine."

He smiled in return and looked from her to the sleeping women across the room. "This does seem to be rather a sleepy house, this afternoon!"

"Yes, strange that, considering all that we have before us. The hours ahead could bring real danger. You would think that nerves would be raw. Everything seems so peaceful. Don't you think that is odd?"

"Odd? No! Reassuring, I should say!" after a pause, he asked. "You do not wish to speak of what I told you last night?"

"You think you are my son?" her voice cracked a little and she could not look him in the eyes.

"I know it and so do you."

"It is not possible, it was all a nightmare!"

"Not as much of a nightmare as will fall on you if you do not face this matter," he said firmly and with none of his usual gentle manner. "Anyway, I have already told Owen that he is my brother."

"What? When?"

"This morning, shortly before he told me to leave."

"Oh God, please do not go!"

"I have no choice and now you have no choice but to do the right thing and tell your men about you and One Wing."

"I need you with me, Jeffrey. I can't lose you again!" Margaret pleaded, her eyes filling with tears. Little Alice stretched, wrinkled her forehead and let out a small cry. Across the room, Ivy began to stir.

"I won't be far away and you will see me again. Soon this misery will be finished but still you must tell Owen and James the complete truth. Remember in our talks about truth and wisdom; always season the meal of your life with the pepper of wisdom and the salt of truth." He leaned forward and gently touched her cheek.

Now the child wailed and Ivy left the bed. "I am coming," she mumbled sleepily as she took her daughter and smiled down at Margaret. "You were sleeping too?"

"Pardon?" Margaret asked blinking in the sunlight.

"I asked if you were also asleep."

"No, I was having a nice chat with Jeffrey...." She stopped talking, looking in amazement as she saw that the chair he had been sitting in was empty and he was nowhere in sight. "Where did he go?" Margaret asked looking around.

"Jeffrey is not here any longer, Margaret! He left hours ago. Father told me that Owen made him leave."

"But he was here, just now and I was talking to him. He was holding Alice!" Margaret insisted.

"I guess you were dreaming."

"I was not dreaming, Ivy, it was too real," Margaret said more to herself as she looked quickly around the large room.

She found Owen in the kitchen with Abbey. "Owen! Have you seen Jeffrey?"

"Not for a while, Mother. He has left the Estate," he answered and turned to Abbey. "Wait for me with Ted. Tell him about Caruthers. I won't be long."

"Did you make him go?" Margaret asked.

"Yes!" He took her gently by the arm, led her into the dining room, and closed the door. "Isabelle told me not to trust him."

"A ghost? You act on what a ghost tells you?" she was angry now.

"More than that, Mother. I did not trust him from the first...and you should not be so open to strangers, especially now."

"But you can trust him. I know that. Why didn't you come to me first? For God's sake Owen he saved Elizabeth's life. I saw him do it with my own eyes!"

"What?"

"During that night after you left she took a down turn. Her fever was unbearably high and her pulse weak. She was dying but I had done all I could do. Jeffrey insisted he could heal her so I let him try; there was nothing to lose. He put one hand on her heart and the other on her head. A strange red glow moved through her body and she trembled as though in convulsions. This glow passed through her and into him. Immediately her fever broke and she just seemed to be in a deep sleep but Jeffrey was terribly ill. Lord, Owen, he took her illness so she could live. For hours, he was



terribly ill but by dawn, he was more or less himself. It was a miracle!"

"Why the Hell didn't you tell me this before?"

"He made me promise not to tell anyone. Who would believe it anyway?"

"Who indeed! You should have told me anyway. But he is gone now and there is nothing we can do about that."

"But he is not gone, Owen! I was just talking to him. At least I think I was...maybe I was dreaming after all."

"I am sorry, Mother. I know that you were close to him, but I did what I felt was best." He decided not to tell her his impossible belief that Jeffrey thought he was her son. "You know the school he teaches in, you can contact him there when school starts in the fall. He did have a message for you, though."

"What was it?"

"It didn't make much sense. Something about seasoning your meals properly."

She gasped, suddenly growing pale. "But that is what he just said to me in my dream!" She put her hand on the wall to steady herself.

"Are you alright?" he asked. "Perhaps you should go to bed for a while."

"No I am fine. Fine! I must keep busy."

"Good, go and take care of Ivy and Elizabeth, as you have been doing. Will you do that?"

"Yes, of course."

"Stay with them at all times and for no reason leave the house without James or I with you. The rest of us will be very busy in the next twenty four hours. I need to know that the three of you are in place and safe."

"Of course, Owen."

She looked so sad he could not just leave her without trying to put her at ease. "Don't worry about Jeffrey. I am certain he will contact you again." With the insanity that surrounded them then he was completely unsure of what form that contact would take.

Jeffrey did not leave the Estate. He waited until he was sure that Owen was back in Hock House and then turned his horse and headed to the tree line along the cliffs. From there he traveled out of sight to the village lane where some men were dismantling the dangled, burnt out remains of the Willard cottage.

After getting directions from the men there, he took the paths through the fields and soon reached the Tabor Cemetery. He tied the horse up at the gates and went the rest of the way to the crypt on foot. He pushed open the door, sunlight streamed down into the blackness below. Without pause he went down the steps, turned into the room that held the female Tabors and stopped at the marble tomb of Isabelle He ran his hands over the smooth cold top, lowered his head.

"Isabelle!" he called with urgency. "I know you can hear me. I will speak with you. Show yourself." He waited with his head down and his eyes closed. He sensed her but received no answer. "Isabelle Tabor! I will not be ignored!" Now his voice was a rumble, deep and angry. It echoed through the crypt.

This time he got an answer in the form of light footsteps coming down the steps. She stepped into circle of sunlight and turned to face him. Isabelle was as Owen had seen,

young and lovely. When Jeffrey did not turn in her direction but stayed with his head bowed and eyes closed she spoke to him.

"What do you want?" she asked her voice cold.

He lifted his head slowly and glared at her. His eyes no longer soft brown were bright shining silver. "Why do you interfere?"

She said nothing, but shook her head from side to side.

"Answer me!" he demanded, stepping closer to her. "What are up to?"

"I am trying to help Edmond. Do you forget he is my son?"

"And do you forget who I am?"

"That is not likely is it? You can stop your bombastic behavior. I know that you cannot hurt me and I am not afraid of you."

"Do you want to see what I can do? You would be surprised. Is that what you want?"

"So then, has your struggle from the dark side to the light side been too much for you? Have you given up already? You disappoint me, Jeffrey." Isabelle stopped here and waited while he seemed to try to gain control of himself. "Don't be a fool! Can't you see that we are on the same side here? I want what you want at the end of this but you do not see the weakness of the human state as I do. They need more help. They need the complete story and that is what I will give them."

Jeffery paced in a small circle, rubbing his eyes roughly with the palms of his hands. "But you will not tell them about me. Do you understand? That is up to my mother!"

"I had no intention of that; that part is your problem. And One Wing, does he suspect anything?" she asked.

"No! He is as always blinded by his own light and Emile; he thinks only of himself. He is drunk and hiding in the grotto. He does not even know that they have Elizabeth back again!" As quickly as it came, his anger faded and a slow, strange smile spread across his face.

"You are enjoying all this, aren't you?" she asked in small amazement.

"Of course!" he answered proudly, all his anger gone and his eyes once again a soft brown. "Wouldn't you if you were in my place?"

"I could never be in your dreadful place; stuck in a battle between the hell land of your father and the Heaven of your mother."

"I am not stuck, as you say. I have made my choice and the proof of that will be in my actions."

"But you do not know how this will end for you. Doesn't that give you some cause for concern?"

"All I know is that One Wing and Emile will die. Then I will be free to have a normal life. Just remember, Isabelle to keep your place in all this!" He walked past her and up the steps to the daylight.

"Isabelle had a full figure." Ivy explained. She had helped Elizabeth change into one of the dresses Owen brought over from the Hall and was braiding her hair. She leaned down and whispered in Elizabeth's ear. "My father used to say that she had everything a man needed, all piled in the right places."

Elizabeth smiled and held out the lace bodice of the beautiful dress. "Very well

endowed, was she?"

"Huge breasts!" Ivy nodded and stood back to study Elizabeth's hair in the mirror. "I saw her naked once. My Lord, her tits were magnificent! I wish I had half what she had, if I did..." she stopped, suddenly aware that Owen stood behind her.

He grinned at her. "Tell me, I have to know, who owns these magnificent, huge tits?"

"Owen! I wish you wouldn't sneak up on a person like that!" Ivy blushed.

"What do you want me to do, Ivy? Hang a cow bell around my neck?"

"Yes!"

"So who was this interesting female you saw naked?"

"Go away, Owen."

"It is my bedroom! Anyway, we need a few words with Elizabeth. Do you know where my mother and Ted are?" Edmond and James had joined them.

"They are in the kitchen," Elizabeth answered.

"Good. Ivy, please go and keep them busy. I do not want them bothering us for a little while."

Ivy rolled her eyes, picked up her sleeping child and left the room.

"What is it now?" Elizabeth asked, looking from one man to the other.

Owen took a chair, sat next to her and took her hand. He felt a slight reaction as she tried to pull her hand away but he held it tighter. "We need to have your help and it may not be easy for you!"

He saw Edmond look at James who shook his head slightly.

"Of course I will help you. Anything is better than just sitting around here waiting."

"It seems that you are a conductor for the dead to communicate with us. I need you to help so that Isabelle can speak with Edmond. She asked for you specifically. Apparently, Abbey is not strong enough. You may be frightened but..."

"Frightened? I am not afraid of the dead!" she narrowed her eyes and asked to the three men that watched her. "Are you?"

"I liked it far better when we did not believe in ghosts!" Edmond said sitting heavily down on the bed.

"So did I," Owen agreed. "However, it seems that they very much believe in us, so here we are. Will you do it?"

"Of course I will do it. Shall we get started?"

"Not here; Isabelle wants us to come to her old rooms at the Manor at dusk and we shall have to get away from Ted and Margaret. I do not want them to get in the way. Especially Ted, he has good reason being very protective over you."

At 5:30, Elizabeth began to complain to Ted and Margaret that she needed to get some air. "I feel as though I am suffocating in here!"

"I will sit with you on the upstairs terrace!" Ted offered.

"No! I want to go for a walk with Owen. Alone! I have to talk with him. He can push me in this chair. Is that alright, Owen?" Elisabeth asked.

Owen shrugged. "I don't see any reason why not." He brought the wheel chair over to Elizabeth.

"I don't think this is a good idea, Owen!" Ted said sternly. "We don't know if Soskice hasn't sent men here to get Elizabeth back again."

"Then James and Edmond will come with us!" Owen said helping Elizabeth into the chair.

"I think it is all right, Ted," Margaret said, patting his hand. "We must understand why she feels so restless."

"Please, Uncle Ted? I will be fine."

Margaret and Ted watched from the window as Owen pushed the wheelchair up the roadway towards Tabor Manor with Edmond and James not too far behind.

"They are up to something," Ted said shaking his head.

"I know but we had best leave them at it, don't you think? James will look out for them!"

"I bloody hope so!" Ted said and stayed at the window until they disappeared around the side of the Hall.

"It has been a very long time since I was in here." Edmond said as they locked the door to Wilmot's old rooms behind them.

"It smells funny!" Elizabeth said as Owen helped her across the room and into a wing backed leather chair.

"Isabelle wore a strange scent," James said, smiling. "Always made her smell like a roasted turkey!"

"Juniper!" Edmond said as he sat on the bed. "My father hated it but she wore it all the time."

"Maybe she was hoping it would keep him away from her," James said and the others laughed nervously.

"It is so cold," Elizabeth shivered. "I think she is nearby. Can't you feel the strange energy in the air?" she asked Owen.

Owen shook his head. He pulled the blanket from under Edmond and wrapped it around her. "What did you do earlier to get Nora into you?" he asked.

"I just closed my eyes and called for her, in my head. And I put my bare feet on the floor," she kicked off her ragged shoes, leaned her head back into the darkness of the chair and closed her eyes.

"Isabelle! We are here!" Owen said into the darkness. He was beginning to wonder if this was a good idea after all. Would he again regret exposing Elizabeth to danger?

"Jesus!" Edmond mumbled under his breath. "This is insane!"

"Sit closer to Elizabeth." Owen said as he moved motioned for Edmond to move closer to the chair.

"I think perhaps we should be quiet for a bit," James offered from his place leaning against the wall near the door.

Moments passed as they sat in the dimness of the stuffy room. Suddenly they all noticed the temperature in the room dropping. From down the hall they heard the old grandfather clock strike six times, and then the door that James had carefully locked opened slowly half way and closed again. They all heard the sound of rustling skirts. Owen felt Edmond stiffen beside him. He placed his arm on the younger man's shoulder.

"Steady!" he whispered in his ear.

Now the air was bitterly cold and they found it difficult to breathe. They watched transfixed as the small shape under the blanket began to change. The legs grew

much longer so that red slippers were visible. The body reached higher in the chair so thick and curly black hair showed from around the wing back.

The woman that had been Elizabeth and was then Isabelle sat forward smiling at the men with her. She was just as Owen had seen her, beautiful again, young again and but for the pale blue glow of her skin she looked very much alive. Her smile faded slightly as she felt the hot waves of fear roll towards her from her companions.

"Please don't fear me," she said softly. "I am the woman you knew, no more, no less!" She said as she turned her head towards her son.

"I did as you asked." Owen said, his voice cracking in his dry throat. "Edmond has the ring and knows about the shifter." He could feel Edmond begin to shake and tightened his grip on him.

"Edmond, my love! You finally see me! I have tried so many times to speak with you."

He made a small sound that seemed as though he was saying 'mother'.

She moved her arms from under the cover and seemed to want to take Edmond's hand but then changed her mind. She sighed and lowered her eyes. "I have a lot to tell you, so I should start before this female is missed too much by her guardian. I understand that Reverend Browne has told you much about Emile, what he wants and is planning."

"Yes," James answered when the others did not. Despite his usual calm reserve, his legs felt heavy and weak. He sat down in a chair by the door.

"Then I have to tell you about the creature we call 'One Wing'. Despite what you have been conditioned to believe in your world there are such things and even worse, as demons and he is one of them. It is interesting, isn't it, how clever the devil has been to make the world believe that he and his cohorts do not exist? While One Wing is a lesser demon, he is still a mighty foe and it is he, more than Emile Soskice who is the real enemy here. Emile's plans center only on his burning desire to receive a new body and on nothing else."

"One Wing has lived, for lack of a better word, in the vast grottos, caves and tunnels, natural and manmade, that intertwine along the Southern Eastern coast line, for over one thousand years. He cannot leave this area. He is the creator of all the shape shifters. When all is ready and collected to make the shifter, it is only he who has the power to bring them to life."

"Over that last ten centuries One Wing has had many children. It has been his burning obsession to make a so-called perfect demon to terrorize the 'upper world', this demon would be perfect, in form and shape, very human, with a completely evil mind. I am not speaking only of an evil person of whom there are so many but a human who carries only the needs of Satan with no soul what so ever. They have created many hundreds as this but one way or the other they have been failures."

"Emile Soskice is one of them. He is the son of One Wing and a human female. As you have seen, he is far from perfect and his own extreme self-interest is, to their evil cause, seen as a weakness. Emile has many times tried his father's cause and created such sad fellows as Bob Willard. That is of interest to us here but not the main matter at hand."

"It is important for you to know of the history behind One Wing's hold over the Tabor family. In 1504, a Herbert Gascoigne owned this land. The locals loathed and

feared him, the cause being his deep connections in the dark arts. This was during the time when people such as Gascoigne hung for their beliefs. The laws of man never reached him. That pattern repeated many times over the following centuries.”

“The first Tabor to come to this land was a landless and impoverished Lord Oscar Tabor. Oscar married Herbert's only child, lived with her on the Estate and became very active in the occult with his father-in-law. This was the first Tabor contact with One Wing.”

“When old Herbert died in 1514, Oscar took his place as head of the Gascoigne coven. He wanted nothing more than to increase his wealth and land holdings. He did so by forming the gang of smugglers, murders, thieves know as the Hell Hounds. To further his causes he formed a pact with One Wing. Under this, he would be forever successful in all his deeds and never face any justice and he would turn over to the dark side his first-born son to do with as they pleased.”

