



Midnight

Megan Derr

Midnight
By Megan Derr

Published by:
Megan Derr
Amasour.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission of the publisher, except for the purpose of reviews.

Edited by Nikerymis
Cover art provided by Loki

This book is a work of fiction and as such all characters and situations are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual people, places, or events is coincidental.

First edition January 2009
Copyright © 2009 by Megan Derr
Printed in the United States of America

ebook version

Table of Contents

The Mad Duke

I. I Rain.....	8
I. II Moonlight.....	16
I. III Black Witch.....	23
I. IV Tradition.....	30
I. V Heartbeat	38
I. VI Precious.....	45
I. VII Dragon.....	53
I. VIII Apple	60
I. IX Necromancy	67
I. X Consequences	74
I. XI Angel	82
I. XII Blood	88
I. XIII Kiss.....	96
I. XIV Hex	104

The Corpse Child

II. I Lost.....	114
II. II Obsessed.....	122
II. III Vampires.....	128
II. IV Flirt.....	135
II. V Monster.....	142
II. VI Fancy.....	150
II. VII Magic.....	156
II. VIII Body.....	163
II. IX Snow White.....	170
II. X Reckless.....	177
II. XI Draugr.....	184
II. XII Reunited.....	192
II. XIII Passion.....	199
II. XIV Dance.....	206

The Mad Duke

I. I Rain

All his adventures began with rain, it seemed.

The time of day varied, of course, but there was always rain.

It fell relentlessly across the city, turning midday into early evening. The window was spattered with raindrops and bits of muck washed free of the crevices by the downpour. The street looked more like a river, and the people rushed about like drowning rats.

He was glad to be inside, even if he was only going to be so for a few more minutes.

A glance at the clock showed it to be just a minute or so past noon.

It was not a propitious hour for beginning his sorts of adventures. He was a nightwalker – better to begin at noon's opposite, but no one ever bothered him at his club or knocked upon his door at the stroke of midnight.

No, they bothered him at noon while the sun was still high. Even if today it was mostly buried by the incessant rainclouds.

Stifling a sigh, Devlin sat up straighter in his chair and gave one last look at the rain and frantic people outside. He signaled the steward to bring him a brandy, for to judge by the expression on Crochton's face he was going to need it.

Crochton made his way slowly across the parlor room of the fashionably shabby club that was Devlin's second-best sanctuary. He preferred his home, but even an aspiring hermit needed a change of pace once in awhile.

Especially when said hermit kept finding himself besieged by social obligations and nightmarish adventures despite all efforts to be a boring hermit. Such obligation and nightmares were in the family tradition, however, so he supposed avoiding them was an endeavor doomed to failure.

The club was simply done up, leather and velvet and dark woods, made to look worn and aged and comfortable at great expense. Men quietly played cards in one corner, while others argued over some article in the rags at another, still others scattered about in ones and twos to read or talk or simply sit in peace and cozy company.

As Crochton crossed the room, every man to the last looked up to watch his progress with not nearly as much subtlety as they liked to believe. Furtive whispers started up the moment he'd passed the first table, eyes shifting from Crochton to Devlin and back again.

Crochton was old, but not yet decrepit. At seventy three, given the life he had led, he looked better than could be expected. He'd lost one eye

to a nasty bit of magic at the age of forty. It was completely black, mostly useless now, a stark contrast to the emerald green of the remaining good eye. His hair had been white since he was twenty, or so he'd once told Devlin. Very little of it remained now. The lines and scars and wrinkles carved into his skin told stories no man should have had to live through. He limped, favoring his right leg, a legacy leftover from besting four hungry goblins.

If he looked half so good when he was Crochton's age, Devlin often thought, he would count himself most fortunate.

He doubted he would live that long, however.

Someone whispered 'the mad duke' a trifle too loudly. Devlin simply look at him, and his table of cohorts, until they all paled and found something else to look at.

All the whispers, all the rumors, and a new one cropped up every time Crochton visited him.

If the bloody fools knew the reality, they would be too terrified to speak. They would likely never know how much of what they said was true. For their sakes, he hoped they did not, but the odds were high that at least one man in the room would someday become aware of the nightwalker world around him.

One man watched the scene with the same dry amusement as Devlin would normally exhibit. A vampire, one with whom Devlin was briefly acquainted. He lifted his glass of seeming wine in greeting as they briefly locked gazes. Devlin nodded, then returned his attention to Crochton, who slowly lowered himself into the nearest armchair.

"Crochton," Devlin greeted. "What in the bloody hell are you doing out in this rain?" He knew it made Crochton's aches and pains all the worse, and it was a bad day for a spry young man to attempt any manner of travel.

"White," Crochton said in reply. "Finding you, you bloody fool. Why can't you ever be at home when I go to find you?"

Devlin shrugged. "Why do you always try there first? Learn from your errors, Crochton. I am home at night, when not being made to work. Otherwise, I like to keep the natives restless." He flicked a taunting smirk at a table of whisperers, who flinched or startled, and hastily went back to their cards.

Crochton snorted. "Your lot never could behave worth a damn."

"Now, that's certainly not true," Devlin said idly, sipping his brandy. "Most of my remaining family recently departed for the new world. Some rot about starting a new, clean coven." He sneered in contempt. "Purists afraid of the dark. Only the elder of my sisters and I remain now, should anyone decide to accuse us of being witches and start the bonfires."

"You are witches."

"That does not mean they have to start burning us over it," Devlin said. "Burning just gets our blood up, and then we are obliged to bear grudges."

"As I said," Crochton said dryly, "the Whites never could behave worth a damn."

Devlin shrugged again. "Misbehavior suits me ever so much better, do you not agree?"

Crochton shook his head, but his one good eye sparkled with mirth.

Finishing his brandy, Devlin motioned. "So tell me about the disaster in which I am shortly to become embroiled. I had just been thinking my life had lapsed into far too ominous a silence. Your arrival is not entirely surprising."

"Indeed," Crochton said, grunting in further amusement. The levity faded, however, as he continued speaking. "Draugr, we think," Crochton said, green eye sharpening to a hawk like focus. "It has not been confirmed yet, but that is my conclusion from what we do know."

"Your conclusion is worth much," Devlin murmured, a knot forming in his gut.

Draugr...

He called for another brandy, and glanced idly at the scars on the back of his hand.

When the normal people of the world were bold enough to ask, he told them a wild animal had bitten him, on a hunting trip gone horribly and amusingly wrong.

If on occasion one of them knew enough to know it was no animal which put the marks on his hand, they were at least smart enough not to press further questions.

Fellow nightwalkers knew better than to ask.

"Hmm," he said at last, frowning. "How is that possible? One or two would not require my presence. They are annoying, but a trifling, really. Rare is the occasion such as the one we shared years ago. Many of the nightwalkers could deal with a walking dead without much trouble, if any at all. The goblins would simply make a stew of the bloody things. To seek me out, the problem must be far more than it seems."

Crochton nodded.

"Why isn't Lord Tamor handling the affair himself? Is it not his territory?"

"Outside his territory, actually. It is, in fact, at the far north edge of the vampire territory..."

Devlin swore. "Bloody hell. That's dragon country."

"Not close enough for them to trouble themselves," Crochton said, the slightest hint of bitterness in his old, cracking voice. "The vampires refuse demon interference, and I'm certain I need not tell you why. You were the compromise."

"Always happy to be of service," Devlin murmured, feeling anything but.

"I do not see why you are being petulant about this," Crochton said. "Draugr are a simple enough matter for you, especially if you take—"

"I am not taking him," Devlin said sharply, giving Crochton a look that brooked no argument.

Crochton harrumphed, but did not press the point.

"So give me the whole of it," Devlin continued.

"Thirteen have appeared so far, at least that is all that we have been told. More likely have risen since our last missive, and those have been few and far between – purely by average means, rather than magical."

Devlin shrugged. "That is not necessarily a cause for alarm."

"I know it," Crochton said irritably. "One never knows, however. Do not get cocky around me, boy."

"I am no boy," Devlin replied coolly. "Thirty three puts me a bit beyond that particular epithet."

"Hmph!" Crochton said, thumping the arm of his chair. "You are forty years younger than I, that makes you a boy in my book."

"Thirteen so far," Devlin pressed, getting them back to the matter at hand.

"Yes," Crochton said, still glaring. "Seven from a graveyard, six unknown. Two reached enormous size, and three were far too close to becoming proper beasts." He looked grimly at Devlin. "Five were most definitely from the sea."

Devlin made a face and drank his brandy. Finishing it, he set the glass down sharply and called the steward. "Pen and paper, now."

"Yes, your grace."

"Thirteen," Devlin said. "Likely more. What on earth connects them?"

"Nothing," Crochton said tersely. "The graveyard ones were from seven separate, completely unrelated families. Not even third cousins in common. The rest are anyone's guess, though five being from the sea, they are most likely sailors, of course."

Devlin nodded. Sea Draugr had only seaweed for heads – to be strictly accurate, it was seaweed wrapped round and round a skull, but all anyone ever saw was the seaweed. There was no chance of identifying who

the draugr might have been while alive, but most often they were lost sailors anyway, so the point was moot.

"Tomorrow is the full moon."

"I know," Devlin said. "I am sending word to my home, then I will leave immediately. Do I need to keep Lord Tamor apprised? I do hope you brought me directions, instructions, whatever all else I may need."

Crochton did not dignify the latter half of his statement with an answer, merely handed over a packet of papers. "He did not explicitly say so," he said.

Devlin nodded, and tucked the papers inside his own jacket, smoothing the deep blue velvet as he withdrew his hand. "Then tell him he will have the full of the tale when I have reached its end."

The steward chose that moment to arrive with the requested pen and paper.

Taking them, Devlin wrote swiftly, waiting impatiently for the ink to dry. When it had, he closed the letter and dripped wax upon it, then sealed it with his signet ring. It bore his family crest, a single, intricate snowflake.

A footman stood waiting in the entryway with his greatcoat. Devlin accepted it with a murmured thanks, allowing the footman to help him into it. Accepting his hat and gloves, he grimaced and finally threw himself out into the rain.

It did not take but a moment to slide into his waiting carriage, but long enough for the water to slap his face and muck to find its way to his boots.

Still, the inside of the carriage was warm and dry, and he hopefully would not have too long a journey.

Pulling out the packet of papers, he smoothed them out and began to read.

Well, so much for a short journey. The city marked was at least three hours away, and in this weather he would be lucky if the carriage did not wind up mired in some wretched mud hole.

Pulling back the curtain, he leaned out just long enough to bellow instructions to the driver, smirking in amusement at the squawk of outrage that brought.

Settling back, he continued to read over the papers.

The sound of movement, and the scent of amaranth, drew his head up.

On the opposite bench sat a beautiful woman. In the dark of the carriage, her features were not clear, but he knew them anyway. Her skin was fashionably pale, hair as black as pitch, with eyes of deepest blue. She was unfashionably tall and imposing for a woman, but a diamond of the first

water in appearance, and the envy of thousands for it. Witty, charming, and too clever by far for anyone's peace of mind.

Though she looked not a day over twenty, she was nearly five hundred years old.

She held out her hand, and Devlin accepted it, dropping a brief kiss on the back. "Consort," he greeted. "As perfect as ever."

Lady Violet laughed. "Lord White, I came to thank you for agreeing to lend us your services. I am certain you and Midnight—"

"Midnight is not coming," Devlin said coolly. "I am being sent to rid a village of draugr."

"Which is why he would be most useful," Lady Violet said with a faint frown. "I do not understand."

Devlin shook his head. "I will not force him to kill his own kind."

"Midnight is wholly unique."

"I cannot be certain how seeing them will affect him," Devlin said. "That is the end of the matter."

Lady Violet bowed her head in a graceful nod. "Of course. I will leave you to it then, Lord White, and hope that all goes well. Call me if you are in need of assistance. The vampires snarl, but they will not go too far."

"I am certain I can manage a few draugr," Devlin said calmly. "My best to you and our estimable demon lord."

"Ta," Lady Violet said, and vanished as quietly as she had appeared.

Devlin shook his head, and glanced out at the rain again. It was growing worse with no sign an improvement was on the horizon. He felt a pang of guilt for the coachman, who must endure the foul weather directly for the next three hours.

Reaching into his jacket, into the special pockets he had put into each one he owned, he withdrew a small drawstring bag of black crushed velvet. Pulling it open, he then paused.

Closing his eyes, he focused — on the driver, the carriage, the weather, the journey's start, and its end. He focused on the cold, the wet, the misery and illness both could bring. Then he focused on driving those negativities back, imagining a wall between them and his driver and carriage so long as the journey continued.

Eyes still closed, he reached into the crushed velvet bag and extracted the three objects which felt warmest to his touch, and came immediately to his fingers.

Pulling them out, he opened his eyes and let out a soft sigh of satisfaction — the runes had drawn true.

"Let it be," he said softly, and cast the runes on the floor of the carriage.

Light shimmered and spread along the carriage, radiating from the runes in a pattern that almost resembled a spider's web, fading away gradually as the spell sank in.

Bending, Devlin retrieved his runes. His sister, the one remaining on this side of the world anyway, preferred to work in the more modern spell circles. They were more reliable, but also more difficult and dangerous.

They also required space, time, and greater privacy, since any normal person who caught her drawing spell circles would start the bonfire straight away.

Not to say rune casting was any safer. Runes were capricious, too often unpredictable – rune casting required trusting that sometimes the runes knew better than the caster, but also accepting that sometimes the caster was not casting properly. Knowing how to tell the difference was what made it dangerous.

He rubbed a thumb over the runes still gripped lightly in his hand.

As always, they made him think of Midnight. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell the driver to turn back, take him home first.

Dark, however, was hours away yet. Midnight was still sleeping. That aside, to alter the journey in such fashion would break the spell he had just cast.

He'd meant what he said, anyway. He did not want Midnight brought in to this affair.

Since coming into his care almost fifteen years ago, and after he had come of age, Midnight had proven an invaluable assistant. But no matter the spells, Midnight was still a walking dead. There was no telling how being around other draugr would affect him.

Devlin did not want either of them to wind up regretting what might come to pass.

He did, however, sorely miss Midnight's gentle presence. Having him along always made these outings more adventure and less nightmare.

For more reasons that he was comfortable contemplating.

He looked again at his runes.

They were simple, plain, as all true and proper runes were. Carved from bone, the marks carved deep, they were always warm to his touch, and grew warmer still when employed.

This set had been made for him the day of his birth, crafted by his father, who had also been a rune master.

Returning two to the bag, he held the remaining to his lips and kissed it softly, whispering a soft prayer. Then he returned it as well, and replaced the bag in his jacket.

Settling back until he was as comfortable as it was possible to be in a carriage, Devlin closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep. He did not doubt he would require all his energy and alertness upon his arrival. Experience had taught him that adventures never waited for him to be ready.

I. Moonlight

"What have we here now?" A woman's voice demanded, slicing through the carriage, loud and sharp and grating, reminding Devlin unpleasantly of his nanny.

Fighting the last dregs of sleep and straightening his clothes and hair, sensing they were a lost cause for the moment, he threw open the carriage door and stumbled his way out. He managed to gain his feet and balance, and stand up straight and tall, just as his driver answered the shrew's demands.

"His grace the eleventh Duke of Winterbourne," the driver announced imperiously. "He has arrived on a matter most urgent and does not care to be impeded. I trust, madam, that you will inform your master straight away."

The woman nodded, but made no move to obey, too busy gawking openly at Devlin.

He resumed the battle with his clothing and hair, giving her a moment to stare and – hopefully – overcome it.

He was not especially handsome, at least he had never thought so. Certainly he was not ugly. Bright blonde hair, well trimmed and generally neat, not quite perfectly straight. Blue eyes, as most of his family bore. Tall and slender of build, but not overly skinny. Some might say he was striking, and his features were attractive enough, but hardly remarkable.

If only it was his appearance that caused the gawking. Suffering from an excess of vanity would be far preferable to the reality.

No, they all gawked because there was not a bloody fool alive who did not seem to know the name Winterbourne.

The Mad Dukes, the Satan lovers, the witches, they who consorted with devils – a family of darkness, who mockingly bore the surname of White.

"Madam," he said finally, when she showed no intention of moving any time soon. "I trust you have lodgings available? Also, my man requires a fire and good, hot food, as well as a good bed."

"Y-yes, my lord. Your grace! Yes, your grace," the woman said, tripping over the words and nearly her own skirts as she came to her senses and hastened to obey, shoving back a messy mop of gray-streaked brown curls, resettling the cap upon her head. "Yes, your grace," she repeated. "At once. Right this way. Your man can go to the kitchens, the cook will fix him up right and proper."

Signaling to his driver that he was free to go, and would not be needed further for some time, he followed the woman into the lodge proper and up to a room on the second floor that proved to be a suite of respectable quality, if not quite up to city standards.

He had, in the course of his adventure, endured far worse than respectable.

"Thank you, madam," he said, and nodded to her. "Food and a hot bath would be wonderful, if you would be so good as to arrange it. Also, a servant of mine should be arriving within the next hour or so. Show him up straight away, if you please, and see he is given all he requests."

"Yes, your grace," the woman replied, and bobbed a curtsy before shuffling out of the room as quickly as she could, no doubt to tell the whole of the village who was staying in her lodge.

Sighing softly, he began to strip out of his greatcoat, gloves, realizing belatedly that he had completely forgotten his hat in the carriage. Shrugging, he tossed the discarded clothes into an armchair and began to go to work on the rest.

A small glass dish rest on top of a bureau in the bedroom, and into this he cast his diamond cravat pin and matching cufflinks. He stripped off his neck cloth with a grunt of satisfaction, then sat down to remove his boots, setting them where they could be taken away for cleaning and polishing. Stripping off his deep blue velvet afternoon jacket, he retrieved his runes and then tossed it in the armchair with the rest of his clothing, and sat back in just his breeches and shirtsleeves.

Taking the runes, he placed them beneath a pillow on the bed, then moved to sit in an armchair with a glass of whiskey.

Several minutes later, the silence was broken by a rap on the door. The woman bustled in bearing a tray heavily laden with food, tea, and what looked like whiskey. She was followed by two large men in livery bearing a massive silver tub.

Behind them came still more servants with the first buckets of hot water.

Devlin sat in silence as they worked to fill it, thanking the woman for the food and what proved to be remarkably good whiskey.

When at last it was filled, he refused an offer of assistance and dismissed them with another word of thanks.

Alone again, he stood and finished stripping. Purely by habit he noted the scars that decorated his body – a long gash up his right thigh, so deep he had feared he would not be able to use it again. If not for his sister, that likely would have been the case.

Knife wounds, bullet wounds, teeth and claw marks, all ran the length of his torso and back, his legs and arms. He was not a pretty sight, at least according to his few foolish attempts at taking any manner of lover.

He looked in the full-length mirror tucked into one corner of the room, near the bureau, hand moving to the only mark which mattered to him – a set of three runes, marked into his skin forever, shimmering occasionally with ripples of magic.

My heartbeat is your heartbeat, my breath is your breath, my soul is your soul, until my heart ceases to beat, and my breath at last runs out, and my soul passes on.

Turning away, he cast the last of his clothes into the armchair pile, and slid into the steaming water with a deep, satisfied groan.

A small table had been set nearby, holding a tray with an assortment of soaps and oils. He picked one at random, more interested in feeling clean than whether he smelled like roses or sandalwood, and quickly set to work, starting with his hair and working from there.

It was only as he was rinsing the soap away that he finally registered the almost sickly sweet scents of vanilla mingled with honeysuckle. Wrinkling his nose, he shook his head and made a note to pay a tad bit more attention next time.

Shaking his head, he rest his head against the back of the tub and simply sat in the warm water, enjoying the heat of the nearby fire, more than content to avoid any thought of draugr for a little while longer.

He stirred only when the water began to turn unbearably cool, and stood up, water splashing all about as he climbed from the tub.

Someone had considerably left a robe for him, the woman obviously having noted he had brought no luggage with him. It was, oddly enough, a trifle too large. Crossing the room, he poured a fresh glass of whiskey and then returned to lounge by the fire until he had suitably dried and warmed.

By the time he had finished the whiskey, he was warm inside and out, and more than happy to continue the nap interrupted by his arrival here. Moving to the large, canopied bed, he shucked his robe and slid beneath the blankets. Pulling them up to rest securely and comfortably about him, he fell into sleep.

He woke with a jerk, gasping as dreams warred with reality, memories and nightmares fading away only slowly as the glow of the fire and the sounds of someone moving about the room slowly registered.

"Sorry, your grace," said a soft, rumbling voice with a trace of Irish accent. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"No," Devlin said groggily, scrubbing at his face, raking his loose hair back. "I should have woken some time ago, if it's as late as I suspect."

"Just on nine o'clock, your grace."

"Thank you, Barra. Your journey went well?"

"Aye, your grace. Well enough. Your lad weren't happy to be left at home. Said to tell you that you will be suffering mightily for it upon your return, but he'll stay home as you bid."

Devlin let out the breath he had been holding since first learning he would be facing draugr. "Good. Have you clothes set out?"

Barra just glared at him.

Laughing, Devlin threw back his blankets and climbed out of bed, crossing to where his fresh clothes were neatly set out on a small sofa. Barra moved to help him, and Devlin permitted it like always, because Barra was happiest when helping and fussing.

When at last finished, he was dressed head to foot in black and dark, smoky grey, black opals gleaming at his throat and in his cuff links, gleaming ebony for the buttons of his jacket.

"I'm going to hunt for draugr, Barra," Devlin said in amusement, "not attending a ball."

Barra sniffed. "No sense in looking like a heathen, your grace. They're sturdy enough, for all they look like ballroom frippery."

"Of course," Devlin said, checking himself in the mirror and fussing briefly with the knot of his neck cloth. Holding out his hand, he accepted the rings that Barra set in his palm, sliding them onto his fingers – the snowflake signet, a blood red ruby set in gold, an amethyst set in silver, and a plain band of braided silver and gold. That done, he permitted Barra to place opal studs in his ears.

"Am I suitable?" he asked at last.

Barra looked at him critically. "Yes, your grace," he said at last. "Do try not to ruin the clothes your first night out, the grey coat just arrived yesterday and you did pay handsomely for it."

"Yes, Barra." Devlin moved away from Barra and the mirror and returned to the bed, reaching beneath his pillow to extract his runes. Striding back across the room, he knelt before the fireplace and closed his eyes. "What have you heard since your arrival?"

"Whole place is warded, your grace. People have protections up thick enough to make me sneeze. Once it began to grow even a bit dark, they took to their houses. There's definitely draugr about, I can smell their traces. I don't envy you having to deal with them, your grace."

Devlin snorted. "I certainly would rather give the task to someone else." No man should have to deal with such a dire case of draugr twice in his life.

Eyes still closed, he focused on the draugr, on the village, on finding and fighting, but also on the safety of the townspeople. Bringing the thoughts together as one wish, one spell, he reached into his bag of runes and withdrew those warmest to his touch.

He did not look at them, but cast them before the fire. The bone seemed to absorb the firelight and flicker with it. He studied the runes in silence for a moment. "Moonlight on water," he said at last. "High land – hills, most likely. The mountains, I think, are too far off and not what the runes intend."

"The pond, your grace?" Barra said. "I heard mention of it, from a woman shrieking at her husband for going out that way when he knows there are demons about."

Devlin rolled his eyes. "Demons. No demon would bother to cause such trouble in vampire territory, especially when it is so close to dragon country."

"Aye, your grace, but you know how the normal folk are," Barra said, and held out his greatcoat as Devlin stood and returned all but one rune to his bag. The last he kissed softly, whispering a prayer, before returning it to its brothers, and the bag to his jacket."

"It would seem I'm going fishing, Barra. Do not wait up for me."

Barra nodded. "Aye, your grace. I'll have breakfast ready?"

"That would be wonderful. Good night, Barra."

"G'night, your grace."

Nodding in reply, Devlin departed.

He did not bother to take a hat, propriety in this case overruled by the fact that he had lost nearly three dozen hats in the course of his eccentric occupation.

Outside, the village was quiet, empty. Even a remote village such as this should not be quite so still at this hour. The pub, at the very least, should have a bit of life to it.

It was not odd the normal folk were tucked safely away in their homes – they always panicked far sooner than the nightwalkers.

That the nightwalkers too were unwilling to brave their own hours...

Frown deepening, Devlin continued on his way along the cobblestone streets, headed north as his runes had bid.

In the distance, he could see the jagged shadow of the mountains that marked the end of vampire territory and the beginning of dragon country.

Strange that the vampires did not simply tend to the matter of the draugr themselves. Walking dead should not pose a real difficulty to vampires.

Then again, this *was* the very edge of their territory; he had not seen a single one since his arrival, and Barra had not mentioned any. Likely they feared adding to the problem with their own presence. Of all the nightwalkers, vampires were most talked about and feared – after witches, of course. Normals were wrong about nearly everything they said, but ignorance often caused more harm than truth.

The vampires might also be afraid the dragons would become tangled up in the affair at some point, in which case a third party was indeed the best option. The dragon clans were nothing if not an entirely too traditional lot.

Faint threads of mist had curled lazily about in the village. Here, just outside it, the mist was swiftly turning into a proper fog. It reflected and obscured the light of the near-full moon.

It also distorted sound, but he had not survived nearly twenty years as a nightwalker by falling prey to the deceitful ways of mist.

His power would be strongest on the morrow, when the moon was full, for the moonlight had ever been the truest friend of nightwalkers. Not that he was anyone to be trifled with even on a moonless night, but the addition of the full moon made everything so much the sweeter.

Unfortunately, it also meant the draugr would be stronger – significantly.

Best to conclude matters as quickly as possible, before the full moon granted powers to the walking dead that would make them ever so much harder to destroy.

This time he did not close his eyes, simply focused on what he desired, needed – moonlight and clarity, to hear and see those he hunted, who would be hunting him shortly if they were not already.

Reaching into his jacket, he did not take out the bag but simply opened it where it rested, reaching into it and extracting three runes that were nearly too hot to hold.

Not looking at them, he cast them into the thick fog. "As you will it," he said softly, bidding the runes to do as they saw fit.

At first, nothing seemed to happen – but Devlin knew patience.

Only a moment later, and the fog shimmered, pulsed, and began to thin once more into a half-hearted mist.

The draugr were strong, but not yet strong enough their magic was superior to his own.

"Bones of my father's father," he murmured, stretching out his right hand, palm up, "return to my hand."

He'd barely finished the words when the runes he'd cast landed softly in his palm. Closing his hand around them, he returned two to the bag, and kissed the last before it joined its fellows.

Mist more or less negated as a threat, he looked around what remained. Dark fields, dotted with stone and shrubs.

The pond was not far ahead, and he did not doubt he would soon be greeting company. The runes had said the safest place to encounter them – both for himself, and to keep the villagers from harm – would be here.

It glistened in the dark, moonlight rippling, like quicksilver over black ink.

The smell struck him before anything else, for draugr were nearly always a pungent lot. He turned slowly, not eager to draw attention if they had not yet spotted him, and waited for the approaching shadows to draw near.

I. III Black Witch

There were three of them, and to judge by the increasingly awful smell, old ones.

Arguments abounded about whether fresh corpses or old corpses made the better draugr. The fresher, the better put together and the longer it would last physically. As they grew in power, the body would weather the changes better. Older corpses, however, took better to the magic. They would grow stronger faster, and be all the better for it – if they survived the rigorous changes required. They'd also had more time to forget any personal elements of what it was like to live – they would not try to find old lovers or family, or their old homes.

It was also a toss up between land draugr and sea draugr, but Devlin had always considered that a pointless argument – one worked with what one had, and if there was no ocean to hand, then land draugr it was to be.

Here, however, both would be available. The three approaching him appeared to be nothing more than low level land draugr – hardly a reason to summon him. They were not even attempting to go on the attack, just heading toward him at a steady gait.

Thinking only of what he faced, what he must do, Devlin reached into jacket and gave his trust to the runes.

Seven were hot to the touch, and came to his hand at once. Holding them loosely, he let his arm rest at his side, and waited.

Their eyes glowed a rich blue that was both dark and bright. These were old corpses, but not terribly old, for significant amounts of flesh remained. The skin was snow white where it still clung to the rotting body, shining in the moonlight where it managed to slip through the mist. The bones, where they peeked through the rotting flesh, looked black.

They were, in fact deepest blue. Corpse blue, some called it. Draugr were a type of walking dead most distinguished by their stark white flesh and dark blue bones.

Now they were moving with a bit more purpose, as the scent of his life fully reached them. They made noises that in a living creature would have been sounds of hunger, hate, even a bit like lust.

Backing up a step as they increased their pace, he threw a single rune at the nearest, calling out as he did so, "As you will it."

He did not wait to see what would happen, merely repeated the gesture at the other two.

As one, they burst into flames that were deep blue and violet, with hints of purest white and dark scarlet. The draugr screamed and snarled as best they were able.

Then they vanished.

Devlin frowned.

Something was wrong. They should have burned to ash, the witch flames shifting from violet and blue to far more common orange and red, as first the curse was burned away, then the remaining magic and corrupted bits of soul used to do the cursing, and finally the body itself.

They should not have simply vanished.

Someone, or something, had called the draugr away before they could be completely destroyed.

Whoever had done it had not only sensed the draugr had come to harm, but had overpowered his rune cast witch fire.

That would require sorcery, or necromancy, at the very least. Surely he would have sensed either, was someone of such magical talent in the vicinity. An alchemist, perhaps, if he was of sufficient skill.

A demon could do it, but this was not a demon's style – they had no need of draugr or other such creatures. Demons had no need of anyone. A sorcerer could be employing a demon, of course, but again there was no need, not if he had a demon at his disposal.

He understood now why Lord Tamor had sent him, and why the vampires had agreed. This clearly ran deeper than simply draugr stirring to protect their possessions. They were not waking, but being woken.

"Bah," Devlin said, and held out his hand, summoning his cast runes.

He did not restore all the runes to his bag, only those he had just used. The others he kept hold of, to use should things shift against him.

It was still far too quiet. Night was never truly silent, when one knew how to listen. A silence this deep was the silence of fear, and it meant that the dead still walked amongst the living.

The runes were hot in his hand, agreeing with his assessment, awaiting their casting.

Nothing stirred. Nothing smelled. Nothing belied its presence.

He did not like it.

Brow furrowed, he turned back to the dark pond, watching the silver ripples as a light breeze stirred the water, upsetting the reflected moon. He looked up. No clouds inhabited the sky, leaving the stars naked and bright, dancing around the queen moon.

He looked back down at the pond, and a sudden burst of heat from the runes made him wince.

That and the splash of water caused him to leap back just in time, as a roaring monstrosity rose from the water, sloshing water all about, spraying him with it, along with what were probably bits of rotted flesh.

Grimacing, Devlin threw three of the remaining four runes he held, calling for the runes to do as they saw fit – the creature burst into witch fire, shrieking in pain, but it did not stop coming toward him.

It was large, easily the size of an ox, here stark white, there dark blue, slimy like the soured meat it was, but with the telltale gleam of scales which said this thing that had once been human was becoming a true monster.

He swore softly and threw his final rune to slow it, reaching to grab more – when bright gold flames joined his dark ones, and the creature was turned to ash.

The presence struck his senses just as he heard a voice, and Devlin whipped around to face it.

"Well, well," said a figure that might have been carved from ice, he seemed so cool and hard. Devlin did not need the light to know he wore the stiff, imposing garb of a priest – and the holy marks of a slayer. "I might have known that if draugr were about, a black witch would be as well."

Devlin smirked, but ignored him for the moment. Turning his back, a tacit insult, he held out his hand. "Bones of my father's father, return to my hand."

Runes back in hand, he deposited all, with a kiss to the last, then finally turned back to the priest. "If I am a witch, you should not suffer me to live, priest. Have you come to kill me?"

"Such a one as you is not worth my time, Duke Winterbourne."

"Hmm," Devlin said. "Here I thought you might be able to do something about the sudden chill I was feeling. I suppose I shall have to light the fire myself."

The priest shifted restlessly – angrily, likely. The bastard had never possessed so much as a scrap of humor. "Why are you summoning more draugr, your grace? Have you grown bored with that abomination you are said to possess?"

"He might be an abomination in the eyes of most," Devlin said coldly, then pointed a finger at the silent, shadowy figure half-hidden behind the priest, "but that, Father Winsted, is cruelty in the eyes of all."

Father Winsted stepped back, chest puffing out with anger and pride. "This? You can only envy the skill."

Devlin stared at the sad, pathetic creature which stood motionless and uncaring as Father Winsted pet it. "That is the saddest excuse for an

angel I have ever seen. Your lot never could perform real magic worth a damn."

"I believe it was holy fire which just saved your worthless skin, witch," Father Winsted replied. "It would behoove you to show a bit more gratitude."

"I am the eleventh Duke of Winterbourne," Devlin replied, reaching up to smooth a hand down his jacket in a gesture of bored amusement, flicking back the lace at his sleeves with a practiced motion, making certain the moonlight caught in the various jewels he wore. "Showing gratitude to lowly priests is beneath me. Especially lowly slayers who form weak angels from a weak will and must use holy fire to kill a draugr when basic witch fire is more than sufficient."

"Arrogance will be your downfall, witch," Father Winsted snapped. "No good ever came from choosing the path of the devil."

Devlin shrugged. "The devil always hosts a better fete, and he is by far the better dancer. I do not work well when priests are about, so I shall leave the draugr hunting to you this night, Father. Do indulge me though – who bid you come here?"

"None but the lord."

"I was afraid of that," Devlin replied, and walked past him, headed slowly back toward the village.

Marvelous. Draugr were not enough, now he must contend with a money-hungry slayer. Hadn't they all been killed off and eaten by goblins yet? He had not stumbled across one for so long, he had half-hoped they had finally passed out of existence.

Draugr, slayers, he did not want to know what might cross his path next.

"Your grace!"

He looked up as Barra came loping toward him. "What is it?"

"A priest—oh, never mind. Sorry, your grace. I had hoped to find you before he did. Smelled him right as I was bedding down for the night."

Devlin gripped his valet's shoulder in comfort. "Quite all right, Barra. I should have sensed him before I did, but the draugr rather took all my concentration."

"So you did find them, your grace?"

"Yes," Devlin said. "Something most strange is afoot. Did you bring my books?"

Barra bristled. "Of course I did, your grace, and Master Midnight added a few more to the pile as well. Said you should have thought of them, but probably were too distracted."

Devlin smiled.

"Your grace...what with the draugr, and the priest now...did you see his angel? Terrible shame, that one – do you think it might be prudent, begging my forwardness and all..."

"No," Devlin replied to the question Barra did not quite manage to ask. "Midnight is to remain home, and that is final. The more I see of this mess, the better I feel he did not come."

That was not true. He ached for the soft smile that made eased him no matter what his mood or troubles, the touching words that always discomfited, but warmed nonetheless.

He lightly touched his chest, feeling the warmth of the marks over his heart.

"Look sharp, your grace," Barra said. "That bloody priest is coming 'round again."