“This marriage produced many children the first of these was a set of male twins. The first-born of the boys was listed as stillborn but in fact, he was given to One Wing as was promised. Oscar Tabor lived for another forty years and during that time he gathered vast wealth and a great deal more land. He also trained the remaining twin from his first birth to follow his example in every way.”

“This way it went for every successive Tabor generation, the growth of wealth, land and power and they were never touched by the hand of the law of the land. The first-born

male of these families was in every case given to One Wing to whatever evil purpose he had in mind. When it came to Wilmot Tabor he was also so trained and more than of a nature to keep up the traditions. He ruled over the covens, as did all his ancestors and became involved with Emile Soskice and his Black Crow.”

“Wilmot told me the rest of what I tell you. I have no reason not to believe it, as outlandish as it seems. He was almost thirty when he married Margaret. Her uncle gave her to Wilmot for the same reason that John Delacourt handed over Elizabeth. In the first year of that so-called marriage, they had a daughter, Belle. Do you know of this?” she asked looking at Owen.

“Only just recently!” Owen answered. Edmond had begun to relax but he still held him firmly by the shoulder.

“Wilmot was not pleased to have been given a female but as he was required to do he offered the child to One Wing. The creature did not want the female child so she was given to Emile to make a shape shifter for Wilmot's use,” she stopped here again looking at Owen. Her large, black eyes brimmed with tears. “I am so sorry, Owen. I cannot imagine what pain your mother must have gone through!”

“Margaret is a remarkable woman,” James said.

Isabelle nodded. “She is. Then Owen was born,” she continued, “and Wilmot waited for word from One Wing as to when he was to bring the child down to him at the grotto, but it never came,” she looked at James then to Owen. “He wanted only Tabor sons, you see!”

“Then Wilmot knew I was not his son?” Owen asked.

“Sometimes there are many long, unreachable roads between the heart and the mind. As much as was ever possible for Wilmot, he loved his wife and you, Owen! He was beyond relief that the call for his child never came, just as it was unbelievable to

him that you might not be his son. In all the years of our marriage, he never said anything to me that made me think he knew that James was your father.”

“Then Margaret left and Wilmot married me. As I sit here and before the eyes of God, I did not know that Wilmot was married when we began our affair but I did know it shortly after I found out I was going to have you Edmond. I believed I loved Wilmot...what more can I say on that?”

“Now I come to the most shameful part of that lifetime. When we married, Wilmot knew I was pregnant. He seemed pleased but I could tell that he was deadly troubled. I so wanted to come and live with him here on his homeland but he insisted that I stay in his London town house. We became embroiled in the most terrible arguments...but that is not important now! Let me just say that Wilmot knew he met his match with me and that I would not do just he wanted, without question. Therefore, he told me the truth of what he called the ‘Tabor Curse’.”

“As you can imagine at first I had a very difficult time believing him. I thought he was insane...until one day, when to prove himself to me, he had Belle transform,” she paused here, briefly lost in terrible memories. “I had no choice but to believe him then.”

She looked at Edmond for the first time since she had begun talking and saw the terror was gone from his eyes, replaced with sad fascination.

“It was at that time when I first met Abbey Pritchard. He took me to her to see if she could tell the sex of the child. She could and told us that we would have a boy. I did not know that she was also his mistress. To realize I was going to have a wonderful son was thrilling for me but the threat that hung over our precious baby from One Wing made me mad with terror.”

“Together Wilmot and I formed a plan. So desperate was I to protect my son that I fell in league with the devil and became a part of the most shameful actions of my life. Wilmot would return to the Estate alone and would impregnate one of the younger maids, one with no family to worry over her.”

“Even this adultery was totally acceptable to me for the protection of my child,” she lowered her head, her voice heavy with the tears she held back. “True to his nature Wilmot very quickly had two, not one, of the poor girls with child. Each, unknowing of the other, was moved to London apartments. To keep them quiet and happy Wilmot convinced them they had been elevated from the position of servant to mistress. All the while I stayed waiting for the birth of my baby in the London town house.”

“That time came. I gave birth to Edmond with only Wilmot to help me. We were thrilled and terrified. We told no one that the baby had been born. I stayed in the town house, never once leaving it. All we could do as we waited for the births of the other babies was hope against hope that One Wing could not sense the existence of Edmond. Apparently, he did not. Wilmot felt that that was because we were so far from the creature’s home under the Tabor Estate.”

“The first of the other babies was born a few weeks early and not a healthy child. However, he was a Tabor male and that was all that we wanted. Wilmot killed the mother with the same poison he used on many others. They thought that she had simply died from the difficulties of childbirth. Then he gave the child to One Wing!” Isabelle paused here for a long moment. Her small audience sat in stunned silence. “This was how we tricked the demon into believing that Wilmot had finally paid his debt and to this day that is what he thinks. I did not have to ask what ever happened to the second girl

and her child. It was painfully obvious.”

“When Edmond was four months old, we moved to the Estate. I was still so terribly frightened that One Wing might one day find out the truth. I kept you by my side, day and night, for all the years I had left.”

“Then that is why I was never sent off to school as was Henry and Edward,” Edmond spoke for the first time.

Isabelle nodded and smiled at Edmond. “I am so sorry, Edmond! Your young life was lonely and no doubt boring but what else could I do but protect you from the sins of your father and his family?”

Edmond nodded, took his mother's cold hand and held it tightly.

“From that point onwards I insisted that Wilmot do all he could to pacify Emile and One Wing. I was a fool and a coward and met my own bitter end because of that. I had long since learned of Abbey and so many more of Wilmot infidelities. I had grown to hate my husband. I was such a fool. I had no idea the grave danger I was in.”

“Emile decided he wanted a new shape shifter. First, Tom Hobson killed a prostitute who worked for Abbey Pritchard. He also killed my poor, dear friend, Jane. Edward murdered me. When Nora had her baby just a short time later, Wilmot instructed Mavis Willard to kill her and the baby. They took what they needed from us and the shifter you now call Reine was made,” she stopped here and looked at her son sternly but with gentle pity. She knew the deep feelings he had for that woman and what a lonely life he had had up until then.

“Wilmot had Nora killed, not Soskice?” Owen was barely able to contain his anger.

“Yes, that is the truth of it and not the lie he told you just before he died. However, I am not finished yet, Owen. When that shifter was made, Wilmot broke his connections with Emile and the Black Claw thinking, no doubt, that he had done his fair share.”

“He had grown old, unsure and weakened. I think for the first time he was tired of the fight. Emile would have none of that. Together and with the help of Mavis Willard, they set up a plan to bring the gypsies to entertain at Wilmot's birthday celebrations. Emile paid Edward to kill Jack and to use a Tabor dagger to do it. You can imagine the terrible, fearful surprise Wilmot had that night when he saw Emile and the rage he felt. They knew the effect it would have on him and it was all a part of their plan. Emile fully expected to be jailed on the land if he cursed Wilmot.”

“Then this was a sort of twisted plan?” James asked incredulously.

“It was, as a game of revenge. There was a setback for them when Elizabeth escaped with the child and fell under the care of Owen but the raven took care of that matter. And other matters as well. She killed Edward and Tom O'Conner,” she stopped here, looking at Owen and saw his thoughts about Olivia. She sighed and added, “These murders were necessary for Emile's plan to inhabit the body of Richard.”

“There is only one time that One Wing can be killed, but you all know of that?” she asked. They nodded at her. “But there is more. He can only be killed by a human male one who has somehow escaped the wraith of One Wing. Only this person would be a mortal foe to this demon!” All heads turned and looked at Edmond.

“Me?” Edmond asked with surprise.



"Yes, my dear!" Isabelle pulled a chain out from under her dress. From the leather pouch, she poured six bullets into her hand and gave them to Edmond. "Your father made these from the alter cross he took from St Agnes when you were a baby. One Wing cannot be slain in any other way but with silver from a holy relic and only in the hours between midnight and sunrise this Sunday. It is up to you, Edmond, to kill that monster and restore some small dignity to the Tabor name. Do not aim for what you think is his heart because he does not have one; but aim between his eyes. Be strong, my son! God will be with you!"

"And One Wing does not know that Edmond, as Wilmot's first conceived son, exists?" Owen asked.

"As you say, Edmond was conceived first but that does not change the fact that One Wing was fooled. That has given him a mortal weakness in the terrible world he exists in."

"So," Owen said turning to Edmond, "it seems our mighty enemy has no idea what danger he is facing."

"None, what so ever! I have to go now but I have one last thing to tell you and James," she said looking from one man to the other. "I have told you all I can and now it is time, past time, for Margaret to tell you all she knows on this matter."

"What?" James asked.

"Do not misjudge her; Margaret is a good woman but she has told you only what she thinks you need to know and only what she allows herself to believe...there is more that you must get from her and quickly; the hours are closing in!" she turned her head to Edmond. "You will see me again, son. In my heart and in your heart forever!" With that she fell back into the chair, quickly faded and Elizabeth lay as she had before Isabelle took her body, looking only asleep.

"What the bloody Hell isn't she telling us?" James demanded as he stomped out of the room.

Elizabeth sat up, coughed and gasped for air. "Did she come?" she asked.

"Don't you think you had better go after him?" Edmond asked Owen.

"No!" Owen answered firmly as he took the blanket off Elizabeth and picked her up.

"What happened?" Elizabeth asked again. "Did Isabelle come?"

They put Elizabeth back in the wheel chair. On the walk back to Hock House, they told her what they had learned from Isabelle. Ted was standing in the doorway as they approached.

"That was a long walk!" he said to Owen, suspiciously. "You had better get up to your mother's room. James is about to break the door down. Are you alright Elizabeth?"

"I am fine, Uncle Ted! But I am rather hungry." Owen did not hear any more as he headed up the stairs and saw James banging on Margaret's bedroom door.

"Open this door, Margaret. I will break it down if I have to!" he was yelling.

"No! I will not talk to you while you are in this mood. Go away!" she called back at him.

"Unlock the door, Mother!" Owen said as he reached James and in a tone, she knew better than to ignore.

"Owen?" she opened the door but only a crack looking out at the two men.

"What is the ...." she began but did not finish as James pushed the door open and stepped into the room with Owen close behind.

"Leave us!" James said firmly to Owen. "I want to speak with her alone!"

Owen shook his head. "This is my business as well, James! I want to witness this!"

"You do, do you? Very well! Close the door!" James said and stepped up to Margaret who nervously stood her ground and looked up at him defiantly. In a quick movement with one hand, he took her hands, held them behind her back, pushed her hard up against the wall, and took her face with his other hand. Harshly, with great anger and long bent up frustration he forced his face onto hers, kissing her for a long time. She struggled but without results. When finally he backed from her he whispered loudly into her ear, "You hit me and I will hit you back!" he released her.

"Owen! Are you going to just stand there and let this terrible man ravish me?" she demanded breathlessly to her son.

"No!" he answered with a small smile. "I am going to sit here, watch and maybe learn something!" He took a chair from the desk and placing it hard up against the door sat down, with his arms folded across his chest.

"You sit down as well!" James ordered Margaret, his face red with rage.

"No! Both of you get out of my room!"

James pushed her to sit on the bed and stood over her. "For nearly thirty years you have denied me my every request; even the very basic, God given right to call my son as my own."

"But, I told Owen and Wilmot...." she began but stopped when he placed his hand over her mouth.

"Be quiet!" he said, his voice dripping with warning. "Because of your cowardice, lies and terrible deception I lived a life of guilt. Did it ever once occur to you that I believed your 'suicide', the self-murder of the female I loved with all my heart, was my fault?"

"Now I will have the complete truth from you or you will leave here right now, return to your men in dresses and never set foot on this land again!" He moved his hand slowly, pulled a chair and sat in front of her with his legs on either side of hers, waiting.

She turned her frightened eyes to her son. "Owen?" she asked but got no answer from him. His silence spoke loudly of agreement with his father. She lowered her head and let the tears fall. "But I have told you all that I know to be the truth, anything else is only my own nightmare!"

"You choose to leave then? And once again abandon those you claim to love?" James asked. "Fine, so be it! I will have a horse prepared for you!" he stood.

"No wait!" she called to him. "I will tell you what you want. But it has nothing to help you with in this matter here."

"We will be the judges of that, Mother!" Owen said. She glared at him but any strength she had left vanished quickly, her shoulders sloped and she hung her head.

"That night when I wrote that letter," she paused took a deep breath and looked up at the writing desk where she had composed her suicide letter so many years before. "It was not a lie, not a ruse so that I might run away. It was real and I had only the end of my pathetic life in mind. I could not live another night alone in this bed while you slept with that woman you had married!" she looked at James for any softening of his manner

but got none. She turned her gaze out the window and through the ancient oak tree; she could see the silhouette of the dark tower.

"A dreadful storm had blown in from the channel. A fitting night to die, I thought. I wrapped up in my black cloak and headed out in the night. I swear to both of you that I had nothing more in mind that night than to die!" she took her hanky from her pocket, wiped her face and blew her nose.

"I made it to the rocks at the base of the tower but the wind and rain had picked up fiercely. I remember thinking that it was God pushing me back, trying to stop me. The rocks were so slippery, it took ages and when I was half way or so to the top my cape became tangled in the jagged edges, as I tried to pull it free I slipped and fell, banging my head on the stones," she pulled back her hair and the men could clearly see the rough scar just behind her temple. "I think I must have been unconscious for a time but I struggled out of the cape and made it finally to the top of the rocks. I said a prayer and let myself fall forward."

"You know how it can be, when only seconds seemed like a lot longer? That is what happened to me then. I was falling; then I stopped. I was aware of pain in my right shoulder and left thigh and of course, my head. I should be dead but I was not. Then I was aware that I was once again moving, this time sideways out over the water. I tried to look around. All I could see through the blood and the driving rain was the tops of the waves. I could tell that I carried by something large and extremely powerful. I struggled but when I did the claws on the ends of the arms or legs that held me cut further into my skin," she stopped talking, opened the buttons on her dress and exposed three deep, purple scars on the back of her right shoulder. "I have similar scars on my leg."

"Suddenly we were out of the wind and rain. I knew we were inside a tunnel or a cave by the smell. Then I saw a fire, strange smokeless red flame that seemed to be coming from a pit in the ground. I remember thinking that I must be dead and that this was Hell. The last thing I saw before I fainted was the fire as we headed into it!"

"When I woke, I was in what seemed to be a very large and dark room. So large that I could not see either side through the gloom just darker shapes that I took to be furniture. The bed I was on was unlike any I had ever seen, round and at least 10 feet in diameter.

The only light source came from far above me but I was unable to tell just what it was," she took a deep breath and shuddered from the terrible memories that flooded her mind. Owen and James stunned by what they were hearing said nothing, waiting for her to find the words to continue.

"Can I have a drink, Owen?" she asked. He handed her his flask. She took a long mouthful but did not give it back to her son.

"I was naked, my wounds were bandaged and my head ached miserably. Chained by my ankle to the bed I could stand but do nothing else. I called out but got only my own echo in response. Eventually I must have fallen asleep and when I next woke, there was beside the bed a small table with food and water, a porcelain pot on the floor."

"It was this way for a very long time, days and maybe weeks. I do not have any idea how much time went by before I actually saw or spoke to him."

"Who?" James asked and neither man was surprised at her answer.

“One Wing!” she spat out his name as though the words burned her mouth. “I woke one day to find that the chains that held me were gone. I remember finally getting out of the bed, wrapping myself in a blanket and crossing the cold marble floor until I reached the walls. I move all the way around the room, which I found was also a circle, feeling up and down as I went. There was a great deal of furniture but not a single door or window. At least if there was one I could not find it.”

“The constant fear, loneliness, frustration, was suddenly more than I could bear any longer. I went mad, screaming and throwing things about. That went on for a while. I smashed a chair and found in my hand a very sharp broken piece of wood. It was more than enough to push into my heart,” Margaret shrugged. “Death was my only way out of there! Suddenly I was flying backwards across the room and thrown onto the bed. Then I heard his voice for the first time.”