"I am overcome with excitement," Devlin murmured, making Barra laugh.

He turned slowly, resisting an impulse simply to walk away – it would just annoy the good Father all the more and compel him to follow Devlin back to his lodgings.

"Father, is it not well past the time when good, god-fearing children should be tucked into their wee beds?"

"Tis my divine duty to slay the heathen creatures infesting the night and drive them back into hell where they belong. Should I start with that filthy mongrel you call a manservant?"

Devlin regarded him coolly, looking down his nose at the supercilious bastard with every scrap of condescension which bred into him. "Strictly speaking, sir, only demons come from hell and they are always summoned by others. It is impossible for them to come if not called. This man is not my manservant, but a trusted and valuable assistant. If you so much as harm a hair upon his head, I will kill you."

"Threatening a man of the cloth, are you?" Father Winsted asked, seeming more amused than angry.

"No," Devlin replied. "It had been my experience that threats are most often empty. I do not make threats. I make promises. Do not hunt those who belong to me, do not even insinuate that you might. I have killed for far less."

Father Winsted glared, his smug amusement gone. "You are the one who requires killing."

"You are welcome to try. Certainly your ancestors put enough of mine to the pyre and listened to their screams. What stays you from doing so now?" He bared his teeth in a smile of mocking cordiality.

In reply, Father Winsted only glared hatefully.

Still all charm and smiles, Devlin asked, "How is your little sister these days, Father?"

"One day, Duke Winterbourne, I will see you put to death," Winsted snarled.

"I do not doubt that one day I will die with your knife in my back," Devlin said. "However, the blood debt you owe me will stay your hand a little while longer, and we both know you are not quite foolish enough to spill the blood of a witch so close to the full moon. Holy man you might be, but fighting with the devil is simply another manner of dance. Ta."

With that, he turned and walked away, Barra close upon his heels, ever watchful.

This time, Father Winsted did not pursue them.

"No mistake, your grace," Barra said a few minutes later. "That one won't be happy 'til bathes in your blood."

"Indeed," Devlin replied. "I expect some day he shall. I do not doubt he helped persuade my brother and sister to depart for the new world to find salvation." He grimaced.

Barra snorted. "Whites have always been black witches, and the very best of the lot. 'Tis a sad day indeed when they begin to follow the path of the so-called righteous."

"All things come to an end, Barra," Devlin said quietly. "Everything which rises must someday fall. The Whites were always bound to decline someday." He smiled faintly. "We shall not fade away entirely, however. Too many fortunetellers have declared we would live forever, one way or another. Perhaps some of that time will be amongst the righteous, but the truth will out. One day we shall all be black once more."

"Aye, your grace."

They lapsed into silence then, content to say so until they reached their lodgings. "My books, Barra," Devlin said as they entered the building. "Perhaps a pot of tea as well, if one can be found about this place at this hour?"

"Of course, your grace. Bite to eat as well, I should think. Back in a blink, and the books will be on your bed," Barra replied, and left him at the foot of the stairs to see to it.

Climbing the stairs, Devlin let himself into his rooms and promptly stripped down to his black waist coat, casting all else aside for Barra to tend. Then he strode across the room to the bed to take up the half dozen volumes sitting upon it.

Three were of a goodly size – one bound in black leather, with archaic symbols written in an ornate script across it. The second was bound

in deep blue leather, stamped with silvery runes. The last was bound in red leather, and bore no markings.

Of the remaining three, two were of an average size, both bound in plain brown leather, with only simple runes stamped along the spine, and the snowflake crest on the front. They were spelled so that only those of White blood could open them, or those who had permission freely given.

The last was small enough to tuck into his jacket should he desire. It was a compendium of his encounters with the walking dead. He had started it a little over fourteen years ago, when a night which had started out so simple and calm had turned into a complicated nightmare and thrown him down the path to becoming an expert not simply on nightwalkers, but on the walking dead.

Moving to the fireplace, he set the books on a small table beside one of the deep armchairs there. Settling comfortably into it, he took up the larger black book first. As always, Midnight proved an invaluable assistant – even at a distance, he filled in the holes Devlin left.

The black book was a general history of magic in the area – when the various types of nightwalkers had begun to appear, when the vampires had staked their claim, what little information was available on the reclusive, secretive dragon clans. It was not a book he had thought to request, being far more interest in his family grimoires and two of his more interesting bestiaries.

Ignoring the pang that came with thoughts of Midnight, Devlin settled down to read.

I. Tradition

He muttered to himself as he read, a habit of old that had often had his siblings groaning and complaining and throwing things at him until he shut up.

More than once, he found himself starting to speak more loudly and clearly, as though to another person. He also caught himself looking up to catch a patient, gentle smile, or starting to give an order to jot something down.

He scowled every time he did it, growing increasingly aggravated. Honestly, was he so attached?

The answer, he conceded reluctantly, appeared to be yes. It should not come as a surprise, for he had always made a poor hermit. He was the oldest of four, and had ever been surrounded by two boisterous sisters and a reckless brother. His parents had been just as vibrant, perhaps to counter the grim realities of living a nightwalker's life. He was the eleventh Duke of Winterbourne, a position that had more than a few conventional obligations in addition to his decidedly unconventional responsibilities. He had little use for normal companions, but counted several nightwalkers as friends, and dozens more as comrades in arms and associates.

Barra had been with him even longer than Midnight; he was far more friend than manservant.

Despite their profound stupidity, he still loved his siblings who even now were still crossing the sea to find a new home. He treasured his remaining sister all the more for being the only one to stand with him. He still missed his parents something fierce.

He did not deny he loved Midnight. From the very first, Midnight had stirred something protective and fierce. How could he not love Midnight, who shared his heartbeat, breath, and soul.

Still, he should not be...oh, bugger it. He was pining away like a homesick lover, though he certainly did not love Midnight in such fashion.

What was Midnight doing now? At this late hour, with no one else about, he was likely buried in the library. Perhaps stretched out on the long chaise Devlin had put in there solely for Midnight. He had been a voracious reader from the very first, reading faster than Devlin could acquire new volumes.

He might go in search of a bit of fresh blood, a rare indulgence but one Devlin granted him. He did not require it the same way as other living

dead, but enjoyed it in much the same fashion Devlin enjoyed his brandy. He certainly drank far less than the peasant vampires wandering about all over the city.

Swearing softly, Devlin slammed his book shut and returned it to the pile on the table. Rubbing his temples, he forced away thoughts of Midnight. He did not need him to do this; it was foolish to feel so out of sorts simply because a trivial pattern was broken. Another day or two and he would be home again, and all would be well.

Nodding, he reached out and picked up the red-bound book.

The pages were hand written in an elegant, spidery script, the writing frequently interspersed with drawings, diagrams, and other useful visuals. It was a bestiary that focused exclusively on the walking dead, and extremely rare. Only three other copies of it remained.

It was only one of many valuable books in his family's collection.

Not a one of them, he could not help thinking with a hint of smugness, contained anything even remotely similar in nature to Midnight.

He sighed as he realized that the very moment he had let his guard down, his thoughts had gone straight back to his absent companion.

When had he become so dependant upon Midnight? How had he never noticed?

Perhaps it was simply because they had never been apart so long, for Midnight had helped him from the very moment he was old enough, strong enough, to do so. Before that, he had taken Midnight along with him anyway, far too worried about what might happen were he to leave his mysterious charge alone.

Too many had wanted Midnight killed once and for all. Still others, when seeing what he had done, had wanted to learn the spell, duplicate it. He had not dared let Midnight out of his sight, in those earliest days.

Now he could not even study without Midnight near to hand, far too used to reading and dictating, while Midnight transcribed his words and bickered over every last one of them.

He rubbed his temples again, chagrined by the depths of a dependence he had never even noticed was there.

The sound of the door opening drew his attention, and he looked up, grateful for any distraction.

"Tea, your grace," Barra called as he came bustling in with a tray that was piled high with a good bit more than tea. "I managed to nick a bit of left over supper, as well. Books proving useful at all, your grace?"

"Yes," Devlin said. "A bit." He accepted the cup of tea Barra held out, taking several sips. Strong and sweet, perfect as always. "Marvelous. Thank you, Barra."

"Aye, your grace," Barra said, then grinned. "You look a bit put out, if you do not mind my saying so, your grace."

Devlin glared at him over the rim of the teacup. "Only if you are about to encourage me to summon Midnight."

"Oh, I would never be as impertinent as that, your grace."

"Indeed," Devlin retorted, "and I am destined for sainthood." He stared into his teacup. "Something is odd, where the draugr are concerned. I also do not like that Father Winsted has shown up; his presence never bodes well. I will not risk Midnight in this venture."

"As you wish, your grace," Barra said peaceably, though it was clear he still disagreed with Devlin's decision. He held out a bowl filled with a thick, warm soup. "Have a bite to eat, then, before you get back to work. That and a bit of rest, and I haven't a doubt you'll solve the mystery before another day has passed."

"Let us hope you are correct," Devlin said, and accepted the fragrant soup.

Several hours later, he felt game enough to begin the next stage of the investigation.

The greatest difficulty in being a nightwalker was the hours – especially when one was a Duke, and had normal matters in addition to duties decidedly abnormal. In his case, there was also Midnight to consider, who could not walk about in sunlight.

It meant his life was composed of snatching sleep where he might, and oft times that meant sleeping through the morning and early afternoon. He was, fortunately, considering an eccentric – peculiar sleeping habits only made him more so.

By the time he was fed, rested, and ready to face the world once more, it was just past two in the afternoon. Beyond the windows of his rooms, the sky was overcast and gloomy. Barra had already warned him it felt far more like winter than autumn, and had dressed him accordingly.

Today he was dressed in black and deepest red – hardly subtle, but as his presence here was already well noted, subtlety was hardly a requirement. He let Barra do as he pleased, only fussing for form's sake.

"Ready, your grace," Barra said from where he stood near the door, dressed himself for the inclement weather.

"Excellent," Devlin replied, and shrugged into his great coat, settling the heavy folds of it into place. Then he took up the gloves Barra had set out, pulling on the supple black leather and flexing his hands to settle them just so. "Lay on," he said at last. "The pond first, I think. Let us see if some manner of clue managed to survive the good Father's holy fire."

"Aye, your grace," Barra said, and opened the door, following behind Devlin and locking it up. "It's doubtful, of course. That angel was poor-made but strong."

Devlin grimaced, balling one leather-clad hand into a fist. "Yes, they dump their will into the power and very little else. A pity. Angels are beautiful when properly made. It is something of a lost art these days, I fear. Neither here nor there, at the moment."

He nodded absently to the people clustered together in the main hall downstairs, ignoring their gawking, and led the way out into the street.

In stark contrast to the previous night, the streets were filled with people rushing about on errands, off to visit friends or family, and nightwalkers here and there doing what could be done during the light of day – savoring it, no doubt, for many nightwalkers simply could not pass for normal in sunlight.

Plenty of staring followed in his wake, but Devlin ignored them all, his attention solely for the pond, the draugr.

Unfortunately, the pond turned up nothing. He found a trace of ashes at the pond's edge, but not even his considerable skill could pull any information worthwhile from it.

When priests destroyed something, they did the job thoroughly. Devlin had to concede that much, if reluctantly.

He frowned in thought, looking out over the pond, the surrounding land – hills and fields, a rolling landscape of dark green, stone walls, rock, and jagged shrubbery. Combined with the dark clouds overhead and the chill in the air, it was both reminiscent of his family home and the stuff of nightmares.

"The first three came from that direction," he said, pointing toward the mountains. "I doubt they came from dragon country, for surely those bloody knights would have bestirred themselves to tend to a few draugr, but there may be something afield we cannot see here."

Barra nodded. "Shall I shift, your grace? I'm picking up smells aplenty, but I could pick up more..."

"Do so, then," Devlin replied.

Nodding again, Barra went perfectly still – then bent over and fell to all fours. By the time he touched the ground, he was no longer a man, but a large wolf with russet fur. His green eyes were all the more vibrant in this form.

He chuffed, and nudged Devlin's hand, then darted off, nose to the ground as he explored.

There was a delicateness to him that no werewolf naturally possessed. A rough lot, werewolves; a nightwalker race more than happy to

cling to their savage, wild ways rather than succumb entirely to civilized ways.

If a wolf could be pretty, that was certainly Barra.

Unfortunately, it was a trait held against him. Devlin had, in fact, encountered Barra when he was being attacked by full-blooded wolves. He had sent the wolves fleeing for their lives, then taken Barra home – partly out of concern, but partly out of curiosity.

Someway, somehow, Barra had never left.

Barra let out an excited bark, then bolted.

Devlin chased after him, running fast enough to lose sight, but not foolish enough to try and keep up.

They moved steadily through the countryside, pausing here and there, as Barra turned up burial mound after burial mound, some more obvious than others – far too many of them empty. Still more seemed undisturbed, and Devlin warded them as best he could.

He wished he could say that would be sufficient, especially as it always had been before...but something told him matters would not be so simple this time.

Casting a ward over the last, he recalled his runes and replaced them in his jacket.

Looking around, he saw more time had passed than he had realized – and they were right at the mountains now. Returning to the village would take them hours, likely. Evening was already beginning to encroach.

Damn it. He should have taken more care.

He hoped his wards would hold, because to be out here when the moon rose and the draugr with it...

Shaking his head, he dismissed worries about which he could presently do nothing, and looked around for Barra.

Barra roamed the field, nose still to the ground, pausing every now and then to chuff at Devlin, friendly easy noises that said he was enjoying their work, and felt they were making progress.

Then just as abruptly he whimpered and bolted toward Devlin, tangling in his legs before sinking to lie at his feet, whining softly and plaintively.

Devlin frowned and knelt, stroking and petting. What in the devil would frighten and cow Barra so? Especially to the point he did not shift back into his mostly human form.

The question was answered even as he silently asked it, as two figures slunk out of the scrub of trees lining the mountain side.

One was human, tall and broad and handsome in a fierce way. His hair was dark gold, eyes dark, his features the kind that one associated with

ancient portraits of noble kings and lofty lords. He was dressed entirely in black, save for hints of a deep violet waistcoat. His jacket fell to mid-thigh, only half the prominent metal buttons done up, leaving the bottom half open – likely for the man to better access the sword hanging low on his left hip.

He walked with a confidence – an arrogance – that not even Devlin possessed.

Most of it due to the creature which moved with the sinuous grace of a predator alongside him. Despite the fading light, the creature's dark-silver scales gleamed, and its amber eyes glowed. It growled low as they drew near Devlin and Barra, tail lashing back and forth with restless grace.

"Who are you, who dares to trespass upon the land of the Pendragon?" the man demanded coldly.

Devlin stood slowly, careful not to alarm the growling dragon. He met the man's eyes, which this close proved to be dark brown, without flinching. "Who are you, who dares to demand a name without giving your own? I have not trespassed quite yet, and will not tolerate such blatant rudeness."

The man grunted, annoyed but conceding the point. "I am Neirin du Lac, knight of the Clan du Lac, in service to the Holy Pendragon." He dropped one hand to rest it lightly upon the head of the dragon. "This is Troyes. I ask again, witch, who are you?"

Before he could speak, Barra shifted back to his mostly human form. Standing straight, despite the fact he was clearly unsettled by the fearsome dragon. "He is Lord Devlin White, eleventh Duke of Winterbourne."

Neirin's brows went up. "Winterbourne? What brings a rune master of such notoriety this far? Have you business with Pendragon?"

"No," Devlin said. "I was asked by Lord Tamor and Dracula North to investigate a draugr problem in this vicinity. Unless it spills over into dragon country, I cannot think I should need to put your people to any trouble. I drew close only because my assistant followed their scent this far."

The dragon growled again, more loudly, head swinging up to look at the transformed Barra. Neirin did likewise, eyes looking pointedly at the delicately pointed ears. "Yes," he said, voice dripping distaste and disapproval. "What manner of mongrel are you? Obviously wolf, and the ears are decidedly elfin...peculiar indeed."

Barra flinched, as though struck, and recoiled to stand behind Devlin.

Devlin immediately reached for his runes. "Your manners leave much to be desired, knight. Has your lot forgotten kindness, so consumed by being coldly superior? Is chivalry so dead?"

"I do not answer to you, rune master," Neirin replied curtly. "The clans act with a purpose, whether it is understood by outsiders or not. What is this about draugr? No such thing has been seen about here, and Troyes has not smelled them."

The dragon – Troyes, Devlin supposed – made a sharp barking sound. He had never actually seen a dragon before, and had assumed much of what he had heard to be overblown rumor.

It would seem it had all been very much fact. The dragon was large, nearly the size of a small pony, and half as long again. Beautiful as only deadly creatures could be, all teeth and scale and that wicked looking tail.

He startled as the dragon abruptly shifted into the form of a handsome, even pretty, young man with longish black hair and amber eyes, dressed much like Neirin save for a blue waistcoat and no sword, and boots that climbed to his thighs rather than stopping at his knees.

"Lord Neirin," Troyes said in a voice that still held a hint of draconic growl, "Smell moving death here. I could not before." His nose wrinkled, twitched. "Witch magic." He looked at Barra. "Wolf. Elf. Human."

Barra flinched again.

"Leave him in peace, dragon," Devlin snapped, "or I will show you that even an overgrown snake like you can have cause to fear me."

The sound of a sword being drawn drew his attention back to Neirin, and Devlin was impressed despite himself at the man's movements, his simple presence – arrogant and aggravating, but it would seem he had earned the right to be so, at least to some degree.

"Do not offer a challenge you are not fit to meet, rune master," Neirin said. "I promise you and your mongrel are no match for Troyes."

Devlin smirked. "Do not be so certain, knight. I have fought and survived far worse than you. Do not insult those who fall under my protection. Barra has done you no harm, and he is owed an apology."

"I owe nothing of the kind," Neirin replied. "I speak only the truth – he is a mongrel. My dragon only picked out the individual parts, and named them. There was no insult given, and it your fault for construing one."

"Certainly I can see why no one continues to listen to your great fallen king," Devlin replied curtly. "I guess he has forgotten that once he too was a mongrel. Take yourself off, knight. I do not waste my time by fighting with presumptuous children. My concern is solely for the draugr, and as I doubt you will stay and lend your assistance to the matter, best to take yourself off."

Neirin's eyes flashed with anger. "Now who is casting needless insults? If you insult my liege again, rune master, then you will get the fight you are obviously seeking. My assistance I would have lent, but I will not

fight alongside a man so unworthy of it. Do not trespass upon the lands of Pendragon, rune master, for you will find no welcome."

With that, he sheathed his sword and turned sharply around, striding away with all the arrogance he had displayed walking toward them.

Barra spoke when they had finally vanished into the trees from which they had come. "Apologies, your grace. Never met anything like that before – I did not mean to present you so poorly to them."

"I felt no shame by your presence, Barra, and you well know it," Devlin replied, gripping his shoulder in a gesture of comfort. He smiled. "They were just angry that we are both prettier by far. Come on, then, let us explore a bit more before we return to the village. A chance, but one we must take, for that damnable knight cost us precious time and we need whatever clues to this affair your nose can find."

"Aye, your grace," Barra said, and shifted back to his wolf form.

I. O Heartbeat

Dark fell hard and fast, and Devlin should have made for the village far sooner than he did.

They travelled swiftly but not, he feared, swiftly enough.

Barra panted close by, though he was not running as fast as he could, because there was strength in numbers and he was too loyal to leave Devlin simply to reach safety sooner.

It was cold now, a bitterness to it that hinted at the coming winter.

"I sense no draugr," he said. "Barra?"

Barra growled, but in a way that indicated all was well for the moment.

Mist was curling all around them, but it did not have the feel of being magically summoned. He hoped it remained that way. They certainly would have to face draugr at some point, but he preferred to do it closer to the village, should matters take a dire turn.

Hopefully it was not much further.

His hopes were dashed by Barra's low, warning growl – followed immediately by a shrill scream.

"Damn it," Devlin swore, and promptly followed when Barra took off running, anxious not to lose him in the dark and mist.

The scream came again, definitely that of a woman, probably young.

They found her in a small house a mile or so from the rough path they had been following – and he thought he glimpsed gravestone through the mist as the shadowy shape of the cottage itself came into view.

She was curled up in the doorway, screaming for dear life and clutching what looked like a rosary as three figures closed in on her.

Two of them were overlarge, the changes occurring too fast for the rotting carcasses, causing the flesh to swell and split, completely burst open in places. The smell would have made him gag, save he was far too used to it.

Barra threw his head back and howled. The sound was high and sharp and piercing, and carried a hint of magic to it, the unique affinity all elves possessed for living things.

The draugr were far from living, but they likely remembered it, and would be drawn to the power and life Barra offered up so prettily.

Turning away from the screaming woman, the draugr began moving toward Barra.

Distracted by the howl, the pretty bait, they forgot to look for a hook.

Devlin cast his runes, one to each creature, three in total, and left four in his hand.

They burned, screams drowning out the woman's – then vanished.

He swore, loudly.

The woman's screams abruptly cut off.

"Barra," he said sharply, sensing more dead, wondering what had become of the woman. "Go find her."

The mist was a proper fog now, thick and dangerous – but he dare not waste his runes at the moment, for in the time it would take him to retrieve them, or simply draw new ones, they would be upon him.

"Safe," Barra called out. "She got inside, and has barricaded it I think."

Devlin nodded, some of his tension easing. At least the woman was safe, and now they could work without having to look out for her as well. "More are coming."

"Aye, your grace," Barra said. "I can smell at least six of them, and two are right bastards."

"Bloody hell," Devlin said, and recalled the runes he had already thrown.

Barra frowned. "I smell the ocean, your grace."

Devlin shook his head. "Impossible. The sea is on the opposite side of the village. There cannot be sea draugr here! It has only been dark a few hours, and it would take them most the night to travel such a distance. Confound it!"

Then the draugr were upon them, and these ones did not move slowly. No, these were more powerful, and six turned to seven, turned to eight, and every time he struck one, two more seemed to take its place.

None of them remaining long enough to burn away. Shortly after the witch fire struck, they simply vanished, and more appeared to take the place of the lost.

Land and sea, precisely as Barra had smelled.

Devlin cast his runes, and realized he was out. He was beginning to tire. Dodging the large, heavy arm of an extremely swollen draugr already beginning to show scales, he knocked hard against the side of the house, and realized abruptly he was far more tired than he had first surmised.

These draugr were not attacking aimlessly – these were no greedy beasts eager for life or desperate to protect their belongings. These were coordinated, and attacking with some greater purpose, being driven or guided.

Being controlled.

He held fast to his runes, depositing most of them back in his velvet bag, keeping seven in hand, lurching to his feet and drawing upon his remaining strength, forcing his mind to work.

One scaled draugr was suddenly two, and Devlin fumbled with his casting, too tired—

Then one gave a garbled, pained cry, and tumbled to the ground.

He did not waste time in wondering, but cast his runes, watching it burst into flame and vanish.

The second did not get a chance to make a sound

Instead, its head was suddenly gone, torn away by a fearsome strength. The body fell to the ground, and lay still.

He cast his runes again, and watched in amazement as this time the body actually burned. The flames shifted steadily from deepest violet slowly down to basic orange, until finally going out, leaving only a pile of ashes.

Barra growled, and he followed the sound, swiftly burning two more decapitated bodies.

When the last was done, he cast out his senses. He could feel no more draugr.

Except...

"I told you no," he said softly, knowing the barely audible words would be heard anyway.

Gentle laughter drifted back toward him.

Then the fog began to clear. Slowly, bit by bit, it faded from the thick soup it had become to a thin mist, to delicate tendrils...and finally vanished altogether.

Without the fog, the night was clear and cold and sharp. High above, the full moon shone bright silver, casting down its light in a dreamlike parody of midday.

Atop a dark horse – a dark brown stallion, Devlin knew, for it was his own favorite horse – sat a figure whose snow-white skin seemed to glow in the moonlight. His hair looked black, but Devlin knew it was a deep, rich blue. It fell just past his shoulders, and had probably been tied back at some point. Unlike Devlin and Barra, he did not wear a heavy coat, merely a black brocade jacket with a subtle skull and crown pattern.

He did not even wear gloves, though they were likely tucked away somewhere. His nails were as dark as his hair, and would be just as blue in full light. Like his eyes, as deep and dark as a sapphire, or the depths of the sea. His face was that of an angel's, but his smile was the devil's as he slid from the horse and swept Devlin a careless bow.

"You should not be here, Midnight," Devlin said. "I gave explicit instructions that you were to remain home this time."

Midnight rose to his full height, jerking his head to sweep his long hair back over his shoulders. He laid a hand on his chest, over his heart. "The pen said one thing, but I heard quite another, heartbeat."

Devlin scowled. "It is not safe for you, not with the draugr acting so oddly. I do not care what you decide to hear."

"I hear only you, heartbeat," Midnight said, and Devlin refused to be soothed by the fond, gentle smile Midnight gave him.

Refused.

Midnight's smile faded as he looked out over the moonlit field. "Yes," he said thoughtfully. "There is a...song...a song for the dead. It is beautiful, enchanting even. Compels the draugr to wake, and walk, and kill, and whatever else the siren song chooses."

Devlin frowned. "You are not enchanted."

The smile returned, and Midnight moved toward him, reaching out to rest a hand lightly upon Devlin's cheek. "The angelic choir would never sound half so beautiful to me as your voice, heartbeat." Midnight touched his own chest with his free hand. "I hear you, and feel you, to the exclusion of all else."

"Cease," Devlin said, refusing to flush like a schoolboy, feeling a discomfiture that only Midnight could draw from him.

Midnight laughed softly, and let his hand slide away.

"I suppose it would be a waste of time and effort to order you home," Devlin said with a sigh. "Damn it, Midnight."

"You could not expect me to ignore your summons," Midnight said. "Hearing you but being forced to stay home was a cruel thing to ask of me. I had to come."

Devlin sighed again, but let the matter drop. "So what is the point of origin for this siren song?"

Siren song. That was deep magic – a spell, most often in the form of music or song, that compelled those who could hear it to do whatever the spell said, to the point the victim would even kill himself. It took a powerful magic user to cast such an enchantment.

Especially one who managed to cast it over walking dead.

"I cannot tell," Midnight said slowly, frowning pensively. "It comes from nowhere, and everywhere. Peculiar. Impressive. That is sorcery at the very least, or necromancy, yet I sense neither. Only hear the song."

Devlin frowned. "The spell could be distorting your perception of the location, but neither I nor Barra have sensed the presence of a powerful magic user. I am the strongest in the region, at the moment." Which

suddenly reminded him he had not collected his runes. Holding out his right hand, palm up, he recalled the runes, kissing the very last one before tucking all away in his jacket.

Midnight watched him go through the ritual, an intensity to his faintly glowing dark blue eyes. "So what shall we do, heartbeat?"

"If you are here, I suppose we can press on with our explorations," Devlin said reluctantly.

He would definitely be an extremely useful addition – Midnight was the penultimate draugr, and more besides. So long as Devlin lived, so too did Midnight, but he was still a draugr, with all their strengths and weaknesses.

Sunlight was his greatest enemy, followed by the holy magic wielded by the likes of Father Winsted. Thanks to the spell that granted him life, he did not crave or need the flesh of the living to maintain a semblance of life – unless he exhausted his strength, in which case he most often drank blood from Devlin or Barra.

Unlike most draugr, he did not grow to enormous proportions as many did before they settled once more into a more human like shape. He could, however, shape shift as only the most powerful draugr could. His alternate shapes were a raven and a cat, both of a blue so deep they could be taken for black except in the sunlight Midnight would never see anyway.

Midnight smiled at him again, reaching up to brush back a long strand of hair. The movement pulled on his sleeves, drawing them back just enough to show a bit of the runes marked into his skin. A ring of runes wrapped around his wrists, ankles, and throat. A cluster of runes rest on his lower back, still more on his abdomen, with the three master runes forming a triangle over his heart. They were twin to the marks over Devlin's own heart.

Heart, breath, and soul.

"Shall we then, heartbeat?" Midnight asked.

"Yes," Devlin said, "but do not think that you are not in trouble for defying me, Midnight."

Midnight grinned. "I will accept whatever punishment I must, so long as I am by your side."

"Oh, do stop it," Devlin said, fighting a smile, refusing to be anything but aggravated Midnight had defied him.

"Yes, heartbeat," Midnight replied. He stretched, and spun around in a circle. "A beautiful night for hunting, hmm? Could the magician we seek be hiding out in dragon country?" His eyes glowed brighter. "Do you suppose we might see a dragon?"

Devlin winced. "We already saw one, earlier."

"Oh," Midnight said, slumping in disappointment. "What was it like? Are they as fierce as everyone says? Do they really have silver scales?"

"More like steel, really," Barra said. "They shone more like metal than scale, for a certainty. Right bastards, if you ask me." More than a trace of bitter unhappiness thickened his voice.

Devlin's mouth tightened. "Yes. They could give me lessons in arrogance."

"That *is* impressive," Midnight murmured, snickering when Devlin glared at him. He batted his eyelashes. "No one wears arrogance better than you, heartbeat."

"They called Barra a mongrel," Devlin said.

Midnight smiled sweetly. "Then I look forward to meeting them myself, and teaching them some manners. I though knights were supposed to be the very definition of courtesy and chivalry and all that rot."

"Rot, yes," Devlin said. "Come, the night is passing."

They both nodded, Barra shifting back to his wolf form.

"Thank you for the horse," Devlin said.

Midnight nodded, but said nothing, merely stood as though waiting for something.

Devlin conceded defeat after a moment, as undone now as he had been the first time by the dark sapphire eyes. "I am still angry with you, Midnight, but I am happy you are here."

Smiling in that way of his, sweet and gentle and warming, Midnight stepped close and embraced him, burying his face against Devlin's chest.

He smelled like magic, or so Devlin had always secretly thought – bitter and sweet, rich and sharp, like copper and roses tangled together. Though he should be cold to the touch, he was warm in Devlin's arms.

Their hearts, Devlin knew, beat together – literally as one. Sometimes he thought he could feel it, Midnight's heart beating against his own.

"Come," he said, reluctantly loosening his embrace, refusing to think of how much more he would like to do.

Midnight nodded, drawing away slowly, fingers trailing before he finally pulled away entirely. "Shall I take to the sky, since Barra is covering the ground?"

"Have you the strength?" Devlin asked.

"I made certain to draw a bit of blood before I came after you," Midnight said. "A footpad who will remember nothing."

Devlin nodded. "Then take to the sky, Midnight."

"Yes, heartbeat." Midnight stepped back and threw out his arms – and in the next breath, he was a large raven.

He landed lightly upon Devlin's shoulder, a surprisingly heavy weight, and picked at his hair for a moment before cawing and launching into the sky. He flew in circles for a minute, then cawed again and flew off into the night.

Barra howled briefly in greeting, then took off after him.

Devlin laughed softly, and strode to his patiently waiting horse. Few animals could tolerate nightwalkers – even fewer could tolerate Midnight. His horse had always been unflappable, and the only one Devlin knew who would not only tolerate Midnight, but permit Midnight to ride.

Mounting, smiling because suddenly he just could not help it, he settled himself and then gave the horse its head, indicating only that he was to join the chase.

Nickering, the stallion eagerly obeyed, taking off across the night with confidence, chasing easily after Barra, who in turn followed the near-invisible form of Midnight flying high in the sky.

They likely would not find anything tonight, not when it was so late, and their unknown nemesis had most likely retreated...

But it was enough, for now, simply to run with his oldest and dearest friends by the light of the moon.

I. VI Precious

Clouds had begun to fill the sky as night gave over to morning, the cold air taking on the feel of rain.

By the time they had returned to their lodgings, the rain had begun to fall. Only lightly at first, but not long after finding the safety of their rooms, it had begun to fall in earnest.

"Mad yourself right at home, I see," Devlin said dryly, observing the satchels piled at the foot of the bed.

Barra frowned in disapproval and promptly moved toward them, muttering to himself as he began to unpack the contents and stow them properly, setting aside various bits and pieces to be pressed or otherwise fussed over.

"Well, I couldn't know how long we would be here," Midnight said, unperturbed by the looks Devlin gave him. "Best to be prepared, is that not what you are always saying? Though, if you had seen fit to follow your own advice, you would have sent for me instead of stating I was to stay at home kicking my heels."

Devlin folded his arms across his chest. "I left you behind out of concern for your safety, Midnight."

Midnight ducked his head, immediately contrite. "Yes, heartbeat. I realize with draugr about, there is a concern I will revert fully to acting like a walking dead. Certainly if drastic measures must be taken in regards to my person..."

"You should have stayed at home," Devlin said, crossing to him and grasping Midnight's chin. "You should go back, for it would seem the danger only grows and grows. Someone who is able to use siren songs to control the draugr? That someone is controlling them at all? What if they get hold of you, Midnight?"

Reaching up, Midnight slid his arms around Devlin's neck. "I am sorry to have upset you, heartbeat. I do not like to be the cause of your worry. If home I must go, then I will do – but you must take more care here, because it causes me pain to feel you and know you are in danger, and need me, and I am too far away to help."

Devlin sighed and tugged away the arms around his neck. "Then stay, you spoiled brat, but take extra care in all you do. If ever I tell you that you must go, do it without question."

"Yes, heartbeat," Midnight said, smiling. He braced his hands on Devlin's chest, then reached up and kissed his cheek.

"Brat," Devlin said.

Midnight merely smiled again, then spun away to stride across the room to where Barra had brought in a pitcher and bowl, along with rags and soap.

Devlin turned away as he began to strip, moving to the fireplace and the books still stacked there. "Has anyone tried to get nosy, Barra?"

"Aye, your grace," Barra said. "That woman what owns the place. I scared her good and proper, though."

"Mm," Devlin murmured, and set down the book he'd just picked up. "With Midnight here, it is time to take additional precaution, I think. Have you seen my chalk anywhere?"

Barra finished helping Midnight into a night robe, then moved to the wardrobe and after a moment pulled out a small leather case. "Here, your grace."

Devlin smiled. "Thank you, Barra."

Nodding, Barra went back to helping Midnight.

Moving to the door, Devlin removed a piece of chalk and began to draw on the back of it. He went slowly, working with extra care. More than one he wiped away a mark and redrew it, frowning in concentration all the while.

Spell circles were not his specialty – he was a rune master. He worked better trusting the magic to do as it saw best. Spell circles were the realm of those witches like his sister, more precise and less trusting in nature.

It was also the realm of sorcerers, who had long required a way to lay out their complicated, intricate workings. Hundreds of spell books around the world explain the art of spell circles, and taught how to do them. Still others showed how to lay out spell circles for spells that were better off never cast.

Devlin tended to trust magic over people, in all things. However, some things were best laid out and made clear. Runes were good, but in matters of wards and protections such as these, the spell circle would better serve.

Stepping back, he examined his work critically. "What say you, Midnight?"

"Yes," Midnight said. "You are much better at those things than you credit yourself."

Devlin scoffed and motioned the words away with one hand. Examining the spell circle thoroughly one last time, he nodded to himself and then placed his hand in the middle, then spoke the words that activated it.

The circle vanished as the spell took, spreading out to ward the whole of the room from any and all manner of intrusions.

Moving to the window, he repeated the work, continuing until all three windows in the suite were warded, as well as the fireplace. The windows he also warded against sunlight, to be extra certain Midnight could rest without fear of harm.

He stared out the last of the windows he had spelled. "Dawn approaches," he said softly.

Midnight yawned from where he lay in the enormous bed. Dark runes shimmered with magic on his bare chest, his wrists and throat, and the blankets were settled low enough that Devlin could just see the cluster of runes on his abdomen.

Silently cursing, he turned back to the window, trying hard not to think about the way the long, dark blue hair tumbled about all over, rich and fine against the perfect white of Midnight's skin.

"You should rest, heartbeat," Midnight said. "There will be much to do during the daylight, and when dark comes again we shall have to go hunting. Come and rest awhile."

"I'm fine," Devlin muttered, but even as he said it, Barra had appeared at his elbow to drag him away to prepare for bed. He continued to fight and protest, but when it became obvious he was losing the battle, he swore loudly and finally conceded defeat.

When he was finally shoved into bed, he could not summon the energy to continue protesting. Barra called a good night to them both, and Devlin returned it, before settling more comfortably in bed and attempting to glare at Midnight.

Midnight simply smiled at him, eyes bright with mirth, from where he lay comfortably burrowed into a pillow. "Good night, heartbeat, or perhaps I should say good morning."

"Simply say sleep well," Devlin said, and folded his arms beneath his head before he gave in to the temptation to reach out and pull Midnight to him. He closed his eyes.

"Sweet dreams," Midnight said softly, and then he was asleep, as easy as that.

Devlin had always envied him that ability.

He opened his eyes again, and drank in the sight of beautiful Midnight.

For the first couple of years or so, Midnight had slept in his bed every night – in his arms, even. He'd been so small and delicate, then. Devlin had feared for him. He feared for him now. Even amongst the nightwalkers, Midnight was strange.

Of those who had seen him, understood what he was, too many had been frightened and rejected Midnight. It cut him deep, and Midnight deeper still, for even before the spells laid upon him, Midnight had lacked a real desire to cause harm.

He had never hated. Even in death, Midnight had sought only for affection.

And sustenance, Devlin thought with a smile. He reached out to stroke Midnight's cheek in a feathery caress, capturing a strand of hair between his fingers and rubbing it absently for a moment, before finally forcing himself to withdraw.

All Midnight had ever wanted, alive and dead, was food and affection.

He watched Midnight until sleep finally took him.

It was the homeless boy, Devlin realized.

He stared in shock, anger and something dangerously close to hate boiling up inside him.

They had ordered the townspeople to find shelter, to lock themselves indoors. The draugr were great in strength and number, and too many of them were coming from a location they had not yet been able to find.

No one had taken in the homeless boy?

Devlin pushed away from the corner into which he'd been tucked, moving out of his hiding place, breaking the ward he had thrown up, and strode out into the street.

The little homeless boy looked more fragile than ever. He could not be more than six, Devlin thought, anger stirring anew. He was defenseless, and so very tiny. As delicate as a bird, and one with broken wings besides.

Broken, he thought bitterly, by the people begging Devlin to protect them.

If not for his father's orders that he come, Devlin would have left them all to their own devices. But the Whites had always helped protect the nightwalkers, and the normal people from the nightwalkers, and he would not shame his family name now.

He knelt and held out a hand, a lump in his throat as he took in how dirty and small the poor little thing was. Homeless people were not an unusual sight, nor were homeless children. They always caused a pang, but this one...this one struck something deeper, something he did not fully understand, if he understood it at all.

The poor thing had been curled up by the stable when Devlin had clambered from the carriage. He would not have noticed the boy, save for the sharp gasp that had struck his ears. When he'd looked for the source of

the sound, he had seen pale brown eyes staring back at him as though enchanted.

Then the boy had realized he'd been seen, and the stable master had bellowed, causing the boy to bolt.

Devlin had seen him here and there in the days since, and always the little thing was staring at him. The one time Devlin had smiled back, and given him a bit of coin, the boy had turned red faced and started to cry. Then he'd bolted, and Devlin had not seen him again.

Until now.

He knelt and held out a hand. "Come here, little one. I will not hurt you. It's not safe—"

"Devlin!"

Crochton's sharp warning came too late, as the boy surged forward and grasped his hand, and bit down hard.

Devlin swore, but did not tear his hand away, for fear of causing injury.

Now he noticed what he had not before, too angry at the townspeople and too concerned for the boy.

He was dead.

Devlin had never been the sort given to tears. If he had the energy to cry, he had the energy to do something more productive. Still, the sight of the sad, little boy turned to a walking dead made his eyes sting.

Beneath the filth and grime, his skin had gone white. Snow white; some would say bone white. Except his hair had gone deep blue, as had his fingernails, which meant his bones were blue as well now.

His eyes too, were that deep, rich, beautiful blue. It should not be beautiful, yet to Devlin it was.

The boy stared at him, unmoving, lips coated with blood from where he had bit deeply into Devlin's hand.

"Shh," Devlin said, and reached out to stroke the filthy hair.

He paused when the boy seemed to lean into the touch, but after a moment resumed it.

Sure enough, the boy was pushing against it, like a cat looking for more petting.

Anger coiled in Devlin's gut, threatening to consume him, tempting him to show the bloody bastards who had let this happen why a witch was far worse an enemy than a draugr.

He had never known a child to turn into a draugr before. How had he died? There were no visible wounds; the little thing was perfectly preserved.

"Devlin, destroy it and let us get back to work."

"No," Devlin snarled, looking up at Crochton, who had come out of hiding and stood nearby. "A child, god damn it. He was only a child, and they let him die. They probably killed him."

Crochton looked at him sternly, but not unkindly. "He's dead now, Devlin. Probably best for the poor thing, given he was about on the streets. If you cannot do the deed, lad, then step away and let me. We've more important things to be doing, this night. I can feel the draugr, and we need to find them before more harm is done."

Devlin moved without thought, scooping the frail little body up and holding it close. "No," he said.

"It's dead," Crochton said sharply. "Just a bloody corpse. If you are too weak to destroy it, then bloody let me!"

"I said no!" Devlin snapped.

Crochton looked angrily at him. "What do you intend to do then? Keep it? It's a fucking corpse."

"I don't know," Devlin said. He started to say something more, but the boy in his arms made a whimpering sound.

He looked down, to see the boy licking blood from his lips.

"Hungry?" Devlin asked softly. Ignoring Crochton, who continued to lecture and glare, he moved to a crate pushed against the side of a shop, in a narrow alleyway. Setting the boy down atop it, he bent to pull a knife from his boot.

Crochton was right, he knew. The boy was dead, had been turned into a draugr. It would be better simply to destroy him and be done with it.

Devlin could not bring himself to do it. All he could see were the sad brown eyes watching him with wonder, the way the boy had cried over a simple bit of kindness, the redness to his cheeks as he realized Devlin had caught him staring.

Staring into the dark blue eyes calmly watching him, wondering what, if anything, went through a draugr mind, Devlin lifted his hand and slit the palm open.

He grimaced at the pain, but did not linger over it. Instead, he held his hand out, close to the child's mouth, and nodded that he should drink.

The child watched him, not moving.

Devlin lifted his hand higher still, cupping his palm so the blood filled it, and pushed the child's head into it.

He drank, small tongue flashing occasionally as he lapped at the blood, pausing every now and then to stare fearfully at Devlin, resuming only when Devlin smiled gently at him.

"Amazing," Crochton muttered. "He actually retained some sort of comprehension. I wonder why."

Devlin did not reply, having no reply to give, simply reached out with his free hand to stroke the matted hair.

A chill lanced up his spine suddenly, and he knew by the colorful swearing that Crochton had felt the same.

He turned his head to see the draugr shuffling toward them, blue eyes glowing, surrounding by a mist that was swiftly taking over the whole of the village.

"Damn it to hell," Crochton said. "We missed our chance to see where they go when they are finished with the village."

Devlin started to speak, but was distracted as the boy shoved his hand away and hopped down from the crate, taking remarkably sure steps as he moved to stand in front of them.

No, Devlin realized.

The boy was standing in front of him. He had thrown his arms out, and was making angry, growling noises at the approaching draugr.

"Oh my god," Crochton said in wonder. "It cannot be."

"What?" Devlin snapped, too busy drawing his runes and focusing on defeating the draugr as well as protecting himself, Crochton, and the boy.

"Draugr only want three things when they rise – food, to protect those things precious to them, and to see their loved ones again," Crochton said. "I think the boy was coming for you all along. He is trying to protect you, Devlin. You are what he sought in death, and is trying to protect."

Devlin froze, runes forgotten as he stared at the boy who stood before him, arms spread out as he tried to warn off the other draugr.

"I wish I had protected him," Devlin said softly after a moment. "I was going to take him home."

Crochton looked at him with a sympathy Devlin could not remember him ever showing anyone. "The kindest thing you can do now, Devlin, is to destroy him completely."

"No," Devlin said, suddenly determined. "I'll find another way."

"There is no other way," Crochton said sharply, even as he braced himself to face the draugr that were now far too close. "He's dead. There is nothing else you can do."

Devlin threw his runes at the draugr, watching as three burst into flame. "If no other way exists, I'll make it. The boy is mine, now. I will do as I see fit."

"What would your father say?" Crochton demanded. "He would not stand for this."

At that, Devlin only grinned. "He would say I'm old enough to make my own decisions, no matter how bloody stupid a decision it might be."

Crochton grunted in defeat. "As you will it, then, you bloody fool."

Devlin looked at the frail, broken bird trying so hard to protect him from the monsters drawing ever closer. Even in death, the boy had only wanted Devlin. It was humbling, and heartbreaking, and he would do whatever was necessary to see the boy was happier in death than he had ever been in life.

I. VII Dragon

"We should go home after we are finished here, heartbeat," Midnight said into the silence that had fallen as they all dressed to go hunting.

Devlin stood patiently as Barra fussed over his jacket, a beautiful piece the exact shade of midnight's hair, with quartz for buttons and a fat sapphire nestled in the folds of his neck cloth. He often felt like Barra's doll, but the man turned him out so well, it was hardly a chore to be so. "Pray tell, where else would we go?" he asked, being purposely obtuse.

Midnight rolled his eyes and finished tying his own neck cloth, fastening a silver snowflake in the folds. His cufflinks matched, offsetting the deep burgundy of his coat. "Well, if you insist, we can return to the city."

"No," Devlin said, pausing to murmur a thanks to Barra, "it would be nice to return to the country for a time. After this, there will be nothing keeping me in the city. I could use a bit of countryside not infested with draugr."

Twitching the lace of his cuffs so it fell properly, he picked up his gloves. "I am hoping to solve this sooner rather than later, though the elusiveness of our prey is proving more than a little vexing."

"It has only been a few days, heartbeat," Midnight said, standing still as Barra pulled his hair back and neatly tied it off with a ribbon to match the burgundy coat. "The siren song plays faintly, and where there is a song there is a singer. We will find him."

Devlin hadn't needed the reminder that Midnight could hear the siren song. He scowled. "Midnight—"

"Yes, heartbeat," Midnight said with exaggerated patience. "At your command, I will flee to safety. However, I think you underestimate me. I keep telling you, no voice but yours compels me."

Ignoring him, Devlin shrugged into his greatcoat and pulled on his gloves. "Come then, Midnight, Barra, let us go pick a fight with the walking dead."

Smiling, Midnight followed after him, Barra closely on their heels.

Outside, his horse stood ready. Devlin mounted, and motioned to the other two. "Do as you see fit, but remember to take care. I will meet the both of you outside the village, by the pond. I believe we will explore those mounds we discovered when we encountered the knight and dragon."

Barra's face shuttered. "Aye, your grace. Though, if you hope to be gaining his help, perhaps I should stay well away."

"If that bigoted knight decides to speak rudely about the company I keep again, I shall let Midnight take him to task for it. Dragons do not frighten me. Now, let us be off. There is much to do, and the moonlight will not last forever."

Without another word, he gave the signal to his horse, and raced off through the village as quickly as was wise, headed for the pond.

Shortly after arriving, he was joined by a wolf and a long, sinuous, dark cat. "Splendid. No trouble shifting or getting out of the village unnoticed?"

A chuff and a mewl were his replies, and Devlin nodded. "Let us go, then."

The two animals raced off ahead of him, and while it looked as though they simple darted across the landscape, he knew they both were alert for any clue, any scent, any oddity.

He chased after them, going more slowly, not wanting harm to come to his horse.

They reached the old burial mounds in record time.

Dismounting, Devil secured his horse to a tree and then joined Barra and Midnight amongst the mounds.

As he had expected, the wards he had placed had proven insufficient. They had, to the last, been broken. He knelt by the nearest mound and held his hand over it, fingers spread, palm down. Closing his eyes, Devlin felt the broken magic, the greater magic of the draugr or their puppet master. "Midnight," he said, not opening his eyes, still trying to feel, "what do you hear?"

"It's muted," Midnight replied. "Faint...almost as though the magician is distracted, or putting his energies elsewhere. Perhaps we trouble him?"

Devlin slowly opened his eyes. "I doubt we are so fortunate as to be that intimidating. My fear is that he is trying something new. You tore off their heads like they were made of paper, Midnight, and that somehow took away his control and allowed me to burn them. I would imagine he is angry, at the very least."

He stood up and brushed off his hands. "The wards were broken by an outside force, which means our puppet master is not strong enough to break them from a distance, nor able to tell the draugr to do it themselves. He must have come here to do the breaking – which begs the question why he would go to such trouble to break these wards, when there are countless corpses in the village graveyard that would be far more useful."

Midnight's eyes glowed and flashed. "I smell old draugr here," he said. "Either the bodies recently bespelled were draugr before, or this place was used in the past and the bodies of those days were turned to draugr."

"Places like this are steeped in blood and corpses," Barra said. "You cannot have history without them, and this place has more than its fair share of history, eh? Not to mention the dragons." His face darkened briefly at the word 'dragon'. "Must have been all manner of battles here, with them about, eh?"

Devlin nodded. "Quite so. So this is hardly the first time the village has been plagued by draugr. Then again, most remote villages such of this are troubled by such things at least once, oft times more. It would explain why the problem was brought to us so quickly. They recognized it straight off."

"It may also explain why they are here again," Midnight said. "Where the dead walked once, they can walk twice."

"Yes," Devlin said. "Much easier to do it a second time, now that the path has been laid, so to speak. Are you certain there is no way to hear from where the siren song originates?"

Midnight shook his head. "No, heartbeat, I am sorry."

"No need to apologize," Devlin said. "Obviously our singer knows his game."

"I suppose it's too much to hope for that only a very small number of persons in the world are capable of a siren song which only the dead can hear," Barra said with a sigh.

Devlin snorted. "You can bet that if such a list existed, the writer and his efforts would have been dealt with straight away in decisive fashion. I certainly do not fancy my name being jotted down somewhere for all and sundry to see, especially if it lists my talents right alongside it."

"Even if everyone knows what you do and are good at anyway," Midnight inserted dryly.

"That is neither here nor there," Devlin said primly.

"Of course not," Midnight retorted. "Whatever was I thinking?"

"I'm certain I could not say."

Midnight laughed, moving closer, tossing his head to flick the long tail of his hair over his shoulder. "Heartbeat, I—"

As one they all stopped, and turned sharply toward the sudden feeling that raked across all their senses.

"The song," Midnight said, holding his head and whimpering softly. "It's increased, the volume is near deafening, but it does not call me. It does not call any of the ordinary draugr. It's calling to something else...no...it's *taunting* something." He looked up, toward the hills.

Devlin followed his gaze, and saw the barest hint of movement. A flicker of something, almost like moonlight on water.

He did not waste time trying to solve the puzzle from a distance, but bolted toward, running up the small hill as quickly as he was able, Midnight and Barra close on his heels.

Pure, unadulterated shock nearly had him tumbling right back down the incline. "Bloody hell."

"Indeed," Midnight said grimly, as the long, sinuous neck of the dark blue dragon swiveled around so that two glowing blue eyes could focus upon them.

Then it breathed black fire.

Devlin shoved Barra as he moved, hitting the ground hard and rolling, barely keeping from tumbling right back down the hill they had just climbed.

Barra twisted away, shifting as he went, and threw back his head to howl. Normally such a cry would bring pack to help – no werewolf, however, would ever answer the cry of a mongrel lone wolf. He wondered what Barra hoped to accomplish, but could not spare the attention or breath to ask as he once more was forced to flee from the black fire breath of the draugr dragon.

"Who the hell would be crazy enough to wake a bloody dragon," Devlin demanded. "How did anyone wake it? Dragons only obey their liege lords."

Midnight tried to get in close, but jumped and turned into a raven at the last, unable to get past the teeth and tail and fire. He landed on the ground near Devlin, and shifted back. "The song was not waking it, not the way it has all the others. It was taunting it, rather than controlling it. I think the dragon woke on its own, and the singer must have its lord. The dragon is attempting to reclaim its master."

"Damn it," Devlin said. He reached into his jacket for his runes, attempting to focus his thoughts – but the dragon was simply too fast, striking seemingly without warning, not giving him a chance to form a spell and cast his runes.

Barra was on the opposite side. "Let me and Midnight distract it," he called. "Maybe that will give you a chance."

Devlin nodded, not liking the plan – such as it was – but not seeing any other way.

Shifting back, Barra threw himself toward the dragon, dodging out of the way just in time. As he withdrew, Midnight surged forward, a sleek and elegant shadow, mewling loudly to draw the dragon's attention.

But the dragon, it seemed, was no fool. Though he drove both back, he never quite took his attention from Devlin.

Until something flashed, as brilliant as the moonlight, and a deafening roar echoed across the landscape.

Then the flash of silver became a blur, and Devlin barely stumbled out of the way as the figure met the dead dragon head on.

He had seen hundreds of fights in his lifetime, far too many of them fatal. None of them even compared to the dark and deadly beauty of the fight before him now. The steel-colored dragon fought the dark blue one with ease, black fire meeting silver, tail clashing with tail, and then the steel dragon's teeth sank into the neck of the dead, and a horrific screech filled the air.

Devlin clapped his hands over his ears, recoiling from the sound. He reached for his runes to put the affair to an end once and for all, when the dead dragon suddenly broke free and attacked the silver with renewed fervor.

It swung around wildly as the silver dragon dodged its teeth, massive tail arching out—and headed straight for Barra, who did not see it until too late.

A blur of movement, a startled cry, and suddenly Barra was no longer on the hill.

The living dragon moved, once more sinking his teeth into the dead one, this time holding on for dear life.

Devlin formed the spell in his mind, and cast three runes.

Dark witchfire erupted, consuming the dead dragon.

The living dragon did not let go, but held fast to the dragon's throat.

"Will it be all right?" Midnight asked. "It needs to let go or it will be burned."

If the living dragon was bothered by the flames, however, it gave no indication. Instead, it remained there and held fast, until the flames shifted in color, then it simply dropped the dead dragon and slinked from the fire.

Its eyes shimmered rich amber as it stalked toward Midnight, growling deep and low.

Devlin stepped in front of Midnight. "Back off, dragon."

The dragon gave a series of sharp, chittering barks, and simply moved to circle around.

"Enough, dragon!"

The voice was faint, but audible.

Immediately the dragon stopped moving, and sat back on its haunches, making several more of those odd, barking sounds. Its tail smacked the ground hard once, twice, and then the dragon went still.

Devlin eyed it suspiciously, but when it only yawned and lay down upon the ground, he moved away from Midnight and toward the sound of the voice.

He stood at the edge of the incline and looked down.

At the bottom of the hill, he could just see Barra and another figure tangled together in the shrubbery. To judge from the curses now reaching his ears, it would seem the two were losing a battle to get free of the shrubbery.

They managed it a moment later, after a great deal more profanity, and both began slowly to climb back up the hill.

It was the knight. Obviously, Devlin thought in annoyance. "I confess I am shocked, sir knight. I had not thought we mongrels and misfits worthy of your time."

Neirin looked at him coolly as he reached the top of the hill. "You should be grateful I did lend my assistance, rune master, else your mongrel here would be lying at the foot of the hill with a broken back – at the very least."

"Yes," Barra said, flinching at the word 'mongrel'. "I thank you for saving my life." He looked at the slowly dying orange flames. "Indeed, I think you saved us all."

"Quite," Neirin said. "Why has a dragon become a walking dead?" He looked around the clearing, and his eyes landed on Midnight. "What is that abomination?"

Devlin moved before he thought, grabbing Neirin by the neck of his shirt. "I tire of you, knight," he snarled. "Their names are Barra and Midnight, not mongrel and abomination. You saved our lives, I concede that point, but it is the very least you owe us when it is one of your own which attempted to kill us this night. If you damnable knights—"

He let go at the sound of a deep, angry growl, turning even as he pulled out runes.

"Enough," Neirin said sharply. "Troyes, it is quite all right. I know you would never let real harm come to me. These fools could never match your strength." He knelt as the dragon drew close, and stroked his hands along the sleek scales.

His face softened as he pet his dragon, and Devlin thought for a moment he was seeing a man who was not the infuriating, arrogant bastard he would quite like to toss back down the hill.

"Barra," he asked, ignoring the knight and dragon for the moment. "Are you all right?"

"Quite, your grace. Nothing a good bit of rest won't fix right up. The knight saved me, sure as anything." His eyes flicked to the kneeling Neirin,

something in them flashing, but then he looked at Devlin and smiled again. "Sorry I missed the fight; I hear that to see a dragon fight is a wondrous thing."

Devlin nodded. "It almost makes up for the fact they are quite unbearable otherwise."

"Enough," Midnight said, head tilted thoughtfully to one side. "The siren song has subsided. I think our enemy has once more retreated."

"No doubt all the angrier that we once more overcame his challenges," Devlin said grimly.

He turned as Neirin stood up, one hand still resting lightly upon his dragon. "By your leave," Neirin said stiffly, "I would like to hear whatever explanation you can offer. Whoever this person is of whom you speak, he is harming the clans now. That makes this dragon business."

"Why should I?" Devlin replied. "You have been nothing but rude since the occasion upon which we met."

"I saved your lives," Neirin snapped.

"Learn their names," Devlin retorted. "Treat them with the accord they are due, and perhaps I will see fit to tell you what you have until now deemed beneath your notice."

Neirin glared, his dragon growling. "You, rune master, have no business calling anyone insufferable."

Devlin started to snarl a nasty reply, but he was prevented by bright, rippling laughter. He turned to glare at Midnight.

Midnight only laughed again, and smiled at him. "Devlin, stop making friends and let us all adjourn to our lodgings. Barra, are you all right to walk?"

"Fine," Barra said.

"You," Devlin said, glaring at Midnight.

Midnight merely smiled, and led the way down the hill.

I. VII Apple

"Barra, tea and whatever food you can steal from the kitchen," Devlin said as they reached their rooms once more.

"Of course, your grace," Barra replied, but lingered long enough to take their coats and see they were properly hung, his gaze slipping more than once to the figure who had taken up seats near the fire.

Devlin quirked a brow, but did not ask, relatively certain Barra did not want to be caught staring. He had not realized Barra was so fascinated by dragons – or maybe he was simply keeping watch over a possible enemy.

Midnight brought two more chairs close, making a loose circle of four, and sat down in the one opposite Neirin, leaving Devlin to take one of the chairs immediately next to him.

He studied their silent guest surreptitiously, not quite certain what to make of him.

Dark gold hair gleamed in the firelight, and though it was pulled severely back, Devlin could see a hint of curl to it. His eyes, a deep brown, were focused on the dragon. He sat rigidly in his seat, almost reminding Devlin of a schoolboy who knew he was about to receive a dressing down and possibly a thrashing. He idly stroked the dragon's head, which lay in his lap, the dragon making low, soft rumbling noises.

Then it struck him.

Despite his posturing and arrogance, the knight was nervous. About what?

It was, predictably, Midnight who broke the silence. "You do not often leave your lands, do you?"

Neirin looked up, hands resting heavily on the dragon, as though seeking comfort. "I have never left them, save for an hour or so at a time, and always in the company of older, wiser knights. This..." He motioned to them, the room, "I do without permission."

"Oh?" Devlin asked, surprised. He was prevented asking further questions, however, as Barra returned carefully balancing a heavy tray.

The dragon – Troyes, he probably should take better care to recall it had a name – gave a sudden growl. Not a threatening sound...more like one of interest. Sliding from Neirin's grasp, Troyes prowled over to Barra, who had set the tray down upon a large table and was busily pouring and arranging things.

He paused as Troyes drew near, and watched in puzzlement as the dragon pushed against his thigh, then sat back on its haunches and tilted its head up to look at Barra.

"What..." Barra trailed off.

Devlin looked at Troyes, suddenly reminded of a puppy begging for scraps.

They all turned in surprise at the sound of laughter, to see Neirin staring with fond amusement at his dragon. He stood up and crossed the room, joining Troyes and Barra at the table. "Aha," he said softly, and reached out to pluck up a bright red apple.

Troyes growled low, butting against Neirin's thigh.

"Apples are his favorite treat," Neirin explained, realizing suddenly that all eyes were upon him. He smiled hesitantly – Devlin would almost say shyly, except even hesitant there was an arrogance to Neirin – at Barra, and lifted the apple he held. "May I?"

Barra's cheeks flushed faintly, and he nodded, ducking his head to busy himself with the tea. "Of course." His fussing ceased as Neirin held out the apple, tea forgotten as he watched the dragon delicately pluck the apple from Neirin's hand, and crunch it down in a matter of seconds.

"Say thank you," Neirin said sharply, when the dragon would have wandered off.

Troyes growled and turned back to Barra – and suddenly was human, as easy as that. "Apple," he said. "Thank you, wolf-elf."

Barra blinked, eyes wide as he stared at the tall, broad dragon. "Um. You're quite welcome."

Making a sound remarkably similar to the growls of his dragon form, Troyes reached out and abruptly ruffled Barra's hair.

Yelping in surprise, Barra stumbled back, foot catching on a table leg – but he was snatched back from falling over completely by Troyes, who frowned at him. "Not hurt. No fear. Troyes good."

"Yes," Neirin cut in before anyone else could speak. "Troyes good. Now get over here before you give the poor thing an apoplexy."

"Good," Troyes repeated, then awkwardly patted Barra's shoulder, before turning and slinking back to Neirin, where he dropped to sit on the ground with his head against Neirin's thigh.

Devlin started to say something about the miraculous display of manners, but a warning look from Midnight made him reluctantly keep his mouth shut. Instead, he accepted the tea Barra gave him with a murmured thanks, and watched their guest do the same.

"So why do you never leave the clan?" Midnight asked.

"I thought we were here to discuss the draugr," Neirin replied stiffly.

Midnight shrugged. "I meant no offense; certainly we can move on to the draugr, if you prefer."

Neirin looked at him, then back at his tea. "The dragons," he said softly. "Everything we do is for the dragons." He dropped one hand to comb through Troyes thick hair. "They can look human, and act human, but to mistake them for human is a fatal mistake. They are living weapons, and should always be treated thus. They act human only in the barest sense of the word." He hesitated. "There are...other reasons the dragons must be guarded, secrets I cannot discuss." He shot a brief glare at Devlin. "I know the popular belief if that we do not care, but it is not true – it is simply that we must put our dragons first, in all things."

"Hmm," Devlin murmured noncommittally. "So if you must put them first, and should not be here, why did you help us and then ask to learn more of the draugr."

"I heard the wolf," Neirin said, flicking a glance at Barra, who stared in surprise, then dropped his own gaze to his tea. "We were on night patrol, and heard him howl for help. I did not think he would do such a thing idly, knowing full well he was in clan territory." He frowned. "I did not expect to see a draugr dragon."

Midnight nodded. "Someone is using a siren song to wake and control the dead around here. We cannot find the source; the song seems to come from nowhere and everywhere."

"A siren song to control the dead?" Neirin repeated. "Then, unless I am mistaken, should it not be controlling you?"

"It should, yes," Midnight said with a smile, "but I was always an odd draugr, and am now only odder still. No voice controls me but that of my heartbeat." He touched the space over his heart. "Devlin."

Refusing to look at Midnight, knowing he'd just get caught staring and smiling like a halfwit, he focused on Neirin. "So the dragons will help us, now? It is quite possible, after all, that the magician we seek is hiding on dragon lands."

Neirin frowned and shook his head. "I doubt it," he said. "If a magic user was hiding on our lands, we would know it. Dragons are sensitive to magic."

"It is still possible," Devlin replied stiffly.

"It is not impossible," Neirin replied, just as stiff. "However, he would have to be supremely clever to avoid the greater part of two clans, since most of my own Clan du Lac resides with the Holy Pendragon right now."

Devlin snorted. "Of course no mage could fool that many. Whatever was I thinking?"

Anger flashed in Neirin's eyes. "You asked for my help, rune master, and I am giving it. I say only what I know – that it would be incredibly difficult to hide such powerful magic from so many knights and dragons. Surely the energy it would take to hide from so many would not be worth expending for a mage who is already casting a siren song."

Devlin scowled as he realized Neirin had a point.

Midnight snickered.

"It concerns me he managed to stir a dragon," Neirin continued, though the glint in his eye said he knew he had scored a point. "If he managed it with one dragon..."

"He will take others, or has already," Devlin finished. "I do not want to think about what manner of harm could be inflicted should several of those things attack at once."

Troyes growled low in agreement, and Neirin looked quite as though he would like to growl.

"If you like," Neirin said slowly, "tomorrow I can show you where our dead are buried. Perhaps we might find some clue there?"

Devlin quirked a brow at him. "Forgive me my suspicious nature, knight, but only a day or so ago you all but threw us off your lands. You insulted Barra then, and only an hour ago your manners had not shown much in the way of improvement. Now you are offering to show us a dragon graveyard? That sounds to me like a serious breach of clan protocol."

"It is," Neirin said levelly, but his temper was in his eyes. "I do not break rules lightly, rune master. My decisions are not easy ones, and I did not make them lightly or hastily. You cannot possibly begin to understand the full consequences of my actions, so do not condescend to me." He hesitated, and looked down at Troyes.

Who, Devlin noted with interest, was watching Barra, who did not notice the dragon's staring because he was himself watching Neirin.

Devlin looked back at Neirin. "Yes?" he said, when Neirin continued to hesitate.

Neirin sighed softly. "Sometimes life does not go according to the plans we make, or those made for us. When faced with the unexpected, a man can choose to bemoan his fate and do nothing, or accept it and forge the new path offered. I am offering my aid, rune master. Do you accept it or not?"

"We accept, of course," Midnight said before Devlin could speak.

Troyes growled low, nuzzling against Neirin's leg.

"Tomorrow, then," Devlin said, not quite able to dismiss all the stiffness in his voice. "Where shall we meet you?"

Neirin smiled, all charm, and spoke with exaggerated cordiality in his voice. "At the location of our first meeting, shall we say? For the sake of fond memories."

"Fond indeed," Devlin replied with equal politeness, though his smile was all teeth.

Midnight rolled his eyes. "It's like watching two cocks strut around the yard, except there are no hens to impress."

Barra choked on his tea, setting it hastily aside, but did not pull a handkerchief out quickly enough to entirely muffle his laughter.

Devlin shot Midnight a withering look. "Why could you not remain at home like I told you?"

Midnight smiled sweetly. "If not for my presence, people might be impressed by your posturing, and we certainly cannot have that, heartbeat."

Devlin frowned. Midnight never called him 'heartbeat' unless they were alone or amongst trusted friends. Otherwise it was only 'Devlin.' If he was saying it front of Neirin and Troyes, that meant he considered them...

Not trusting himself to speak, Devlin expressed his feelings by giving Midnight another glare, then set aside his tea in favor of fetching the brandy.

Troyes rumbled something indistinct, and was immediately soothed by Neirin, who looked up after a moment. He turned to Barra. "I do not suppose you might tell me how to find the kitchens? We are out far later than ordinarily we would be, and by now Troyes usually is fed."

"What does he eat?" Barra asked, setting aside the tea he had only just picked up again.

"Meat," Neirin said. "Raw is preferable, but I'm certain whatever I might find would more than suffice."

Barra was at the door before he had even finished speaking. "Back in a moment, then," he said, and did not wait for a reply.

"I did not—" Neirin frowned. "He need not have done that, I was perfectly capable of fetching the food myself."

Devlin sipped his brandy. "Barra likes to help." Not strictly true – Barra liked to help him, and Midnight. Beyond that, he did not much care. It was more than a little peculiar that he had leaped so quickly to help Neirin feed Troyes. Devlin didn't like it, but he had no intention of saying so. "Stopping him is quite impossible. I think he is also anxious to prove he is more than a lowly mongrel."

Neirin's mouth tightened. "I apologized to him for that, rune master. You need not—"

"Enough," Midnight said, rolling his eyes again. "It is past. If I and Barra are not still upset, heartbeat, you have no right to be, either."

"I'm a Duke," Devlin said, knowing he sounded petulant but not particularly caring. "I have the right to be as upset as I please about anything and everything."

"You are quite intolerable tonight," Midnight said, shaking his head back and forth, looking more amused than put out.

Devlin said nothing, merely sipped his brandy.

Neirin looked as though he would like to express his own thoughts on Devlin being intolerable, but was choosing to keep the thoughts to himself.

Instead, they simply glared surreptitiously at one another, until the opening of the door finally forced a stalemate.

Troyes immediately stirred, shifting to his dragon form as he padded over to Barra, who held a platter piled with chunks of roasted meat. "This was the best I could find," he said anxiously, looking at Neirin. "Will it suffice?"

"Quite," Neirin said. "If you set it by the fire, he will see to the rest."

Smiling faintly, Barra moved to obey, hesitating a moment after setting the platter down, before finally backing away.

"You may not want to watch," Neirin said, smiling faintly. "He never could be bothered to learn table manners."

Troyes growled at him, amber eyes glinting, but was too busy decimating the meat to argue further.

Barra laughed, and picked up his teacup, sipping at tea that likely had gone tepid. If it bothered him, though, he gave no show of it.

Devlin amused himself by thinking of all the lovely ways he would kill the bastard if he brought any manner of harm to Barra, who clearly had more than a passing interest in the obnoxious knight.

A soft laugh drew his attention, and he turned his head just enough to see Midnight regarding him fondly and far too knowingly.

He was prevented from speaking by the chiming of the hallway clock, which rang only twice before falling silent.

Neirin frowned and set down his own tea. "We had best go. If I am gone much longer, they will come looking for me, and that will not end well. I thank you for your time. Unless something goes wrong, I will see you tomorrow to visit the graveyard. Three thirty, shall we say?"

"Three thirty, then," Devlin said.

"Then I bid you all a good night, and peaceful dreams," Neirin said, standing and shaking out the folds of his coat, smoothing it out. He motioned to Troyes, who licked himself clean and then padded over to push against Barra.