“‘Stay on your bed!’ He said his voice more like a deep rumble from the ground than anything else.”

“Where are you?” I called out to him. Then I saw him or the huge black shape of him across the room. I could make out no details then; just that he was at least ten feet tall and seemed that wide around. “Who are you?” I asked, as the shape seemed to float closer to the bed.

“‘You will call me ‘master’!’” he answered. But others like you think of me as One Wing.”

Owen and James fixed their eyes briefly and then back on Margaret as she continued her amazing story.

“I do not know who you think you are but I will not call you ‘master’” I said to him. I am Lady Margaret Tabor and if you know what is good for you, you will let me out of here. My husband is a very powerful man!” It was foolish but I was half way mad!”

“He laughed at that. ‘Well, well! So they have brought me an important fish this time! How ironic, a Tabor for me to play with!’”

“‘You had better not hurt me!’ I yelled at him. How pathetic I must have sounded to him. ‘Get me my clothes and show me out of here.’”

“But he vanished then and for days more I was alone again. Time after time, I tried to find a way out but never was lucky. I was truly beginning to wonder if I was not dead

after all. Then he returned, standing only in the far shadows. This time I said nothing but waited huddled under the blankets on the bed.”

“‘Stand and let me see you!’ he ordered. I ignored him, pulling the blankets tighter around me. ‘Stand!’ he ordered again and this time it did not matter if I obeyed him or not as I was suddenly floating naked above the bed. I could not move but felt as though I was held in a suspended block of ice. From the corner of my eyes, I watched him as he moved closer to the bed. He had the body of a huge and powerful man, as I said at least nine or ten feet tall and I could see that he was naked and very dark skinned.”

“Then whatever held me in place vanished and I fell to the bed. The very second I hit the bed, straps seemed to come from under the bed, wrapped around my arms and ankles and there was nothing I could do, but lay there. I could see him very clearly then. His torso was human in appearance. He had silver wings that would have spanned thirty feet. He had feet of a horse and a long thickly muscled tail. What I had thought was

dark skin was actually a very smooth; fine type of black scales that covered every inch of him. His face was what I have often thought was a mixture of a man and a vicious pug type dog. He had bright silver eyes that pierced the dim light with a glow. He had thick, red horns coming from either side of his forehead, curving into fierce points, and almost meeting just above his eye line. The only article of clothing he wore was a silver cape that was hooked with gold rings over the horns and flowed down his back. His left arm was malformed, twisted and held close to his body; the hand more like a birds foot."

"I am fairly certain that I was screaming then, I really don't remember anything but the creature before me. It seemed as though he was going to rape me and I tried to steel myself for the assault. After looking at me for a few seconds, he lowered his head and seemed to smell my belly. Suddenly he turned and disappeared into wherever he came from and the binds that held me disappeared. This bizarre scene repeated night after night. In my fear and naivety, I had no idea what he was doing. Until the time finally came when he first raped me," Margaret stopped talking then, her face bright red with shame. She took another swallow from the flask but this time James took it from her and handed it back to Owen.

"I know this is hard, Margaret!" James said to her then with a little softening in his tone. "But for the sake of that innocent baby you must continue."

"I am aware of that, James!" she snapped at him. "When he was done he told me that I was with his child. I wanted to die so much then that the moments on the stones paled in comparison."

Owen left his chair by the door and sat next to her on the bed. He put his arm around her and looked at the shocked and saddened face of his father. Neither man then had any words of comfort for her. Nothing would have helped. In the back of his mind were the words of Jeffrey, the unbelievable statement that Margaret was his mother.

"Do you still think my awful story will help you bring Richard back to his mother?" she asked looking at both men.

"You have not finished yet, though, have you?" James asked in turn.

"Very well!" she sighed. "From that time on One Wing stayed with me day and night. As much as I hated him for some reason, I lost all fear of him. I thought that the worst he could do was kill me and that would be a far better thing than the life I had. He never ate or slept, not that I saw anyway, and at first, he rarely spoke. He would sometimes abuse me but mostly he would sit and watch me as though I was some kind of caged pet. Then he began to ask me questions about my life, my marriage and about human life in general. The more I told him the kinder he was to me, for lack of better word, and soon he began to let me ask him questions."

"He told me that he was the biological son of Satan and that his mother was three things, disease, greed and avarice. It made no sense but nothing did then. He told me that I had been brought to him by one of his minions, whose job it was to hunt human females. Mostly these women had been whores, prostitutes and criminals. Women, he felt, who would rarely be missed."

"There were times when I felt I would go mad with loneliness, fear or boredom. I would fight with him; maybe I was hoping he would kill me. That could be! But he seemed to enjoy me most then!" Margaret stopped then as a new memory hit her like a cold wave. "Oh, sweet Jesus!" she moaned. "It must be true!"

"What is it mother?" Owen asked gently.

She sighed and shook her head. In her mind's eye she saw Jeffrey smile and nod encouragingly. "When I would go mad like that he would laugh and as I said enjoyed it but then when he had had enough he would place his hand over my face and then I would fall asleep!"

"It came to the time that I could at any moment give birth. I ate a meal that I believe adulterated with something to bring on labor. From that point onwards, I have no memories of the baby being born. I only remember waking and my son was at my breast. The baby was healthy and perfect, physically perfect. I thanked the Lord that he had none

of his father's physical characteristics. I would not allow myself to think what sort of mind or soul he might have."

"One Wing was very pleased with the child. He spent hours every day watching him and me together. He seemed to be studying us. I wanted to name the baby but One Wing would not allow it. He said he would choose the name and would do so when the time was right. In my mind I called him Jamie," she blew her nose. "I am sorry, James. I should not have done that!"

"That does not matter, Maggie."

She shrugged and continued. "When Jamie was three months old, by that time I was able to distinguish the passing of days by the feeding of my child; One Wing came to me and told me that he was going to set me free. I would live because I had given him a perfect child and one day he might want me again! However, I could not take the child. I would leave and never see the baby again. I had done what I was brought there for and that I should be honored that he had decided to let me leave instead of killing me."

"I told him that he should kill me now because if he sent me away from my baby, one day, somehow I would see him dead. He laughed and then for the first time smiled at me. I tell you this because his smile was more terrifying than anything I had seen. A smile that spread slowly across his face with hundreds of needle sharp, blood stained teeth, in several rows. 'You want me to kill you? Are you sure?' he asked licking his lips with a long, thick and black pointed tongue. 'I have not had such a tempting fresh meal in a while!' The terrible smile faded and he leaned so close to me I could feel his frozen

breath. 'Perhaps you had better watch out what you wish for. If I kill you it will not be fast or easy. Don't tempt me!'"

"Wisdom got the better of me then and I said nothing more. He told me that I could not go back to the Tabor Estate because Wilmot had already remarried and they all believed me dead," she looked at Owen. Her tears had stopped but her face was still burning with shame.

"He also told me that before I left there he would erase my memory of him and the child he had taken from me. So, you see, a year had passed from the night I left Hock House for the last time until I woke one night naked, cold and lost in woodlands. I had no memory of anything at all, but leaping from the rocks at the Old Tower. My story ends here. Some of the Brothers from St. Francis found me in the morning. They gave me a home and a place of work and helped me in time to regain contact with Owen."

"Then he did not erase your memories?" Owen asked after a moment of silence.

"He did. For several years, I had no idea what had happened to me. When I would sleep, One Wing came to see me as though I was dreaming. At first I thought they were little more than troubling nightmares and dismissed them as best as I could. Slowly he began to release the memories. I stubbornly refused to believe any of it! I would have to be insane to believe...wouldn't I?" she looked from man to his son but they could give her no answer.

"One Wing was furious at my refusal to accept that my dreams had been a reality so he branded me!"

"Branded?" James repeated in a voice thick with rage. Owen looked at his father and had never before seen the hatred he saw then.

"Yes! So that when I woke that day and for every day from then on I would know he was real and very much a part of my life."

"Show me." James demanded.

"Very well. I have little pride left. You may as well take the last of it!" she lifted her skirt and lowered her left stocking. On the inside of her thigh was a black inverted cross.

"Good God!" James stood quickly and pulled her skirt down. "I am so sorry Margaret!" He tried to hold her but she pushed him away and clung to Owen.

"I told you what you want, now leave me be. I don't want your pity."

"I don't pity you, Margaret! Not in the slightest. I admire you for your courage more than I can ever say," he stood and gently he pulled her from Owen. "I am sorry for putting you through this; for being so hard on you. Can you please forgive me?"

Margaret let her body fall against his and he held her with gentle protection.

"Mother, I have to ask you a few questions. They are important." Owen said.

"What?" she asked looking back at him from the folds of James jacket.

"When was the last time you had a visit from this thing?"

"Over time I learned that he could only reach into my sleeping mind if I had been asleep for more than a few hours. I taught myself to sleep only at short stretches. Since I have been at Hollyhock House, I have been able to sleep all night and have not seen him. I am not free though, not really. I just do not know if he will come again! I will have to spend the rest of my life tormented by One Wing."

"The child, did you ever see him again after the time One Wing set you free?" Owen asked.

"Yes. It is madness, but that is the mess we are in, I suppose. James, some of this I have already told to Owen. That night while you were sleeping in the small room off the infirmary Jeffrey came to see me. Elizabeth had taken a serious turn for the worse and I was certain that she would not make it through the night. Somehow, Jeffrey had sensed this. He was so frantic that I let him do what he called a 'healing' on her. Somehow, Lord knows how, he pulled the illness from Elizabeth and took it on himself. For some time he was very ill but by the time you woke he was over the worst of it."

"Now, this happened a week or so after Jeffrey came to St. Francis. Our youngest mare, Jessie was at her time. It was her first baby and the poor thing was panicking terribly. I could not get her to settle down. Every time I came to her, she bolted. The colt was so very close to being born, if only I could aid and pull him! Jeffrey watched for a while and then quietly asked me to send all the others away."

"Once we were alone with the frantic horse Jeffrey did the strangest thing, well one of many strange things he did! He stood as close to Jessie as he could and made eye contact with her. Immediately she calmed. He placed his right hand over her head. Jessie made a sound like a sigh, lay down on the straw and went into a very deep sleep. In a moment, the beautiful colt was struggling to his feet with the careful nudging of his mother."

Margaret paused and looked from one man to the other. "It was such a touching scene. I turned to Jeffrey to ask him how. Quickly, he lowered his pale gray eyes but not before I saw that, they were then shining like molten silver. He knew that I saw this. He

just smiled and said, "All is how it should be here, Margaret. That is all you need to know."

"Jeffrey is your son? Is that what you are thinking?" James asked incredulously.

"I have no doubt," her voice was barely a whisper.

Owen sighed. "This morning when I told him I wanted him to leave he told me that he was here only to help us and that because Margaret was his mother."

"Why did you send him away?" she had begun to cry again.

"If he is your son he is also the son of an evil being. How in Hells name can we trust him?"

"Owen is right, Margaret; the son of One Wing! Think of it!"

She did think of it and for a long while, she cried as James held her. Quietly Owen left them and went downstairs.

"Come along, Maggie! Lie down for a bit."

"But I have to see to dinner," she sniffed, argued and lay on the bed.

"Ivy and Hanna will do just fine," he pulled drapes closed, tossed his hat on the dresser and laid down beside her. He pushed some loose strands of hair off her forehead and put his arms around her. "Margaret I am so very sorry."

"It was not your fault, James. Why should you feel sorry?"

"No, I mean I am sorry for the way I have treated you these last few days. I made a jack ass out of myself and hid like a coward behind my anger."

"I don't understand..."

"Oh Lord. I wallowed in my own small misery all these years. Your own misery and nightmare was far worse than mine," he rose up on one elbow and looked intently into her eyes. "You told me that you still loved me and all I could do was puff up with anger. I love you too! I have always loved you and always will. I love you as much now as I did that afternoon down the south meadow when we conceived Owen."

She smiled slightly and shook her head. "Jamie, were there ever bigger fools than us?"

"I doubt it. But my foolish, cowardly days are over!" he laughed. "As they say, better late than never! I have two questions for you, Maggie?"

"Go on then, ask me," she encouraged him when he had been silent for a moment.

He cleared his throat. "As soon possible, when this matter is concluded, will you do me the great honor of marrying me?"

"Jamie! Are you sure?"

"As sure as my name is James Whitehall. I want and need you to be my wife. Will you marry me?"



"Yes, yes, yes!" She pulled him down and kissed him with a powerful passion. "What is the second question?" she asked when they parted.

"Well, this is when I am most likely going to get my face slapped but it is worth the risk. For twenty four years, my body has ached for the need to make love to you again. How would you like to help me ease that ache, finally?"

"Here? Now?" she asked with surprise and wide eyes.

"Yes! Here and now! We have wasted so many years. We do not need to wait for a marriage license," he ran his hand along her side and rested it on the side of her breast. "What do you say, beautiful Margaret, will you be my lover?"

"I think, James, that you should lock the door."

Ted was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. "It is alright." Owen said to him. "They are just working out their problems and thank God for that. Where's Elizabeth?"

"In the kitchen with Ivy and Abbey."

"Reine and Edmond?"

"In the study."

"Come outside with me, Ted! I need some fresh air!"

They crossed the blooming spring gardens and sat on stone benches. For a while neither man spoke, each lost in thoughts of the terrible events that surrounded them.

"You look discouraged," Ted offered.

"Discouraged? No! Disappointed is more the word. I liked things much better when my beliefs did not extend past my own two hands and the hard ground under these old boots. Heaven and Hell, demons and ghosts, they were not a part of life, now they seem to be running my life."

"Ah yes, enlightenment is never easy."

"Good Lord, Ted, enlightenment! Is that what this all is? I thought it was murder, rape, torture and fear. The tears of my mother seem to have precious little to do with anything enlightening to me."

Ted had no answer. So many times, he had also wondered why it took so much suffering of the innocent to bring the dark forces to check.

"What is your opinion of Jeffrey?" Owen asked.

"Well, I did not spend much time with him. He seemed well enough to me. Very quiet though. Did you notice how he seemed stand, silently watching us, from the shadows?"

"Yes but he is gone now and if you see him again let me know right away. Did Edmond tell you about Caruthers?" he asked after another short silence.

"Oh yes, he did and bloody hell, Owen; there was his name bright and bold in the list and it right underneath Wilmot Tabor. A leader in waiting; so it seems. What are you going to do about him?"

"What do you think I am going to do? What other choice do I have? I tell you Ted, if I don't swing from a rope at the end of this I will certainly be found in Bedlam!"

Ted laughed. "With me in a cell next to you, I am sure!"

## Chapter Fourteen

At midnight, the raven circled the dilapidated barn a few times then landed in the shrubbery next to the back wall. Through a hole in the wall, she saw Caruthers, in pale lamp light, leaning against the side of his clip. He was smoking a cigar and humming a tune. He looked supremely pleased with himself.

"The idiot is there," Reine announced to the men when she was back at Hock House. "I have had a good look around. He is alone."

"Good!" Owen pushed his hands through his hair and stood. He was more than ready for a little action. "Well, Edmond, shall we go and see our bent copper?"

In moments, he and Edmond crossed the courtyard, headed up the familiar hillside and as usual, they were well armed. At the hilltop, Owen stopped and peered into the dark bushes.

"Did you hear something?" Edmond whispered.

Owen took a few steps forward then stopped, shook his head and returned to Edmond. "No, I don't think so, just the feeling of being watched, more than likely bloody nerves!"

"Have you planned what you will say to Caruthers? Or is it foolish to think that there will be any talk?"

"It really doesn't matter one way or the other what we say to him," Owen responded, his intent heavy in his tone. "However, if he is as stupid as I think he is I may be able to get some information from him."

Moving silently and quickly they made their way to the barn. Through the broken wall, they saw Caruthers as Reine had seen him only now he was sleeping and snoring loudly.

"Fool!" Owen whispered to Edmond in disgust. "This is going to be far too easy!"

Edmond stayed at the back wall where he could get a clear shot at Caruthers if need be and Owen made his way to the front of the barn and inside. The inspector had no idea he was there until Owen kicked the sole of his boot. His pistol pointed at the startled man's head.

"You don't look pleased to see me!" Owen sneered as Caruthers jumped to his feet. "Drop that!" he said quickly as Caruthers made a move for his own gun. "Drop it, now!"

"Owen! I am glad you are here!" the inspector spoke quickly and nervously as he tossed his gun at Owen's feet. "I may need some help."

"Is that so?" Owen asked. "With what?"

"You do not need to aim your pistol at me. We are on the same side."

"If you say so. Just the same, I feel better holding this thing. Why are you here and how is it you need my help?"

Caruthers gave Owen a nervous smile. "You see, I have tricked Emile's shifter into meeting me here."

"Who is this shifter?" Owen asked.

Edmond, with his pistol pointed at the cornered man, walked slowly into the barn.

"It's Reine Crawford. She is a Soskice shifter. She admitted that much to me when I met with her today. I told her to meet me here so I could capture her," he stopped, looking from one man to the other. "And kill her!"

"Why did you not mention this to us we saw you earlier?"

"I was not sure, Owen. I could not take the chance!" Caruthers glanced nervously up into the broken rafters. "We should be on guard, Owen! She is a raven when in animal form. She could be here any moment. I need my gun."

"If she is so dangerous why did you come here alone?"

"Christ, Owen! For the sake of your family, we cannot have many people know about all this! If I brought a load of flatfoots it would be all over in no time."

"And your reason for wanting the book?" Edmond asked, kicking the gun across the floor.

"What book? I don't know what you are talking about."

"I think our hard working copper is lying to us, Owen! What do you think?" Edmond asked.

"I agree completely," Owen grinned as he spoke. He kept his gun level with Caruthers head. "We have seen your name on the list in the 'book' so pretending anything else is a waste of my time. I don't like that much!"

"I am not lying! I am trying to help! It is you who is wasting time, Owen!" his feigned indigence and obvious fright was almost too much for Owen.

"Right, Bob," Owen sighed with impatience. "Shall we get to the point then? You and I shall come to an agreement. The way I see it you and I want somewhat similar outcomes in this matter. We both want Emile Soskice dead. What I want more than anything else is Richard back alive and well, no more and no less."

"This is insane! You have no right to hold me at gunpoint this way! I told you to kill Soskice when you had the chance. You let him go. It is your fault."

"You want to head the Black Claw and you want the book to aid you in that. You help me get the child and I will then give you the book. I could not care less about what you do after that. If you do not see fit to agree with this, well... I am afraid that you might come to a terrible end this night at the hands of highway robbers."

"You should think twice before being out alone so late at night. Bloody bandits all over the place these days," Edmond added.

"You wouldn't kill me!" Caruthers spat at them. His eyes wide with fear.

"You'd never get away with it. Suppose I told someone I was coming to see you?"

"You were attacked and murdered on your way," Owen shrugged. "Don't forget who we are. The Tabors are untouchable aren't we? Especially with the knowledge that we now have! Make your decision now."

After a moment of heavy silence, Caruthers sighed. "You get the baby back and you forget all about me and the Claw? Am I supposed to believe that?"

"So that is your decision then?" Owen stepped forward and pressed the gun barrel against the old man's head.

"Alright! Alright!" Caruthers gasped as he pulled back. "What is it you want?"

"Ah, you see, Edmond, he is not as thick as he looks. What we want is

information and lots of it. Satisfy that and I will see to the end of Soskice. If and when I have the child safe and sound I will let you go.”

“You can’t keep me prisoner up for all that time....” Owen cocked his gun. “Ask me what you want and I will tell you!”

“Where are all the entrances to the grotto?”

“There are three, one from the beach area on your land; directly under the tower, hidden by tall rocks. Another is supposed to lead down from the Tabor crypt but I have never seen it. The last, and the one that Emile uses most often, is located north of your land. I have also never been there. There are no others.”

“Have you ever been to any ceremonies in the grotto?”

“Of course I have. Many times! Every time they make a new shifter. We need the help of the Demon, One Wing, for that. He lives somewhere beneath the grotto. You obviously know about him!”

“This thing, One Wing, what does he think of your plans to take over the Claw?” Edmond asked.

“How the Hell should I know? Do you think he communicates with me?” there was an edge of panic to Caruthers voice then. “I doubt very much he cares one way or the other who runs the Claw. Emile is one of his many demented and deformed offspring. He hates Emile and just barely tolerates him.”

“Tell me about the ceremony, the how and when of it?”

“It is this Sunday night. It will begin the moment that Saturday turns to Sunday. That is tomorrow night! You have to kill Emile and get the baby before then or Emile will have a new body and the child lost.”

“Are they all at the grotto now?”

“Yes, they are there full of drugs and drink. Take your men and get in there now, Owen! Kill the bastard and get the fucking baby and give me that book!”

“You are full of orders for a man with two guns pointed at him. Tell me about the ceremony.”

“Shit! How does that matter?” Caruthers threw up his hands in frustration.

“The bodies or the hearts of Edward, Henry, Tom and Jack will be laid out on special large, flat sacrificial stones. Two other stones will be for Emile and the baby. At some time after midnight but not a moment before One Wing will appear. There is a fire pit in the center of the grotto; he lives below and comes up there, through the fire!”

Caruthers paused. He was sweating profusely. His breath coming in short gasps.

“Continue!” Owen ordered.

“As soon as he appears, One Wing will go to those stones. He will use his powerful claws to rip out the hearts of Emile and the baby. Then he will consume all the hearts. This done, a female will be brought up from the pit. I have no idea who these females are, but no doubt, they are whores of some kind. It is considered an honor that we are allowed to witness as One Wing copulates with her,” he stopped here looking from Edmond to Owen, expecting to see disbelief, shock or disgust. The flat acceptance of what he told them did not give him any comfort.

“When this is done, she is tied to a stake and burned alive. When the fire has completely burned down Emile will step from the ashes in his new body. It fairly much the same thing when they make the shifters. The only difference is that the master of the shifter is not killed and the baby need not be alive.”

"How many men will be there tomorrow night?" Owen asked.

"Not many; only Emile's most trusted cohorts, his sons-in-law and nine members of the Claw. These are the highest-ranking members. There must be only twenty one, no more to witness. Everyone will be armed. Listen Owen, you can't believe that you can fight them? Not down there. One Wing has his minions. There may be hundreds of them. They are monsters. You will have to get Emile out of there and kill him before the ceremony."

"Tell me about One Wing. His strengths and weakness."

"Christ Owen! You will never be able to kill him! He is a demon. You will have never seen the like of this mighty thing. Killing him will be next to impossible. He must be killed straight out. If only wounded, he will just get stronger. To kill Emile it is almost the same. If not killed immediately, he will be able to heal his wounds. That is what he did after you broke his knees." Caruthers stopped.

"Then you have seen him since his escape?"

"Yes, at the Dead Souls Marsh. But as I say, he is now in the grotto! He has Elizabeth Delacourt prisoner there, at the Marshes, waiting for him for after the ceremony!"

"He does, does he?" Owen asked with a smile.

"Yes, you had better get her away from there before the ceremony. Soskice has plans to marry her and take her to France. If she balks in any way, he will kill her. He is not at all pleased with her for running off. He would have no problem killing her."

"Who helped him escape the tower?" Edmond asked. "Was it the shifter?"

"No. Emile made a mistake. It was after Owen broke his kneecaps. He had Reine get him laudanum from the Willard cottage. He drank too much of it and mistakenly told the bird the truth of her situation. When he sobered up, he realized that he could no longer trust her to obey him. He could not be certain what she might have told you two. He called for one of One Wings minions to come and help him. The minion killed the guard, melted the door locks and carried Emile to the Dead Soul Marsh."

"If Soskice feels he cannot trust his shifter why has he not killed her?" Owen asked.

"He can't kill her unless he can get her to come to him and appear in her human form. Of course, she no longer answers his calls. I told him that he had better do something. He could send some minions after her," Caruthers shrugged and rolled his eyes. "The demented old fool thinks he has nothing to fear now that he is free again. He knows that once he takes a new body, the shifter will simply fall as a dead raven. He is addled with age and drugs and it is far past time for him to return to Hell. Look, I have told you all I can, Owen. What are you going to do with me?"

"Not yet, Bob. Tell me more about the so called sacrifices. Do these murders happen only at 'special ceremonies' or at all the gatherings?" Caruthers did not notice the deeply vicious turn to Owen's voice.

"It is a very important part of the ritual. I have never seen a gathering without a sacrifice. Some die during the ceremonies; some are killed before hand, if all that is needed are to have their hearts. We use only the worthless, the dregs of society; the world is better without them!"

Edmond looked at Owen, a man he knew better than himself. He saw the

hardening of his jaw and the stiffening of his back.

"My wife and child, Edmond's mother and Jane Delacourt were not the dregs of society!" With all the hatred, that he had held so long inside Owen slammed his pistol into the side of Caruthers head. He fell backwards, landing on the rotting bales of hay where he had left his lamp. The lamp dipped sideways. A stream of hot oil poured down on his head and body. A thin finger of fire followed it and in the blink of his terrified eyes, Caruthers was on fire. Moving with the spilled oil, the fire quickly spread over his head, down his shoulders, arms and back. Screaming and flailing at the flames Caruthers jumped to his feet and spun in frantic circles.

Edmond made a move to help but Owen held him back. "Leave him to it!"

Mad with fear and pain, Caruthers ran blindly into the horse. It screamed, reared up and came down on top of him. With the fired mass underneath, the horse panicked, bolted forward and fled from the barn. The fire spread in seconds up the highly varnished wagon side. The terrible screaming thing, that had been Robert Caruthers, was tangled and trapped in the harness. Wailing in agony and fear the horse took off for the roadway.

Stunned Owen and Edmond watched from the barn door as the horrible burning thing disappeared into the darkness.

"Fucking Hell!" Edmond exclaimed. "Shouldn't we go after him?"

"And do what, Edmond? A fitting end, don't you think?"

Edmond followed Owen back into the barn. They put out the fire that was spreading across the old, dry straw and headed back over the hillside to Hock House. "You were going to kill him all along, weren't you?" Edmond asked as they made their way back to Hock House. He looked at Owen's face and found his answer in the stone cold, angry eyes.

Back in Owen's study, they informed Abbey, Reine, Ted and James the events of the last hour. Margaret, Elizabeth, Ivy and Alice were sleeping in the Great Room.

"I wish I had been there!" Reine exclaimed.

"No you don't!" Edmond said, looking at her sharply. "That is not a memory you need! Come along, I am tired." Edmond said as he stood and took her by the hand and from the room.

"So what do you think Ted?" Owen inquired as he finished his glass of whiskey. "Is there more 'enlightenment' to come tomorrow?"

"It very much seems likely, Owen. I suggest we all get some rest."

As night fell, Jeffrey circled the boundaries of the Tabor estate, keeping well into the woods and out of sight of the patrolling guards. He hid his horse and climbed the ridge of thick forestland behind the stables. Near the top, he found the perfect place where he could lay unseen and have a clear view of the back of both the Tabor houses.

He spotted the raven as she flew over him, circled and landed behind the old barn, then returned to Hock House. His curiosity piqued, he made his way down the hill and found what she had seen. He knew very well who Caruthers was and what he wanted.

From his hiding place, he saw Owen and Edmond make their way to the barn and then some while later saw the dreadful sight of the burning wagon. He had no idea how it had happened but he was pleased to see this vicious side to Owen and Edmond; they

would need it.

He lay on his back in the tall grass to relax for a while, but not to sleep. He would not sleep again until this matter was over. Deeply satisfied with the way things were developing he could not help but smile. His bright silver eyes glimmered in the moon light.

Elizabeth woke when she heard the first calls of the roosters from the home farms. She had slept very little. Now with only a few hours to go she decided it was time to talk with Owen. Carefully and quietly, she moved from the bed and after seeing that she had not woken Margaret or Ted, she left the bedroom. Still very weak, she did not trust her ability on the stairs. She sat and took the stairs one at a time. She crossed the Great Room slowly leaning on the walls and furniture until she reached Owen's bed and clung to the bedpost.

"Owen!" she whispered.

More with instinct than wakeful awareness, he spun around in his bed and sat up holding his pistol.

"Owen! It's me! Elizabeth!"

"Shit, Lizzie!" he gasped angrily at her. "What the bloody Hell are you doing? Are you trying to get shot?"

"I want to talk to you while everyone is still asleep. May I sit on the bed? My legs are still so useless."

"Sit on the bed? Shit, you silly cow! Do you have idea how dangerous it is to sneak around?"

She sighed, sliding down to the bed just as she was sure she could stand no longer. "You do not need to call me names, Owen. There are a few I could call you but that would be a waste of time! I am sorry if I scared you. I guess I am not thinking too clearly but I must speak with you."

Owen pushed the pistol back under the pillows. "Well, you have my complete attention."

"I want to thank you for all you are doing for me."

"Thank me? But I thought you blamed me for all this....mess! That is what you told me! And as much as I hate to admit it, you are correct."

"Well, I have been doing a lot of thinking. There is not much else I can do from that damn chair!" she paused and studied his face. In the pale pre-dawn light, she saw only shadows. Her heart pounded. She was determined to not to lose her courage or to let the tears that were always so close, fall. "You were right what you said to me the other day. No matter where I was, Emile would have found me and taken Richard. If I had not been with you, he might have had more luck in trying to kill me. At least here, I have you and your family to help me. That is God sent. I will be forever grateful for that, whether or not you bring my baby back to me."

"First of all, I will get your child back and have no doubt about it. You do not have to thank me for doing the right thing. Did you expect anything less from me?" After a while when she did not answer he continued. "Yes, I can see you did. Well, I suppose I should not be surprised. I have not shown my best side to you, have I?"

"That is not important now, Owen. That time we had together was special but I have put it behind me and will eventually forget about it. And I want you to do the same. You must forget about that night and be sure that it will never happen again. I

want you to promise me that when I leave here you will never try and contact me!"

"Why?"

"You know why! If I am ever to have any chance of happiness, I must be certain that I will never see you again. For my own sanity, I have to put my feelings for you behind me. Maybe someday I will find a man who loves me. I can never do that if I am still thinking about you, remembering our night together and hoping that it might happen again. So, I need you to promise me that you will leave me alone!"

"Is that what you aspire to do? Marry some man you do not love and spend your nights trying to forget about me? That does not sound like much of a life." A shaft of light from a crack in the curtains fell across her face. Owen could see how terribly sincere and sad she was. He reached up and pushed her hair back from her face.

"It is not as if I had much choice. Maybe I will love him too, one day. If you will leave me be!"

"I will not make that promise to you because I have no intention of letting you get away from me that easily. I have been alone too long, rather bitter and full of self pity...." He had much more to say but stopped at the sound of Ted thundering down the stairs.

Ted bellowed for Elizabeth as he ran down the hall and calling for Owen until he stopped dead at the foot of Owen's bed.

"Oh Lord, not again!" Owen said rolling his eyes.

"What the Hell is going on here?" Ted demanded taking Elizabeth off the bed.

"Nothing, Uncle Ted! We were just talking!" she insisted trying to struggle against the powerful man's hold.

"We were having an important and private talk, nothing more, Ted." Owen said his voice going flat as his mother appeared behind Ted.

"Owen! Are you bothering poor Elizabeth again?" she asked sharply.

"No, Mother! She was bothering me and now you are as well! I did not ask her to come down here. I thought you and Ted were supposed to be keeping your eyes on her! How is it she is able to get up and wander about?" Owen returned with his own growing anger.

From upstairs, he heard the voices of Edmond and James.

"Now look what you have done, Owen! You woke the house!" his frustrated mother snapped. Ted carried the complaining young woman up the stairs and back to the bedroom.

"Me? All I was doing was sleeping. Then I woke up and she was standing there saying she had to talk to me. You and Ted woke the place! Go away and let me get some sleep!"

Margaret narrowed her eyes and pointed her finger at him. "You had better get yourself a wife, Owen and soon. Your morals and judgment are severely lacking." She left the room in a huff, followed Ted upstairs and loudly explained the disturbance to James and Edmond.

"House is full of raving lunatics!" Owen called back at her as he fell back into his bed and pulled the covers over his head.