Midnight spoke up. "Barra, escort them to the pond, how about? If dragons do come searching, perhaps you can offer some alibi? We must do all we can to assist our new ally."

Barra nodded, and set his tea aside again, moving to fetch his cloak.

Neirin looked as though he were going to argue, but in the end simply gave a nearly inaudible sigh. Troyes moved back toward him, and he pet his dragon slowly, a frown on his face, looking rather more troubled than Devlin though the situation warranted.

He started to speak, only partly because he was coming to find baiting Neirin would make for an agreeable hobby, but he saw Midnight give a minute shake of his head.

A few moments later, Barra was ready, and Troyes shifted to his human form. Together the three left the room, a silent, pensive group.

Devlin sipped his brandy, and tried not to think about the fact he was completely alone with Midnight.

I. IX Necromancy

"You are so tense, heartbeat," Midnight murmured.

Devlin drank more brandy, keeping his eyes down, trying to avoid looking as long as he could. "You are nothing but trouble, Midnight."

"Oh, now, I have been rather well behaved tonight. I was not the one contemplating calling a man out simply because my manservant looked overlong at him."

"Do shut up," Devlin said tolerantly.

Midnight laughed softly, and Devlin heard him move, stand. Temptation won out, and he dragged his eyes slowly up as Midnight stood in front of him, enjoying every bit of the view on the way up.

Enjoying it entirely too much.

Shifting awkwardly in his seat, he summoned a glare and snapped, "What?"

"You act as though you are afraid of something, heartbeat," Midnight said, hands resting lightly on his hips. His tone was still teasing, but there was still entirely too much seriousness in it for Devlin's liking.

Devlin smirked. "A wise man does not fear death, but knows better than to seek it out."

Midnight gave a derisive snort. "The phrase is 'a wise man does not fear death, but neither does he tempt it'."

"Yes," Devlin said. He stared into his brandy, then slowly dragged his eyes back up, incapable of not meeting those burning blue eyes, even if they seared him through. "However, that was leaving myself wide open to your riposte."

"There is that," Midnight said, but the levity in his voice was forced now. He dropped his hands from his hips, and braced them on the arms of Devlin's chair, bending so they were nearly nose to nose. He smelled sweet, like lavender and roses. "Why do you refuse me, heartbeat?"

"Because," Devlin said, but did not say anything further.

Midnight was silent.

Devlin could see the hurt in his eyes, but what could he do? Give in? He had already given in to far too much as it was. He would not cross the last and most important line.

Though he had always vowed to give Midnight the life he should have had, or the closest approximation, he had ever kept him selfishly close. He could make all manner of excuses, but even those concerning Midnight's safety were thin at best. To do what he most wanted, had wanted since

Midnight was old enough to lust after as well as love...seemed going too far when he had already taken advantage.

Midnight had died, and come back as a draugr, consumed by thoughts of Devlin. A dying boy who had become obsessed with likely the only person to show him any kindness.

So Devlin had taken him, and kept him, and raised him as though Midnight were still truly alive. He had gone to great effort and expense to create the spell that gave Midnight a second life, to ensure that for all intents and purposes Midnight was alive.

He wasn't, though, not really, for all that the spell did indeed grant him life so long as Devlin lived.

He should have been a bit more willing to share. Draugr were driven by possessiveness and memories of loved ones, but Midnight was not bound so tightly to that. If Devlin had taken him out more, as best he was able, had introduced him to other nightwalkers...

Then perhaps he would have come to care for someone else, and if not, Devlin would have felt moderately better about Midnight still choosing him.

Which always stirred the oldest of his doubts – if Midnight had lived, were truly alive now, would he still want Devlin? Or would he simply regard Devlin as his guardian. Would he even now be off on larks with friends, stealing kisses and far more from handsome youths and pretty misses?

Would Midnight call him Devlin or father or your grace? He would not call him 'heartbeat', certainly. The thought left an ache in his chest.

It was despicable enough what he had done, and permitted, already. To take the greatest of intimacies seemed dishonorable, reprehensible, and contemptible.

"Is it because I am a corpse?" Midnight asked, breaking into his thoughts. "I guess the idea rather would turn one's stomach."

Devlin hated the uncertainty – the fear – in Midnight's voice. He had not meant to put that there. Never. "No," he sharply. "You are not a corpse. There is more life in you than me, Midnight. You are beautiful. Breathtaking."

"Then why?" Midnight demanded, letting go of the chair, rising to his full height, taking a half step back.

Devlin immediately missed his closeness, his warmth, his scent. He scowled at himself for it. "It wouldn't be right. I raised you, and am in charge of protecting you..." And will not take further advantage of the fact I was your dying wish.

Midnight frowned, anger joining the hurt in his eyes. "Those are poor excuses and we both know it. We are only thirteen years apart, and I

have been your assistant too long to think of you as a guardian or protector. If the idea of it disgusts you, simply say so! Do not continue to dodge the matter and put me off with such piddling excuses."

"That's not it," Devlin snarled, slamming his brandy glass on the table. "I do not pursue the matter because you are dead, it is true, but not the way you think. If you were alive you likely would not want me, and because I never gave you a fair chance—" to fall in love with someone else, he meant to say, but even thinking the words caused a pain too great to endure.

He snatched up his empty brandy glass and moved roughly past Midnight to the table where Barra had earlier arranged everything, snatching up the decanter and refilling his glass, tossing back half of it at once.

Midnight finally spoke, anger in his voice now. "That is your excuse? Would you be happier knowing I did not choose you blindly? As you keep saying, I am not precisely dead. I am as curious and eager to learn and explore as any truly living man my age. I do go out upon occasion. You would hardly be the first person I have ever *kissed*."

White hot fury poured through Devlin, mingled with black hate and green envy, and a despair as dark and deep as Midnight's eyes. "What?" he demanded.

"I said," Midnight snapped, "you would not be the first person I have ever *kissed*."

His insinuation had been plain enough the first time, the way he said the word *kissed*, but to be forced to hear it twice was more than Devin could bear. He threw his brandy glass into the fire, following it immediately with the decanter, relishing the sound of breaking crystal, the way the flames flared high from the alcohol.

It did not, however, even begin to cool his temper. He rounded on Midnight, snarling, "Then I cannot imagine why you are bothering me, if you are quite happy to find your *kisses* elsewhere."

Midnight recoiled, eyes wide with shock and some measure of fear.

The room was too hot. Too small. Too full of Midnight, who had already kissed and touched and—someone who was not him, whose face he had never seen, and not once had Midnight asked him about such things, sought his advice or guidance.

He and Midnight had always talked about everything, from the serious to the pointless. Never had Midnight held back or kept a secret, except in the matter of gifts.

Midnight had left him out, and had kissed another first, and he could not see why—

Making a rough sound, he snatched up his greatcoat and glove, and strode to the door, pausing only from habit to bark out, "Get to bed, the sun will be up before long."

"Heartbeat, wait—"

Devlin jerked around, and he saw the pain and anguish in Midnight's face, but could not bring himself to do anything to soothe it away. Not when he felt so angry and jealous and hurt and betrayed. "Don't you think it's time to stop calling me that?" He asked coldly. "Really, it was cute as a child, but I think you have made it quite clear that you are a child no longer."

Midnight looked as though he had been slapped.

Turning away, Devlin slammed the door shut behind him and went to find somewhere – anywhere – else to be.

He wandered aimlessly, angrily, for at least an hour, travelling around the village twice before he finally grew too tired to keep up the pace. Then he slowed, and wandered back and forth along empty streets, until eventually he found himself at the well in the center of the village, leaning against it, head tilted up.

Clouds filled the sky, hiding the moon, but here and there he could see patches of cold starlight. A few more weeks, and such clouds would bring snow.

"You are the necromancer Ceadda?"

"Yes," replied Ceadda, looking up with a deep frown as Devlin entered. He closed the book he had been reading and strode across the room, frown deepening as he looked at the figure bundled in Devlin's arms. "What is that?"

Devlin eyed the necromancer warily, not quite letting go of his precious burden. "They say you are the best."

Ceadda shrugged. "Most vampires hardly remember what real magic looks like, for our race. Of course they say I'm the best. I'm not bad, of course, but I am young. Still plenty to learn." He looked again at the figure. "What is that? Besides a corpse, I mean. Draugr, at that."

Quietly, Devlin explained all he could about the boy, and what he wanted to do. "I need your help, though. Such magic is not within my realm, though I have done my best to lay the spell I want to create."

"Let me see your notes," Ceadda said, shoving back a strand of pale blonde hair. Like all vampires, he was stunningly beautiful. If he considered himself young, then he was likely less than two hundred years old.

Old enough, Devlin knew, to remember what it had been like when vampires had real magic. Old enough to hopefully do what Devlin wanted.

"Fascinating," Ceadda said, eyes taking on a glint Devlin well knew – the eyes of the obsessed, given something worthy of attention.

He tried not to let it get his hopes up.

Ceadda strode over to his bookshelves, the only things neat and orderly in the whole of the cluttered room. Devlin could not honestly tell where the study, living area, and kitchen were formally divided; Ceadda's work appeared to have consumed the whole of the tiny cottage. "Who sent you to me?" Ceadda asked.

"My father," Devlin said. "The Duke of Winterbourne. I am his eldest son, Devlin White."

"Ah," Ceadda said, and smiled. "I have longed to repay him for a great favor. Tell him that after this, all accounts are settled."

"I will," Devlin said, almost falling over with relief. Only the cool, spell-preserved body in his arms prevented his doing so. He was tired, so bloody tired, from maintaining the preservation spell and researching and working and hoping and being told he was foolish...

Ceadda looked up from the six books he had before him now, on a table that had been cleared by the crude but effective method of shoving it all to the floor. "Set him down here, come now. I see where your spell will work, and I see the flaws."

Devlin's shoulders sagged.

"But," Ceadda said with a smile, "I also see how we can fix them. Come, now, bring your little draugr boy."

Nodding, Devlin waded carefully through the mess, nearly killing himself stepping over a stack of books and manuscripts topped by glass beakers, until at last he reached the massive, heavy oak worktable where Ceadda was now muttering and writing and beginning to chalk out spell marks.

"How elaborate do you want this spell to be?" Ceadda asked. "Do you simple want to give a semblance of life to the draugr child?"

Devlin laid the boy out and smoothed back his dark hair, rubbing away a smudge of dirt on one cheek. Since the night the boy had protected him, Devlin had been expending much energy to keep him asleep and preserved. That had been weeks ago.

"I want him to have the life he never did," he said softly. "He was...no child should live so, or die so. He tried to protect me, all because I gave him a bit of coin and a smile. He should not be dead."

Ceadda nodded slowly, green eyes intent upon Devlin. "Very well," he said after a moment. "Then I think if we combine a spell of binding with a spell of soul sharing and your preservation spell, as well as..." He continued to speak, rattling things off almost faster than Devlin could follow, drawing and sketching and furiously scribbling notes in a hand remarkably poor for a man at least one hundred years old.

Devlin nodded, and agreed or argued as he felt he must, until at last they seemed to agree on what should be done and how they would accomplish it.

Just as Ceadda was about to begin drawing, he paused, and turned to Devlin with a frown.

"What?" Devlin asked tightly, dreading what fatal flaw he was about to hear that they had somehow missed, that would ruin any chance of his mad idea working.

"His name," Ceadda said, mouth quirking in faint amusement. "What is his name? The spell will hardly work without a name."

"I..." Devlin shook his head, horrified. "I do not know. He does not have one, to the best of my knowledge. The few times I asked after him, the villagers only called him 'the boy'."

"Ah," Ceadda said, looking pleased. "That is all to the good, then. Giving him a name will make the binding between you all the stronger. What do you want to call him, then?"

Devlin frowned. "I don't know." He'd never named anyone before, not even a family pet. His horses all came with names, or he let his siblings pick since it amused them so much to do so.

He looked at the boy, reaching without thought to smooth the dark hair again, and worry over every smudge and mark upon the snow white skin. So beautiful and strange, the white and blue. The draugr he had killed only weeks ago had been terrifying, horrifying.

The boy only looked cold and pretty, like a midnight sky filled only with the stars and moonlight.

"Midnight," he said suddenly, and immediately liked it.

"Peculiar name," Ceadda said. "Sure you wouldn't prefer something a bit more in the main?"

"Do I look as though I know what it is like to be even remotely in the main?" Devlin asked. "For that matter, do you?"

Ceadda grinned. "Fair enough. Midnight it is," he said, and drew the appropriate runes where the name was meant to go.

Silence fell for several minutes as Ceadda worked, slowly and meticulously drawing out the spell work, working in runes that Devlin did not know. Necromancy runes, he supposed. Vampire magic, quite different in purpose and design from human magic.

Then Ceadda handed him the chalk, and Devlin hid a grimace as he began to write in his own runes, working with even more care than Ceadda had displayed.

He wondered if anyone else had ever tried this – combining necromancy with rune work, vampire magic with human. It had been his

father's idea, fully endorsed by his mother. Ceadda too seemed confident and eager.

Devlin silently recited a fervent prayer that all went as it should, and that soon his draugr would be as alive as it was possible for such a thing to be.

When he finally finished, he took a deep breath and finally stepped back.

"Well done," Ceadda said, eying the work critically. "Well done, indeed, but I expect no less of a White." He turned to Devlin. "Off with the jacket and shirt, then. The spells will require skin runes, and you'll have to be done before we can touch him."

Devlin nodded, and immediately began to strip, tossing the clothes aside, eyes only for the boy – for Midnight.

He startled as cold fingers began to draw the runes that soon would be a permanent part of his skin.

If their spell worked.

Should it fail, likely it would kill him.

He looked again at Midnight, confirming what he already knew – that Midnight was well worth the risk, and far more besides.

I. X Consequences

"I do not see him," Devlin said, annoyed. He should have known better than to believe a single bloody word that knight said.

Barra frowned, brows furrowed in concern. "Something is wrong," he said. "He said he would be, and it's not like him not to keep his word."

Devlin quirked a brow at that. "Not like him? Do you not think that a bit hasty? Infatuation is all well and good, Barra, but show a bit of sense."

"Like the sense you've been showing?" Barra muttered.

"What was that?" Devlin said, eyes narrowed.

Barra just looked blandly at him. "I said, shouldn't we go look for him?"

"I say let him rot," Devlin said.

"Yes, your grace," Barra said, rolling his eyes. "Seeing as we need him to find the graveyard, I think you may have to alter your decision."

Devlin made a face at him. "You're awfully impertinent this morning."

"Master Midnight is quite distraught, your grace," Barra said, "and to judge from the way you're growling, it's your fault."

"Like bloody hell it's my fault," Devlin snapped. "Stop taking his side."

"Yes, your grace," Barra replied, clearly having no intention of listening.

Devlin glared at him, but did not bother resuming the argument.

Midnight was not distraught. They had argued before, and far more dramatically, if not over something quite this serious. Give it a day or so, and all would be back to business as usual.

"There he is!" Barra exclaimed, waving one arm to signal they had seen him.

Troyes waved back, but the two figures did not increase their slow pace as they left the forest and made their way across the field.

As they drew closer, Devlin realized why they were moving so slowly – Neirin was clearly in a great deal of pain.

Barra immediately moved toward them, falling into his role of caretaker. "Neirin, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Neirin said, though the words were plainly a lie. "Do not worry about me. I apologize for being late, I got a later start than I intended."

He didn't, Devlin noticed, stand up quite straight. He hunched forward, as though his back pained him.

Barra reached out and lightly touched Neirin's arm, then hastily withdrew his hand. "You are in pain. Isn't there anyway we can help? What happened? Were you attacked?"

Troyes snarled angrily. "No attack. Would protect!"

"I'm sorry," Barra said, recoiling as though struck. "I intended no insult, truly."

"Troyes," Neirin said quietly, but with an edge.

"Sorry, wolf-elf," Troyes said, and reached out to ruffle Barra's hair.

Neirin smiled tiredly. "We had an even longer night than I had feared," he said. "Please, I am fine. Only a bit sore. It will ease as the day wears on."

Barra only shook his head. "I smell blood. You are far from fine."

"I said leave it," Neirin said firmly.

"If you insist," Barra said quietly.

Neirin sighed. "Come, the graveyard is not too far from here, but it will still take us some time to reach it."

"Would you care to make use of my horse?" Devlin asked, ignoring the resentful glare Neirin cast him. "If you move as slowly the whole day as you have so far, we will fall prey to further draugr, and in your state – whatever that state is – that would not end well, no matter how strong your dragon may be."

"You do not know my dragon," Neirin retorted. Then he grimaced. "But I concede your point, rune master. I will accept your offer. Troyes, if you will assist me?"

Troyes rumbled in discontent, but moved to obey. The care and...almost tenderness...he displayed helping Neirin up, made Devlin look away.

He was not feeling guilty.

Not since Midnight was the one who apparently went off kissing people when Devlin had always believed he was simply going to the bookstore.

"If you are done trying to set the ground afire with the power of your glare," Neirin broke in, amusement plain in his voice, "perhaps we should be on our way?"

"Perhaps you should just be silent and start moving," Devlin snapped.

Barra rolled his eyes. "Do not mind his grace, he and Master Midnight had a bit of a tiff last night. He's still a tad out of sorts. Nothing an apology won't fix."

Devlin ignored him. "If you are not going to proceed, I will be more than happy to simply find it myself."

"Must be quite the apology owed," Neirin murmured, then nudged the horse into motion before Devlin could deliver a scathing retort.

"What in the bloody hell is the point of being an eleventh Duke if no one is going to show proper deference," Devlin grouched, then trudged after them.

He did not owe an apology. Midnight was the one who had betrayed him. Played and teased and flirted, and all the while he was getting his kisses elsewhere. Why then press Devlin time and again? Obviously he was not needed for such things.

His stomach roiled, reminding him he'd had naught more than brandy since storming from his room. He had returned only when the sun was well up and he knew Midnight would be sound asleep.

As always, Midnight had been enchanting in sleep. The urge to go to him, wake him, to coax out a familiar smile had been almost more than he could resist.

The he had imagined Midnight kissing someone else, some unworthy stranger, and he'd lost any desire to do anything but go and find more brandy.

He shivered, but could not tell if it was from the cold inside or out.

Shoving away his thoughts as best he could, he focused on his present circumstances. They had left the fields and foothills well behind, and were into the mountains proper, though far from the higher, more difficult slopes.

"So how do the knights and dragons bury their own?" he asked, moving close enough to rest his hand against his horse's neck. She nickered at him, perhaps the only one at present who was neither angry at him nor in the mood to mock him.

"In stone," Neirin replied. "Knight and dragon together, in death as in life."

From the opposite side of the horse, Troyes growled low.

Devlin said nothing, merely sunk back into his gloomy thoughts.

Why was he so upset? It made no sense. He had always been ashamed of not letting Midnight out to explore more, of always keeping Midnight close...

Obviously he had been feeling guilty for no reason. Indeed, it would seem he'd been too trusting.

Or at least too naïve.

The sound of growling distracted him, and he looked up to see that Troyes had shifted to his dragon form and was now prowling several paces

ahead. He was somewhere between a feral cat and a great snake – Devlin could see why they were called living weapons.

Mostly from genuine curiosity, but also to distract himself, he asked, "So how do knights and dragons pair off? Is there some special rite to it? Simply go to tea and see if you get on?"

Neirin gave a snort that sounded suspiciously like laughter. "Go to tea, indeed. Dragons choose their knights, a few months or so after birth, once they are able to stumble about on their own."

"What makes a knight suitable?" Devlin asked. "A certain degree of arrogance?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes, actually," Neirin said. "Are you asking merely to make mockery?"

Devlin shook his head. "No. Dragons are a mystery even to nightwalkers. I never thought to see one, let alone spend an extended length of time with one. It is fascinating."

"It's also distracting, I would wager," Barra said.

"Do be quiet," Devlin retorted.

Barra merely snickered.

Neirin shook his head, but wisely did not laugh. "No man should own a weapon he cannot properly wield," he said. "Dragons obey only their liege lords, and they choose for lieges those who hold no fear of them. Every living person fears dragons on some level, because that is what they are made to inspire. Only the holiest of kinds and his knights are perfectly without fear of dragons, and so we are their lords."

"The swords get to choose, hmm?" Devlin said aloud. "That is vastly intriguing. Will you have to kill me, now I know your secrets?"

"A knight once betrayed us," Neirin said. "He took the secrets of the dragons to those who should not know them. To betray the clans almost certainly means death."

Devlin said nothing.

"Why would you tell us, then?" Barra demanded. "It is foolish to risk your life and Troyes simply for the sake of conversation."

Neirin shrugged. "One can not expect trust if he is not willing to give it, and as I said last night, I am forging a new path." His gaze lingered on Barra, who only looked away.

Devlin thought he caught a hint of flush though, and would have smiled, except seeing one of his oldest friends dance carefully around an infatuation for an arrogant knight reminded him all too well of his own woes.

His fingers twitched, seeking out the space over his heart, but Devlin fought the impulse.

A day or so, and all would go back to the way it was. He simply had to be patient.

Except, he thought bitterly, matters would never be what they had been. Whenever Midnight smiled in his fond and gentle way, he would wonder who else received those smiles. Who else heard Midnight's easy laughter?

Who had tasted him, and felt him, and known him as Devlin never would?

Bloody hell!

Midnight was his, god damn it all. Why had someone else—but he had always wanted—

Heaving a sigh, he rubbed at his aching temples and wished he had thought to bring a flask of brandy.

Instead he rubbed his temples again, and tried to clear his mind. He did it only through sheer force of will, and years upon years of practice. One who could not clear his mind could not be a rune master.

When his mind was clear, he focused only thoughts of Midnight, himself, the turmoil into which he had found himself cast. Though he dare not close his eyes while walking up a mountain, he did block out all outside distractions before reaching into his jacket.

Three runes came to his hand, warm to the touch.

He pulled them out, then stared at them in silence. Their basic meanings were clear enough. Runes had various meanings, but part of being a rune master was knowing what each meant according to the situation. That was seldom as easy as it sounded, but these three were easy enough with present circumstances being what they were.

Dark.

Love.

Lie.

Dark was Midnight. Love and lie were simple enough. It was the collected meaning which eluded him, and stirred a deep and twisting ache in his chest.

His love for Midnight was a lie? Midnight's for his? Were they only confirming that Midnight was a liar?

Regretting calling upon the runes when he clearly was not stable enough to handle their truths, he returned two, kissed the last, and returned it as well.

He kicked at a stone, then another when the first did not make a suitable racket.

"Is he always like this when he is in trouble?"

"Only when he is in trouble with Midnight," Barra replied. "He raised Midnight from childhood."

"Ah," Neirin said, and his smile this time was sympathetic. "No one knows your weaknesses better than someone who has known you for so long. He is certainly intriguing, your draugr. I can only imagine the magic which must have gone into his making."

Devlin nodded, but said nothing, not trusting himself to speak of Midnight.

"I am greatly intrigued by Midnight," Neirin said. "We seldom encounter magic in the clans, and I can see his making is great magic indeed. However, I sense that, like the dragons, it is better that as few know his secrets as possible."

"Yes," Devlin replied. "I shudder to think what many would do if they thought death could be overcome in such fashion."

The possible repercussions of his actions in regards to Midnight had not struck him until too late – not that knowing them sooner would have stopped him.

Many of the nightwalkers were long lived – vampires, imps, djinn, to name a few. A precious few were truly immortal – demons and kitsune the most infamous of that lot. Several of the nightwalkers with a more typical lifespan envied the longer-lived races, and Devlin did not want to know what some of them might do if they were to obtain the secrets of Midnight's making.

"There it is," Neirin said suddenly, and lifted a hand to point.

Devlin followed the direction he indicated, and saw what looked like the opening to a cave. Normal, save for the fact that the rock had been carved with runes and other markings unfamiliar to him, forming columns and an archway.

"Here do knights and noble blades find eternal rest and reward," Neirin recited. "The phrase is actually a good deal more complicated, but that is the essential message. Troyes."

Immediately Troyes shifted and moved to help him down from the horse.

Devlin noticed that blood stained his shirt in patches.

You cannot possibly begin to understand the full consequences of my actions

What, he wondered, would be the penalty for showing outsiders the graveyard?

"You shouldn't be doing this," Barra said, clearly sharing Devlin's line of thought.

Neirin ignored him, and simply stood leaning against Troyes for a few moments. Then he pushed away, standing up straight with what was obviously a serious effort, and slowly moved toward the entrance to the graveyard.

Devlin rested his hand briefly on Barra's shoulder, doing what he could to soothe his worried friend.

Then he simply did what they had come here to do.

"I sense that draugr were here," he said after a moment, moving to join Neirin at the entrance. "Likely traces of the one we destroyed last night, possibly more, but I simply cannot tell for certain." He wished Midnight were here; he would be so much better at sensing and tracking the draugr.

But they dare not explore a dragon graveyard in the dark, and anyway Midnight would just spend the whole of it ignoring him.

He *hated* when Midnight ignored him.

"Perhaps we will obtain more clues once in—"

Neirin's words were drowned out by Troyes sudden growls, as he shifted back to his dragon form. His tail lashed back and forth, legs splaying, bracing himself as though to strike.

"What is it?" Neirin asked.

The dragon gave a series of sharp, low barks.

Neirin paled.

"Whatever is the matter?" Devlin asked.

"You have to go," Neirin said. "Now! I thought we would be—I guess they had me followed after—" He shook his head. "You have to go, because I cannot promise they will let you live if they find you here. Please!"

Barra did not move. "We cannot just leave you."

"Yes, you can," Neirin. "You must. Please, I am sorry. I thought I could show you without any danger, for no one comes here."

Troyes growled, tail begin to strike the underbrush with real fury now.

"Go! Please, for me, go," Neirin said, staring hard at Barra.

"Fine," Barra said, clearly wanting to do no such thing.

Devlin did not waste time arguing, merely mounted his horse and turned it around. "Barra, we go. As fast as we can."

"Do not stop until you are well clear of the mountain," Neirin said, then turned his back to them and motioned to Troyes, who lunged off into the woods, to be followed more slowly by Neirin.

"Barra!" Devlin snapped. "Let us go. We do him more harm than good by remaining."

Tearing his eyes away from the forms which had vanished into the trees, Barra gave a stiff nod and shifted to his wolf form. Whining briefly, he then lunged off, racing quickly ahead, leaving Devlin to catch up.

The sounds of growling and crashing in the underbrush urged them on, but the attack Devlin feared never came.

By the time they reached safety, he was exhausted simply from the tension. His dismount was more of a fall, but he did remain on his feet.

Barra immediately shifted back. "What will they do to him, your grace?" He asked, eyes dark with worry and fear. "They've already whipped him, I don't need a wolf's senses to know that much."

"No," Devlin agreed. "That was plain enough to even the most oblivious of normal folk. I do not know, Barra. He is pretentious and obnoxious and entirely too arrogant, but no man deserves to be whipped the way he obviously was. I do not know what else he may face. We will see him again, though, I will stake my life on it."

Once again he found himself wishing Midnight were about – Midnight always knew what to say or do, especially with situations such as this.

"Come on," he said, when Barra only continued to stand about, staring at the mountains looking miserable and lost. "Let us see what else we may accomplish, and then you can harangue me for angering Midnight, until your aggravating knight shows up again. No doubt he will appear properly suffering and chivalrous."

Barra smiled weakly, and at last gave a nod. "Aye, your grace. Speaking of, you'd best apologize to Midnight before he gets any further depressed. I don't know what the two of you argued about, but I know it's got him bloody despondent."

Devlin sighed, and said nothing, merely mounted his horse again and led the way back to their lodgings.

I. XI Angel

He had abandoned his rooms with the approach of sunset, still unable to speak to or even look at Midnight.

Barra had frowned at him in disapproval, and tried to make him stay, but Devlin had resisted.

Did Barra know that Midnight had taken lovers? Was he the only fool in the household not to realize? Had they sensed he would be displeased and pitied him, and avoided telling him?

Was he making any sense, even to himself?

No, he was not. Devlin kicked irritably at debris in the streets as he walked. The sun had set over two hours ago, by his pocket watch. The moon was rising, waning slowly away to nothing. He hoped they finished before they reached a moonless night – full moon held power, but so did the darkest of nights.

Would Midnight come find him?

Remembering the stricken look on his face the previous night, when Devlin had told him to cease using 'heartbeat'...

No, Midnight would not come find him. At some point, he would have to go to Midnight.

If they were back in the city, would Midnight have run off to his lover for comfort?

Devlin suddenly wanted badly to throw something. Or break something. Any manner of violence would suit, really. When he thought about someone else seeing and touching the runes he had placed on that body—

Violence was not nearly sufficient. He wanted to bypass violence and go straight on to murder.

Draugr, he told himself furiously. He should be focusing on the other draugr. The ones that were a problem to everyone, not the one which was merely a personal heartache.

What did they know so far?

Very little, he realized dismally. A powerful magic user was using a siren song to make and control draugr. His spells were strong enough – good enough – to manipulate even dragons.

Yet they could not sense so much as a trace of the magician; merely the traces of his draugr. It would have to be a sorcerer or necromancer at the very least, and Devlin should be more than capable of sensing them.

He could not. Only the draugr were proof that anything was happening at all.

This complete lack of any clues had him deeply worried. His knowledge of the nightwalker world was vast – it was the reason he served as a sort of inquirer into such affairs on behalf of Lord Tamor.

He had not even sensed the siren song, and he should have been able to sense spell work. If Midnight had not defied him, likely he would even now be ignorant of the song.

It was still quite possible, no matter what Neirin said, that the culprit was hiding somewhere in the dragon lands. If he was good enough to elude the dragons, then he was definitely capable of slipping past Devlin, though it pained him to admit it.

Perhaps it was time to cast his runes on the matter. He did not like to use them for such broad, uncertain questions, but he was swiftly running out of options.

Of course, he acknowledged sourly, he could go apologize to Midnight. Then Midnight and Barra would resume helping him.

They could go on working together as though all was as it had been...and then Midnight could go off when they returned home and play with his damnable lover.

Snarling, Devlin turned sharply down a small street, headed as far as he could possibly get away from his lodging, the village, anywhere Midnight had been or might go.

He eventually came to cliffs overlooking the sea, staring down at the dark moving mass, here and there shining in the moonlight. It was beautiful, with a sharp and dangerous edge, yet one more thing to make him think of Midnight.

Damn it.

Sighing, he turned away and picked his way as he best he could in the dark, stumbling and tripping more times than he cared to think about, until he at last reached a stretch of smooth sand. A few minutes scouring turned up a bit of rock with a sharp-enough edge to it.

Kneeling in the sand, he drew a moderately sized circle, taking care to make certain it was well-formed.

Such wards – the ancient precursor to spell circles – were only used in such castings as he was about to employ.

Those who would master the runes began young, and with few – at seven years of age, the first and most basic seven runes were given, learned. Every two years, two more were given – nine, eleven, on up until the full set of twenty one was obtained. By the age of twenty three, most had obtained

the level of rune master, though few were truly as skilled as Devlin and his ancestors had always been.

A ward circle was employed when more than seven runes were cast in the matter of a reading, which was quite different from casting the runes in battle or similar such circumstances.

Typically, he did not cast a reading if it required more than the normal three runes.

Dark. Love. Lies.

Mouth tightening, Devlin shoved away thoughts of Midnight and focused solely on what he needed to know.

He pulled his rune bag from his jacket, and opened it, but did not reach for them.

Sitting down upon the sand, folding his legs up, he closed his eyes and cleared his mind.

Then, one by one, he drew in thoughts of the village, the draugr, the odd way they behaved, the siren song, the dragons, the lack of clues...then he began to pull them together, blending them into a simple question:

What will lead me to the cause?

Eyes still closed, he reached into the open bag of runes and one by one began to cast them into the ward circle.

When he reached his hand into the bag and no more came to his hands, he closed the bag and then slowly opened his eyes.

Nine runes.

Some of the tension bled out of him. During the casting, he did not count. He had dreaded the runes climbing to a higher number, given the nature of the question. If the count had been higher than thirteen, he would have broken the ward and undone the casting.

A rune master of true skill could handle up to seventeen. Beyond that, and the runes began to fray the mind.

His great great grandfather had attempted a full twenty-one. No one ever knew what question he had asked, but the answer had cost him his mind. Edward White, the eighth Duke of Winterbourne, had died a stark raving lunatic, even by the rather loose standards of the nightwalkers.

Reassured by the low count, Devlin finally took in the runes themselves.

His own was there, as well as Midnight's. The rune for 'spirit' had always represented his family, perhaps because spirits were neither good nor bad – they were simply too stubborn to die away.

Devlin frowned at the runes. They were arrayed in peculiar fashion.

The rune for 'death' seemed most central. Four runes touched it, from north to west – magic, spirit, speak, hear. The 'magic' rune was touched by 'desire' which in turn touched 'bond'.

'Bond' connected to both 'spirit' and 'dark' – Midnight's rune, most often.

It could mean something different, in this context, for thoughts of Midnight had not entered his head. But 'bond' connected his rune with Midnight's, and that meant it probably did mean Midnight.

That wasn't hard to figure out – if it was mentioning a bond between him and Midnight in this context, then the rune did not carry its alternate meaning of 'love' here. It meant, most likely, the spell that wove them together and granted Midnight life.

Hmm.

Death, magic, spirit, speak, hear. Death connected to magic, which desired the bond between him and Midnight. He was connected to death, in turn connected to speak and hear. Except he had no control over death, which seemed to be the implication.

What were the runes trying to tell him?

Devlin sighed and looked out over the sea, praying silently for the clarity he usually possessed, but which now eluded him.

He was in discord, and knew it, and the source.

What to do about it – that was the true reason for his disharmony. He could not have it both ways. Midnight was his and only his, unfairly, or was his after belonging to others. Neither option pleased him.

Must everything be so complicated?

He looked down at the runes again, but before he could renew his contemplation, a cold shiver raced up his spine right as his senses warned him who was approaching.

Snatching up his runes, taking a fair bit of sand with them, he turned just in time to avoid a strike from Winsted's angel.

It was, he thought, more like a moving – deadly – doll than a true angel brought to life.

Despicable, to have the talent to make an angel, only to abuse it.

"So you have decided to kill me after all?" Devlin asked, then gave up talking entirely, all his energy and concentration going to avoiding the angel. All to nothing, likely. He could avoid it for a time, his experience working for him – but it was an angel, and one ordered to kill him, it seemed.

A witch, even one of his skill, still was no match for an angel, especially one such as this. An avenging angel, though it was not well formed. The power was there, the obedience, and the beauty – but very little else.

Only guardian angels were more powerful. He thanked whatever gods favored him that he was not facing a guardian angel.

He wondered morosely why and how he always managed to get himself into these situations.

The water wasn't an option, it would only impede and not prove a challenge to his attacker.

"It has been decided that by killing you, we will solve the problem," Winsted said calmly. "You and that corpse child you keep, against all laws of man and god."

On the list of laws he had broken, Devlin rather thought keeping a corpse rather low on it, but now was not the time to bicker over fine points.