Margaret and Elizabeth were the first to come to the dining room that morning. They were at the table when Reine came into the room. Until that time Edmond, Margaret and Ted have been able to keep them apart. This was the first time Elizabeth



had seen her since learning of her true nature.

"Good morning!" Reine nodded as she poured a cup of coffee and sat down across from them. Her face was paler than usual.

"Good morning, Reine!" Margaret spoke when Elizabeth stayed silent. Under the table, she had placed a restraining hand on Elizabeth's arm. She had felt the tension in the young woman and wondered if she knew just what a powerful creature Reine was.

"You are Emile's fucking shifter," Elizabeth spoke in a voice rigid with anger.

"I am a changeling," Reine sighed and answered quietly. "And I have no connection any longer with Emile Soskice."

The others had begun to trickle in and stood silently watching. Abbey could sense the danger and knew all too well about the poor hold Reine had on her temper. She took a seat beside Reine.

"You were there all those times when Emile raped me. I heard you laugh! Would you care to tell me what was so fucking funny?"

"Not now, my dear!" Margaret whispered to her.

"No? Why not, Margaret? Now is as good a time as any. She is the bitch who took my child and gave him to those murderers. You all may be afraid of her but I am not!"

Owen stood behind her, leaned over and spoke in her ear. Elizabeth raised her arm and pushed him away.

"I am sorry for that!" Reine said calmly. "That was a mistake. I did only what Emile told me to but I am free now!"

"How lovely for you, shifter! You are free! Well, that makes it all just that much better doesn't it?" Elizabeth spoke between clenched teeth.

"Anyway," Reine shrugged and rolled her eyes. "Sex with Emile and Jack didn't quite put you off it, though, did it? Look how quickly you slid into a Tabor bed!"

Elizabeth leaned forward and glared at Reine. "I am not myself right now, been sick you see but I am sure you know all about that. But one day soon I will have my strength back and when I do..."

"What will you do?" Reine stood, her eyes growing brighter with anger. No one noticed that she swayed slightly.

"Reine, stop it!" Abbey tried to pull her back into her chair without luck.

"I will find you and slit your throat, bitch!" Elizabeth finished her thought. Her voice broke with hatred.

From behind Elizabeth, Reine saw Owen place his hand on the gun in his belt and caught the look in his eyes. She took a deep breath.

"You are right to be angry," she said with heavy control. "I am sure I would feel the same way in your shoes. I have said to all that I am sorry. Now, I say it to you. I will do all I can to get your child back. Let us hope that you come to your senses by that time!" She sat back in her chair.

After a moment of silence, Owen cleared his throat. "Well, now we have all that settled I suggest we eat and get on with things!"

"Where's Ivy?" Margaret inquired to James, hoping to change the subject.

"Still asleep. The baby kept her busy most of the night. Seems our little Alice is rather a night bird!" he answered.

"If you ask me there are too many bloody birds around here," Elizabeth muttered.

"That is enough, Elizabeth!" Owen sat next to her, his plate loaded with steaming eggs.

Abbey had noticed Reine's hand shaking as she sipped her tea and the grey color to her face. "Are you alright?" she asked.

"I am fine!" she snapped an answer, then shook her head and sighed. "No, I am not fine." She opened the buttons of her high-necked blouse then exposed her neck. It was terribly swollen, purple, blue and dark red welts all around.

Edmond dropped his fork came to Reine and pulled her to her feet. "Who did this?"

"Who do you think?" she answered, put her hands to her face, swayed slightly then fell into his arms.

"She's fainted! Hanna, bring the smelling salts." Margaret called down the hall as she moved around the table.

"No!" Reine moaned and opened her eyes. "Just let me sit. It will pass!"

Edmond helped her back into her chair and sat next to her. "For God's sake Reine, what happened?"

"Emile did it, didn't he?" Abbey spoke when Reine did not.

"Yes, Emile did it; he tried to kill me."

"But how? When?" Edmond was completely confused.

"Last night when I was sleeping. He can enter my mind when I am asleep," she stopped briefly and turned in her chair to face Edmond. "Do you remember those scratches?"

"Yes, of course!"

"He did it because he was mad at me for not answering his call. The next day when I saw him he healed them."

"That's impossible!" Edmond exclaimed with little conviction.

"It is impossible, yes but none the less Soskice can do it. As can the masters of all the shifters. It is all in what the shifters believe as reality. Like a child with a parent. From the time they're created, they are under the belief that the master is in complete control of every breath they take," Ted explained. "Reine, think about it. When you were shot the wound healed over night by itself didn't it?"

"Yes," she answered doubtfully.

"It is in the nature of the shifter that they heal that way...it is not because their masters have any special power over them."

"But he healed the scratches by just touching them. I saw them disappear."

"Yes but the only harm he can do to you when you are not with him is only very superficial. He now knows that you have abandoned him. If he could kill you from a distance, believe me would have already done so. That attack last night was most likely just to frighten you and make you run off!"

Abbey took the smelling salts from Hanna and placed them under Reine's nose. She coughed and gagged, then shook her head. "What the Hell is that shit?" she demanded angrily.

"Tell us exactly what happened!" Owen demanded.

"How can I talk with that stuff...?"

"Reine!" Owen raised his voice, banged his hand down on the table.

"He came in the same way he always does. It is like a dream but very real. If

he hurts me in the dream, I wake up injured. He came last night. Told me that they knew I had killed the minion. He told me that I was a traitor and that he was going to kill me." She closed the buttons on her blouse as she spoke. "I wanted to fight him and tried but I can't move in those dreams! He wrapped his belt around my neck and slowly began to twist it!"

"What a shame he did not twist tighter," Elizabeth interrupted, getting to her feet. "Uncle Ted! Please take me upstairs! I can't stand another minute of this!"

"Mother you take her away and stay with her. I need Ted to hear this," Owen said with growing impatience.

"I don't think she likes me too much!" Reine said with sarcasm when Margaret and Elizabeth had left the room. "Someone needs to remind her that I was shot trying to save her life!"

"Christ, Reine, continue with what you have to tell us and forget about all that!"

"Alright, Owen! Jeffrey! He showed up and made Emile stop hurting me."

"Jeffrey was in your dream?" Edmond asked.

"Yes! Emile was choking me and then Jeffrey just appeared. He pushed Emile away from me and Emile vanished. Jeffrey gave me a message for all of you!" she looked around the eager faces and went on. "He said that he is the keeper and the author of the Chronicle. It is now finished and he wants you to read the last page. Then he was gone!"

Without a word, Ted stood and went to the great room.

"Why didn't you tell me when we woke?" Edmond asked.

"I already told you and Owen, I am afraid of Jeffrey and if you have any sense you will be too. I do not know what he wants or what he really wants to be!"

"You are thinking that he wants to take his father's place?" James asked.

"What else could it be?" Reine answered.

Owen told them what Margaret's story of how Jeffrey seemed to pull the poison from Elizabeth to keep her from dying.

James shook his head. "If he is one of them and some sort of evil thing, why would he put his own life at risk?"

"A good question, James, perhaps will find the answer here." Ted said as he placed the trunk on the floor, unlocked it pulled out the mysterious book. "This last page was most definitely not here last night. I will read it out loud."

'Reverend Browne,

'My name, as you have known me is Jeffrey Slocumb; it is not my given name but the name I choose to go by. I am the biological son of the demon One Wing and the human female, Margaret Morgan Tabor. It is right that she not be present as you read this because, as her loving son, I do not wish to see her endure any more heartache.'

Ted stopped reading and looked up at Owen. "How did he know she wouldn't be here?"

"God knows, Ted! Keep reading!"

'For my first fifteen years, I lived in my father's lair under the grotto north of the Tabor land. I was greatly favored by One Wing over all of his many other children for the simple fact that I had a perfect human body, with none of his physical features. It

has been his great desire over these last centuries to produce a son with the appearance of humanity and a dark soul of total evil. Until I was born, all of One Wing's offspring had been deformed, as you have seen in the body of Emile Soskice.'

'I was well educated in human and non-human history, literature, art and mathematics and the evil work that I was expected to excel in. I was included in more and more of the deadly deeds of that world. Many times, he brought me with him on his nighttime visits to my mother but kept me in the shadows and she did not know I was there.'

'James, you must forgive her for all of her perceived weaknesses. You have no idea the misery she has had all these long years. In every one of One Wing's visits he raped her. She held hold on her sanity by convincing her that they were little more than terrible dreams. She is not free of him and never will be until he ceases to exist. He has placed his scent in her and can get at her whenever he wants. He has not killed her because he thought he might want her to reproduce again. Now she has reached the stage when she will not be able to make any more children. One Wing will sense that very soon and, believe me, he will see her as useless and kill her. It is up to the men who love her to end this monster and her nightmare once and for all.'

'Now back to my own story. As I approached manhood, it became clear to me that I did not in any way fit in with that life. As I hated him, I was also terrified of my father, as I am sure you can understand. I was more than lucky that I was able to hide my light soul from One Wing or he would have killed me. On the event of my sixteenth birthday, I ran away from that world and entered the human world for the first time seeing true day light.'

'With, no money, only the clothes on my back, pure instinct and more than a little fear I headed to the North West. Twice One Wing sent his minions after me. I am far more powerful than they and squashed them like the insects they are. I finally made it to the port side of Liverpool where a foul pimp and his prostitute, befriended me.'

'I was much taller and better built than most and so it was easy to lie about my age. Holster, the pimp, hired me to protect his female when she was on the 'job'. Through them, I had my first nasty taste of the evil, underbelly of human existence, but at least I had a place away from One Wing. A few weeks passed and then the pimp and woman disappeared. Not an unusual occurrence in that world so I thought little of it and made new plans.'

'I secured a position as deck hand on the RMS Stanley Beamish and we set out from the Liverpool Port to America on May 30. 1881.'

"I have heard of that ship. It sank on that voyage with all on board lost," James put in.

Ted continued to read. 'No James, the ship sank but there were survivors.' He stopped again and all looked at the passage; written as though Jeffrey was there with them at the time.

"Christ!" Owen muttered running his hands through his hair. The room had gone strangely dark and silent but for Ted's voice.

'The captain and six crew members, including myself, survived. The scandal that this brought to the shipping line was quickly hushed up and since then it has been believed, that as James said, all died when the ship sank.'

'But I had made it to what I had hoped was a new and better life in the United States. I was lucky and hired by the family Jackson as farm hand and in time began to teach the two young sons how to read and write. It was a fine life and for the first time I knew happiness. When I was away one day the family home burned down. Every member of the Jackson family died in the fire.'

'So you will see the pattern here. Further similar events happened and for the sake of time, I will not go into any more detail. Every time I settled and tried for a 'normal' life tragedy soon followed me. I knew that One Wing was tracking me. Every attempt I made to live free of him ended in the taking of many innocent lives. From my experience with him I had seen how he could easily get into the sleeping minds of those he has had close personal contact with...as he did with Margaret. Therefore, it had to be the way he was able to locate me at every stop I made. I believe that it was his hope that I would give up and return to him.'

'He can enter only the very deepest part of sleep and that comes after more than two hours. I quickly learned to live with very little sleep. From then on One Wing had much less luck tracking me but still occasionally, he found me. The last time was in my twentieth year. I made the very natural human pact of love with a woman. We married and for some months, I was able to protect her. One night I slept too long and when I woke that morning, I found her dead beside me. The doctors told me that she had suffered a heart attack and that it was a sad but very natural death. I knew better!'

'It was then that I decided One Wing had to die. That was five years ago. I came back to England, took a teaching job in Dover, and never had more than an hour's sleep at a time. I spent most of my long nights writing this book.'

'I learned of the marriage Soskice had forced on Elizabeth Delacourt. I made contact with Emile, under the pretense to get him to release Elizabeth, even though I knew he would never do that. Through him and his idiot son, Jack, I learned what was happening at this crucial time with One Wing. I knew it was time for me to get the book into the right hands and that was you, Reverend Browne.'

'Eventually as the time approached that One Wing could be killed I staged the accident that brought me into my mother's world. It was important for me to have some knowledge of the events on the Tabor land.'

'It is not possible for me to kill One Wing myself or I would have done so long ago. I needed to see to it that the only person, who could kill him, did so. That person is Edmond Tabor. As Isabelle told you, he is the only human who has ever escaped his fate at the hands of that demon.'

'I learned of the events Soskice had set up on the estate and I knew just what he was aiming at. One Wing would give him a new body. To do that he would have to leave his lair and come up to the grotto at the one time he could be vulnerable to Edmond Tabor. And that is exactly what I needed to see done to see the end of this helper son of Satan.'

'And so, as Margaret told you I kept Elizabeth alive. You wonder why! Simply that she is a light soul, a keeper of the true faith of the one Almighty God and as long as I still breathe, I will not sit by and see another such person die. And, of course, with that I needed her to stay alive so that Owen, and through him, Edmond, would have reason to confront One Wing and Soskice on the night of the summer solstice.'

'To help fill the long wait for this coming weekend I have taken to hunting down

and killing shifters. The lot of you would be surprised just how many of these things walk amongst you! I have had many chances and reasons to put Reine down but she will be a valuable tool for you in these next few hours. As strange as it seems, somehow she has found a powerful light in her soul. Perhaps that came with her love for Edmond. We will see just what she can do and I will decide then if she should live.'

'That is my rather long and somewhat unbelievable story. I understand completely why you do not trust me but perhaps in time you will see that differently. God be with you all, tonight...as I will be every step of the way!'

Jeffrey'

"Well, I'll be blowed!" Ted exclaimed, taking off his spectacles and sitting back in his chair. "Did you know that he was your half brother, Owen?"

Owen did not get a chance to answer. As Ted closed the heavy gold cover, the book vanished, the velvet cloth slid to the floor. For a long while no one spoke. They all sat staring at the place the book had been.

"Well, I can say that I have seen and heard everything now!" Edmond finally broke their trance.

Owen picked up the cloth and threw it in the fireplace. Looking from face to face, he said. "Not a word of any of that is to get back to my mother. He maybe her son but she needs time and peace of mind. Then she can decide whether or not to take him into her life."

"I think she has already decided that, Owen," Ted spoke with gentle firmness. "She loves him just as any mother loves her child. As you have seen with Elizabeth, the love of a mother is an eternal, almighty force.'

"True, Ted. However, for now and the matter we have to deal with I will not trust him. It would be foolish to take such a risk."

James agreed. "It may be that evil magic is behind all this but it is the cold reality of this day we must deal with."

"We have at least twelve hours until we can make our moves. It is going to be a long day. Edmond, I want you to stay with Abbey and Reine as much as possible. Ted you will stay upstairs with Elizabeth and Margaret. James you will look after Ivy and Alice. Under no circumstances is anyone to leave the house without checking with me first. And," he turned and pointed at Reine "you are not to go to sleep again. I don't care what you do Edmond but keep her awake."

With her hand on her sore neck, Reine nodded at him. "I have no intention of going to sleep!"

"Good! Edmond, take Reine and Abbey into the study and stay there. James you go to Ivy. I will be in my bedroom!" With that, he left the room.

"Well, I guess we had better do as we are told!" James smiled slightly at the blank faces that watched Owen's departure.

"He's got a nerve if you ask me!" Reine complained but no one agreed with her and they all did as instructed.

The hours dragged by mercilessly for all at Hock House. Hanna prepared meals but no one bothered to eat much. Ted kept Elizabeth and Margaret up stairs as much as

possible and Edmond kept Reine downstairs.

Owen chose to spend the day alone. He paced the length of the Great Room. He read when he could concentrate. Mostly he sat staring out the window, restless, agitated and feeling like a caged animal.

It was just before seven when Reine appeared in his doorway, her hands on her hips and tapping her toe. "I am bored to tears!" she complained to him.

"So?" he closed the notebook he was sketching in and tossed it aside.

"So! What kind of an answer is that?"

"You did not ask me a question, Reine! What is Edmond doing?"

She rolled her eyes. "Playing cards with James, Ivy and Abbey! Some silly game about bridges or something. Apparently, only four can play and no one wants to teach me. I don't want to learn anyway," she pouted.