He would love to inquire as to the reasons Winsted and his fellows had decided he must die – if he had brought his comrades into the affair at all – but he could not spare even that small amount of attention.

Nor could he cast his runes. They were jumbled, ripped from the earlier casting. He could not pause long enough to shape what he wanted in his mind, anyway.

He screamed as a bolt of burning light struck him, searing his side. It caused him to stumble, and he threw out a hand to catch himself, succeeding only in tearing open his hand on a jagged edge of rock.

Then the angel was upon him, empty eyes glowing gold as it moved on its directive to kill.

Devlin screamed again as white-hot pain coursed through him.

Typical of a slayer, he thought hazily, Winsted had not given his angel mercy. It was literally incapable of caring if it caused its victims pain.

He heard the caw of a raven, vaguely, and then suddenly he was on the ground, trembling and dizzy and in excruciating pain – but alive.

The world returned in bits and pieces, until he was just conscious enough to register a bellow of inhuman rage, and a scream of pain far worse than his own had been.

Slowly lifting his head, then raising himself just enough to brace his weight on his elbows, he watched Midnight battle the angel.

It was a brutal fight – both were already streaked with wounds and blood. The lifeless angel was made only to combat those things Winsted declared evil. His mission was to kill Devlin.

To do that, he must now get past Midnight, an animated corpse who had risen years ago solely to find and protect Devlin. When Devlin was faced with true harm, Midnight lost all sense.

"Midnight..." The words came out a rasp rather than the shout he had attempted, and Devlin wondered hazily just how much screaming he had done. He struggled to get up, but made it only as far as his knees before

pain and dizziness caused him to fall the opposite direction to land without a speck of grace upon his backside.

The angel threw itself at Midnight, who snarled and threw him off again, his impossible strength and speed, along with his transformative capabilities, made him a match for the angel.

Devlin did not see what happened, only that suddenly the combatants were no longer an equal match.

With a cry of anger and triumph, Midnight tore away the leather collar wrapped around the angel's throat. It shimmered, then fell to pieces in his hands, then turned to dust. Then nothing, and Midnight moved again, snapping the angel's neck – and ordinarily Devlin knew he would have simply torn the head clear off.

The angel drew a soft, short breath as it happened – then burst into a flurry of runes and light.

Midnight did not pause, but lunged toward Winsted, who stumbled away with a panicked cry, fear and disbelief filling his face.

"No!" Devlin gasped out, knowing Midnight would hear him no matter how low or hoarse his voice might be. "I promised his sister I would not kill him."

Midnight snarled in outrage at being thwarted, but settled for simply knocking Winsted hard upon the head, sending him to fall unconscious upon the sand, not quite far enough down to be drowned by the tide.

Turning away from Winsted, Midnight stalked toward Devlin.

He dropped to his knees beside Devlin, scratched and bloody and very much the worse for wear. Nothing rest and Devlin's magic could not fix in a night or so.

Save the tears streaming down his cheeks. "I killed an angel," Midnight said.

Devlin reached out and tugged him close, until Midnight's head rest on his shoulder. "It's all right," he said, not bothering to try for anything but a murmur. "That was a poor imitation of what an angel should be, and whatever part of it could feel or think, is probably happy not to be bound."

Midnight said nothing, but seemed to ease a bit at his words, weight falling more solidly against him.

The weight was reassuring, comforting, and Devlin opened his mouth to speak, because suddenly an apology seemed such an easy thing to give –

But drawing the breath for it proved too great and painful an effort. Everything went black.

I. XII Blood

"Bloody hell, who took a heavy object to my head?" Devlin asked sourly as he sat up in bed.

He started to complain more, but was immediately distracted by the sight of Midnight, fast asleep next to him. The room was dark, only hints of sunlight slipped through the closed door dividing the bedroom from the sitting room.

Midnight looked terrible, and the sight of his wounds brought back everything that had happened.

Devlin forgot about his aching head and reached out to brush back strands of Midnight's hair, rubbing his thumb over the tracks of dried tears on one cheek. Then he withdrew, throwing back the blankets to stumble about the room.

His head ached something fierce, never mind the aches and pains slicing through his body with every increment of movement. The next time he had it out with an angel, he was going to demand a quick, painless death. He was the eleventh Duke of Winterbourne, perfectly within his rights not to have to tolerate this slow and painful nonsense.

Where were his bloody runes?

When in doubt... "Barra!" he snapped out, hoping Barra was near to hand.

The door opened a moment later.

Barra looked about as fit as Midnight. What had transpired after his inelegant collapse?

"You're awake," Barra said, and Devlin noticed his grip on the door was white-knuckled. "Must say, your grace, the two of you have had me worried something fierce. He dragged you here, then collapsed himself, and not so much as a peep out of you since then – and that right before dawn."

Devlin winced. "I see." So close to dawn. Midnight must be exhausted, after the fighting and the injuries, then dragging him back here.

Never mind he had probably still been upset by their fight before all that.

Sighing, he returned to what he had originally sought. "My runes, Barra."

"Out here, your grace," Barra said. "They're a right mess, but I know better than to mess with them, eh?"

Nodding, Devlin followed Barra out to the sitting room, grimacing in pain but ignoring it. Midnight was far more important, and to fix Midnight he must first fix his runes.

They were, as Barra had said, a right mess. A jumble of sand and runes rested upon the table, along with his velvet bag and whatever runes remained within. Given the state of things, he dreaded that some had been lost.

He murmured a thanks as Barra pressed a soft, clean cloth into his hands, only absently hearing the opening and closing of the door. Barra no doubt was off to fetch food and tea, instead of resting as the bloody fool should. Devlin would make him upon his return.

One by one he picked up the dirty runes and wiped them clean, brushing every last grain of sand from the runes and the table. That done, he picked up the piece of chalk which Barra had left for him, and drew a circle upon the table.

Setting the chalk aside, he then picked up a knife. Even exhausted and worried, Barra had set to work preparing, anticipating – then again, work had always settled Barra's mind to rest like nothing else.

He looked at the scars in his palm, left there from occasions of feeding Midnight, and also from the few other occasions he'd had to restore the attunement between himself and his runes. Face blank, he slit open his palm. Setting the knife aside, he picked up the nine runes and dropped them into his bloody palm. Then he picked up the velvet bag, and tipped out the rest of the runes, holding and moving and rolling them until every last one was covered in his blood.

Then he cast them into the circle, breathing a sigh when all that was there seemed to fall properly into its place.

It seemed as though they were all there, but he went through each to make certain.

Touch. Taste. Smell. Speak. Hear. Fire. Water. Earth. Wind. Metal. Life. Death. Spirit. Sun. Moon. Magic. Need. Illusion. Bond. Time. Imbalance.

All there.

Devlin released the breath he had not realized he was holding.

Scooping up the bloody runes, he dumped all but one into the bag. Kissing the last, he then joined it to the others. Shaking the bag, he again cast the runes into the circle.

They fell exactly as they had before – save they were now pristine and perfectly white.

Good. They were in harmony again.

Returning them to the bag, kissing the last one before replacing it, he then strode as quickly as he dared back into the bedroom.

Throwing back the bedcovers, he again stroked Midnight's hair, frowning as he noted every scratch and bruise upon the perfect white skin. Then he touched all the runes marked into that beautiful skin, lingering longest over the ones over Midnight's heart, reaching up to feel the warmth of his own through the fine lawn of his shirt.

Closing his eyes, he thought of Midnight, and healing, of restoring. Pulling the thoughts together, he reached into his rune bag and drew those that came warm to his touch.

He cast them upon Midnight's torso, and then opened his eyes. Magic shimmered as it went to work, and in the time it take to draw two breaths, the deed was done.

Gently he retrieved the runes, kissing the last one before dropping it in the bag.

Then he set the bag aside, and simply touched for a time. Not in amorous fashion, merely comforting – to himself, more than Midnight, for Midnight was more dead than alive while the sun shone. Devlin had not favored winter, not until Midnight.

Winter, however, meant less sunlight, which meant Midnight was awake more often, and longer, and on a precious few particularly cold and wretched days, could stay awake during the daylight hours.

The sound of the main door opening recalled him, and reluctantly he drew back. With a last, lingering look, wishing it were dark already so he might repair whatever troubles remained between them, Devlin turned away and went to rejoin Barra in the sitting room.

As he had suspected, Barra had gone to fetch sustenance. Which stirred a sudden thought. "What time is it, Barra?"

"Just past three, your grace," Barra said. "I ordered you a bath while I was downstairs."

"Thank you – for everything. Go get some rest, Barra. You'll be of no use if you should suddenly collapse from working and worrying yourself half to death."

Barra clearly was about to start arguing.

Devlin went in for the kill. "What happens if your shining knight shows up and you are too tired to help him?"

"That, your grace," Barra said stiffly, "is cheating."

"I cheated death to keep Midnight," Devlin replied "Why on earth would I not cheat at everything else?"

Barra rolled his eyes. "I cannot seem to recall, at present, why I wanted you to wake up."

Devlin smiled. "That tea smells heavenly, Barra."

Still grumbling, Barra nevertheless set promptly to work, feeding Devlin food and tea until every last crumb was gone.

By the time he was permitted to cease stuffing himself like a holiday goose, the bath was ready.

This time he was more careful not to select some ridiculously sweet soap, choosing instead one that smelled only of sandalwood and lemon.

Rising from the bath, feeling almost like himself again and largely free of pain, Devlin found himself attacked by Barra and a wardrobe's worth of clothing.

He suffered the attack in silence, content to drawn in lawn and lace if it would make Barra feel better.

When Barra finally decided victory had been achieved, Devlin supposed he could not begrudge him the results.

Though he still wondered why such finery was required when he was only going to track down a nasty little slayer and wring the blood bastard's neck.

His breeches were a deep, rich brown, with a waistcoat of the very same, though it held a paisley pattern woven in gold and red thread. The jacket was a few shades lighter, the cuffs of cream and gold lace. The neck cloth matched, and bursts of red crowned the whole in a cravat pin and cufflinks.

"How much of my fortune goes to my wardrobe?" he asked idly, smoothing back a small strand of hair, fussing with his lace cuffs.

Barra snorted and did not reply to the question, merely began to tidy up around the room, ringing for servants to come and take the bath away. "What are we about to day, your grace?"

"I believe that we will instruct Father Winsted in why it is unwise to attempt to kill me," Devlin replied. "I may have promised not to kill the bugger, but I never vowed not to slap him around a bit. As my father used to say, a lesson that does not involve some form of pain is a lesson poorly learned."

"Aye," Barra replied. "Your father was a character."

"To say the least," Devlin replied, smiling faintly at the memory of his father. If the tenth Duke were still around, he did not think his siblings would have fled across the ocean. Devlin wondered what it said about him that he was not strong enough to keep the family together.

Maybe he was simply too selfish. His world had revolved solely around his family until the night a small, dead child had tried to protect him. After that, his world was Midnight.

Sighing, he allowed Barra to help him into his great coat, then tucked his runes into his jacket and picked up his gloves.

"Where do you think—" Barra abruptly stopped, and bolted across the room to the door, throwing it open right as someone began to pound upon it.

Troyes stood in the doorway, looking as though he had been dragged through the woods or on the losing end of a fight.

His face was also streaked with tears. "Master—wolf-elf, help."

"What's wrong?" Barra demanded, immediately going to grab his coat.

"Hurt," Troyes said. "Would not let me protect. Dying."

Devlin pulled his gloves on even as he was striding to the door.

"Take us to him, now," he barked.

Troyes did not waste any time, merely turned and all but ran back the way he must have come, through the halls, down the stairs, and out into the busy streets.

Ignoring the people around them, not particularly caring what manner of spectacle they were likely making – hoping they would simply chalk it up to yet more strange behavior from the Mad Duke – Devlin ran after Troyes, with Barra close on his heels.

He should have called for his horse, but it would have been precious time wasted, if Neirin was indeed dying.

Once well away from the village and any chance of strays wandering about the fields, Troyes and Barra shifted.

Devin stood no chance of keeping up, then, and so did not try, merely went as quickly as his own legs could carry him.

It seemed to take forever, but at last he reached them.

He swore loudly at the sight which greeted his eyes.

It was a bloody miracle Neirin lived at all. Devlin did not waste time on a detailed analysis, merely drew out his runes and cast them, find filled only with thoughts of healing and saving.

The wounds were too severe for one simple casting to heal; only time would repair him wholly, but Devlin poured his energy into the casting, and it proved enough to at least keep him from dying.

Only then did he drop to kneel with Barra and Troyes alongside Neirin's body.

His back was a horrifying mess of deep lash marks. Devlin did not doubt that metal must have been at the tip of the lashes, and he wondered if it had been a single lash or the far more brutal nine-tails. When the wounds finally healed, his back would be a canvas of hideous scars.

Troyes whimpered, cradling Neirin's head in his lap.

Barra looked no better.

"What happened?" Devlin demanded, wondering how they would get the man back to his lodgings. They would need his horse, at the very least.

"Told secrets. Too many broken rules. One—one hundred lashes," Troyes said, crying again. "Locked me up, would not permit me to protect. Blood and screams. Could not protect." He dropped his head to bury it in Neirin's hair. "B-banished," he said. "Live or die, they do not care. Not knight. Bad dragon."

"No," Barra snarled. "Good dragon. Of course you're good, Troyes. Neirin is good, too." He reached out to hesitantly touch Troyes, who promptly turned and nuzzled into the touch, eyes closed.

"Wolf-elf good," Troyes said quietly. "Master like." He opened his eyes, the rich amber color dark with pain, but better than they had been only a few moments ago. "Think wolf-elf pretty. Liked kiss."

Barra's cheeks turned red.

Devlin coughed to cover a laugh. "Liked kiss, is it? Well, well, Barra."

"We need to get him back to your rooms," Barra said, pointedly ignoring Devlin.

"Yes," Devlin said, sobering. "I have prevented further blood loss, and hopefully eased some of his pain, but he needs better attention than we can give here. Barra, go and fetch my horse. We can carry him that way, then tend to his wounds once he's abed."

"Yes, your grace," Barra replied. He touched Troyes one last time, spared a lingering look for Neirin, then turned and shifted, racing off back toward the village.

Devlin sat in silence, moving only to restore his runes.

What manner of conversation did one hold with a dragon, when attempting to break an awkward silence?

He was spared the decision when Troyes suddenly gave a deep, low, angry – and even fearful – growl.

Not bothering to ask for details, Devlin stood up and closed his eyes. Protection, he thought. Protection strong enough to hold up even against dragons.

Reaching into his bag, he drew five runes, and cast them blindly in four directions – north, south, east, and west. The last he held, dropping to one knee and thrusting the rune into the ground.

Then he opened his eyes, watching as the ground and air alike seemed to blur and shimmer, then return to normal.

Not a moment too soon, as two figures slunk from the trees and into their tiny clearing.

Devlin had seldom felt intimidated in his life. He had no cause to feel such a thing – he was powerful in the normal world, in the nightwalker world, he had wealth and affluence and talent.

The day his parents died, leaving everything well and truly for him to manage, had intimidated him.

Meeting the demon lord, and realizing they could be friends, had intimidated him.

The man before him now intimidated him.

It annoyed him, that one figure could make him feel thus, when he was obviously nothing more than another knight.

Except Troyes was still growling, angry and afraid, but with his head bowed, as though he dare not look up.

Meeting the man's amber eyes – exactly the color of a dragon's eyes – he felt a sudden and overwhelming urge to remain kneeling.

Scowling, he forced himself to his feet. "If you have come to lay more harm upon my friends," he said coolly, "that shiny bit of metal with you will not be enough to keep you from harm."

The man's brows went up, mouth quirking in amusement. "Indeed. You could only be the Duke about whom I have heard so much lately." His eyes flicked down to Neirin and Troyes, and for a moment Devlin thought he saw a hint of pain.

A soft growling sound drew his attention, and for the first time he really took in the man's dragon.

It was, he realized, gold-colored. Not silver like Troyes. It was also larger, longer, curling protectively around the man, reaching as high as his hip.

"He is alive," the man said, more statement than question.

"No thanks to you," Devlin snapped. "Is this how the clans treat all those who dare to break a few rules? You are no better than the normals, taking issue with anything that does not meet your expectations."

Shadows flickered in the man's eyes. "The world does not understand us. Once, it did. Perhaps someday it will again. Until then, I must keep my people and my dragons safe. I did not approve what was done to Neirin. I protested it. He is my friend."

"I would never allow this to be done to a friend," Devlin said coldly.

The man met his eyes, and it took everything Devlin had not to back down from that gaze, not to lower his head and submit to whatever the bloody hell that gaze was ordering. Who the hell was this man, to have such an effect?

"He knew the laws," the man said quietly. "He has broken them time and again. This time, he went too far. I could no longer protect him. Take care of them, Winterbourne." Then the man simply turned and walked away, his golden dragon shimmering in a patch of sunlight before they were gone as suddenly as they had come.

Devlin sank to the ground, suddenly exhausted. "Who in the bloody hell was that?" he demanded.

Troyes made a whining, growling sound. "Prince Avalon and Caliburn. Holy Pendragon."

"I see," Devlin said. May he be spared from ever having to contend with dragons after this. Bloody annoying lot.

A soft groan drew their attention, and Devlin looked down, catching Neirin's pain glazed eyes. "You," he said imperiously, "are nothing but trouble and aggravation. I thought knights were supposed to do the rescuing."

"Bugger off," Neirin whispered, then slipped back into unconsciousness.

I. XIII Kiss

They got Neirin back to the lodging house with less trouble than Devlin had anticipated, and the frowning disapproval of the landlady vanished with the appearance of gold and the promise more would be forthcoming if she kept her mouth shut and provided him with a second set of rooms.

She gave them the suite opposite Devlin's, likely to keep all her problems in one place, but Devlin did not complain as it worked out all the better for them.

Depositing Neirin in the bed, he immediately set to work, fetching his chalk to cast circles that would both do a better job of healing Neirin, as well as ward the new suite against as thoroughly as he had warded his own.

When he finished, he went to check on Neirin.

Troyes was sitting on the bed next to him, legs folded up, hands clasped loosely in his lap. His eyes were locked on Barra, who was tenderly going about cleaning Neirin up and tending those wounds his spells had not completely closed.

What in the world was he going to do with a banished knight and dragon? Were there any who did not live within the confines of the clans?

Well, it was a problem for another day.

"Barra, take a bit of coin and locate us some good food. Our fallen knight there will probably be starving when he wakes, and I bet the dragon could do with a bit of good meat, eh? I could use a cup of tea, myself." He could do with a bit of brandy, but best not to be going on with that at the moment.

"Yes, your grace," Barra said, reluctantly pulling away from tending Neirin.

Biting back a teasing remark about making a lovely wife, because he knew Midnight would only tread upon his toes for it where he was, Devlin turned away.

Going back to his own rooms, he cast his runes before the fire, seeking only one thing.

Where to find Winsted.

The runes told him, a simple casting of three.

He started to leave, then hesitated.

His feet were moving before he had given them permission, following the path to weakness into the bedroom.

Midnight still lay unmoving, but rest had healed what his runes had not, and Midnight now looked as good as new. His chest rose and fell slightly, and Devlin reached out to push the blankets back, rest his hand on the space over Midnight's heart, his other hand on his own.

One heartbeat, two bodies.

Some bastard might have Midnight's kisses, even his affection, though the thought still made Devlin physically ill and inclined toward violence. They would never share a heartbeat though, never share a breath. Or a soul.

He had that, even if someday he had nothing else.

Bending, he placed a brief, soft kiss at the corner of Midnight's mouth, stroking his cheek as he rose, lingering for one last moment before finally turning away.

Closing the door behind him, he strode from his rooms back to Neirin's suite.

In the hallway, he nearly collided with the landlady and another woman.

Definitely a noblewoman of some sort...but one travelling alone?

He frowned.

She was a beauty, light brown hair pulled back in an ornate chignon, fair skin unmarred. Likely she had removed her cloak upon arrival, for now she wore only a high-waist gown of deep crimson, embroidered with dark gold flowers at the hem and waist. A matching necklace of delicate flowers made from gold and rubies was around her throat. Her eyes were a clear blue, like the lake at his family home.

They were also cool, as his mother's had often looked when she was about some manner of unpleasant business.

Something was clutched in her right hand, the way she held it fisted closed, but he could not see what.

"Oh, your grace," the landlady said, lips pursed in annoyance. "A young *lady* to see you and your new guest. I expect—"

"Thank you," he said, cutting off the coming lecture and reminders of who might visit him here. He held his arm out to the woman, and she took it with a polite smile and a murmur of greeting.

Inside, he closed the door and, safely away from the landlady, withdrew his arm. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Who I am matters not," the woman said coolly. "I was away visiting my family home until this morning, and so only just recently learned of what has become of Lord Neirin. I have come to say my goodbyes, and close matters between us."

Matters between them?

Devlin had a suspicion he knew the nature of the matter, but did not voice his opinion. "If you are of that ilk, why do you not have a dragon with you? Do women not have them?"

"Of course I have a dragon," the woman said. "How dare you suggest I am unfit. We never take our dragons out amongst people, the risk is far too great. It is one of our most important rules, and if you did not know that, it only goes to prove *he*--

She broke off, pursing her lips, looking much like the landlady had only a few minutes before.

"I wish to see him," she said at last. "I came here because I wanted to be civil about it, not because I wanted to stir up more trouble. He has certainly caused enough of that."

"Madame," Devlin said coldly, giving her a mocking bow. "He is through there, by all means go and speak of *matters*."

She gave him a sharp look, obviously realizing he knew what she was about.

Devlin let her go, and wondered what the devil else was going to transpire that day.

If dragons were always this damnably difficult, may he be spared ever having to encounter another.

He looked up at the sound of the door opening, to see Barra with his perpetually overburdened tray.

Barra froze as he stepped into the room. "Perfume," he said, nose wrinkling. "Traces of a strange dragon, and definitely a woman. Who is here?"

"As you say," Devlin said. "A woman who has a dragon, though apparently it is not the done thing to bring one's dragon when one ventures off clan territory. She has come to part ways with Neirin in civil fashion."

"Family?" Barra asked, worry putting lines on his brow.

"Perhaps," Devlin replied, knowing the woman was nothing of the kind.

A low growl brought both their heads around to face the closed bedroom door, but even as Devlin moved, the door opened again and the woman stepped calmly out.

She nodded to Devlin as she reached him, completely ignoring Barra. "Good day to you, your grace."

With that, she swept out, the door closing quietly behind her.

"Starchy lot, dragon folk," Barra said idly. "She was no relation; didn't smell right."

Before he could say more, the bedroom door opened again and Troyes came slowly out.

Barra moved immediately toward him, tray forgotten. "Troyes. Who was that?"

Troyes blinked at him, then shrugged in disinterest. "Lady Christina. Going to be mate. Not now. Gave back ring." He smiled briefly. "Neirin woke. Wake again soon?" His eyes moved to the forgotten tray. "Food?"

Barra, however, had latched on only to his first statement. "Mate?" he asked, voice unsteady. "What do you mean, going to be mate?"

"Mate," Troyes repeated, shrugging again. "Not now. Good. Food?"

Looking miserable, Barra moved to the table and picked up the tray of raw meat sitting there, thrusting it toward Troyes, not looking at him.

"Thank you, wolf-elf," Troyes said, and reached out to ruffle Barra's hair.

Barra smiled, but it was a weak effort.

Troyes frowned. "Why sad, wolf-elf?"

"I did not know Neirin had a mate," he said, sadness mingled with bitterness now.

"Not mate anymore," Troyes said, frowning now. "Not matter. Neirin has Troyes. And wolf-elf?"

Barra said nothing.

Devlin felt the stirrings of anger. "Has your damned knight been toying with Barra all along?" He demanded.

Troyes growled, but it was a sound more of confusion and hurt than anger. "No toy," he said, meat forgotten. "What wrong? Just mate. No matter. Troyes mated too." He stepped toward Barra, reaching out to touch him again.

Barra jerked away, moving to sit in a chair alongside the table.

Whining, Troyes shifted and curled up on the floor, twining around himself beneath the table, still continuing to whine and growl.

Devlin was torn between forcing the dragon to explain what in the hell was going on, or going to wake up Neirin and demand the answers from him. What sort of bastard took a mate, then seemed unaffected by the fact that she left him. Why was Troyes so uninterested in the matter?

Before he could decide upon a course, they were interrupted yet again by the opening of a door – but this time it was the hallway door, and he knew who it was before it finished opening.

Midnight poked his head inside, then smiled in relief and stepped fully inside. He was only partially dressed, in black breeches and white stockings, and a white shirt. His hair fell loose all around, and without his gloves, his dark blue nails shone in the light.

Devlin looked out the window, realizing only then that it was just dark enough for Midnight to rise.

He started to speak, but his breath caught in his throat.

Midnight looked at him briefly, almost shyly, but said nothing. "Whatever is going on here?" he asked. "If Troyes is about, then Neirin must be, yet Barra looks utterly depressed."

Tersely Devlin explained all that had transpired, ending with the latest revelation that Neirin apparently had had a mate until only a few minutes ago.

"Perhaps there is a misunderstanding," Midnight said. "How awful that so much has happened to Neirin. 'Tis a wonder he does not hold it against us, all that has befallen him." He smirked briefly. "Then again, he apparently likes Barra's kisses."

Barra frowned.

Devlin felt anger stir again. A 'mongrel' like Barra was hated by other wolves – that meant he stood no chance of ever finding a mate amongst them, and he was wolf enough to want a mate. He was not elf enough, unfortunately, for their fierce independence and wanderlust to overcome the wolf's desire for pack and mate.

Midnight rested a hand on Barra's shoulder, and smiled again at Devlin.

He attempted to say something again, but his voice seemed not to function when Midnight looked at him.

Beneath the table, Troyes whined again, then gave a series of low, sharp barks and stood up, padding across the room to the door, sitting back on his haunches as it opened.

"You should not be up," Barra immediately said, but did not rise – though to judge from the way his hands were balled into tight fists in his lap, he was fighting the urge to do precisely that. "You are mostly healed, but still require a great deal of rest, and you will reopen your wounds—"

"What's wrong?" Neirin cut in, looking from Barra to his dragon. He held out a hand to Troyes. "Why are you crying?"

Troyes shifted back and stood, wrapping himself gently around Neirin. "Wolf-elf no like. Troyes bad."

"Troyes good," Neirin said sharply. He lowered his head and dropped a kiss on Neirin's shoulder, a bit of which was revealed for the dragon only barely was wearing a loose white shirt, having shucked all but it and breeches while he lay with Neirin.

Devlin blinked. He had noted that Troyes was always touching or clinging or some other such, but he had taken that for simply one more peculiar element of dragons. That casual kiss was not the sort a master gave to a subordinate, even if said subordinate was a dragon.

Surely they were not amorous...hadn't the damnable dragon just said Neirin had until very recently had a mate?

"Why is my dragon so upset?" Neirin demanded.

"You have – or had – a mate," Devlin said coldly. "One that you appear to have simply coldly discarded. Are knights and dragons always so dismissive about such things? I told you before I will not tolerate your playing with Barra."

Neirin frowned, looking as confused as his dragon had before. "Christina? We were to be married, but it was simply an arranged marriage. To be honest, we never much cared for one another. Her family is extremely old fashioned; the le Fay clan has always been excessively so. I had every intention of breaking the engagement, anyway, even before I got myself—" His mouth tightened. "Banished," he said more quietly, the word obviously hard to force out.

"So she is not your mate?" Midnight asked calmly.

"Well, we were obviously supposed to have children. A du Lac with a le Fay..." He drifted off, looking at Barra, who regarded him cautiously. "Mate," he continued slowly, "only refers to childbearing amongst dragons. In dragon thought, she would have been my mate. But dragons do not take such thing seriously. Troyes has already been mated twice; he has fathered three children, and more will shortly be following. I think, perhaps, that word means something else entirely outside of the clans?"

Midnight laughed softly. "Quite. Among wolves especially, a mate is a love and lover for life."

"Oh," Neirin said, looking horrified. "Please, no, forgive us. That is not what she was to me at all. As I said, I could not stand the woman – nor could she bear me. She quite hated I was more interested in the outside world than clan politics."

He kissed Troyes' shoulder again, then let him go and strode to Barra, kneeling and resting one hand on Barra's. "Please, I intended no harm. I meant what I said to you the other night."

The tension bled from Barra's frame, and he gave a slow nod.

"There," Midnight said. "A simple misunderstanding." His faintly glowing blue eye slid toward Devlin. "There seems to be a great many of those—"

He abruptly broke off, and doubled over as a terrible scream tore from his throat.

Devlin was across the room before he thought.

Midnight clung to him, still screaming in abject pain.

"What's wrong?" Devlin demanded. "Damn it, Midnight, what the devil is wrong?"

"Song," Midnight gasped out. "Drowning—you—can't hear you, hea—" He screamed again, and when he looked up his eyes were glowing brightly. "Please, I can't hear you. The song is drowning you—going to hurt—don't want to be—"

Devlin grasped his shoulders and gave him a shake. "Damn it, Midnight. You are mine. Do not dare listen to another; I will not tolerate such defiance."

Midnight tried to laugh, but it only came out another scream.

He'd never felt so helpless. Damn it, where was the bloody bastard behind all this and how was he finally getting to Midnight?

"Help," Midnight pleaded. "I do not want to hurt you." His glowing eyes were full of misery – and a growing madness that was visible proof the siren song was winning.

Devlin tightened his grip on Midnight's shoulders and dragged him close, ignoring the pain where Midnight's fingers dug into arms, the layers of cloth insufficient protection. "You're mine, Midnight. Do not dare forget that, simply because some stranger sings to you."

Then he covered Midnight's mouth with his own, dispensing with niceties for the moment in favor of kissing hard and deep and sure. Midnight tasted as he smelled – sweet and bitter, rich and sharp. Like magic, Devlin had always privately thought.

He also abruptly realized that Midnight was a bloody liar—it was so very easy to tell that Midnight had never been kissed. *Dark. Love. Lies.* Midnight had lied to him about being with others.

As soon as they were safe, he was going to wring Midnight's neck.

Gradually the death grip on his arms ceased, and he could feel Midnight relax, knew the spell was losing its hold.

He broke the kiss when all seemed well, and the need for breath grew urgent.

Midnight looked at him, eyes wide with surprise and happiness.

Devlin reached into his jacket, and drew a single rune, pressing it to Midnight's forehead. "Sleep, dark angel," he said softly, and caught Midnight in his arms as he immediately succumbed to Devlin's spell.

Motioning for Barra to precede him to open the doors, he carried Midnight back to their bed and laid him out, gently smoothing his hair and pulling up the blankets.

Then he fetched his chalk, and warded the room and bed heavily enough that even a demon would be thwarted for a time.

Finished protecting Midnight from further attempts at foreign control, still tasting the kiss on the lips, Devlin snatched up his greatcoat and

gloves, and went off to find Winsted, for the bastard priest was his best place to start.

And when he found the magician behind the siren song, he would rend the bastard limb from limb.

I. XIX Hex

Finding Winsted proved to be a simple matter – he was, conveniently enough, right where a priest ought to be.

Devlin entered the small church with an amused smirk. More than a few of his ancestors had been condemned in such places; a few were even buried in them.

He stood before the altar and regarded it absently, waiting.

A moment later, his waiting ended, as a priest came out and stopped short at the sight of him.

Devlin was interested to note the man was a nightwalker. Not human, certainly, though that was all he could tell for certain; his exact nature proved elusive.

"Where is the slayer?" Devlin asked. "You would do better to tell me, for I will have no qualms tearing this place apart to find him. I have done worse."

The priest regarded him in disbelief. Even you, your grace, would not evade punishment for bringing harm down upon god's house."

Devlin snorted with laughter. "If you think so," he replied, "you do not know the whole of my reputation. I assure you, I will decimate this place unless you tell me where to find that slayer."

"So violent," said a cold voice, just as Devlin sensed him.

He spun around sharply, reaching for his runes – but Winsted simply stood there, looking tired and hateful and furious. "What was that nonsense about making promises to me my sister?" Winsted demanded. "Why would she extract such a promise from you?"

"Because she knew that if she did not, I would kill you and gladly," Devlin replied. "Only that promise stayed the hand of Midnight last night, and we both know it."

The hate overtook Winsted's face, blocking out all else. "Your nasty little ghoul killed my angel."

"Your angel was trying to kill me," Devlin said blandly. "Under the circumstances, I cannot extend apologies. I take no pleasure in the death of an angel, even your poor imitation, but I prefer to live."

"That ghoul—"

"He is a draugr, technically, not a ghoul. A ghoul is something else entirely, being living for one thing." Devlin sneered. "As a hunter, should you not have your facts straight? You speak of ghouls as a normal might."

Winsted returned the sneer full measure. "I hardly taken offense to being thought of as normal. Better than being thought part of your abnormal lot."

"My dear Father," Devlin said idly. "You are part of our abnormal lot."

"I choose to kill you abominations, when you trespass too far. That does not make me one of you."

Devlin shrugged. "If you say so, Father."

"Why did my sister extract such a promise?" Winsted demanded.

"As I said, because otherwise you would be dead, and she does love you. Family always loves family, no matter how stupid they might be." He thought sadly of his own sister and brother, somewhere on the ocean, and hoped the idiots were alive.

Winsted stared at him, the hate vibrant and alive in his eyes.

The case had been years upon years ago, back in his earliest days of working independently, taking over almost entirely that peculiar element of his father's life. He'd been tracking an alchemist believed to have gone mad, and along the way learned that his housekeeper had gone missing.

He had met Winsted then, but had not learned until the end that the missing woman was the Father's little sister, the only family he had left.

The alchemist had, indeed, gone quite mad from his own studies. A delicate art, alchemy. Equal parts magic and science, because mastering one of those was simply not enough. A spell gone horrifically awry, and it had been Devlin who had killed him and saved Winsted's sister – while Winsted had taken a nasty blow to the head, and spent several weeks laid up in a church.

Devlin and the sister had become...not friends, precisely, but he always kept a distant eye upon her. A housekeeper now, in the household of a normal acquaintance. He suspected she was far more accepting of and involved in the nightwalker life than she wanted her brother ever to know.

Winsted had hated him ever since – both for being the one to save his sister, while he had only fallen to injury, and for being what he was, as well as untouchable for even a slayer tread carefully in the matter of a blood debt.

It had been upon an occasion of visiting her for tea – secretly, for it was not the done thing for a Duke to take tea with a housekeeper – that she had extracted a promise that Devlin not kill her brother. He had done so, even knowing that she would never manage to exact the same from Winsted.

"Why are you trying to kill me?" he asked. "I have done nothing but try to find the cause for the draugr here."