Despite his mood, Owen could not help but smile. "Bridge is a very complicated game and a complete waste of time, if you ask me. I would not worry too much if I were you. What would you like to do then?"

"Maybe you are happy just waiting until dark but I am not. I think I should go up to the main tunnel and take care of those guards," she paused, rubbing her hands together, "I mean, they have to be dealt with at some point."

"I don't know if I want you to go alone. More than anyone else, Reine, I need you tonight!"

"But how can anyone come with me? Besides, I am at my best on my own. I can circle back and see if any guards wait at the two other tunnels as well! I still have the Soskice dagger," she lifted her skirt and showed him the knife carefully strapped to her leg with two garters. "And I have this." She pulled a length of wire from her pocket. "I took it from your piano."

Owen winced. "My God, you are a dangerous female, aren't you? I'll bet you are quite the pull under the sheets as well!" he said as he took her by the arm and walked her over to the window.

"What a shame you did not take me up on it when I offered it to you. Now you will never know, will you?" she smiled at him.

"True, but no doubt that is for the best in the long run," he rubbed his whiskers and frowned. "I do not want you to kill those guards. There is still time before the ceremony and should anyone else come in that way that would certainly announce trouble."

Reine looked disappointed. "I suppose you are right. I did not think of that. And I am trying to change my ways."

"Change your ways? You mean to leave your shifting world behind?"

"Shit, Owen. I am a changeling! Shifter is an insult. And yes, I am changing my ways. I will do anything to please Edmond!"

"Well, do not change too much yet, my dear; at least not until tomorrow! I will need your nasty side tonight."

"I will be all you need and more," she smiled and patted his cheek. "By the way, I just told Edmond I was going to the toilet. I will leave it up to you to explain."

"Thank you! Remember do not kill anyone and be very careful! We will be at the Manor by the time you return. I will leave the parlor window open for you." In a moment, the raven was back in the air. He shook his head and thought then that he

could see why Edmond had it in his mind to keep her around for a while.

"Reine has gone to check the tunnels," Owen announced as he entered the study. "It is a good idea to know if any new guards have been added."

"You sent her out on her own?"

"Good Lord, Edmond, she is worth ten of us. We have to take what help we can get," James said. "Just be glad she is on our side now!"

"Put the cards away. We have much to do!" Owen said. "James, Edmond I want you to go to the barracks and round up as many men that are sober enough to stand. Put two more at the front and back of this house and two inside at each of the doors. Tell the rest of them to go to the Hall and bring as many weapons as they have. Abbey and Ivy, wait here. Mother will bring Elizabeth down after I have had a word with her. I will come to the hall with Ted when I am sure all is secure here."

He knocked lightly on Margaret's bedroom door and stepped inside. Margaret stood nervously when she saw him, knowing too well, what it meant. "Is it time?" she asked.

He nodded. "I would like a word with Elizabeth."

Ted and Margaret left the room. Elizabeth, like Owen, had spent most of the day watching from the window. Her mind numb with worry and occasionally lit with rays of hope.

"Still in the hated wheel chair?" he asked as he sat on the bedside and turned the chair to face him.

"Margaret insists and it is easier than arguing with her!" she tried to smile at him. She looked smaller and somehow much younger; like a frightened child.

"We did not have a chance to finish our conversation this morning. It has become rather difficult to find privacy in this house."

"Margaret and Uncle Ted were very upset. I did get a stern talking to."

"As did I. Mother thinks I had better marry again, at least for the sake of my morals. No matter what anyone says, I have no regrets about welcoming you to my bed, Elizabeth. You were beautiful and our loving making was wonderful."

"Yes Owen, it was wonderful."

"Good!" He leaned very close. "Will you now please tell me what you whispered to me during the dance?"

"You really want to know? Why?"

"Just please tell me?"

She smiled, her face slightly reddened. "I was drunk, remember that! I said, 'Do you still want to fuck me?' I was thinking of that summer years ago. You did really have a go at me."

Owen leaned back, a slow grin spread across his face. "Do you still want to fuck me?" he repeated. "I do wish I had heard you, Lizzie. I would most certainly have had an interesting answer for you. Perhaps when this matter is done with you will present me with that question again," he lowered his gaze to her breasts, then shook his head, cleared his throat and sat up. "I brought this for you!" he said as he pulled from his trousers the money pouch she had stolen from Emile and handed it to her.

"Oh, I forgot all about that! I don't even know how much is in it!"

"A lot, Lizzie! Six hundred pounds!" He had added his own money to double to amount that had originally been in there.



"I had no idea Emile was so rich!" then as quickly as it came, her smile faded. "Owen, are you giving this to me now because you think you might not return tonight?"

"No. I am giving it to you because you told me that as soon as I brought Richard back here you and Ted would be leaving. Since you are in such a great rush to get away I might forget later."

"I see!" she whispered.

"And because I am not to contact you in the future well, now is the only time. If that is still what you want?"

"Nothing is the way I want it, Owen. But I have to think of the future," she said so quietly he could barely hear her.

"Of course you do! That is the smart thing." He stood and smiled as he picked her up. "I will take you down stairs, then Ted and I will leave." She was crying then. Owen knew it but he had other things on his mind.

He placed her next to Ivy on the settee. He unlocked his desk and pulled out the Soskice dagger case. "Mother, Ivy, Elizabeth and Abbey, I want you all to stay here. Do not for any reason separate. I have the house well guarded." He took one of his loaded pistols and handed it to his mother. "Elizabeth, Ivy, do you still have the pistols I gave you." They nodded. "We will be back in a few hours!" Owen said. No one said anything more as he and Ted left the house.

Catching a head wind and flying even faster than usual it was not to long before the raven arrived at her first destination. The wagon, the women and children were gone and now there was a third guard. The dogs were still there. They had built a large fire off to the side of the main tunnel entrance, two of the men sat there and a third appeared to be sleeping leaning up against a tree and about a dozen feet away from his companions. She saw that they had many rifles at the ready. Nevertheless, she thought as she headed off towards the beach tunnel, they would not be a match for us. Several times, she circled the Tabor beach and the crypt. There were still no guards.

"It has been brought to my attention that the people initially responsible for the deaths of Edward and Henry Tabor and Tom O'Connor will not be brought to justice so I have decided to bring justice to them." Owen said to the men James had gathered in the dining room of Tabor Manor. "This will be dangerous work so if any of you do not feel up to it now would be the time to walk away." As he thought, not a man moved.

"For all of you who help tonight there will be a year's wages for your efforts," Edmond added and this met with an agreeable mumble.

"You should know that we will be faced with things from another world, the world of Satan!" Ted added.

"We will be fighting the 'Tabor Curse'?" Wiggs asked.

"Yes!" Owen said firmly.

"Then, we are all in for it! Aren't we, men?" Wiggs asked looking around those gathered behind him. They all agreed eagerly.

Owen and James explained to the men what they would face and the importance of the timing of their actions. He and James made sure they were all properly armed. Owen decided that James and four men would be the first to leave as they had the farthest

to travel. They loaded the first of the three wagons with a third of the dynamite, many rifles and boxes of ammunition.

They were giving final instructions when Reine joined them. "Nothing much has changed. There are three guards at the main tunnel! The females and the children are gone," she said smiling as she looked across the faces around her. "There are still no guards at the other tunnels. Who am I going to go with?"

"We don't need no skirts with us!" the one called Harrison laughed and spoke a little too loudly. "She'll only get in the bloody way!"

She turned and walked towards him, fixing her steely gaze on his face.

"You are going to wish you never said that!" Owen leaned down and whispered in Harrison's ear.

"Your name?" Reine asked her voice barely a whisper.

"Harrison!" he said meeting her stare.

"First name?" she asked as she slipped open the button on his jacket.

"William. But I do not mean nothing, Miss, only that what can you do for us?" he asked looking to Owen for help.

"Will, Billy Boy! You won't need this tonight!" With a movement too fast for those with her to see, she pulled a silver whiskey flask from his belt and held it. With her index finger and thumb she folded it completely in half and then once again until the remains of the cheap whiskey squirted from the flask. "You have had far too much of this poison. Lord knows you might just get in the way!" A quiet murmur rolled across the group of astonished men.

"Still think she can't help us?" Edmond asked standing next to her.

James took Wiggs, Smart, Hutchings and Clark. These men he had known the longest and most trusted. They loaded the first wagon with a third of the dynamite, rifles and ammunition. It was just before ten and time for them to leave.

"Are you sure I cannot have Reine with me?" James asked, smiling down at his son from the wagon seat.

"We could use a few more like her that is true! But you are on your own."

"None of us are on our own, son. I see the finer hand of God at work here!"

With that, the wagon rolled away. It was the first time in his life that Owen had heard his father speak of God or call him son.

"Are you alright?" Abbey asked Margaret as they settled for the long wait. She had noticed how pale and drawn Margaret was. "I am sorry, that is a ridiculous question. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Talk to me, so I don't have to hear the words in my head. Over and over I hear of the dreadful mistake I made that put my son and his father in this danger."

Abbey patted her hand. "Regrets!" she sighed. "What a weight they are! What could you have done that would have changed this? Do you have any power over this evil?"

"I should have listened to James and left the estate with him and Owen. We would have had a life together far from this and they would not be in danger now. I was selfish and mercenary."

"You were only young and foolish. None of us can escape the mistakes we make that cost us so dearly in later years. God only knows I have my share."

"Tell me!" Margaret urged.

"Oh Hell...that could take all night!" she laughed. "Most of all, because of all this I feel regrets right now for the pain I gave to you and to Isabelle Tabor. I was so stupid to allow myself to be used by Wilmot Tabor," she paused for a few seconds and added. "But I was barely a girl when I met him and for so many years I was hopelessly in love with him and would do anything he wanted."

"I also regret never having any children. It was not that I did not want any but it always seemed that a better time would come and a husband as well! It never did and now it is far too late!"

"Listen to us!" Margaret said and tried a weak smile. "You'd think we were a couple of old ladies, full of regrets and nothing else. I am not old yet, well not completely, and neither are you. Who can say what we are still capable of?"

"Yes, there may be hope for us yet!" Abbey agreed. "But actually I have been thinking that I don't want to go back to the Turtle Dove. Not after all this! For a while, it was doubtful I would even get out of this in one piece. I would be a bloody fool not to learn something. Maybe I will sell up and buy a small place in the country. I have a large nest egg saved. But I just feel that I can never go back again, things just would not be the same!"

"That is true, Abbey. Things would not be the same!"

As they waited for the correct time for the second wagon to leave Owen had Cook fix and serve strong coffee. He took Reine, Ted and Edmond aside.

"Have you ever seen One Wing with your own eyes?" he asked Reine.

She shook her head. "The changelings are not very high up in that world. Just like servants in this world."

"What do you know about him then?" Owen asked.

"Just what Jack told me and Jack talked all the time. One Wing is much bigger than that thing we fought. Ten men and half tall, Jack used to say. He is fast and strong, even stronger than I am. Like the minion we killed, he can shoot fire. But as I say, this is only what Jack told me and he was as loopy as they get!"

"Why do they call him One Wing?" Edmond asked.

"One of his Wings is a different color than the rest of him and there is something wrong with it. He cannot fly for more than a few feet; more like a long hop. He also has the same deformities as Emile. His left arm is withered and useless but for its razor sharp claws and he has a rotten place at the back of his head like Emile."

"The thing to remember about One Wing that is most important for you, Edmond, is that he can only be killed with a bullet to his brain. The first shot must be very accurate!" Ted said.

"Don't worry!" Reine said taking Edmond's hand. "We will kill that thing and his demented offspring!"

"The most important thing is to get that baby out of there, and then we kill Emile and One Wing. Are there others like we had at the Willard cottage?" Owen asked.

Reine sighed. "I think that there must be. Jeffrey said there was. At least we have killed one of them."

"And then we shall kill the others as well!" Owen said firmly.

It came time for Ted, Green, Harrison and Reine to leave. As before, the wagon

was loaded with the dynamite, guns and ammunition.

Edmond took Reine aside. "Promise me that you will not take any unnecessary risks!"

She smiled at him. "I won't! Do not worry about me. I can take care of myself and I am not going to get killed," she laughed. "I am not finished with you yet, Edmond Tabor."

"Really?" he smiled back at her. "That does open up a world of possibilities, doesn't it?"

"You will see!"

Back in the Hall kitchen, Owen called for Hastings, Daisy, Hanna and Wilmot's valet to sit with him and Edmond. All the other staff he sent to their quarters with strict orders not to appear again before morning.

"I am not sure how much of this matter is known to you four!" Owen said. "But there is a baby being held by Emile Soskice."

"We are aware of that, Mr. Tabor," Hastings said. "The young woman who was staying at Hock House is the mother?"

Owen nodded. The gossip grape vine had not been broken in the mayhem. "Yes, well, when I have secured the release of the child he will be brought back here for the four of

you to protect. When he is here, take him directly up to the nursery, it is by far the safest room in the Hall. Are you armed?"

"I have my revolver," Hastings said showing his shoulder holster under his coat. "I have had it with me night and day for some time now."

"Good! And you?" he asked the valet.

"I have a pistol, Mr. Tabor. It is as old as my old bones but still works like a charm!"

"You will also need this," Owen said as he opened the dagger case. He took out the final knife and handed it to Hastings. From the corner of his eye, he saw Cook cross herself and heard her say a quiet prayer. "If there is an attempt to retrieve the baby you may find yourself faced with something not from your usual world. And you can believe me there are a great many things not of this world. So be prepared to meet what I can only say is every child's nightmare. A creature that is stronger, wilder than anything I have ever seen. The most important weapon it has is the ability to breathe fire!"

"A dragon?" Hastings asked with raised eyebrows.

"That is the only term I would have used had it not sounded so insane! To that end, have several blankets at hand in case you need to fight any fire. Your bullets with do little but stun and distract him. Only this dagger will put the thing down. That I have seen from personal experience. Once you receive the baby bring him directly to nursery and do not open the door again until you hear my voice from the other side," then after a pause, he added. "Should I not make it back then only open to door to Edmond or James. Then they will take the child to his mother."

"Oh, dear!" Cook gasped.

"Every possibility has to be considered! It is by no means guaranteed that we will all survive this night!" He and Edmond stood and headed to the back door.

Owen had Edmond's small clip prepared, placed a small wooden box and several

clean blankets under the seat. Two of the four men he had chosen to accompany him took their places on the clip seat. He and Edmond took the third wagon, the other two men, and their share of dynamite and they began the trip to the crypt.

"How many guns do you have?" Owen asked Edmond as the rolled past the burnt out Willard cottage.

"Three. The dagger is in my boot. The silver bullets are in my most accurate weapon." He patted the expensive pistol tucked under his belt. After a moment of silence, he added, "I won't let you down, Owen!"

"I have no doubt in that!" Owen answered. He could feel the younger man's excited tension and knew he was more than ready for action.

Owen seethed with his own needs. As focused as he was on Elizabeth's baby, his mind burned with the need to kill Emile. Just as much as that, he wanted to kill One Wing, but he knew that must fall to Edmond. One way or the other he and Edmond would see both of them dead before very much longer.

Just before they reached the entrance to the cemetery, Owen pulled both wagons to a halt. To the men in the clip he said, "You will wait here. When we get the child, Miss Crawford will bring him to you. Put him in the box and take him back to Tabor Hall immediately. Hastings and Hanna will be waiting for him in the kitchen. Do not stop for any reason. Just go quickly there, return here and wait inside the crypt in case you are needed."

"Yes, sir!" The two men in the clip exchanged glances.

Owen, Edmond, and their men continued the rest of the way to the crypt. The night air was cool and still. The full moon so bright it was easy to see for some distance around.

"Do you remember when we used to play here?" Edmond asked as they came to a halt at the entrance of the Tabor crypt. "We were frightened, just the same! We thought it must be haunted."

"It is!" Owen said flatly, as he pushed open the wooden door, propped it open with a stick.

They unloaded the dynamite and brought it down the steps and into the Lord's Chamber. "Now," Owen said when the cases were lined along the far wall nearest to the gargoyles, "you two prepare the fuses and keep them dry. Remember, Miss Crawford will be coming out this way with the child. Help her in any way she needs. And, this is most important, if you see a raven....do not shoot it!"

James knew the area they heading to very well. As they rode along he told his men what had happened to him and Owen in the Willard house. He did not tell them the true nature of Reine. They listened intently with the wisdom of the ages passed along to the simple hard working and God fearing people of the British countryside; without doubt or suspicion. After an hour and a half, they pulled the wagon into a cluster of trees off the roadway and because of the dogs stayed down wind. James ordered Higgins to stay with the wagon.

"They should be just on the other side of the rise," he whispered to his companions as they climbed the steep hillside. "Three men so we will take one man each. Smart you take the dogs out first, then any man near to them."

From the top of the hill, they saw Emile's men just as Reine had told them. The shots rang out almost in unison; the dogs killed first then two men fell dead. One man only wounded fell into the fire. James shot again and he lay still.

"Well, that was easy, too easy!" Wiggs exclaimed as they climbed down the hill.

"We are just beginning!" James warned. "Christ, I hope no one inside heard those shots!"

Once they had the explosives carefully inside the entrance of the tunnel, they pulled the bodies of the dead men and their weapons inside. James shoved the barrel of one of their rifles across the two door handles.

"That won't keep any late comers out for too long but at least we will hear them!"

Smart stayed with the dynamite to attach the fuses. The others made their way along the passage.

At several yards from the opening to the grotto, the wide tunnel narrowed considerably providing a secure viewing place for the men. It was exactly fifteen minutes to midnight. They could see straight across to the fire pit, the smokeless red fire and beyond that to the gypsies' wagons. On the left side of the fire pit was a small crowd of men who gave the appearance from their shabby dress and obvious stages of drunkenness to be Emile's men. Nine men, dressed in hooded robes sat in two rows to the right of the pit.

"This, my friends, is the gateway to Hell. Let us hope that this is as close as we ever get to it," James whispered.

"Who are them in those black out fits?" Clarke asked.

"Some of our Majesty's finest men, unfortunately! The upper echelon of society who have fallen under the Claw!"

"Blimey!" Hutchings shook his head.

"We will be doing a great service this day! Look up high above them to that slightly darker area above them and a little further back. That is where Ted and Harrison will be providing cover. Owen and James will enter from the other side. And remember this; it is most important; you may see a large raven. Leave it be, it is on our side."

"A bird is on our side?"

"Yes! And be bloody glad for it!"

"What are those flat stones for?" Clarke asked.

"That is most likely where they make their sacrifices. And I think we will find those packages on them are the hearts of Henry and Edward Tabor, Jack Soskice and Tom O'Connor."

"Fuck!" Wiggs shook his head. "Tom was a bit of a mushroom but he sure didn't deserve that!"

Reine showed Ted the way down the Beach road and they got their wagon as close to that tunnel opening as possible. As the men unloaded the wagon, Reine stood silently, looking up to the Old Tower directly above them. She thought of the time not too long ago when she lured Tom O'Connor to his death.

"Thinking?" Ted asked following her sad gaze.

She nodded. "I have done so many terrible things, without a moment's thought! If I try really hard do you think God will ever forgive me?" she asked her silver eyes

moist.

Ted smiled and put his arm around her shoulder, leading her towards the tunnel. "I wouldn't be surprised if He already has! But, when this is done, we will talk of these matters, if you wish?"

"Yes, I think I need that!" she smiled at him. "That would be a help, I hope!"

"Good! Now buck up, we have work to do."

Ted left one man behind to prepare the explosives. Holding a lantern in front, Reine led Ted and Harrison to within sight of the rope ladders.

"I don't understand why Soskice doesn't have this place guarded." Ted whispered to Reine.

"He's a fool," she answered and smiled. "All of his life he has never been challenged and never once paid a second thought to anything other than his own success. That is all the better for us. What time is it?"

"One quarter to midnight." With several rifles tied to their backs, the two men started up the ropes. Ted turned and looked back at Reine. "Good luck!" he said and watched as

she slid behind a large bolder. What a strange world we have, he thought as he pulled up to his place on the wall and studied the scene below him.

"Where is she going?" Harrison asked.

"I believe to get her pet raven!" Ted answered and in a few seconds, the large black bird was on the ledge between them.

It took the four men to open the hidden crypt. Owen led Edmond down the tunnel to hide behind the large stalagmite and waited impatiently for the minutes to pass.

They would make no move until Reine had taken the baby out of that tunnel to safety. Owen watched Emile, still sitting motionless and alone, leaning against the middle wagon. He burned with rage and the need to take action. He could not get the images of Elizabeth's scarred back out of his mind. Now the bastard was prepared to murder her child! Every fiber of his being was ready for the killing of Emile Soskice.

"Do you see that out cropping of boulders in the shadows just behind the stone beds?" Owen asked Edmond. "When we have finished with Soskice, stay low to the ground and head there. Remember, if it is as they say and you are the only one who can kill One Wing, then you have to stay out of sight until you can be sure of your attack. I will do what I can to lure him into positioning."

Edmond nodded his understanding.

"Good Lord!" Harrison whispered as the raven landed on the ledge between him and Ted.

"When I give the signal go!" Ted said to the raven. "Ten seconds to 11:45! Go!"

The raven lifted off into the black recesses of the grotto ceiling.

"That is one smart, bloody bird!" Harrison said to Ted.

"Keep your eye and thoughts on what you are doing!" Ted ordered, leveling his rifle at the seated men below them.

Down on the grotto floor, hiding behind the rocks at the base of the wall Reine transformed wearing torn and dirty men's clothing. Moving quickly and quietly she

made her way to the backside of Emile's wagon. Her heart was beating heavily and her breath coming fast. She bent slightly and could see the back of Emile. He would not be able to sense she was there as long as she stayed in human form but she knew any sound or movement out of place could easily give her away. She had to get that child, above all else, to prove herself to Edmond, to Owen and for her own sense of worth.

The curtains inside the wagon window were open at one side. A small table lantern set a faint glow in the smoke filled cabin. Reine could see the naked back of Rose prone on the cot bed. Just over her shoulder, she could see the top of Richards's curly dark hair.

Without a sound, she moved to the side of the wagon, slowly opened the door only a few inches and climbed inside. She knew the smell of opium and the air in that small space was thick with it. She bent and took a closer look at Rose. She was not sleeping or in a drugged stupor but dead; a bullet hole between her eyes.

Reine picked up the baby. He did not cry or even open his eyes and fell limp in her arms. He is dead, she thought in an instant panic. How could they be so ignorant to let the child breathe that stuff? She placed her hand on his tiny chest and felt his heart beat. She rolled him securely in a blanket.

As Elizabeth did the night when she escaped, Reine stood still in the doorway, listening for sounds that Emile was alert. Saying a quick prayer for help, she moved down the steps, holding the baby close to her chest and under the baggy coat. She wanted to run but knew that would most likely attract attention so she maintained strict control.

"Here she comes!" Edmond whispered to Owen as he saw Reine step out from the shadows of the last wagon.

Owen said nothing. He pulled the Soskice dagger from his boot.

Reine had reached the crypt tunnel. After seeing that no one looked in her direction, she dashed to the stalagmite and squeezed through the opening.

"I've got him!" she whispered as she reached Owen and Ted.

"Good, get him out of here!" Owen said, but Reine was already half way down the tunnel.

Reine ran from the crypt past Watson, across the field to the waiting men. She saw one man stand and draw his gun so she pulled off the floppy hat and shook out her hair. "It's me! Don't shoot!" she yelled at them. At the clip, she pulled the box from under the seat, placed the baby into it and covered him with a blanket. The cool air had revived him somewhat and he began to cry. "There! Get going!"

Across the grotto, Emile seemed to wake. He raised his head and looked briefly towards the fire pit, then pulled up on his stick until he was on his feet. The atmosphere had grown intense and charged with more anticipation as each moment passed. When the gathered saw him stand a round of applause came from the seated men and cheers from the gypsies.

Quietly, quickly, staying low to the ground and as much as possible behind the boulders, Owen and Edmond moved out from behind the stalagmite and stopped at the backside of Emile's wagon.

Completely unaware of the danger just feet from him Emile moved slowly up the wagon steps. Leaving the door open, he went inside. This was a perfect shield for



Owen and Edmond as they slipped inside directly behind Emile. Emile did not see them as he peered through the small area for the baby.

"He's gone!" Owen whispered, his voice harsh with the burning hatred he had for the creature before him.

Surprised but only for the briefest second, Emile raised the gun and pointed it at Owen. Edmond knocked it from his hand. The old man opened his mouth to call for help. Owen slashed across his face with the dagger. His jaw fell uselessly; blood pouring down his front. Emile fell to his knees. Owen leaned down, ripped away the veil and cape then grabbed a hand full of his hair to pull his head back. To his shock, the hair with what was left of Emile's scalp came off in his hand.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed in disgust, dropping the disgusting mess. Now holding only the bloodied skull he leaned around and looked into the terrified silver eye. "This is for Nora Tabor and Elizabeth Delacourt!" he whispered harshly and with all the bitter rage he felt deep to his core he pulling the knife across Emile's neck. Then again and once again and the head came free from the body.

Quickly they stripped the dead man. With the cape and veil in place Owen took the knotted walking stick then bending his arm and spine, he looked very much the image of Emile Soskice. He grimaced with the terrible stench of the outfit.

Edmond rolled a pillow in a blanket so that it would appear as though he was carrying the baby and looked at his watch. "Two minutes until midnight. Good luck!" he said giving Owen the bundle. He pushed it under his bent left arm as Emile would have done and left the wagon. Slightly dragging his leg Owen made his way through the thick, low-lying mist towards the sacrificial stones. A low murmur of approval spread through the spectators. He placed the pillow on the fifth stone and sat motionless on the one next to it.

Staying close to the ground Edmond made his way behind the first wagon and into the dark, sheltering rocks. He climbed up as high as he could and found a perfect vantage point. He took the gun loaded with the silver bullets in his right hand, another loaded with ordinary bullets in his left hand.

Back in the tunnel again Reine shifted and following the scent of her lover and landed beside him. She cocked her head and looked at him. He ignored her, keeping his eyes on the grotto, for any movement that might be a threat to Owen.

Seconds passed like hours. The spectators and those hidden filled with anticipation. The strange dark cloud that had curled over the rim of the pit had settled low to the ground. From the depths, they all began to hear the thud of heavy hooves on stone steps. The glowing red fire slowly began to split and the footfall came closer.

Owen was peering from under his veil, his heart pounding in his head and one hand held tightly onto the revolver tucked in his belt. Even with what he had learned in the last few strange days and with the careful description he had of One Wing, he was not prepared for the creature that stepped out of the pit.

First, he saw the great rack of blood stained horns, the huge head, the round, flat face with layers of hanging jowls; huge silver eyes shining like balls of molten silver. The body, like that of a huge and powerful human male covered with a mixture of thick, black hair and fine needle like scales. He had powerful legs, long and like that of a horse, his feet cloven. A black satin cape hung on gold rings from the horns, no doubt to cover the deformity of his withered left arm, mismatched, useless wings and rotting

sulk. A long tail layered with razor spikes trailed behind him.

One Wing stood on the lip of the pit, turned his head in full circle to survey the grotto. Owen took a deep breath and for the first time in years asked God for help. One Wing took a step towards Owen then stopped, moving his head from side to side. The feeling that something was about to go terribly wrong began to crawl up Owen's spine. The creature then turned and walked directly to the wagon that had been Emile's. He leaned close to the wagon walls and sniffed the area like a dog.

"Jesus!" Owen thought. "Does he smell Emile's blood?" That fact had never occurred to him.

One Wing made a sound half way from a laugh to a grunt, with his powerful right arm broke the window of the wagon, and pulled away the wall as though it was made of matchsticks.

By then all those hidden knew that things were not then going as planned but the stunned spectators still watched in silent surprise, unaware of the danger they faced. The demon reached inside and pulled out the decapitated body of Emile. He ran it under his nose then turned it so that the torn place that had been the old man's neck faced him, placed his mouth on the hole and began to suck loudly on it. The body hung like an empty sack. One Wing pulled it away from his face and threw it into the pit. He ran his thick, snaked tongue across his mouth and laughed in the direction of the audience.

"Fools!" he laughed a sound that rumbled across the grotto.

At that instant one of the gathered dignitaries, who had finally realized what he was seeing stood and was pulling his revolver from his jacket. "That is not Emile!" he yelled to his counterpoints and pointed his gun at Owen. That was the last he said and did as he took two bullets in his head, one from Edmond and one from Ted. Owen left his place on the stone and ran for cover in the rocks beneath Ted and Harrison, firing on the back row of Claw members as he went. From above Ted and Harrison joined Owen and fired down on the seated men.

On the other side of the pit James and his crew began their attack on the stunned and drunk gypsies. A few managed to gather their wits in time to arm themselves but in the confusion, their wild shots missed their marks. In seconds, all of the gypsies lay dead.

Owen saw one of the Claw run further into the shadows, untouched by the shots that rang out about him. As he ran, he pulled off his hood and Owen recognized him as Wilmot's doctor. The cornered man fired twice at Owen but missed widely. Owen aimed, fired, hit the man then fired again into the body. He turned to run back when he came face to face with Jeffrey.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded angrily. "We do not need you!"

Jeffrey raised his gun slightly higher than Owen's shoulder and fired once, finally killing the only wounded doctor who had been about to shoot Owen in the back.

"Apparently you do! Never assume, my brother. That one was far from dead!" Jeffrey answered as Owen turned in time to see the doctor finally fall dead. When he turned back, again Jeffrey was nowhere in sight.

Then as quickly, as it began twenty one men lay dead. The grotto now filled with gun smoke was silent. Owen moved out into the open and crossed the grotto, stopped ahead of James and his men.

During the fight One Wing, impervious to bullets and the mayhem around him moved closer to the crypt tunnel. He sat on his haunches, as a dog would do. He slowly swung his horned head side to side. As Owen took a few steps closer to him, he stopped the swinging and demanded with a voice that rumbled from deep in his belly.

"Who are you?"

"Owen Tabor!"

One Wing nodded his huge head. "Finally, I meet the bastard son of my Margaret. The imposter! You are no more a Tabor than I am!"

Owen took a few more steps closer but did not dignify the remark with an answer. He needed to lure the creature closer to Edmond.

"And so, why are you here?" One Wing asked.

"To kill Emile Soskice and retrieve the child."

"Then you have done all you want; leave my territory!" The monster stood then taking his own steps closer to Owen, shining his gaze across the collection of men.

"We have come to see the end of you, as well!" Owen answered as he and James took a stance opposite each other, twenty paces at either side of the creature.

One Wing threw his gigantic head back and laughed. He ran his good hand in a circle and then pointed back to himself. "Do any of you have any idea who I am?" his laughter died. His question was heavy with threat.

"Certainly, a freak of nature. Nothing more frightening than your own stink!" Owen answered.

"I cannot be killed!" One Wing spat at them. "I am a favored son of Satan. A ruler of the underworld, a chief of all I see!"

"I am going down there," Ted said to Harrison as he raised himself up on the wall opening.

"That is not part of the plan!" protested Harrison.

Ted told him just what he could do with the 'plan'. "They will need me more down there than up here now. If anything unfriendly moves shoot it!"

"A year's pay isn't nearly enough!" Harrison mumbled to himself as Ted lowered into the grotto.

"A favored son of Satan?" Owen laughed. "I doubt that. Anything as malformed as you would hardly be a pride and joy. Is that not the reason you sit banished to these caves?"

"Your childish insults mean nothing. Take your fools and get out of here. That was my only warning!"

"We will leave when you are done!" Owen leveled his gun and fired directly into the creatures' belly.

One Wing laughed again. He looked down to the open wound, inserted his fingers into the bloody hole pulled out the bullet and threw it at Owen. Instantly the wound closed and healed. He moved his powerful arm across the area; fire flying from his finger tips. Owen had to jump aside to move away from the flames. "I have no fear of you! There is not a man here who can harm me!" He raised his ugly face to the ceiling and howled. A sound so fierce and penetrating it cut to the core of each of the men.