"Before your arrival, the draugr wandered about the village, causing fear and panic, occasionally a bit of harm – though its believed the harm was not intentional." Winsted pulled out a notebook and made a show of turning pages, reading off his careful little notes. "Since your arrival, the number of draugr per night has increased, and they have turned purposely violent. Upon the arrival of your abomination, it all increased again. The obvious experimentation occurring with the draugr has shifted its attention to you. Given the nature of your abomination, the council agrees that whomever is experimenting with draugr has taken an interest in you and the creature Midnight, and has turned hostile in his efforts to obtain you. "

Devlin went still. Experiments? "What do you mean, experimenting? Someone is attempting to study the draugr?" That would perhaps explain why they were being woken and controlled, but what experiments?

He drew a sharp breath as his reading on the beach came back to him.

Death connected to magic, which desired the bond between spirit and dark.

The magic user manipulating death desired the bond between he and Midnight – if he was experimenting with draugr, and trying to control them, then of course he would covet Midnight, who was the penultimate draugr.

Who, though, would perform such experiments? Why could Devlin still not sense him?

"How do you know so much?" he demanded.

Winsted smirked, clearly pleased with himself. "The gift of observation, something you clearly lack."

"The gift of letting everyone else do the work, you mean," Devlin retorted. "I believe your lot calls that sloth."

"You would know nothing about it," Winsted replied, "so I really do not care what you have to say, your grace."

Devlin shrugged dismissively. "If you know so much through your amazing powers of observation, perhaps you have observed the location of this experimenter? I cannot think you would suffer one such as that to live."

"You know nothing about me," Winsted replied.

"So let me be certain I understand you – a nightwalker is waking the dead for the purpose of some strange experiment, and he now covets Midnight, so obviously he seeks powerful draugr. Instead of seeking out and killing him, you choose instead to focus your attentions on myself and Midnight?"

Winsted drew a bit closer, and Devlin wondered that so much hate could be contained in one person. "My duty is to execute those

nightwalkers who trespass too far into the land of god's children," Winsted replied. "You, Duke, cause more harm than good to the world. That abomination should never have been brought forth, and the longer it lives, the more harm it will bring to the world. Unless you truly believe that he who seeks your draugr will be the last to desire him."

Devlin could not argue that. He knew all too well the dangers in continuing to let Midnight exist. Too tempting a thought, cheating death. "I do not care," he said. "Midnight is mine, and with my death will go the secrets of his making. Until then, I will kill all those who dare to bring him harm."

"Selfish and uncaring," Winsted said bitterly. "You are the same as every noble I have ever encountered. Do you not care at all that you bring more harm than good to the world?"

"Of course I do," Devlin said. "I also disagree. My path is to protect the world – both the normal and the nightwalker. We need not be enemies, priest, it is you who has ever made us so."

Winsted bared his teeth. "I will never call one such as you friend."

"Is it that you hate me?" Devlin asked. "Or do you envy me? You are already guilty of sloth, priest, I would not add envy to the list."

"What is there to envy?" Winsted asked, drawing closer still. Devlin tensed, wondering what he was about. "Your title? I have no need of such things. Wealth? The church provides me with all I need in that respect. Your magic? Mine is the equal of yours, and divinely granted, not taken from the bones of a corpse and washed in blood. The fact that you must sate your unholy needs by spreading the legs of an animated corpse?"

Devlin saw red.

He was across the church without even realizing he had moved, reason returning only slightly with the feel of Winsted's nose shattering beneath his fist. He stepped back, trembling with rage, and reached into his jacket, ready to draw his runes in a moment.

Winsted lay upon the floor, hand cupped over his bleeding nose, hate a hot-cold fire in his eyes.

"Do not dare impugn my honor or his," Devlin snarled. "Midnight is no man's whore. Do you mention such things because his beauty stirs unholy wants in your blood, priest? Perhaps the church should be burning you right alongside me. I would be careful, because yours is not a brotherhood which ever understood true loyalty. They care not who they burn."

"I am no filthy sodomite," Winsted said, the words garbled and hard to understand with his shattered nose. "No filthy witch fit only for the pyre

such as you. My orders are to kill you and take in the abomination Midnight."

Devlin laughed. "I see," he said, unsurprised. "So the church has decided it wants the secret of my dark angel. Too bad. You will never have it." Especially if they killed him, but he would be damned if he told them that – let them kill him. He and Midnight would not be parted by something so trivial as death. "Come, then, priest. Kill me."

"With pleasure," Winsted whispered, rising to his feet – and in a single fluid movement he pulled something from his pocket and threw it.

He blocked it barely in time, throwing out a rune that countered the object just in time.

The power of it lingered for a moment, making Devlin flinch.

A hex. The bastard had actually obtained a hex – and typical of the church, it had been bound in a cross.

He fell back, eager to get away from the hex, though his rune had managed to break its magic.

Back in the earliest days of witch-hunting, the so-called holy had developed ways of marking out and capturing nightwalkers. Of those various ways, none was more effective than the hex. Its mere presence caused a nightwalker pain, and should it touch him it would cause paralysis of his magic for a brief period of time – just long enough to kill him.

The secret of their making was fiercely guarded by the church, but Devlin did know they were extremely difficult to make. He had never encountered one before, for typically they were reserved for nightwalkers far more important than he. Then again, one rune had broken it, which meant it was an extremely weak hex – probably not intended for more than causing guilty parties to flinch.

Which made him wonder what the hell the bastard was really up to.

He took a step back, as Winsted moved forward, hating to give ground but not willing to be closer to the man than necessary if he was hiding further hexes. "I'm flattered, Father. I had not realized I was worth a hex. You could have simply asked, if you were not certain I was in league with the devil."

Winsted said nothing, merely drew out his rosary.

Devlin flinched again, despite himself, and drew three runes, casting them upon the floor to create a protective ward—

But something flashed, a light flaring up to blind him, and he realized far too late that the first hex had merely been a trap, and breaking it part of the whole bloody plan.

When the light cleared, and he could more or less see again, he saw his own runes had triggered a spell cage.

This was not Winsted's work. He was not important enough to be given a hex, nor skilled enough to lay such a complicated trap. Either a greater figure of the church was about somewhere, or Winsted had lent his services to another.

He was betting on the latter, though he had not though Winsted capable of quite that level of hypocrisy.

With an effort, he managed to laugh. "Now you are flattering me, Winsted. I'm quite honored, but flattery ultimately leaves me unmoved. If you are hoping to add lust to your envy and sloth, I am afraid you shall have to try harder."

"Lust?" Winsted echoed, and let out a sharp bark of laughter. "Do not besmirch me with your disgusting words, Duke."

"Ah, yes," Devlin replied. "I am a Duke, and close friends with Lord Tamor. If you think to kill me, you will bring down his wrath and a demon lord has nothing to fear from you."

"I have nothing to fear from him," Winsted replied.

Devlin examined the spell cage as best he was able without taking his attention entirely away from Winsted. "This is hardly a fair fight," he commented lightly. "I did not think you quite this cowardly. Why the spell cage?" He tried to step out of it, simply for the sake of experimentation, but wound up screaming in pain for his troubles.

It reduced him to a shivering heap on the floor, doubled over and gasping for breath.

He could not even use his runes, for the supposedly broken hex was within and part of the cage, rendering him incapable of using his magic.

Damn it.

Winsted laughed. "Interesting that you referred to that creature of yours as a dark angel. The way it killed my angel, I can see why the term is an apt one. Imagine how useful such a single-minded creature would be."

Devlin stared at him in disbelief. "You were just telling me I just die because Midnight is too much a threat. Now you are telling me you have become one of those threats?"

"Put to the lord's work, they would be as dark angels seeking redemption."

They would also, Devlin thought bitterly, be far cheaper and easier to make than true angels.

Devlin looked at him in disgust. "Your sister would be ashamed of you. Do your superiors know what you're about? I think they will burn you alongside me."

Winsted stepped close and backhanded him. "Do not speak of my sister, witch. As to my superiors, they will see, once I take them a dark angel and show them what I have in mind."

"Where did you get the hex?" Devlin asked.

"I borrowed it from a brother who died in the line of duty some years ago," Winsted answered casually.

Devlin wondered how, precisely, that brother had died. He had always known Winsted was malicious; he had clearly underestimated him.

Still, it did seem strange, somehow. Winsted was devoted to his cause – a true slayer. It did not fit him to act this way, to side with the nightwalker he hated, even for the sake of his church.

"It is time for you to depart," Winsted replied, and knelt to touch a mark in the spell cage, whispering a soft word.

Devlin braced himself to die—

But instead felt only the cold rush of a transportation.

When the cold faded, he was still within a spell cage, but the location had changed.

Twin cages, woven with a transfer spell, made with the use of holy magic and designed to be triggered by his runes.

Only a sorcerer was that powerful.

He was in a dark room, and as his senses settled from the transfer, he picked up on the musty, moldy smell of a cellar.

Then candles began to flicker, one by one, until the room was lit with a warm, yellow light, and other scents began to reach him.

Beeswax from the candles, various herbs and spices, the smell of chalk, the clean scent of water, the coppery tang of blood, and the sweet-bitter scent of magic.

He looked around the room, seeing all manner of sorcerer paraphernalia – books and parchment, a profusion of them, for sorcery was the constant study and improvement of magic, a complete mastery of the arcane arts. There was very little a sorcerer could not do, so long as he could figure out *how* to do it.

Then he saw the body.

It was under a preservation spell, he could see that much. A man, dressed in simple but costly looking clothes, stretched out on a small bed tucked into a corner of the musty cellar. He could not have been more than forty or so when he died. How he died, Devlin could not determine from here.

Not a draugr, at least. The hair was auburn, the skin a warm gold in the candlelight. Well to do but not, he thought, nobility.

Had he been the sorcerer? Surely not, as it was obviously sorcery which had captured him. A relative, then?

A cold chill raced up his spine, and he turned his head.

"Greetings, rune master."

Devlin swore softly as he regarded the ghost of the dead man across the room, and the full meaning of the reading from the beach struck him like a blow.

Death had been central, with four runes touching it – magic, spirit, speak, hear. Magic had also been touched by desire, connected to bond, joining himself and midnight.

Spirit had also been connected to death, though, and he should have realized that it carried a double meaning. Spirit meant himself, but it also could mean ghost.

Speak and hear – death both sang the siren song, and could hear it, because a ghost cast it, and the draugr heard it.

So, the full meaning had been *Sorcerer ghost controls the draugr, desires the secret of Midnight*.

The bloody runes had given him the answer and he had not been able to see it.

"I have been trying for years to create what you apparently have possessed all along," the ghost said, anger on its silvery face. "I never heard a whisper of your draugr."

"Good," Devlin snarled.

"Tell me the secret of its making," the ghost replied, "and I will let you both go."

"No," Devlin said. "I will die before I share such secrets."

"Then once the draugr comes for you, because I know he will, I will kill you and rip the secrets from his body."

Devlin hid a laugh. "So be it."

The ghost snarled an unclear word, but its meaning was clear enough as Devlin was abruptly overtaken by darkness.

The Corpse Child

M. I Lost

Midnight woke feeling both deliriously happy and in abject pain.

Happy because he could still feel Devlin's kiss.

Devlin had only kissed him to save him from the damnable song, true, but if Devlin had kissed him once then that was at least enough for Devlin to know he had been lying. As if he would bother with anyone else when there was Devlin.

Which drew his attention sharply to the pain – a pain he only felt when he could not feel Devlin. It usually happened on the extremely rare occasions Devlin traveled too far away for him to sense, which had happened only twice since he had first woken under the power of the spell.

He reached up to touch the runes over his heart, softly whispering, "Heartbeat, where are you?"

Why would Devlin go too far for him to sense?

The brief happiness he had felt over the kiss faded away into wrenching devastation. He had thought...the way Devlin had looked at him...then the kiss...

Perhaps he was getting his hopes up for nothing. A corpse was a corpse, after all, and no matter what Devlin said it must bother him...

But that kiss! That had felt like a great deal more than simply trying to save him from the siren song.

Then again, he thought bitterly, he knew nothing about kisses. Books and etching could only teach so much, and he had never wanted any but Devlin to give him practical knowledge.

He sighed, thinking of how horrifically his brag about having experience had backfired. The way Devlin spoke, he had thought he would be happier knowing Midnight had chosen him after playing with others...instead...

Grimacing, Midnight threw back his bedcovers – and only then noticed the wards which had been placed around the room, and even around the bed itself.

Devlin had ensured he was well protected, even a demon would find such wards extremely bothersome.

Surely he would not do that if he were leaving for good?

The wistful thought died almost before he had finished it, for it simply was not true. Devlin honored the promise made to a woman not to kill a man whom Midnight had long believed should be dead. Especially since that same man so badly wanted to kill Devlin.

Of course he would ensure Midnight was protected.

"Heartbeat," he said again, whispering it softly, feeling a deep ache that he would probably never be able to call Devlin that again.

Moving out of the wards, pushing back the curtains, he saw that it was late evening, but still some time before midnight, which meant dawn was hours away yet. Either he had slept for only an hour so, or well through one night and day, to wake the next night.

Hoping he had only slept an hour, Midnight left the bedroom and entered the sitting room. It was deserted, though the fire had been stoked recently. Well, if Barra were about, at least he would have one friendly face...

Leaving Devlin's rooms, he crossed the hall and knocked upon the door.

It was opened a few moments later by Barra, who looked distinctly flushed and ruffled.

Smirking, Midnight said, "Sorry to interrupt. I do not suppose you have seen Devlin, wolf-elf?"

"Oh, be quiet," Barra muttered, righting his clothing as he stepped back to let Midnight inside. "We have not, come to that, but he went off hunting that priest only an hour or so ago. I expect he will be back any time, and likely in quite a temper." He offered Midnight a smirk of his own. "I'm certain you'll be able to soothe it, Midnight."

Midnight shook his head, frowning unhappily. "I cannot feel him," he whispered. "Did he run away?"

"Can't feel him?" Barra's smirk vanished abruptly. "Nay, Midnight – he made no show of running off in one of his fits of guilt. He was determined to beat Winsted black and blue, to get out of him what all he could of the bloody bastard behind the singing."

"You are certain?" Midnight asked, too afraid to hope, but even more terrified that something might well and truly be wrong.

"The man is a bloody idiot," Barra said, aggravation and affection in his voice in equal measure. "It's plain as day to everyone but himself that he loves you – in all ways, including the more wicked." Barra winked. "I would wager he is working out his guilt by inflicting hellish wrath upon that no good man of the cloth."

Midnight shook his head. "If I can't feel him, and he didn't run away, then he must be in trouble."

Barra grimaced. "Maybe tracking down the priest took him out of range."

"If he had to go that far, he would send word," Midnight countered. "I am going to find him."

"You'll need to get dressed first," Barra said dryly. "Come on, then." He grabbed Midnight's upper arm and half guided, half dragged him back to Devlin's rooms, moving to the wardrobe by the bed and rifling through it, until he came out at last with what he deemed suitable clothing.

A jacket of the deepest green, the rest of his ensemble black, right down to the neck cloth, with emeralds here and there to add a crowning touch, and his hair tied back with a matching ribbon. "There, now," Barra said, nodding in satisfaction, handing over a pair of gloves. "Now, let me tell Neirin we'll be off – if Devlin is in danger, you'll likely need help to get him out of it again."

Midnight nodded, impatient to be going. He waited in the hallway, snuffing the lamp there so that anyone strolling by would not have enough light by which to see his hair was actually blue.

As were his nails, which recalled him to his gloves. Tugging on the supple black leather, he flexed his fingers to settle them just so. They fit as perfectly as a second skin, warm and smooth, soft as silk from wear. He curled his fingers and pressed them gently against his mouth, inhaling the scent of the leather.

Leather always reminded him of Devlin, a scent that clung to the man even when he was too busy thinking or moping to realize he'd just bathed in rose oil or used vanilla and honeysuckle soap.

Sandalwood, leather, and musk – those were Devlin, scents he'd associated with his beautiful savior even before he had known precisely what those scents were. He placed a hand over his heart, closing his eyes, feeling the steady beat, reassured by it – if he was alive, so too Devlin, and if he was alive then he could be saved.

Of course, if he really had fled and was off drinking himself half to death, Midnight fully intended to give him a thrashing.

Just as his worry and fear began to overwhelm him, Barra reappeared. He quirked a brow. "I'm impressed you're still here."

Midnight shrugged and headed down the stairs, hitting the streets and then drawing to an abrupt stop – he had no idea where to go. Not a one. Always Devlin knew where they were going, or decided where they would go...or he could feel Devlin, and follow that.

Now, there was nothing. Devlin could be right beneath his nose and he would not know it.

He fought tears and an overwhelming urge to start destroying things, knowing it for the draugr impulse it was. They would find Devlin, and he was probably just being a ruddy, guilt-laden bastard.

Midnight licked his lips, imagining he could still taste a hint of the kiss Devlin had given him.

"This way," Barra said, stirring him from his thoughts. "It's faint enough, but I can smell him."

Of course. Midnight felt like an idiot. He was with a werewolf. Barra may only be half wolf, but Midnight had never known his nose to fail.

It took them over three hours, between sorting through various trails and possibilities all the while trying not to attract unwanted attention. No one would dare to cross the Mad Duke, but without him about people might manage to summon a bit of boldness and demand to know what they were about.

Thankfully, they went ignored, and just past ten they came to the church.

"Here, I think," Barra said. "He's wandered about this place so bloody much, it's hard to tell, but this is the freshest trail and it ends here."

The church was a small one, quaint and charming. Midnight preferred to stay well away from such places, ever fearful of what reaction he might stir, given that the only priests he had ever known were all slayers.

Devlin could be inside, however, and so he preceded Barra up the steps, pushing open the door and stepping inside.

It was a pretty little place, if rather plain. The windows were all stained glass, which meant it was not quite as poor as it seemed at first glance. The pews were all old, scratched and faded and worn, but it gave an impression of warmth and welcome, rather than seeming stiff and rigid.

The floor was tiled with slate, and looked surprisingly dirty, as though dirt and grime had only been half-heartedly swept up. An incredibly lazy effort, as he could still see bits of something beneath one—

He let out a strangled cry as he realized what he was staring at, and immediately rushed over, kneeling to pick the object up, curling his hand around it. Hoping he was wrong, Midnight opened his hand again, only to stare miserably at the object lying on his leather-covered palm.

A rune. Fire, to be exact. He knew the rune as well as he knew his own face. It was Devlin's.

He turned and showed it to Barra, who made a sound remarkably like a growl. "He would never go somewhere without retrieving all his runes."

"No," Midnight said. "Where is he, then?" He bit back the mindless rage that wanted to consume, the same blind hate that had driven him to protect Devlin the other night – to kill an angel. He had hated himself for doing it, but he would kill a thousand if they tried to kill Devlin.

"Keep an eye out," Barra murmured, and shifted to his wolf form. Nose to the floor, he began to explore the sanctuary in earnest, occasionally chuffing or growling, or scratching at a bit of floor.

Midnight kept watch, holding fast to the rune, willing it to tell him where Devlin had gone.

He rubbed his thumb over it, wishing it could speak to him. The runes spoke only to Devlin, however. Midnight's realm was the magic of draugr – he could control mist, shift to a bird or a cat, and there were precious few nightwalker who could match his strength and speed.

The sound of the door opening brought him sharply round, tensed for anything – but he drew up short when he saw it was only Neirin and Troyes.

Barra immediately abandoned his search, transforming back. "You should be in bed!" he snapped.

Neirin only smirked. "Did I seem weak and unfit for physical labor earlier?"

Making a sound remarkably like a squeak, and turning a rather amusing shade of red, Barra could only glower in protest.

It made Midnight laugh, despite himself. Barra deserved to have someone to tease and embarrass him, and even if it made him ache all the more to have Devlin back, it made him happy to see Barra happy. "I had not realized such things were a remedy. How interesting."

Barra only shifted his glare to Midnight. "We have work to do," he said, then shifted back to his wolf form.

Troyes laughed softly, and touched Neirin's arm briefly, then shifted as well, joining Barra in exploring the church.

"Have you found anything?" Neirin asked, one hand resting lightly upon the hilt of the sword at his hip.

Midnight silently held out the rune. "He was here, and got into a fight, I think. This is the fire rune – it is most often drawn in combat, or so hea—Devlin once told me." He swallowed, realizing he had nearly said 'heartbeat' aloud for anyone to hear.

It was one of his lingering uncertainties. He was fairly certain Devlin had just been angry when he had said it sounded childish, and Midnight should stop using it – with that painful implication he was loose with his favors.

Still that moment made him wince, because he had been angry and hurt, but only wanted Devlin to stop keeping him at arm's length—but his impulsive lie had only erected a wall between them, and he was as yet uncertain as to how much of it had been knocked down by that one kiss.

All of it, he hoped. If Devlin had been kidnapped, at least it proved he was not running.

Midnight clutched the rune tight, the bit of bone a poor substitute for the man himself.

He looked up as Troyes and Barra shifted back. "What have you learned?"

"Devlin, obviously, was here – and so was Winsted. There are traces of chalk, but it's not Devlin's," Barra said, brow furrowed, a thoughtful frown on his face. "I also smell...something...bitter, cold, almost rotten, but I've never smelled anything like it."

Midnight stared at him in surprise. What in the world was it, that Barra could not identify it?

Troyes provided an answer in his own way. "Bad smell is magic stop." He looked at Neirin, obviously expecting his knight to translate.

Neirin obliged, mouth quirked in a faint, fond smile. "I am not certain what you would call it, but the word we use is 'hex'."

Midnight hissed, even as Barra growled. "A hex?" He trembled with fury, and only the feel of the rune kept him from lashing out at anything and everything. "What is that vile priest doing with a hex?"

Despair tangled with his rage, as he thought of all that could have been done to Devlin if he had been struck with a hex. They were difficult to make, by all accounts, and extremely expensive. The Church parceled them out even less often than it did mercy, where nightwalkers were concerned.

"So you have heard of them," Neirin said. Guilt and dismay flickered across his face. "They were just one secret stolen from the dragons, centuries ago, when one of our own betrayed us." He laughed sadly. "Them, I should say, for I am a betrayer too, now."

"Neirin good," Troyes rumbled, as he and Barra moved as one to Neirin's side.

Midnight turned away from them, unable to take the sight of it when he wanted so badly to hold Devlin and be held.

He touched the rune to his lips, closing his eyes, feeling again that one kiss—

With a rough sound, he shoved the rune into his pocket and focused on the matter at hand. "So the priest used a hex, and then...you said chalk."

"Yes," Barra replied.

Midnight frowned. "That makes no sense," he said. "Chalk is the realm of witches, sorcerers, and alchemists – no holy mage, especially a slayer, would dirty his hands with chalk. They keep strictly to incantations and talismans, that sort of thing."

"Soured holy man," Troyes rumbled, amber colored eyes glowing faintly.

"What does that mean?" Midnight asked.

Neirin shrugged. "It means his smell was off, something about it was not true. We have limited experience with magic, however, so I am afraid we cannot be much help in that respect."

"Any help you can offer is greatly appreciated," Midnight said, mouth twisting with bitterness. "Especially since come the sunrise, I will be useless." He barely kept from slamming his fist into the nearest pew, knowing it would break if he did so.

The sound of feet scuffing on stone drew them all, and Midnight saw a priest come through the door beyond the altar.

Before he could move, Neirin was bolting down aisle, drawing his sword as he went.

The priest turned and ran, but Neirin was right behind him, and a moment later Midnight heard a terrified shout.

Another minute or so passed, and then Neirin reappeared with the priest in hand.

Obviously terrified, the priest put up no further protest, not even trying to run when Neirin released his hold.

He stared at Midnight wide-eyed. "You—"

"There were two men here," Neirin cut in, voice cool and haughty, so much like Devlin when he was angry and wanted something done about it immediately. "A priest and a nobleman. The Duke of Winterbourne, in fact. I am certain, Father, that you do not want to explain to all and sundry why such an important peer of the realm has gone missing in a church that is watched over by a nightwalker."

"Horned magic," Troyes rumbled.

Midnight blinked, too startled for a moment to speak. "You're an imp? And a priest?"

"Yes," the imp said miserably. "My master was the priest, originally. When he died, I took his place. Please, you can't—that damned priest already threatened—if I didn't—"

"Tell us what happened," Midnight said. "No one will turn you in, not if we can help it. What transpired?"

The imp nodded slowly, obviously not trusting them, but resigned. Imps normally had powerful magic; if this one did not, then he must still be recovering his power. Midnight did not have the skill to see past the illusion that hid its real form. He could only sense the priest was a nightwalker. Or perhaps the imp was not entirely free, but bound to the church in some manner. That would certainly explain why he did not leave it.

Well, it was not his problem. He did not care about anything but Devlin.

"The slayer, he knew what I was," the imp said. "He said if I did not help him, he would kill me as well. So I helped him, I drew the spell circle that was on the piece of paper he gave me."

Midnight's breath caught. "Piece of paper? Do you still have it?"

The imp nodded slowly. "I think he meant to take it, but forgot. After the witch vanished, the priest just left."

"Where is it?"

When the imp told them, Barra immediately ran off to fetch it.

"What else?" Midnight asked. "My friends say the smelled a hex."

"Yes," the imp replied. "He had one of those, bound in a gold cross. The witch stopped it, but that was part of the trap, I think. Then the spell activated, and he vanished, and that was that."

Barra returned, clutching a piece of paper.

One edge was torn, as though ripped from a book. Midnight examined the spell circle, and realized after a moment it was no mere circle. "Cage," he said, breathing the word. "That bastard trapped him in a spell cage. There is no way he was capable of such complicated magic as this – even Devlin could not do this. Sorcery, this is definitely sorcerer work."

Barra growled, as did Troyes. Neirin hefted his sword, the steel flashing in the candlelight.

"Thank you," Midnight said to the imp. "You have been most helpful." He turned away, slipping a hand into his pocket to touch the rune there. "Come, my friends," he said. "Let us go find a sorcerer."

M. M Obsessed

"Midnight, you have to get inside!"

"I can't stop," Midnight argued, even as he knew it was futile. He was tired, and already the earliest threads of the looming dawn were making his body ache.

Devlin needed him, and he incapable of helping because he should be dead and could not face the sunlight like a true living person.

For years he had feared that was why Devlin would never love him back, not the way Midnight loved him – a lover was meant to walk side by side, and how could he do that when he could not walk beneath the sun? Devlin needed someone who could be with him always. Protect him always, and Midnight could not do that.

Maybe it *was* the reason Devlin kept him at that last little distance.

Except that kiss—surely it had not been solely to save him?

"Midnight—"

"Fine!" Midnight snarled, fighting frustrated tears. "I'm going, I'm going. Get the stupid, useless draugr inside so he'll be safe." Jerking away from Barra's attempt to comfort, he stormed inside the lodging house and stomped up the stairs, tearing at his clothes the very moment he was safely within Devlin's bedroom.

He was tired of this stale room, this stiff house where they must watch everything they said and did, where he must take care to avoid strong light. He wanted Devlin's townhouse, or better still his country estate. It would be nice to get away from everyone and everything for a time, to have Devlin to himself for at least a little while.

Flushing at the idea of having Devlin really and truly to himself, in all ways, he slid naked into bed and moved until he was on Devlin's half of it. He buried his face in Devlin's pillow, breathing in the lingering traces of his heartbeat.

Closing his eyes, wrapped in warm blankets and the scent of Devlin, Midnight finally permitted sleep to take him.

No one had taught him anything. All he knew, he had learned from watching, from begging, from beatings.

Everyone had a place. If you did not have a place, you were no one. If you were a no one, you got kicked and hit and told to go away. Sometimes, they threw food just to be rid of you. Those were the good days, and he had learned very carefully how to tell when it was a good day, and when it was a bad day.

The woman at the church gave him food, sometimes, without throwing it. She sometimes left him clothes too, but never gave them to him herself. She left them outside, for him to find.

He also knew things that no one else did. He had learned of places to hide in the church, and often stayed there when it was too cold to sleep outside.

A man, and sometimes the woman, taught things to other people. To other children. He listened lots, because the stories were better to think about than food or shoes or that snow was coming.

His favorite stories were about the angels. Bright, golden, and brought ti-ding to people. He didn't know what a ti-ding was, but it always sounded good. He had tried to ask, once, but they had only thrown stuff and told him to go. They always got angry when he tried to talk, because he could not do it well. No one had ever taught him.

Once, he had snuck inside to look at the stories. It was filled with pretty people – golden and bright, just like the woman and man said. He thought they were golden, anyway. The hair looked like coins; he had found one once, and tried to buy bread, but the bread man had gotten mad and told him not to steal, and taken the coin away, but not given him bread.

He dreamed about angels, about one bringing him ti-ding.

Then – oh – yesterday –

He had seen an angel. Big and tall, with hair like coins and eyes just like the sky.

Though it was bad, he had followed the angel around. Surely it was not too bad, because he only wanted to look. Just look.

Then today – oh, today the angel had smiled at him, and given him a coin.

He held tight to the coin now, turning it over and over in his hands, imagining the angel's coin hair, wondering if it was soft like the grass in his favorite place where he slept when it was hot.

He wished it was warm now, because it was so hard to find warm and safe places to sleep in the cold. The church was good, usually, but not always. He really needed to be safe now, with the monsters. They came out at night, and ate the cats and dogs, and had hurt a woman too. He did not like the monsters, but the monsters brought the angel, he thought, so...

The coin was dull in the dark, but he remembered how bright it had been while the winter sun was still out. Hopefully the mean inn man would not find him right away. He was too busy staring at the angel, too.

He rubbed the coin again, and wondered if the angel had a stable, and if he could stay there. Maybe if he gave the coin back? Was the coin enough to stay in the stable? Probably not an angel stable. Maybe he could

help with the horses. He knew a little bit about them, since the scary inn man's son did not always feed them like he was told.

Noise drew his attention, and he froze, listening. That was the steps of scary inn man.

He held perfectly still, so as not to be heard, because if he was heard then the scary inn man would grab him and beat him and throw him out into the streets where the scary monsters were, and he didn't want to wind up like the dogs and cats.

The scary inn man's boots scuffed on the stable floor, and he could hear the scary inn man grumbling and muttering—then the nasty smell of a match, the funny weird smoke from the things he smoked in here sometimes.

Wrinkling his nose, the boy settled into the hay and hoped he did not sneeze or something.

Nothing but silence and smoke for a very long time, until he heard the stable door creak open again. He immediately recognized the church-smell of the woman who sometimes gave him clothes. What was she doing here?

He wished he could move, but he did not dare.

"Are you out of your mind, calling me to see you?" the church woman asked. "What are you thinking?"

"Those draugr," the scary inn man said. "They're getting worse. What in the hell have you done, you crazy bitch?"

The sound of flesh striking flesh, a sound the boy recognized all too well.

"Do not speak so to me," the woman snarled. "You are no better than I, and I believe you were the one who first messed with those things best left alone."

"Yes," the scary inn man said bitterly. "I should have learned my lesson the first time, after spreading your eager legs only resulted in that damned whelp."

The woman made a strange noise, but the boy could only recognize the anger and pain in it. What was a whelp? He wished he could ask.

"You were eager enough to spread them," the woman said at last.

"You were eager—"

"Let us focus on the draugr," the woman cut in. "They are far worse a problem for us, if those two nightwalkers discover we were the ones behind the draugr waking."

"They won't," the man said, but his voice was the same as when he told his inn woman that he had not been smoking in the stable, so lay off. He was lying. "How could they possibly discover we took broke the old wards and took away the jewels? They won't. We left no trail."

"Then why did you bring me here?" the woman demanded.

"Because they will discover us if we try to leave town with the gold," the scary inn man snarled. "We can't pawn them here, and we can't leave to do it, lest the draugr come after us."

"They'll kill the draugr in a few more days," the woman said in sharp-edged voice. "They will not figure out what first woke them, and happily go on their way. Then we can take the jewels away and sell them, and you can stop worrying about funding your fondness for those weeds you smoke."

"And you can fend off those debts of yours a bit, eh, Mary my love?"

"I am not your love," Mary snapped. "I wish I had never met you."

"Oh, now, you don't mean that," the man said in a funny voice.

The boy listened to them move and shuffle, the rustle of clothes, funny sounds he could not identify, then moans and gasps and he wondered if they—

He sneezed.

The noises abruptly stopped, and the boy started to cry, because now they would find him and beat him and he'd only wanted to sleep somewhere warm and safe from the scary scary monsters—

Boots pounded up the latter and across the loft, coming straight to the little corner where he had tried so hard to hide and bother no one.

Rough hands grabbed him up, and shook him hard, and he cried and cried and begged them to stop, he was sorry, but they weren't listening to him, they were arguing and scared of something themselves—then their voices changed, and they were suddenly scarier than the monsters, the way they looked hard and cold and like they were doing something wrong.

He caught snatches of words—accident, from the cold, no marks, little monster, give them away soon.

Then they threw him back to the ground, and held him down and covered his face with a folded up horse blanket and he couldn't breathe and he'd only wanted to sleep and he wished the angel would come save—

Midnight woke with a start, shivering and shaking, desperate to breathe, feeling as though he couldn't.

He'd not had one of his can't-breathe dreams in a long time. He never remembered them. Devlin had often said it must be a memory from something which happened close to when died. Perhaps the last nightmare he'd had as a true living person.

Though Devlin had never said, and likely would never say, Midnight rather thought the memory had more to do with how he had died. Devlin had never told him much of anything about of his life before turning draugr.

That he had been a homeless boy, and fallen victim to the draugr in a little village many miles from London, and that Devlin had wanted to take him in from the first.

Past that, Midnight did not know. He suspected many things, but could prove none of them. Devlin was frustratingly silent on the matter, which he *always* was when he wanted to protect Midnight. Amusing, and endearing, how Devlin would take him along to confront vampires, ghouls, sorcerers, werewolves, gremlins, goblins, and a thousand other nightwalkers, but when it came to Midnight's own past he felt it too much of a burden for Midnight to bear.

He had, of course, done his own research on draugr, when he could drag no more about them out of Devlin.

Draugr remembered precious little of their lives. The memories they did carry were fuzzy and indistinct. When a draugr stirred, it cared only for sustenance and its loved ones in life. Any memories draugr did hold were just enough to recall those loved ones—faces, impressions, but no details.

Midnight could not prove it, but he suspected his very last thought was of Devlin, before he had died. He had one clear, perfect memory of Devlin from before he had died. Beautiful and golden, his hair like a sovereign in sunlight, tall and broad and smiling more beautifully than any Madonna or society belle. *Angel* he often thought, when he recalled that memory. Had he thought of Devlin as an angel? Clearly he had been an extremely ignorant child, for Devlin was no angel.

He was a witch. A beautiful, mercurial, talented, kind, and untamable witch. A dying breed in the civilized world of spell circles and polite talks, carefully respected territory boundaries. Few these days cast the runes; few these days could consider themselves true black witches.

All who met Devlin were intimidated by him. Not that Devlin ever noticed, the idiot. He interpreted all of it as courtesy due his station, or to the peculiarities of nightwalkers. He would never notice that all who met him, regarded him with awe for a nightwalker that was now really only seen in rare books of nightwalker history.

Even his own family was leaving Devlin behind, running away to be pathetic, sniveling white witches across the ocean, far away from the notoriety of the Winterbourne name. Pathetic cowards, knowing they were inadequate against the splendor of Devlin.