"That is a signal!" Ted said as he reached the side of Owen and pulling the Soskice dagger from his boot. James and Owen did the same.

"I wouldn't be surprised!" Owen agreed.

They heard the flutter of giant wings as the minion appeared from the pit. It was similar to the one they had fought at the Willard cottage but much larger. As it landed, it swung a ring of fire around the men, screaming with rage. The raven circled overhead. Owen climbed on to the top of the first wagon. Shooting at the creature and avoiding the lines of flames, James and Ted moved closer to the wagons luring it closer to Owen.

Lacking the ability to sense the trap the minion followed them, growling and spitting fire. At the very last second, the group of men split into two and moved to either side of him. It turned his back and Owen took his chance. He jumped from the top of the wagon and landed on the slippery neck of the creature. It howled, rose up high on his hind legs and swung his head to try to dislodge him. The raven flew down, landed on the minion's head, and with her sharp talons raked his eyes. It screamed in anger and pain.

Owen knew he could not hold on for more than a few seconds so he thrust the dagger to its hilt into the neck and used the weight of his falling body to pull the knife down and around. The wound was instantly deadly and the creature fell as Owen scrambled out of the way.

One Wing had witnessed the scene as he had done before, squatting on his haunches and swinging head from side to side. "I have legions more like that," he spat at Owen as he and the rest of his men moved closer to him. "But as you challenge me, so it will be!"

"Can't you fight on your own or do you always rely on your animals?" Ted called at him angrily.

From his peripheral vision, Owen saw that Edmond had moved down from the rocks and was hiding behind the first wagon.

"I am chided by a holy man? Yes, my animals, as you call them, will fight for me, priest! I am not bound by foolish human pride." Again, One Wing made the call for help. "Let us see what you can do when faced with many more than one!"

Owen and the rest prepared for whatever might arrive from the pit but for a long while, nothing happened. Quickly the tension began to change. One Wing took a step closer to the pit and called again. His only answer was heavy silence.

"So where are they?" Owen demanded. "These legions of yours; have the abandoned you?"

Then from amongst the flames of the fire pit a tall, cloaked figure appeared. Not walking but flying with large black wings, the ends of each feather tapered into golden swords it soared over them and held in place. All but Edmond stood transfixed with this newest creature. He climbed on top of the first wagon and lay down using a large box as cover.

"You will get no more help from them!" the familiar voice of the winged being called out. "They are all dead!"

One Wing bared his teeth and a low growl rumbled from deep within him. "You...!" He hissed and took a few steps forward, getting closer to Edmond. "So my traitor son wants to die as well!"

The black figure pulled in his wings and floated to the ground. His bright silver eyes glaring with hate at his father. Jeffrey spoke in a voice that boomed across the cavern. "You have come to the end of days and you will fight this last battle alone!"

All of your minions are dead.” He nodded to the astounded group of men and stepped back.

“You cannot kill me, fool! But I will gladly kill you all!” One Wing sent a line of fire at Jeffrey, spun and sent one at Owen, Ted and James. He slashed with his razor sharp tail, slicing Wiggs in half at the waist.

Owen pulled off his burning jacket. He and James moved towards One Wing from the sides. More streams of fire seared the darkness. To distract the monster the raven dived at his head. Her first attempt was successful as she took out one of his eyes. It hung from the socket by tendons. He howled with rage. She flew again at him but this time he caught her with his horns. They pierced the bird's belly. One Wing flicked his head and the raven fell down to the ground.

Knowing that Edmond was in place waiting on the wagon Owen emptied his revolver into the demon's back and shoulder. Screaming with rage One Wing turned caught Owen with his powerful right arm, held him to his body and sliced at his face and chest with the withered claws of his left hand.

The raven, bleeding from her severe wounds, saw this and anger overcame her pain. She flew upwards again and drove her beak into the other eye. Almost blinded now and roaring with rage, One Wing dropped Owen and turned in time to see Edmond stand from behind his cover.

Instinctively he knew who this man was. For the first time in his long existence, One Wing knew true fear and it was the last thing he knew. That last second of hesitation was all that Edmond needed to aim between the horns and fire. One Wing stood frozen for the briefest time; blood spurting from his wounds. He turned towards Jeffrey and tried one last time to send fire his way but fell to the ground; jerking a few times he finally lay still.

Edmond jumped to the ground, ran across to the head of the monster and emptied his gun. He took out his dagger, pulled Ted's from his hand and with a knife in each hand; he began to saw frantically at the creature's neck.

“Stop, Edmond, it's done!” Ted said trying to pull him away. “He's dead!”

“I'll make sure that doesn't change!” Edmond yelled pushing Ted away. He took the creature's head by the horns, turned it making terrible sounds until the neck finally snapped. A few more slices with the knives and the head was completely free of the body. Edmond dragged it to the edge of the pit and pushed it over. “Now I am sure it is dead!” he said, covered with blood and gore.

James rushed to Owen, who still lay face down on the dirt where he had landed when One Wing dropped him. He had three deep cuts down the right side of his face and across his chest. They were bleeding but not a threat to his life. Owen jumped as he regained consciousness and tried to get to his feet. He stopped when he saw the terrible sight before him.

“Is he alright?” Edmond asked coming up to them.

James smiled slightly, greatly relieved. “He won't be as pretty as he was but he will live! Relax!” to Owen he said, “One Wing is dead!”

“Reine!” Edmond called out into the now eerily silent grotto as he and Ted walked the area where they had last seen her. They called for her several times more but there was no sign or sound of her.

James took off his shirt and gave it to Owen to hold against the worst of his

wounds. "Come on!" he called out to the stunned men. "We have to get out of here." The fire from the pit was growing dimmer by the second and without that, they would be completely in the dark.

"For Christ's sake, James, we cannot just leave her here!" Edmond answered.

"Listen," James said, "when Mavis Willard died she just vanished. There was no body...nothing! You saw what that thing did to the raven. Reine is dead, she's gone!"

Edmond looked stunned; his skin under the blood dreadfully pale. Slowly he shook his head and sat heavily on the ground.

"Where is Jeffrey?" Ted asked to all peering into the growing darkness.

"From what I saw he can look after himself," Owen seemed to clear his thoughts as James helped him to his feet. "We have to get out of here while we can still see where we are going and blow these damn tunnels."

Realizing the bleak outlook for Reine, Edmond got slowly back to his feet. Owen took a step and slipped down to his knees.

"You'd better lean on me." Edmond said.

All but Wiggs left through the tunnels they had entered. Not a man turned back to the nightmare for a final look. For those that died there, human and nonhuman, this was their final resting place.

"Maybe it is a good thing that Reine is dead," Edmond said as they moved through the tunnel.

"Do you really feel that?" Owen asked.

"No!" Edmond answered after a small silence. "She was quite the woman, when she was a woman."

"And one Hell of a fucking handy bird, too!" Owen agreed.

As they approached the secret crypt doorway, Owen announced who they were to the guards that he had left behind. The older of the guards held the lantern while the other helped Owen and Edmond up the slippery stone steps and out of the crypt. It had begun to rain. The faint light that came down from the open doorway was very welcoming to the two traumatized young men. Owen, bleeding from his head and chest wounds and Edmond covered in gore from the death of One Wing were a fearful sight in the pale lamp light.

"Jesus!" the younger man exclaimed. "What happened down there?"

"The child?" Owen asked, ignoring a question that he could never have answered.

"I put him in Hanna's hands myself, sir!" the old man answered.

"Thank God! And the dynamite is ready? Jack, you have young legs and can run as if a whore's father was chasing you, am I right?"

"Done that, sir!" Jack smiled at him.

"Count to sixty when we are out of here, set the fuses and get the Hell out of here!"

No one spoke as they made their way to the place outside the cemetery gates where Owen had told them to leave the clip and horses. Edmond was thankful for the rain to wash away the mess that covered him. Owen had his mind set on what he still had to do that night.

They collapsed onto the grass when they reached the cemetery gates and very quickly, they heard the running steps of Jack. He slipped on the grass and tumbled

down the hillside, coming to stop just feet from the gates when the first tunnel blew. Rocks, dirt and debris from the crypt landed all around them. The horses firmly secured to the iron rods reared and strained their ties in fear.

Seconds later they heard the second explosions; these coming from the beach area. Edmond stood and looked in that direction. "The tower!" he exclaimed. "It's gone!"

Owen sat up, tried to smile but winced from the pain. "That will make Isabelle happy. She always wanted it knocked down!"

Edmond nodded, sitting back down on the grass beside Owen. "That is true! She will be pleased of how everything went to night!"

Owen looked at Edmond's face, now cleansed of the blood by the rain. In such a short time, he had changed a great deal. He looked older, wiser and much more confident.

"She will be proud of you, as well! I am and proud to call you my brother! Nothing chances that."

After a moment, Edmond said "Thank you, Owen!"

Then from the distance, they heard the third and final explosions.

"That's it!" Owen said getting to his feet. "It's over. I think!"

"Some one's coming!" Jack called pulling his gun and pointing it in the direction of the rubble that had once been the Tabor family crypt.

"It's me, Jeffrey!" a voice called out through the rain.

"Don't shoot!" Owen said to the young man. Then as Jeffrey came closer, he asked. "What is he carrying?"

"Reine!" Edmond exclaimed scrambling to his feet and running up to Jeffrey. "Is she alive?"

"Yes! But she has been badly hurt!" Jeffrey said as he handed the naked, unconscious woman to Edmond. "I think you will find that from now on she doesn't heal as quickly as she used to!"

"How...?" Owen went to ask. "Never mind!" He shook his head looking Jeffrey in the eyes. "You saved our lives," he said flatly, stunned with shock and getting weak from loss of blood. "We have to talk, Jeffrey!" Owen said as he turned and walked to the clip and untied the horses.

"Where are you going?" Edmond demanded. Reine moaned as she put her arms around his neck. "Aren't we supposed to wait here for the others?"

"Bring her up here! We have to get her out of the rain," Owen pulled one of the blankets from the box they had prepared for Richard and tossed it to Edmond. He wrapped it around Reine and climbed up to the seat next to Owen. "Jeffrey and the others can wait here. I've got something more to do!"

"He's gone!" Jack called out turning in circles trying to find Jeffrey. "He was standing right here, beside me but!"

"Never mind about him!" Owen called back as they rode off.

The women at Hock House grew silent as the hours passed. Margaret prayed and paced the room. Elizabeth sat as though in a trance, listening to the wall clock count off the long minutes. She dared not think of anything but that any minute now she would have her baby back in her arms. Ivy sat in a chair and rocked Alice.

Occasionally she would mumble one of the Gaelic prayers her mother had taught her. Abbey watched from the window, unable to see much through the rain but there seemed

nothing else she should be doing right then.

They all jumped at the sound of the first and then the second explosion but still no one spoke.

"They will be back soon!" Abbey exclaimed after the third explosion. "That is good isn't it? They have blown the tunnels..." her voice trailed away.

Still holding his father's torn shirt to his face and in a great deal of pain Owen turned the horses and brought the wagon down on the main road. Edmond did not have to ask where they were going and why. He held tightly to Reine. The feel of her head on him and the soft rise and fall of her chest under his hand made him feel complete and satisfied with the night's work. He knew then, without a doubt that no matter what she had been she was now his woman and would stay with him.

They pulled to a stop at the covered courtyard of Tabor Hall. "Wait here!" Owen said as he climbed down from the bench. He was shaking and very pale. Edmond was going to call after him and suggest that he get help but stopped, knowing his brother well.

"Oh my Lord!" Hanna exclaimed when Hastings unlocked the nursery door and let Owen in. "You are wounded!" She rushed to him, trying to pull his hand away from his face.

"It is alright," he said, gently pushing her away. "I have been through worse!" The baby was fitfully sleeping, bundled in clean blankets in the crib that had once been Edmond's.

"Is it over?" Hastings asked nervously, still holding the Soskice dagger.

Owen sighed and smiled as best he could. "It appears to be, but if I have learned anything in these last days it is that nothing is just what it seems." He took the dagger from Hastings and slid it into his boot. As far as he was aware all the other Soskice knives stayed buried in the fallen grotto.

Richard had started to whine and was now in full cry. "He's hungry!" Cook said picking him up.

"Then I have just the woman for him!" Owen said reaching for the baby.

"Could I carry him down stairs for you?" Hanna asked, but she had already walked out into the hall and would not give him to Owen until he was back in the wagon.

"Someone is coming!" Abbey exclaimed from her place at the window. "Yes, look! There is a wagon."

Margaret and Ivy ran to the front door.

Elizabeth lowered her head, tears falling from her eyes. "Please, Jesus, please send my child back to me!" she prayed, finally allowing herself to feel the pain she had held in check for the last few hours. She heard the voices at the doorway but dared not listen to their words. She heard footsteps crossing the hallway but could not raise her head to look.

Through her tears, she saw the bundle of blankets and the small crying face as Owen placed Richard on her lap. Behind them, Margaret had closed the door.

"He's fine, but I think he is hungry!" Owen said to Elizabeth as she pulled the baby to her chest.

Now through her tears she laughed with joy. "Thank you, dear Lord, thank you!" She held the baby and kissed his face. "Owen, how can I ever..." Her words



froze in her throat as she looked up his bloodied shirt and saw his terrible wounds.

“Listen to me!” he said pulling a chair up next to her and sitting down heavily. “A while ago I said that I had no promises to give you,” he took a deep breath. What she could see of his face had gone a ghastly gray color. “I do have some now but I think I am going to pass out before I can say them!”

“Margaret!” Elizabeth called.

“No! Listen to me! I do not want you to leave here. I love you, Lizzie! Please say you will you marry me?”

She smiled at him. “Yes!” she whispered through her tears and touched his face as he slid to the floor.

## Epilogue

The three dynamite blasts collapsed the grotto completely. Human remains were found but little else. An investigation, of sorts completed. However, with so many remaining Claw members having a great deal to hide it uncovered nothing that pointed back to the Tabors. Much to the relief of many, the investigation into what was to be called the 'Tabor Explosions' was over and done with very quickly.

Margaret Tabor was very busy in the following weeks. What with healing Owen, Reine, Elizabeth, her frequent trips back to Saint Frances and planning her wedding she had little time to worry or wonder about Jeffrey.

On Saturday the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, Ted married Margaret and James in the colored, dancing lights in the Great Room of Hock House. They began their plans to move the orphanage of St Francis to the many empty rooms of Tabor Hall.

As was his usual way, Owen was not an easy patient for his mother. He resented the time he needed to rest and all the attention. An infection left him with deep scars across his face and chest.

Not over night but quicker than most Reine was on her feet again and helped Margaret as best she could.

Happy and finally free of her nightmare Elizabeth quickly regained her strength. She stayed with Owen day and night. As much as he insisted they marry right away, Elizabeth held her place. They would only marry when he was completely well again.

The baby, Richard, was healthy and content with his mother's constant attention.

Ted went back to London and resigned from his church. By the end of the summer, he lived in a village cottage and held Sunday services, to a full house, in the rebuilt and refurbished church of St. Agnes.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup> Ted married Owen and Elizabeth. One year to the day later she gave birth to healthy twins; a boy and a girl they named James Edmond and Jane Margaret.

When Reine was well, Edmond took her back to Tabor Hall. There they lived openly together in obvious bliss, ignoring the scandalized household. The following summer, shortly before Elizabeth had her twins they found that Reine was also with child. This time Edmond did not need any prodding from Owen to marry.

After some soul searching and long talks with Reine, Ted married them in the Tabor church. Six months later Reine gave birth to a daughter. She had black hair and silver eyes and Edmond insisted on calling her Queenie.

James understood that Margaret did not want to live in the cottage he had shared with Alice. He built her a new home behind Hock House. Ivy and her daughter stayed on in the cottage. In time, Ivy married again, this time to a man worthy of her.

Abbey never went back to the Turtle Dove. She had it sold and bought a cottage in the hills near Dover. She stopped drinking, over eating and regained her health. She became a frequent visitor to the Tabor Estate.

The Tabor Estate was once again a busy and happy place. The halls rang with

the laughter of many small, noisy children and for a few years, everything was as it should be...until Jeffrey returned.

The End.