If they were still here, Midnight would kill them and drink their blood, for being so cruel to Devlin. He would not tolerate anyone hurting his Devlin, his heartbeat.

When he found the bastard who had hexed Devlin and stolen him away, not even Devlin would keep him from making a feast of the man. He'd not had such sustenance in a very long time.

Midnight had never wasted time feeling guilty about what he was, or what he wanted. He was neither a vampire nor a goblin, yet craved human blood and flesh the same as though two races. He was no zombie, soul stolen away by a sorcerer, yet his soul and his breath and his heartbeat were not his own. He was not one of the shapeshifters, yet could do that. He was bits and pieces of all kinds of nightwalkers, the sort of creature that even other nightwalkers would—and had—called a monster. He was a living corpse, there was no way around that single fact.

That did occasionally trouble him, for he wanted Devlin badly. His feelings in regards to Devlin had never been simple affection, had never been what a son felt for a father. Even when he was too young to understand how he felt, he knew with a certainty he would never call Devlin father.

He had tried again and again to get Devlin to see it, until he had finally begun to hate his nature, for perhaps his being essentially a corpse was simply too much for Devlin to endure.

But that kiss...he wanted another one. He wanted a thousand of them, a million, and far more than kisses. Too many times to count he had dreamed and plotted, fretted and hoped, and longed for the day he would finally overcome Devlin's damnable honor and sense of obligation and all that rot.

He wanted Devlin back. If he had to tear apart that damned priest, and every other creature and man who stood in his path, he would do so. He preferred to hold the worst of his draugr nature in check, but despite the spell which Devlin had so cleverly and lovingly crafted, Midnight *was* a draugr.

Draugr, when stirred, cared about only three things; were, in fact, obsessed with those three things, and all else paled beside them. They cared only about food, seeing their loved ones, and protecting those things precious to them.

Devlin was his loved one, and most precious to him, and if Midnight had to feast upon a thousand souls in order to get Devlin back, he would do it, and lick the blood from his lips with relish.

III Vampires

Midnight was stirred from his black, bloody thoughts by the opening of the door.

Barra cocked a brow at him. "The sky is not even wholly dark, and you're awake?"

"I do not sleep well when I cannot feel him," Midnight, and shoved his messy hair from his face. Throwing back the bedding, he slid from bed and allowed Barra to fuss over him, guiding him to a bath, and then into his clothes. One of his favorite jackets, in fact, and Midnight had been vastly amused to note that Devlin had never noticed that Barra had packed for the three of them, even before Midnight had taken upon himself to disobey.

Knowing Devlin, he would never notice.

Midnight admired the jacket into which he was put, a red so deep it was nearly black, worked with a faint, subtle skull and roses pattern, the thorny vines weaving in and out of the mouth and eye sockets of the skulls.

Dark lace provided a final touch, and his jewels tonight were rubies and onyx set in gleaming gold.

"So what do you intend to do tonight?" Barra asked. "I am afraid our daylight work has not turned up much, especially since despite his protest, Neirin cannot yet move around a great or for very long."

Midnight smirked, and tweaked Barra's nose playfully. "I am certain you are providing the greatest of care, dear Barra. You are always attentive."

Barra rolled his eyes, but there was no mistaking his happiness.

Sobering, he said, "I am going priest hunting tonight. I will find him, or find a way to bring him to me. If we find him, we can make the rat squeal and give away his master. I cannot think of another way we will be able to find the bloody sorcerer who took Devlin."

He started to say more, but paused as he heard the outer door open and close, and noticed the way Barra brightened. Tweaking falls of lace into proper place, Midnight tied his own hair neatly back with a ribbon the exact color of his jacket.

Then he strode out to the main room, and sketched a playful, but elegant, bow to Neirin and Troyes. Neirin returned the bow. "You are looking well rested, Master Midnight."

"As do you, Lord Knight, especially given the recent insults and injuries inflicted upon your noble person," Midnight replied, grinning. "I guess elf-wolf tonic is a most noteworthy cure."

"Indeed it is," Neirin said, smiling, eyes hot as they looked past Midnight, to wear Barra still stood behind him.

Barra growled low in amusement and embarrassment, but did not shy away when Troyes padded toward him and butted him playfully.

"So we are sorcerer hunting this evening?" Neirin asked. "I confess we were not able to deduce a good starting point for such a hunt. I've little experience with hunting sorcerers, and I have never heard of one who could summon and control draugr. Why would anyone want to? Present company excluded, of course."

Midnight gave a half-bow in acknowledgment, then hummed thoughtfully. "Well, draugr have been woken before, in history. Ancient groups have been known to cause draugr to stir simply to use them as a cheap army, but this was risky since draugr have no concept of loyalty beyond protecting those things precious to them. The nature of the attacks does not seem to be in that vein. I cannot yet tell the purpose."

He frowned suddenly. "At that, I do not hear the song, anymore. Why would it stop?"

"Perhaps because the bastard has Devlin? He may be trying something new," Barra suggested. "I think the only thing we know, at this point, is that we know nothing."

Midnight grimaced. "So, if I were an angry, self-righteous, pompous ass who had recently carried out a personal vendetta in the name of God, where would I be?"

"Scurrying back to London with all due haste, if you were smart," Barra replied. "Barring that, the sorcerer still has use for him, so he is likely about somewhere."

He wished Devlin were there. Longing for his heartbeat aside, they simply were not the same without Devlin. Though Devlin frequently said that he could not manage without their assistance, the truth was that they were only assistants. They supported him; Devlin was the one with the talent for such things. "I think," Midnight said at last, "that we need to speak with the Dracula."

Barra's brows went up. "That's going to be interesting. Haven't met many of those, and the circumstances are hardly ideal."

Midnight worried his bottom lip. "Well, they trusted Devlin to see to this affair. Devlin has been kidnapped—that changes everything. The Dracula, and eventually our demon lord, need to know. I just don't understand to what purpose they took Devlin. That surely will cause more trouble than it is worth."

Neirin, silent until then, quirked a brow and said, "I should think that much is obvious."

"What do you mean?"

"You were brought there to deal with draugr, were you not? Draugr which are acting strangely, which are being controlled. Then they kidnap a witch who managed to create a draugr who, for all intents and purposes, is living and relatively normal? I think that answer the riddle of what is going on here, and why they took Devlin."

Midnight would have paled, if he was not already perfectly white.

"Oh, no."

"Indeed," Neirin replied. "At least they will not kill him, if they need the secret of your making from him."

"You don't understand," Midnight said, feeling cold and afraid, fighting a sudden urge to cry. "If it gets bad enough, and he feels there is no other recourse, Devlin will kill himself to keep the secret of my making." He placed his hand over his heart. "Breath for breath, heartbeat for heartbeat, soul for soul. When he dies, I turn to ash. If that is what must happen to keep my secret from the world, then that is what he will do."

Because if people learned how to make more of him...

His nature was simply one that would be too easy to abuse. The dead should remain dead, but too many people would see a chance to bring them back in the form of something like Midnight. Devlin had long ago sworn he would never share Midnight's making with another soul. When he died, so too Midnight, and any chance of ever knowing how he was made.

Troyes growled. "Find witch."

"First, we have to find Winsted, for he is our closest chance at finding the mysterious sorcerer we cannot seem to even sense. To find Winsted, I think we will need help. If it's true that there are forces attempting to make more of me, then we definitely need to go to higher powers. That means the Dracula who commands this territory." He worried his lip again. "Except, without Devlin, I am not certain he would deign to see us."

Barra laughed. "Oh, Midnight, that is hardly an issue. All know of Devlin's mysterious, rarely-seen companion, and that he is strange even amongst the nightwalkers. If your being tied to Devlin's name was not enough, simple curiosity would compel the Dracula to grant you an audience."

Midnight was not so certain of that, but there was no point in arguing. "All right, then, let us go see the Dracula. He is some hours from here, is he not?"

"Not more than three hours, if Neirin takes Devlin's horse and the rest of us use other means," Barra replied. "Though we must take care the shiny one does not get seen."

Troyes growled in amusement and draped himself over Barra from behind, nibbling at his hear. "Pretty wolf-elf gets more looks than shiny one."

"That I doubt," Barra replied, face red.

Neirin smiled, then turned and retrieved the great coat he had draped over a nearby chair. "Come, we must be going. Three hours is still three hours, and daylight is not our friend."

Midnight nodded, and led the way through the house. Once outside, he slipped into an alleyway with Barr and Troyes, and there reached into his power. Deep into the recesses of his mind, he went, letting go of his human shape, tucking it away, pulling out the form of a cat. Dropping to all fours, he stretched and moved into the lithe, sinuous feline form. He mewed softly as it took, and twitched his nose, taking in the familiar scent of Barra in wolf form, and the sharp, tangy and wild scent of Troyes in his true form.

They traveled quickly, leaving the village behind and striking the main roads—where Barra promptly took over the lead, and Midnight realized belatedly that Barra was the only one who knew where they were going. Neirin obviously would not, and Midnight had always left such things to Devlin and Barra.

The journey was, thankfully, uneventful. No one else seemed to be travelling that night, likely because they knew better than to wander dark roads at this hour for fear of the trouble they would find. Were he not so anxious about Devlin, Midnight would smirk that *they* were the trouble most feared finding.

He didn't know what he expected of the Dracula's home, but it was not the simple, subtly elegant, understated manor that greeted them. Old stone, old wood, with ivy and roses, marble statuary and cobblestones paths. It spoke of power without an excess of arrogance.

It felt strange to be here without Devlin. Midnight rarely went further than the bookshops without Devlin alongside him. Even now, he wanted to toss his head and say something to make Devlin smile despite himself, to ask him questions about this Dracula, for Devlin would have known everything for all that he claimed to care not a whit about the majority of the nightwalker world.

Swallowing his trepidation, reminding himself that while Devlin was absent, he must represent Devlin and the Winterbourne name well, Midnight allowed Barra to knock upon the door for him.

The door was opened by a stone-faced imp. Though he wore an excellent glamour, such magic was no match for Midnight's senses. He was dressed well, and by his manner and appearance was clearly the butler.

Once inside, the Butler removed their coats and inquired as to their purpose by lifting one sharp brow.

Midnight placed one of his own calling cards upon the silver salver the butler held out, and said, "Midnight, to see the Dracula, in regards to the Duke of Winterbourne. The matter is an urgent one."

The butler bowed, and vanished down a hallway. He returned sooner than Midnight expected, and bowed again. "The Dracula is at present indisposed. However, the Alucard can see you immediately."

"Thank you," Midnight replied, and they followed the butler through the hallways, until they came at least to a massive set of double doors that proved to lead into a beautiful library.

All the old wood, numerous books, the smells of paper and leather and ink, could not compare in splendor however, to the beauty by the fireplace.

Midnight always managed to forget the impact of a vampire's beauty. Most species capture their pretty with teeth, claws, venom, magic...vampires simply played the flame, and waited patiently while the moths came.

The more powerful the vampire, the more breathtaking the flame. This one was by far the most stunning Midnight had ever seen.

He had deep auburn hair that turned to reddish-gold at the tips, which fell just past his ears in a simple, stylish cut. Delicate brows of the same red-gold drew attention to eyes the precise color of the square-cut emerald nestled at his throat. He was dressed in dark greens and golds, accented with cream-colored lace. He was pretty without being feminine; the sort of man artists salivated to capture upon their canvas.

"Good evening," the vampire said, standing to greet them, setting aside a snifter full of a dark liquid that might have been wine, save for the nature of the man drinking it. "I am the Alucard Seth Ashworth." He took in the four of them. "My, my," he murmured. "What an eclectic mix we have here. A mongrel wolf, and if I am not mistaken, you are a du Lac, with dragon. And you...the Mad Duke's precious corpse child." The Alucard placed a hand to his breast, and gave them a half bow. "Your servant, gentlemen. You have come to speak of his grace, and said it was urgent. As he is, in fact, missing from your party, I can only surmise his absence is the problem. Care you for something to drink?"

He did not wait for their replies, but turned and walked to the bar tucked into one corner of the library. He poured two brandies into crystal snifters, and these he handed to Neirin and Barra, giving them no chance to argue.

Then he smiled at Midnight, and returned to the bar, and filled another crystal snifter from a pitcher of black crystal. He handed the full wine glass to Midnight, still smiling pleasantly. "A vintage most fine and rare, for my brother drinker."

Midnight stared at him in surprise, then returned the smile. No one had ever called him such, before. Brother drinker...he still far preferred the way Devlin said his name, but that was still nice. "I thank you," he said, and took a sip of the dark blood, surprised to find it was still warm.

"Please," Seth said, motioning to all of them. "Sit, and tell me of your troubles. I am afraid my father is...indisposed, as is my mother, but I can offer you the same assistance."

"We thank you for it," Midnight said, taking another sip of blood, enjoying the taste of it. Rarely did he permit himself such things, for with the spell he had no need of them, and most often he simply took a few swallows from Devlin or Barra.

Seth sat back in his own wingback chair and retrieve the snifter he had set down a moment ago. "Is something wrong with the Duke?"

"He was kidnapped," Midnight said, and explained all that had transpired since they had taken up the case, with Barra filling in those parts Midnight had missed. "We fear that they are attempting to make more draugr like me, and having realized I exist, have taken Devlin to learn the secret of their making."

"I see," Seth said, and frowned, absently tracing a finger around the rim of his snifter. "If that is the case, then I wonder if perhaps Ceadda is not in some danger."

Midnight frowned, and shared a look of confusion with the others, before turning back to Seth. "Who is Ceadda?"

Seth's brows rose in surprise. "Why, my dear, did Devlin never tell you? That is a foolish question, I can see by your expression that he did not. How like both of them to leave it out, though of course that would be for safety's sake...I am rambling. My dear, Devlin alone did not make you as you stand before me. Half of your being is necromancy, and there is only one vampire with that sort of skill in this country. That is Ceadda."

"I..." Midnight scowled. "Devlin always said he made me, that he poured over tombs and moldering texts until his eyes crossed and no one would come near him for the foulness of his temper. He never once said he consulted a bloody necromancer."

"I perhaps should have been more discreet," Seth said with a grimace. "It did not occur to me until too late that perhaps his grace would have considered secrecy the best path to take, for the safety of all parties. However, the damage is done...and at that, Ceadda keeps one finger on the

pulse of magic. If we are hunting a sorcerer who likes to play with the dead, perhaps Ceadda knows of him." His eyes flashed with magic light.

A minute later, another vampire stepped into the room—not a noble, but a gentleman. He was not equal in beauty to Seth, but he was stunning, all blue-black curls and deep brown eyes, dressed in dark violet and rich brown. "This is my man of affairs, Keaton Barker." He moved quickly through the introductions and explanations, concluding with , "Keaton, have Ceadda fetched at once, would you please? Tell him it pertains to the Duke of Winterbourne, and the secret they share."

"Of course, Alucard," Keaton said, and vanished.

M. W. Flirt

Ceadda, as it turned out, was not to be immediately found. Keaton returned well over an hour later, sans necromancer.

"I left him a note, Alucard," Keaton said apologetically. "I will return frequently to see if he has returned, but I could find no sign of where he might have gone."

Seth nodded, and frowned. "That is unlike Ceadda. He was always a reclusive sort, especially for a young one." He chuckled softly. "Not that I am so old myself, but Ceadda...well, it is obvious his world is his books and studies. Well, he will reappear soon enough, I should think. Until then, my friends, I think you all in need of proper sustenance. Midnight, would you care for more to drink."

"Um—if it is no trouble," Midnight said, and wondered if perhaps Devlin would be displeased to learn he had indulged so in human blood. "It's, um, very good."

Laughing gently, Seth motioned for Keaton to pour for the three of them, eyes flashing with magic again. "It is. We are well-provided for by the humans in our territory. A great many of the families are old, and know and appreciate the tradition of feeding their vampire lords. There are, of course, a great many normals, and those we leave alone for the most part." He turned as the door opened to admit the butler-imp who had first greeted them. "Ty, see that dinner is brought for our guests less inclined towards blood. It is also possible we may need to leave upon a moment, so keep the horses at the ready. On the chance we do not leave, rooms will be required. See that one is prepared especial for Midnight, that lets no sunlight breach it."

"Yes, Alucard," Ty said, and bowed himself out of the room to see the orders carried out.

"Now, then," Seth said briskly. "I suppose the next best thing we can do is attempt to find this Winsted fellow."

"If you do not mind the impertinence," Midnight said slowly, "my impression of vampire nobility was always a bit more...reserved."

Seth grinned. "Well, if you were speaking to my father right now, there would be a great deal of *reservation*. However, I am not he. I can be, but only when the situation calls for it. I am a trifle too modern for my parents' taste, but as I am a hundred and seventy-five, there is little they can say about it. I think they are still hoping it is a phase I will outgrow."

Midnight laughed.

"Now, I know very little of sorcerers, but we do keep note of all magic users in our territory. There are three alchemists, one rather mediocre witch, and the rest are mere dabblers, so far as the humans go. We do of course have various other nightwalkers with true magic, but toying with draugr would not be their style. That would seem, if you will pardon me, distinctly human in nature."

"You'll find no argument from me," Barra said with a grin, pointedly looking away from Neirin's amused glare. "I am grateful I'm mostly other things, believe me."

Seth looked at him thoughtfully. "Wolf, obviously, and...elf, I would wager. A unique mix, to be sure, but I guess the human element would harmonize such two extremes."

Barra shrugged, and looked discomfited, far from used to people discussing him in such idle, harmless fashion.

"I would wager you have something to do with the fact the du Lac still smells strongly of fresh blood," Seth continued, smirking. "But, I am not quite *that* nosy. I—" He paused as a bell rang, and stood. "Dinner is ready, it would seem. Come, this way."

He led them out of the library, and through the halls to an ornate dining room decorated in deep blue and maroon, with silver accents scattered about, and a table of rich mahogany. Several places were set out, though two featured only blood, and one a plate of raw meat.

Troyes growled and promptly moved to the meat, sitting down and beginning to eat quite happily. Neirin sat next to him, shaking his head in amusement, and lightly touched the back of Barra's hand as he sat down on Neirin's other side, with Midnight at the corner, and Seth at the head of the table. Keaton, Midnight suddenly realized, had not come with them.

"He has wandered back to his own affairs," Seth explained, catching his confusion. "He comes and goes very nearly as he pleases. Now, then, my dear, you must tell me who you know in the city. Quite a few nobles and tenants like to wander about there, and your demon lord is of course kind enough to tolerate it. Not that he would have much choice, I daresay. The city does truly attract all sorts."

The group chatted amiably for several minutes, a conversation quickly launched when most of the group found themselves fond of the same books. A polite cough interrupted them, however, and Seth looked up with a frown at the servant standing in the doorway.

"If you will excuse me a moment," Seth murmured, and followed the servant from the room.

Barra abruptly started laughing.

Midnight looked at him askance. "Whatever is so amusing?"

"The way Devlin will react when he finds out that rescuing him involved getting help from a vampire who spent the whole of the affair flirting shamelessly with you," Barra replied, face flushed with laughter.

"What in the world are you talking about?" Midnight demanded. "No one is flirting with me!"

Neirin chuckled, shaking his head at Barra, still laughing. "I tend to agree with Barra, I'm afraid. Perhaps you are unused to being the object of flirtation? I cannot think anyone would be brazen enough to try it with Devlin scowling nearby.

"But—" Midnight dropped his head, embarrassed. "That's silly. Why would a vampire flirt with me? Anyway, I belong to Devlin, so there's no point."

Barra's laughter finally eased off, though his eyes were still bright with mirth. "Come now, Midnight. You are quite the tease when Devlin is around; everyone knows you drive the man positively mad. You obviously know your charms."

Midnight stared very hard at his crystal wine glass, and the blood which still filled it halfway. "I don't have charms," he said, glad that his face could not turn red for otherwise he feared he would be redder than the blood he was enjoying. "I just love Devlin."

When Barra only laughed again, he rallied and looked up, curving his mouth into a smirk. "Anyway, I don't want to hear all this nonsense from a pretty wolf-elf who used his *charms* to snare a knight and a dragon. We're going to have to buy you a larger bed, wolf-elf."

Barra turned bright red and made a choked, squeaking sound, and suddenly found his dinner plate extremely fascinating.

Neirin and Troyes both snickered, and Midnight didn't doubt that Barra's next squeak came from someone's wandering hand.

Then the door opened, and they abruptly ceased the friendly byplay—especially when they saw that Seth was accompanied by a new vampire. Midnight immediately smelled magic on him, far stronger and sharper than it had been on any of the other vampires. Stronger than it was on anyone he knew, except Devlin.

He was tall and slender, with messy pale blonde hair that fell to his shoulders...but his eyes, Midnight saw with surprise, were the same brilliant emerald of Seth's. Were they related? They must be, with eyes like that. He was dressed in simple, worn but respectable clothes, all of it stark black. His eyes immediately landed upon Midnight, and widened.

Striding into the room, eschewing proper introductions, he sat down in Seth's seat and reached out to lightly touch Midnight's face. "My

word, it is the corpse child. The spell worked better than I ever could have hoped, though we knew our magic was sound. Stunning, truly."

Midnight had never felt more embarrassed in his life, between the courtesy, the teasing over the supposed teasing, and now this...whatever it was. "Um. I didn't know you helped make me."

Ceadda blinked, then laughed briefly and withdrew his hand. "I had very little part in it, child. His grace did the real work; I only filled in the gaps. He put forth the heart and soul, and magic does not work if it is coldly cast." His levity abruptly faded. "The Alucard informs me that his grace has been kidnapped, because of what we did with you."

"Yes," Midnight said. "That is our belief, anyway."

"It is probably correct," Ceadda mused, sitting back, still apparently oblivious to the fact he had stolen Seth's chair.

Seth, mouth quirked in amusement, slid into the one opposite Midnight.

"We always feared that should you become well known, then someone would desire the knowledge that made you," Ceadda continued. "I think I need not list all the reasons an existence such as yours would be favorably regarded by people, especially amongst the weaker and more short-lived species."

Neirin snorted in amusement, but said nothing.

Midnight scowled. "I cannot believe that idiot never told me that he had help, and how typical of him to do it for the best."

Ceadda shrugged. "It was actually my request that I go unmentioned, because it was safest, but also because I wanted to be left alone. If others knew I had successfully helped such an endeavor, they would pester me for other things. I just want to be left alone."

Seth chuckled. "A fierce recluse, our Ceadda," he said, looking at Ceadda with an indecipherable expression on his face. "Nothing and no one can draw him from his magic."

"Magic makes more sense than the rest of the world," Ceadda replied automatically, still not taking his eyes off Midnight. "I am glad you turned out so well. No spell before or sense was better than you."

"Thank you," Midnight said, not certain what else he could say. "Does that mean you will help us?"

Ceadda frowned. "Seth mentioned my assisting you, but truly I am not certain how I might. I am, as he said, reclusive."

"Reclusive, but not oblivious," Seth said. "Come now, cousin, I know you better than that. If anyone knows of a sorcerer messing around in such dangerous things, it would be you."

"If you had asked me thirty or so years ago, certainly," Ceadda said with a shrug. "However, I only ever knew one magic-using human with the potential for such magic, and he died before he could achieve it. A weak heart, or so the rumors said. He is long dead. Most humans tend to stay that way."

"Dead?" Barra echoed. "Who was he?"

"Silas Walmsley," Ceadda replied. "I met him once, actually. Forty years or so, that was. He wanted a book of mine, or rather, a particular spell from it. I agreed to meet him, though I promised nothing. I did not like the look of him, and told him that I only had a partial of that spell. I showed it to him, and he was never the wiser that I had both a poor and good copy of the grimoire in question." He pursed his lips in thoughts. "Oddly enough, I recently sold the book in question to a demon." He shrugged. "Anyway, he was powerful, clever, and ambitious; a bad combination in any species. Worse, he had the potential to grow more powerful. If he were alive, I would not put this past him—but Walmsley is long dead. I know of no other who could do such a thing, not even a fellow necromancer."

Midnight nodded, and fought against the despair threatening to overwhelm him. How were they going to get Devlin back, when no one knew how to find him? Damn it, if there was a sorcerer alive with the skill and power to do this, then *someone* had to of heard of him. Power never stayed that well hidden.

"Now, now, my dear," Seth said, the soothing gentleness in his voice drawing Midnight's head up. He smiled. "You came to me for help, and your Duke was lost doing a favor for my family. We will help you find him. I'm certain my darling cousin is not out of tricks quite yet."

Ceadda shot Seth a look that was as strange as the look Seth had earlier given him, and Midnight wondered just what sort of history existed between the cousins. Sitting next to each other, he could suddenly see they had more in common than their eyes. Their noses, the cut of their cheekbones, and their well-shaped lips, though Ceadda obviously gave little attention to his own appearance.

After a moment of mutual...it was not glaring, precisely, so much as just intense staring, Ceadda broke away and looked back at Midnight. "I could return to the village with you," he said. "I may not know the sorcerer behind all this nonsense, but it's possible I will see something that you have not. You are closer to death than I, obviously, but I study it in ways you do not."

"Would that I could come along as well," Seth said, and Midnight could tell the regret in his voice was genuine. "Alas, I must remain here."

Certain duties cannot be neglected for even a moment." He started to say more, but the same cough from before came again.

Something much like pain flickered across Seth's face, and Midnight wondered that he could see it now, when Seth obviously had kept it back the whole of the evening.

"Speaking of duties," Seth said smoothly, rising from his seat. "Cousin, do as you see fit, and do not hesitate to call upon me or my name, hmm? It was good to see you again, though I do wish we might speak under happy circumstances for once. Midnight, it was an honor and pleasure to make your acquaintance. Gentlemen, your servant." Sketching them an elegant bow, he turned and followed the servant from the room.

Troyes spoke up for the first time. "Blood drinkers all smell wrong."

"I do not doubt it," Ceadda said tersely. "However, it is not my place to speak of it, and so we shall not. I will come with you to the village, and see if I can help you. I do not want Midnight's secret known to the world, and if there is someone attempting to take it, then he must be stopped."

"You and the Alucard are most generous," Midnight murmured. "I hope someday I can repay all that you are doing for us."

Ceadda shrugged. "The Dukes of Winterbourne have always been good to my people. His father once saved my life. Though helping you evened things between us, still his family is one I will always help. That aside, I do not want to see the wrath that would descend should the demon lord lose one of his closest friends."

Midnight nodded. "Shall we return now?"

"I think not," Barra said with amusement. "The sun will be rising soon; even as a bird, you would not make it in time. I told the woman of the house we would not be back until tomorrow night, and she'd best make certain our belongings were left well enough alone. The Alucard obviously planned on us remaining here the night."

A cloud passed over Ceadda's face. "If you will excuse me, I am going to go see my cousin. I assume we will leave the very moment the sun has set?"

"Yes," Midnight said. "Every moment we waste..." Was one more minute closer to death for Devlin. Midnight *had* to find him, before the sorcerer mistakenly believed that Devlin was better off dead, or Devlin decided he—they—were better off dead.

"Very well," Ceadda said. "I bid you all good night." With that, he rose and left, not pausing to bow, or even looking back.

"Smell wrong," Troyes said again.

Neirin nodded. "They are certainly acting strange, and I wonder why the Dracula never appeared. Poor form for anyone, but vampires especially.

Still, at least the Alucard and his rather eccentric cousin are so willing to help us."

Barra started to say something, but the words were cut off by a wide yawn. "Oh, bother it. I say we find our beds and get some rest. Everything will make more sense tomorrow, or at least we will be more inclined to manage it."

"True enough, wolf-elf," Midnight replied, and drained the contents of his glass before standing.

Out in the hallway, a footman stood patiently waiting, and promptly guided them upstairs to their rooms—one for Midnight, and one for the other three, which made Barra turn red, and allowed Midnight to go to bed laughing.

11. O Monster

He rose just as the sun set, still able to see the barest hints of light on the horizon, even as the rest of the sky sparkled with cold starlight.

Barra was ready and waiting, and quickly helped him bathe and dress. Midnight lingered over the runes marked into his skin, at wrists and ankles and throat, with more at his abdomen and lower back, and the final three master marks over his heart.

Two bodies, one heart and soul. Why was Devlin so stubborn?

Dressed in deep indigo and charcoal-gray, with onyx and amethyst gleaming, Midnight tied his hair back met Neirin and Troyes in the hallway, and all four of them travelled downstairs together.

Neirin was already looking far better than he had only a day or so ago; if his awful wounds still pained him, he did not show it except perhaps in the stiff way he held himself. "Good morning, Midnight."

Midnight nodded and murmured various greetings, more interested in returning to the village, eager to see what help Ceadda could offer.

When they reached the main entryway, Ceadda and Seth stood speaking quietly to each other. Midnight frowned when he saw a livid bruise discoloring Seth's left cheek—it looked as though he had been struck hard across the face. By whom? It would take a great deal of strength to inflict such harm upon a vampire.

Ceadda reached up to touch the bruised cheek, a scowl on his face, and it was obvious what he was saying was far from pleasant. Seth jerked away, saying something just as angry, but stopped short as he saw Ceadda's gaze shift—to them.

"Good morning," Midnight greeted. "Are we...interrupting?"

"Not at all," Seth said smoothly, summoning up a smile that did not really pass muster.

Midnight frowned. "Are you all right?" he asked, eyes on the terrible bruise, and now he could see the eye was swollen as well. What had happened? He glanced at the other three, but they seemed as baffled as he.

"I am perfectly fine," Seth replied. "Save that your final impression of me will be this terrible visage. Be kind, and think of me only at my prettiest, hmm?"

Midnight laughed, if only to cheer him as best he could. "Of course. How could I think of you any other way?"

"There's a good lad," Seth said, and rested a hand on his shoulder, squeezing briefly. "If ever you should like to share a glass of blood with a

friend, do stop by. In the mean time, take care of my cousin while you borrow him. He is given to crankiness and massive eccentric, but I am fond of him."

"Sir," Midnight said, dipping slightly in an elegant half bow. "Of course I shall return him to you in the same condition you present him, if I cannot endeavor to improve him for you. I give my vow."

"Then I shall depend upon it," Seth said, and smiled a bit more genuinely this time, though his eyes still held far too many shadows. "It was an honor to make the acquaintance of you all. I hope to see you again, and under far happier circumstances." He escorted them to the front door, and bowed one last time before vanishing back into the depths of his home.

Silence fell, save for the noises caused by Neirin as he mounted Devlin's horse.

Midnight looked at Ceadda, who presently was the very definition of the word 'brooding'. "Is his lordship going to be all right?"

Ceadda looked up, blank for a moment, before his expression cleared. "Oh. My apologies, I was lost to my own thoughts." He shrugged. "Seth is honorable to a fault. Even the possibility of his own death will not get him to see reason—we disagree quite strongly on what reason is, precisely. I am certain the pitfalls of honor are something with which you are well-acquainted, being so close to Winterbournes."

Midnight thought of Devlin, so wrapped up in honor that he fought against being in love, and grimaced. "Yes, I am."

Ceadda grunted. "If you figure out the secret to overcoming it, do be kind enough to let a fellow sufferer know."

Midnight smiled, amused and frustrated and miserable. "I told him I'd been intimate with others. He was so mad about that, so torn in two different directions, that his armor cracked. Whether it has broken entirely, I cannot yet say."

"I see," Ceadda said, snorting with brief amusement. "He started out your guardian, and now wants to be something else entirely—I can see where that would give him a headache. Honor is overrated. Come, let us go find the sorcerer who has stolen your stubborn Duke away."

Neirin stirred where he sat patiently listening and waiting. "How will you travel, sir? Shall we request another horse?"

Ceadda laughed. "Not necessary. I am a necromancer of no small skill. I shall fly."

Midnight's brows went up at that, but he did not question, simply transformed himself. He opted again for the cat; it had always been his favorite non-human shape to take. Mewling at Barra, rubbing against a lazily growling Troyes, he took off.

From above him came a sharp cry, the flapping of wings, and he looked up to see the dark shape of a bat taking to the skies. Ceadda could transform into a bat? Simple incredible. He'd never known vampires could do such things, not any longer. They'd given up magic for good a century or three ago.

Onward they travelled, pushing hard to return to the place they needed to be. They would find Devlin, before it was too late—that the meeting with the vampires had gone so well surely boded well for the rest of the horrible adventure. So much good was coming from it, he would get Devlin as well.

He refused to believe anything else.

They were halfway home when he was struck by a presence he had not expected to feel—not here, not now, though the only thing that really surprised him was that the bastard had found them, or knew where they would be.

Nearby, Troyes and Barra growled as they felt the same presence—draugr. More draugr than he could easily count, and that was bad.

The draugr came from all directions at once, moving in a circle meant to trap and bind them. He should have sensed them sooner, and wondered why he had not—then there was simply no more time for thinking.

Shifting forms, Midnight immediately lunged, tearing the head from one and throwing it at another, nails more like claws as he fought his mindless, hungry brothers. A burst of light and heat, accompanied by a deafening roar, indicated that Troyes was taking to the fight with a vengeance.

He briefly caught the flash of steel from Neirin's sword, saw Barra lung and sink his teeth into another, and the stench of magic said that Ceadda had his own ways of dealing with the problem.

Still, there were too many. Had he emptied almost an entire graveyard? Yet some had the tell-tale seaweed that spoke of sea draugr. Why were they being assaulted this way?

It was only when a draugr passed by him, as he dealt with another, that Midnight suddenly noticed something—the draugr were attacking everyone but him. Even those draugr he attacked were not putting up much of a fight against him.

Midnight snarled in rage and tore apart two more, rending limb from limb, tearing the head off a third, throwing the body into two draugr threatening Neirin. A thought was all it took to summon up a thick fog, and he absently heard Barra tell the others to withdraw. He could still feel

Ceadda, but only absently, as he devoted all his attention and power to ridding the field of the draugr.

How long he fought, he did not know. Much of the work was done by Ceadda and Troyes, who had little to fear from the draugr. When at last there were no more to kill, he found a tree and collapsed against it, feeling dizzy and sore and tired. It was fortunate he'd had so much blood at Seth's home, for it had given him additional energy—but that energy was now depleted.

The fog he had summoned, and which the lesser draugr had not been able to drive back, slowly thinned out to a fine mist, then at last to nothing.

Midnight dragged his eyes open as he felt, and smelled, Barra. He dredged up a tired smile. "Is everyone all right?"

"We're all fine," Barra said. "You look a bit the worse for wear; there was no need to do so much yourself, Midnight."

"Of course there was," Midnight said. "There was too many of them—you and Neirin could have taken injury from so many. We got them, and now we really need to get moving again."

"You're in no condition to go anywhere," Neirin said firmly. "I doubt you can even stand, at the moment."

Troyes growled. "Not well."

Midnight made a face. "I assure you, I can still return to the village before daybreak." In truth, he was not at all certain of that. There was the horse, if he could get on it. He was tired. Blood would be nice.

Barra snorted softly and knelt by him, brushing back loose strands of Midnight's hair. Midnight realized somewhere in the chaos, he had lost the ribbon binding it back. Then Barra pulled out a knife, and made to reopen one of the pale, thin scars across his arm—this would hardly be the first time that Barra had fed him, though the need had never been quite this dire.

Neirin knelt opposite Barra, suddenly, frowning. "You are going to feed him?" he asked slowly, looking between them. "I thought draugr needed the blood of humans."

"Well, usually he prefers Devlin," Barra said with a smile. "However, I do in a pinch."

"Indeed," Neirin replied, still frowning as he reached out and took the knife from Barra. "You do, whatever the case may be. However, I wonder if perhaps my blood might be more efficacious? I am completely human, after all, and a direct descendant of the Lord du Lac, greatest of the Pendragon's knights."

Midnight laughed. "Now, now, no bragging when Devlin isn't around to take offense." He looked at Neirin, truly surprised. "You have taken to all of this remarkably well. I cannot think many in your situation would help, let alone offer me blood."

Neirin shrugged. "Lancelot du Lac fell because he wanted things he was not supposed to want; they say all the great families bear some form of curse in return for the power and glory granted us. It tempers us, you see. Strikes a balance. They say all true descendents of du Lac are cursed to want something they cannot, should not have, and will suffer greatly for it—if not simply die outright. I always wanted to see what life beyond the clans was like, and for that wanting find myself in it forever. I will never see my home again. I can bemoan that fate, or embrace it"

He abruptly lifted the knife and slice open a small gash on his wrist, then presented it to Midnight.

Midnight immediately accepted the offer, fastening his mouth over the wound, swallowing the blood as it poured out. He was a monster, and often did not care. At times like this, however, he wondered if he would ever have been happy being normal. That was, perhaps, the worst and darkest part of him—he liked being a draugr, except when it seemed that might be what kept his heartbeat from him.

Except that kiss...

He clung to that kiss fiercely, with all the obsession that only a draugr could muster.

Neirin's blood tasted surprisingly sweet. Blood did not usually taste so; it was metallic, or bland, or the thick, rich, slightly bitter taste of Devlin's blood. Sweet was new, and surprising. He broke away when he realized he had been drinking longer than was typical, licking traces from his lips. "Thank you."

"Of course," Neirin said calmly, and allowed Barra to bandage the wound and fuss over him.

Troyes pushed in amongst them, breath hot as he breathed through his snout, smelling like fire and metal, like something wild. He growled, and the sound rumbled through Midnight like a cat's purr, but hundreds of times stronger. Then he backed away and made a series of short, sharp barking sounds.

"He has decided that you are well, I am well, and the wolf-elf is well," Neirin said with a chuckle.

Another sharp bark cut through the night.

Neirin rolled his eyes. "He also says he should get some apples."

Barra laughed. "I'll get him some apples once we're back in the village."

Troyes growled in approval and prowled around Midnight to push and rub against Barra—then he abruptly reared back and whipped around, snarling and growling with hostility.

Midnight struggled to his feet, grateful that the ingesting of the blood was already returning his strength to him—even faster than normal, which left him wondering if clan blood held something special.

Another draugr drew close, moving slowly, preceded by the fog that came rolling back in—and Midnight could not completely drive it back, only thin it, and he felt his own power rage against that of the other draugr.

Powerful, though still not as powerful as he, even if he could control the fog with seeming impunity. Likely, that was cockiness. The moment a draugr learned to do such a thing, it was all he did for a time. Assuming he lived long enough to play with the skill.

Midnight strode to the front of the small group, noticing for the first time how caked in blood and...other miscellany...his hands were. The lace at his wrists was beyond repair; poor Barra would be most put out.

He tensed as the draugr drew near enough to properly see...and swore loudly as he took it in.

Winsted. Someone had turned Winsted into a draugr. That solved the riddle of where he had gone...but why would someone do such a thing? What was the point? Surely Winsted was more useful alive? Hell, he was more annoying alive.

This...did not even seem fair. Midnight hated Winsted, because Winsted hated Devlin and did his best to make Devlin's life miserable, despite the fact Devlin was the only reason Winsted's sister still lived. He would have liked nothing more than to tear out Winsted's throat and drink down his blood as he watched life leech from Winsted's face.

To simply make him properly dead again did not seem fair. It felt as though they all were cheated out of something, even if that something was an ugly, bitter fight.

"Oh my god," Barra said. The others were silent.

Ceadda stepped forward. "He's well made, I will say that much. You act as though you know him."

"Yes," Barra said before Midnight could, and explained as best he could.

Midnight left them to it, and spared one last moment to mourn the unfairness of it all. He loathed Winsted, but this did not seem right. What had been taken from him, for what did he search, that someone was able to make of him a draugr?

Then Midnight bolted forward, running full tilt to meet Winsted head on—and barely dodged in time as one giant fist came flying at him, faster than any human would ever be able to move.

It would seem Winsted was a bit more powerful than he had thought. New draugr tended to be slow at first. The strength and the power and the ability to minutely manipulate weather came much later. So whoever had made Winsted a draugr had managed to accelerate the process.

Midnight dodged another swing, bolting away as Winsted came at him, barley keeping ahead of a fury that had nothing human left to temper it. Finally, finally he saw his chance, catching Winsted's arm as it came at him again—and tore with all his strength.

Casting the arm aside, he lunged at Winsted, catching his second arm, burying the claws of his free hand in Winsted's throat, feeling flesh and blood and bone, listening as Winsted gurgled in surprise more than in a sudden loss of his ability to breath.

The eyes glowed blue, but there was something....something in them had not completely turned inhuman monster. Beneath it all, a shred of the human monster remained.

Pulling his hand from the ruined throat, letting go of Winsted's arm, Midnight tore Winsted's head from his body and cast it aside.

He turned away as Troyes drew near to burn the body to ash, and stared at the filth which covered his hands. He flexed his fingers, then flicked off bits and pieces at which he preferred not to look too closely. What would Devlin think, to see him like this? Would he be repulsed? It was hardly the first time Midnight had gotten into a brutal fight; Devlin would never lead the true life of a gentleman of leisure.

It was, however, the first time he had been this ruthless, this violent. They had taken Devlin, however, were using Devlin because of Midnight. He would be as much a monster as necessary to get back his treasure, his reason for fighting off death itself so many years ago...but he wondered if the methods would cost him the prize.

Making a rough sound, Midnight vanished to find water, ignoring the sounds of the other calling out to him, moving too quickly for them to easily follow, not stopping until he came at last to a stream. Dropping to his knees, he plunged his hands into the water all the way up to his elbows, willing all the nastiness covering his hands to wash away.

He would have cried, if it were in him to do, but crying had never been his way. All he had ever need, when he reached that point, was Devlin's presence. He'd simply stolen into Devlin's arms for an embrace that

let him feel their hearts beat in time. He was not a monster, because he was Devlin's.

"Heartbeat," Midnight whispered to the dark, finally pulling his hands from the frigid stream.

M. Of Fancy

By the time every last body was destroyed, and they were certain no more draugr were forthcoming, it was too close to dawn for them to make it to the safety of the village.

"You should go on ahead," Midnight said to the others. "Simply see that I am well hidden and thoroughly covered, and once it grows dark again I will catch up to you." He truly hated his weakness to the sun. He'd overcome so much—Devlin's spell had given him every semblance of true life, but even Devlin's magic could not conquer the terrible effects of sunlight, or the fact that Midnight fell into a dead sleep with its rising.

"No," Neirin said firmly. "You are, without a doubt now, what our mysterious sorcerer wants. Not all of his magic may be confined to night. He knew where to find us; it is not unreasonable to think he might have intended to strand you here in the open, for better to take you in daylight when you are most vulnerable. We will stay and guard you. If he is trying this hard to obtain you, then at least be assured Devlin is not dead."

Midnight nodded, unable to argue even if he had wanted—something about Neirin's tone and manner made it impossible to voice a protest. He didn't truly want to be left alone, anyway.

They quickly found a thick copse of trees, through which very little sunlight would get through. Once Midnight had settled as comfortably on the ground as he was able, Neirin and Ceadda covered him with their greatcoats, protecting him completely from any possibility of sunlight.

It made him think of a coffin, of being buried. Not that he would ever rest in one—upon Devlin's death, Midnight would turn to ashes. Precaution prevented any other possibility. He had never particularly cared before, but now he was grateful that he would be dust. He didn't want to be buried in the ground; it seemed too awful a way to spend eternity.

As unsettling as it was, he was too tired to be kept awake by it. As the sun rose, Midnight fell asleep.

It should not be so thrilling, but it was. This was only his fourth time venturing out by himself, and after being constantly confined to the house or always made to go about with Devlin or Barra—alone! It should not be so exciting, but there you had it.

True, it was only to the nearest of the bookshops they visited, but where else would he go? At so late an hour, precious little else was open and none of it was conducive to keeping his nature from normals and

nightwalkers alike. Ever fretful, he reached up to make certain his short-cropped hair was suitably hidden beneath his hat. Devlin occasionally took him to museums and pubs and the like, but those visits were infrequent, as he was too strange to go out often, and too young to protect himself well should something go wrong. One day, though. One day he would be unstoppable, and Devlin would have to let him go everywhere.

Entering the bookshop, one which catered specifically to nightwalkers and so was open at peculiar hours, he nodded to the imp clerk and a vampire perusing the poetry, then strode on to the newest fiction released. A good dreadful, that was the very thing. It was always so funny, the ideas that normals had about the nightwalkers right under their noses. Devlin hated when he read the things, but they were so very entertaining.

He was still vibrating from being alone as he began to comb through the selections. So exciting, especially since Devlin had said he would be going nowhere alone until he was at least eighteen—and here he was fifteen and managing perfectly fine. Probably he had Barra to thank for that; Barra was not quite so...Devlin...about things.

Though, tonight even Devlin had not been very Devlin. Normally he frowned and scowled and fussed a bit before finally relenting. Tonight, Devlin had given him extra coin to spend, admonished him to take extra care in all thing, and sent him on his way. Perhaps Devlin was beginning to see reason.

Maybe he could find a book for Devlin, though that was always a tricky affair. His heartbeat had more books than anyone could remember, least of all Devlin. Still, he was always behind on the newest volumes. Abandoning his dreadful, Midnight moved to peruse the newest additions to history and memoirs. Devlin was always fond of such things; the memoirs especially he found vastly amusing, claiming it was entertaining to pick out the truths, the exaggerations, and the outright lies.

He nearly crowed his victory aloud when he found a book guaranteed to amuse Devlin—a book that claimed to be a history and study of ghosts, by a famed 'expert' amongst the normals. Devlin had once read a pamphlet about the man, and laughed himself silly—for the 'expert' was apparently unaware of the ghost which lived in his own house, a ghost that Devlin had turned to for assistance more than once.

Taking the book to the counter, he resisted an urge to fuss with his hair, which was started into itch at the back of his neck, where it was too long to stay properly where it was put. Hopefully Barra would be able to trim it tomorrow. It was much easier to pass it for black when it was cropped short, and who wanted long, girlish hair, anyway?

The clerk held out his book, wrapped in paper, and Midnight handed over the necessary coin, thanking him absently. Leaving the shop, he made his way quickly back home. He kept well away from the lights, deep into the shadows. Unable to resist, he called up his powers and tried to coax up a mist.

He sort of succeeded; strands of mist curled at his feet, along the street, slowly drifting upward. He had most of the street shrouded before he simply got too tired to maintain it. Soon, Devlin had said, his powers would increase rapidly; his body was only wanting of the proper strength for it. In normal draugr, they suffered only those changes which pertained to their unique nature. Midnight, however, was not that simple. Thanks to Devlin's spell, he grew and changed like a living person, which meant his draugr powers must wait until the body was settled before the energy could be turned to his powers.

Midnight wished everything would hurry up; he was so tired of waiting. Waiting took forever. He wanted to be able to help Devlin and Barra on their missions for the demon lord, and not just sit at home all the time.

At last Devlin's townhouse came into view, and he climbed the steps quickly, letting himself in and closing the door shut quietly behind him because Barra always fussed at him for slamming it. He stripped rapidly out of his going-out clothes, putting the coat and scarf and hat and gloves properly away. His clothes were plain black, with practically no ornamentation or frills. He hated the fancy clothes into which Barra was always trying to shove him. Again with the looking silly and girlish. He wanted to look like Devlin—strong and powerful and tough. Maybe Devlin could do that and wear lace and jewels and colors, but Midnight knew he couldn't. He'd heard how women who saw him, on a few rare occasions, said he looked like a doll. Which was girlish.

So, he would never wear the fancy clothes, but he did concede to needing much covering when he went out—especially his hair and nails, the color of which he would never be able to explain logically away. Devlin had once said, over a dinner which included more wine than usual, that in certain areas, they would pass for 'intriguing and beguiling artifice' but then he had realized what he'd said, and been furious with himself, and so Midnight had never figured out what he meant.

Barra had refused to tell him, as well. He hated when they did that.

The house was oddly quiet, he realized suddenly. Barra hadn't even come bustling in to make certain Midnight had hung everything up properly, instead of leaving it lying about all over. Devlin had not poked his head out of the library to grumble at him for whatever reason he could scrape up.

Coupled with the way they had cheerfully—even eagerly, he thought now—pushed him toward the door, he was starting to suspect something was occurring, and they had not wanted him party to it. That stung—Devlin included him in most anything, unless it was 'for adults' which usually meant a request from the demon lord.

If Barra was not pestering him, perhaps he was simply at his pub. That was better than thinking he was conspiring against Midnight. Devlin...he normally did not go out in the evenings unless some unavoidable commitment forced his hand. As he had not mentioned such an engagement, he would most likely be in the library. He spent more time there than all the other rooms in the house combined.

Midnight abandoned the front hall, and headed directly for the library, determined to learn if there was a conspiracy after all—but he drew up short as he reached it.

The door was closed. The library door was never closed, save when Devlin was in one of his moods, and then it was firmly shut. Anyone passing by when he was in a mood could all but feel the malevolence pouring out.

At the moment, the door was only mostly closed, as though someone had pushed it shut but not bothered to see if it actually latched. Midnight hesitated—then scowled and strode forward. Devlin had said he was always welcome in the library, no matter the time or occasion.

Still, as his fingers grasped the door itself, he hesitated again. Annoyed with himself, Midnight nevertheless slowly pushed the door partway open. He immediately saw Devlin—then saw in the next moment that Devlin was not alone.

He was also missing most of his clothes. So was his companion, and really, he was never going to sit on that settee again.

Midnight swallowed as Devlin's shirt joined the rest of the scattered piles on the floor, and pulled the door shut again—but not all the way, because he could seem to tear his eyes away from the sight before him.

Devlin was—they were—it was just like the images in the books he'd found on the low low shelves right behind Devlin's desk, the one day Devlin had been gone for two long, awful, wretched weeks.

Shifting, feeling guilty and uncomfortable and wholly incapable of leaving, he tore his eyes away from the sight of Devlin completely nude to examine the man he was touching and kissing and—

He was pretty, Midnight supposed. Girlish, definitely girlish. He had long, straight black hair that spilled all over the settee as Devlin, uh, pushed the man into it. His skin was pale, and seemed almost to glow in the firelight. Even as Midnight continued to stare through his crack in the door, Devlin sank a hand into the long, dark hair and kissed the man thoroughly.

Midnight clapped a hand over his mouth to keep any noises from escaping.

All around them, on the floor, the settee, a trifle too close to the fire, were there clothes. The dark green jacket Devlin had been wearing, and an ornate crimson jacket decorated with white and gold lace, that obviously belonged to the stranger. Here and there jewels winked at him from the folds of costly fabric.

Oh, he should not be so—but he was—

Feeling suddenly ashamed, for spying and feeling such strange things, Midnight turned and crept away as quietly as he could. Once he reached the stairs, he ran as fast as he dared, stopping only long enough to avoid slamming his door shut, then bolted to his bed and threw himself down upon it.

His breeches were tight and uncomfortable, and Midnight hated it, because the reason for it was Devlin and he'd never thought of Devlin—and oh, what was he supposed to do?

Oh, why had that long-haired stranger come here, anyway? This was all his fault, he was sure of it. If he hadn't come, then Midnight wouldn't have wondered what was going on in the library and gone to see that.

His breeches were still too tight, and got worse every time he pictured Devlin bare-chested in the firelight, the way he'd held that bloody stranger and gripped his long hair and-and—

He realized his hand was fumbling with his breeches and tried to jerk it away, but his hand was having none of that and it felt good and wrong and right and awful—until he finally could do nothing more than picture Devlin and stroke and—

Staring miserably at the mess he'd made, Midnight wondered how he was ever going to explain to Barra the state of his laundry.

Standing up, he stripped out of his clothes and kicked them under the bed. Maybe Barra would forget about them, if he never saw them. Then he strode to his wardrobe to pick out a night robe—but stopped short at the sight of the fancy clothes over which he and Barra argued every morning.

He had many colors, but no red. Good, he thought. Red was an ugly color. Only stupid intruders stealing away his Devlin wore red. He bet the lord stranger did not look very good in it either.

Reaching out, Midnight snagged the newest of his jackets, a deep, rich turquoise with black and silver accents. He and Barra had nearly started shouting over it just that morning, he had been so set against wearing it. Perhaps it was not so bad...Devlin wore such clothes, so did everyone else. Maybe he could at least try it—certainly he would manage it better than he of the crimson jacket.

Carrying it to his mirror, he shrugged into it and tried to picture how he would look properly done up the way Barra was always trying to make him. Better than the stranger, definitely. Maybe he would even try jewelry.

He would probably look even better with long hair, and maybe then Devlin would not be stolen away by interloping idiots who had no business being in Devlin's library and stealing Devlin away from him. He shared Devlin's heartbeat, no one else.

Yes, he decided, and went to put the coat back, trading it for a black night robe. If the fool downstairs was pretty, then Midnight would be prettier still. By the time he was done, Devlin would look at him and no other.

And maybe, a tiny, nervous little voice whispered in the back of his mind, maybe someday he would be the one on the settee with Devlin.

The idea felt illicit, wrong, like some deep, dark secret—but it also felt good, and right, and if he had to be long-haired and fancy to manage it, he would. His heartbeat wasn't allowed to belong to anyone else.

II. VII Magic

It was raining when he woke, a light, cold drizzle that he rather thought did not bode well for the rest of the evening. At least it was not a downpour—that would have been downright ominous.

Midnight threw back the coats covering him and sat up with a groan, stretching and working out every kink acquired from his awkward sleeping arrangement. Gathering up the heavy greatcoats, he slowly stood and sought out the others.

They sat nearby, talking quietly, but the conversation faded off as he approached. As one, they stood up, murmuring pleasantries that he returned. He returned the coats to Neirin and Ceadda, thanking all of them for staying with him.

"Rested?" Barra asked.

"Yes," Midnight said, nodding. He was grateful he did not flush, as shreds of his dream still teased at the edges of his mind. Lord, he had not thought of that night in years. That had been just over six years ago; the night everything had truly changed between him and Devlin.

At least, according to him. Until that kiss, he had wondered if Devlin would always see him as just a child.

"Let us be off," Neirin said. "best not to invite trouble by lingering, and I for one could do with a proper bite to eat."

Midnight grinned. "I could stand a *bite* myself."

"As could I," Ceadda said idly, but with a gleam in his eyes.

"Hahaha," Neirin replied, rolling his eyes.

Barra snickered, then transformed and threw his head back, howling long and low. It was met by Troyes deep, reverberating growl. Midnight and Ceadda transformed, and added their own cries to the night.

Neirin chuckled as he mounted his horse. "A stranger party, I have never seen or been part of." He nudged his horse forward, and followed the quickly moving group from the woods, Ceadda cries heralding them to the night.

They made good time, pushing hard, and did not slow until the lights of the village were clearly visible. Transforming back, the group gathered together and took stock.

"Food first," Neirin said. "There is no point in attempting anything until we have the proper energy to do so."

They all nodded, and continued to walk toward the village, Neirin leading his horse now so as to stay with them.

Midnight rifled through his pockets in vain hope of finding a ribbon. Some days, he wished he still preferred to keep his hair ruthlessly short—but that had changed first from sheer determination to make Devlin *look* at him, and later he had simply come to like it.

Though, he would like it more if he could find a bloody ribbon. If they were to eat out, he must appear as normal as possible. Even in the dim light of a cheap tavern, the blue of his hair would be obvious should anyone really look—something they were far more likely to do if it was loose and tumbling all over in a right mess.

Soft chuckles drew his attention, and then a hand appeared in front of his face—holding a ribbon.

Midnight laughed, and took it, and turned to say, "Thank you, Barra."

"You're welcome," Barra said, still chuckling. "Honestly, if I had a pence for every ribbon you managed to lose, I would be wealthier than even his grace."

"Probably," Midnight conceded. He was remarkably talented at losing them—usually by accident, but not always. He knew very well that part of the plan had always worked; Devlin liked his men with long hair.

With easy, practiced motions he braided his hair and tied it off, allowing it to fall so that it was mostly hidden by the high collar of his jacket anyway. That done, he reached into a pocket and pulled out supple, black kidskin gloves to hide the blue of his nails. "Do I pass muster, Master Wolf-Elf?"

Barra rolled his eyes. "Not if you and everyone else keep calling me that. I do have a name."

Troyes growled in amusement as he turned from where he had been listening to something Neirin was saying. "Wolf-elf."

"Barra, that is my name," Barra said, glowering, but a smile tugging at his mouth. "You can say it, dragon."

"Wolf-elf."

Neirin chuckled. "Forget it, Barra. Once he latches onto a name, that is the end of it."

Barra smirked in a way that Midnight would have warned them meant trouble, if he had been inclined to help them avoid trouble. "Not even for apple pie?"

Troyes growled, eyes narrowing. "Apple pie? Apples?"

"You've never had apple pie?" Barra asked in disbelief.

"No..." Troyes said, growling a bit.

"Then, we shall certainly have to make you one. When we return to the city, I'll have the cook make one. Her pies are the best in the country."

Troyes rumbled and looped an arm around Barra's shoulders, nuzzling his cheek. "Good wolf-elf."

Barra sighed, but did not protest the brief kiss the dragon stole—pointedly ignoring Midnight's sniggering.

"Here we go," Midnight said, having mercy on Barra, motioning to a sign over a battered looking door. "Looks...more or less respectable, hmm?"

Neirin rolled his eyes, but led the way inside and shortly had them ensconced at a table in a relatively secluded corner with food and drink for all necessary parties.

"Do you not need food?" Midnight asked Ceadda, who sat sipping at beer for the sake of something to do.

Ceadda shrugged. "It is not urgent. I will feed in a little while. What of you?"

"I'm well enough," Midnight replied. "I've had more blood in the past two days than I normally have for months at a time." He sighed softly, not quite able to bite it back. "I will be glad when this is all over and we can retire to the country for a time. I've had more than enough excitement."

"Here, here," Barra said.

Neirin quirked a brow, and Barra suddenly squeaked and shot Neirin a dirty look.

"Surely," Neirin drawled in his haughtiest tone, "*some* good has come out of your adventure?"

Barra smiled. "Of course. I think we've finally gotten Devlin past his bloody denial."

Neirin gave him a withering look, and proceeded not to pout into his beer. Then his head shot up, and he gave Barra an amused-impressed look, and Midnight really wished they would stop doing stuff beneath the table.

He turned to Ceadda for distraction. "So you are certain the sorcerer you thought could have done this is really dead?"

"Quite certain," Ceadda replied, sitting back in his chair and idly turning his beer back and forth, jewel green eyes sharp and bright, even in the dim light. "He died about twenty years, due to problems with his heart. I met him forty years ago, as I said, to discuss a book in my keeping. At that time, I had two copies of it. That he did not know, and I am glad to this day I was wise enough to keep that particular detail to myself. I had two copies of it—one in excellent condition, the other all but falling apart. I cautiously took the poorer copy with me, to meet him at his home. Which, incidentally, is here." Ceadda pursed his lips in thought. "He is dead, but I suppose

someone else might have secretly taken up his work. He dabbled in arts that even I prefer to avoid, but that is humans for you."

Neirin rolled his eyes. "As the only true human at this table, I will be gracious and not take offense to that."

Ceadda smiled. "Then you are a rare, intelligent human."

"So the sorcerer died of a weak heart?"

"I'm certain the magic in which he dabbles sped the process," Ceadda replied, but nodded. "When I met him, he was not in the best of help. To look at him, you would think all was well, but a vampire can smell it." He tapped his nose, then wrinkled it. "Bad blood, that one. In every sense of the word. What poison his body wasn't born with, he added via magic. Started out with alchemy, moved on to sorcery, and what he wound up with, I do not want to know."

He shrugged. "I heard through my connections that he had died, and came here to see for myself. My encounter with him had always lingered, and I kept an ear out for any word of him. Seemed too easy that he would simply die of his health problems, but I saw the body for myself and confirmed it. He was dead."

Midnight frowned in thought. Dead was dead, though. "What kind of magic interested him? You said it was stuff even you would not touch."

"Oh, everything. He contacted me to get his hands on a spell of control—but the one I gave him was incomplete, and I knew for a fact he would find a complete version nowhere other than my library, and I had already made certain he would not look there again. He liked spells of control, spells of coercion—cruel stuff."

Neirin lifted his brows. "Is it so different from using beauty to snare food and convince it that it wants to *be* food?"

Anger flickered across Ceadda's face. "Yes, it is different. We hunt no differently than any other creature in existence, save that we do it with pleasure rather than pain. You can hardly call that a fault, knight, not when that creature sitting beside you knows only to obey you, and die for you, and never let an independent thought enter his head."

"That is not the nature of our relationship," Neiran snarled, all but lunging across the table.

"Do not insult me unfairly," Ceadda said coolly, "and I will not insult you. Every other human in existence persuades others with the power of his beauty—at least I only take blood, and do so as painlessly as possible."

Neirin grunted, grimaced, and subsided.

Midnight returned to the matter at hand. "Spells of control and coercion?" he repeated. "So, he wanted to force someone or something to do his bidding?"

"Well, a great deal of higher magic involves coercion. Summoning demons is ordering them to come forth, the making of angels is coaxing them into a mortal shape...then you have the sirens, and of course alchemy is taking basic elements and fusing them with magic to contort and bend both into something entirely new. *All* of magic is, at heart, coercing, commanding, coaxing, or convincing various things to change in some way. It is only that it can be done by way of beauty, or by way of brutality. Silas Walmsley preferred brutality. Whatever his ultimate goal, I never knew. It was enough to know that it was best never achieved.

"He's dead, but it cannot be coincidence that the dead walk where he once lived and those same dead are being manipulated by unseen forces. I can only surmise that he had an apprentice, or that someone otherwise managed to get close enough to take over the work when he died."

Midnight nodded, worrying his bottom lip. "I guess we shall have to go investigate his home? I do not see any other way to solve this riddle. But, if the sorcerer was right here in the village, one of us would have sensed him, surely? What Devlin or I do not sense, Barra typically smells, and knights and dragons must have their own methods."

"Smell blue and wolf-elf and blood drinker and master," Neirin rumbled. "Witch gone. No more magic."

"Blue?" Midnight asked, then felt silly when they all looked at him in amusement. "Oh. Me, of course." He slunk further down in his seat and took a deep pull of his beer as they laughed.

Ceadda frowned. "It is strange that nothing whatsoever can be sensed. I cannot think he would manage to shield himself this well from an entire village, and such an array of nightwalkers as is here presented. So, he must not be here. However, here is where the trouble began, decades ago. So perhaps here is where we might clues."

"We never found any before," Midnight said skeptically, but conceded, "however, we did not have you before, and hopefully that will make all the difference."

"Indeed," Ceadda said. "Come then, let us go, if all are fed."

"Apples," Troyes cut in with a stubborn growl.

Neirin shot Barra a look. "You are wholly responsible for this."

Barra laughed. "I do not deny it. One moment." He stood and crossed the pub, and spoke with the woman who had earlier fetched their food. A few minutes later, he returned and set a plate down in front of Troyes.

Troyes' nostrils flared, and his eyes widened.

As quickly as that, the slice of pie was gone. He licked his lips and looked at Barra as though he had every intention of devouring him next.

Only the firm hand curled around his arm likely recalled him to the fact that such behavior was a bad idea when not behind firmly closed doors.

"Good wolf-elf," he growled instead, an obvious promise he would do a great deal of devouring later behind those closed doors.

Barra flushed, but beamed.

Midnight laughed, and drank the last of his beer, and Ceadda's as well. "Come on, then. Let us go call upon a sorcerer."

Outside, Midnight turned to ask Ceadda something—and realized the vampire was no longer with them.

Neirin shook his head in amusement, and motioned toward the pub. "He stopped to chat with the barmaid."

"I see," Midnight said with a laugh.

They waited patiently, and Midnight was grateful that the rain had let up, nothing now but a faint drizzle. It was chilly, probably, though the cold tended to affect him less than others. He could not wait for the snow, especially since the later seasons meant more dark, which meant more time with Devlin.

A few minutes later, Ceadda rejoined them.

"How was the house wine?" Neirin asked drolly, and Midnight had a sneaking suspicion that Neirin tended to apologize in the same fashion as Devlin—that is, he did and said everything he possibly could to be forgiven, without actually having to utter the words 'I'm sorry' or 'my apologies'. Those words were reserved strictly for purposes of sarcasm, so far as Devlin was concerned.

Ceadda did not seem bothered by it. "Excellent," he replied, and if any tension between them had lingered, it was now gone.

Midnight shared a look of amusement with Barra, and said nothing.

"Hmm," Ceadda said thoughtfully, looking around, slowly leading the way from the pub. "It's been several years since I've been here; let us hope I still remember the location."

"Several years," Barra said in amusement. "Two decades would be several years to a vampire, I guess."

Ceadda laughed, and turned right as they reached a crossing. "This way, I think."

They walked quietly through the streets, and Midnight teased and encouraged the threads of mist that drifted around them. It would shroud the enemy, if the sorcerer tried to attack them again, but it would also shroud them—and it was only mist. If he wanted to be serious, he would make it a full-fledged fog.

He smiled briefly, remembering all the time he had confounded the threats they faced by the simple means of a calling up a fog where there

should not be one. That alone was often enough to settle a problem before it got out of control.

"Aha," Ceadda said in sudden satisfaction. "I do believe we are nearly there." So saying, he turned the last, curving corner of a steep incline of street and continued on down 'til they were nearly at the end of it—stopping in front of a large house made of gray stone, half-covered in ivy, and with light glowing warmly in most of the windows."

"This was his house?" Barra asked, sharing a look of horror with Midnight.

Ceadda frowned. "Yes...is that a problem?"

"I'll say," Midnight said with an unsteady laugh. "Ceadda—this is where we've taken rooms. This has been our abode while we worked upon the mystery of the draugr."

"I see," Ceadda said. "Perhaps my memory serves me ill, but I am pretty certain it does not. This was the house of the sorcerer. We had tea in a green salon, and he invited me to stay for dinner. I stayed the night, in a room of maroon and brown."

Barra laughed, but it was not a terribly amused sound. "Your room," he said to Neirin. "Oh, good lord, he's been right beneath our noses the entire time."

"Indeed," Ceadda replied. "The graveyard where he was interred is not far from here, just back the way we came and down to the left."

Midnight shook his head, not certain what there really was to say at this point. "I suppose we had best speak with the landlady, then, though I fear she is not fond of us. Perhaps she can tell us a bit about the former tenant."

Neirin briefly touched his sword hilt, then motioned to the house. "Then let us go and speak with her."

III. Our Body

"How did you come to take room here?" Neirin asked, as they climbed the steps and let themselves inside.

Barra responded, "The coachman found them, and I handled the finer points once I arrived. Devlin requires only a good bed, good food, and a hot bath. Past that, he does not trouble himself with minor details. We put up with the most awful ghost, once, simply because the beer at the pub in question was of exceptional quality.

Neirin snorted in amusement, but was prevented from making a comment by the arrival of the woman they sought.

"You're back then," she said. "Starting to wonder if you would be returning after all."

Midnight doubted that, seeing as they had left a fair bit of expensive belongings behind, but he supposed all such people hoped for a visitor foolish enough to leave behind diamonds and rubies, and far more besides.

He kept slightly back from the others, in the shadowy portions of the poorly light parlor into which they had gathered. Truly, he would be grateful when his little world returned to normal again; when they could go to Devlin's country estate and he would not have to worry about such things as being looked at too closely. Where he could be himself, wholly and completely, without fear.

Neirin seemed to have taken over the conversation, and swiftly turned it into an interview. "Madame, you have been most considerate and accommodating, especially to myself and my man here. We hate to trouble you with questions, but I am afraid they are rather pressing."

The woman wiped her hands with her apron, obviously a nervous gesture, and nodded slowly. "What questions could you possibly ask me that are so important?"

"They pertain to this house, actually," Neirin said. "Specifically, the former owner."

Something passed over her face, a shadow of some sort, but then it smoothed out, banking all her thoughts and feelings. "Master Silas, you mean?"

"Master Silas?" Neirin asked.

"Yes," the woman said quietly, letting go of her apron long enough to smooth back her hair. "I worked for him, you see. Me mum and I, and Da

'til he passed away when I was girl. We kept the house clean, made his food, all that. Strange man, Master Silas, for a certainty. The villagers would have as little to do with him as possible. The madness always ran strong in his family."

Neirin motioned for her to sit, then glanced at Barra, who was already heading toward the door in search of refreshment. Sitting down next to her, Neirin slowly coaxed more information. "So how did you come to be in possession of this lovely house?"

"Master Silas weren't altogether, if you know what I mean, but he was a right enough sort for the most part. He had no family left, you see, and the villagers avoided him. No friends as I ever saw, though he had the odd visitor now and again." Her gaze flitted briefly to Ceadda, a faintly puzzled look in her eyes, but after a moment she turned back to Neirin.

"He left us the house in his will, saying as how we were the only ones to care for it, he would trust it to us. So, we keep it up and let the rooms. Mama is too old now to manage it, but I do well enough on me own."

Neirin nodded. "Why did the villagers avoid him?"

"Cause he was mad, like I said," the woman said patiently. "Always with his books and his elixirs, rambling on about ghosts and monsters and witches. Terrible, that, and not a little frightening when he was really on a tear. Spooky, like." She shivered and tugged a bit at the old, faded shawl wrapped around her shoulders. "Mum dealt with him by herself in those moods; wouldn't let me go near him. The night he died, he was in one of those moods; she said he drank down one of his potions and that was that." Bitterness tightened her mouth. "Plenty came and saw him then; I think they wanted reassurance he was dead. We laid the body out proper, and saw he was buried. Then we found the house was ours, and we've kept it proper since."

Midnight frowned. "He killed himself?" That didn't sound like the Silas of whom Ceadda had spoke. Quite the contrary—a man such as that would have done his best to stay alive as long as possible. Hadn't Ceadda said Silas had died of his heart problems? He glanced at Ceadda, who looked troubled and concerned.

"Not on purpose," the woman said earnestly. "He was always working on those things. Said they would keep him alive forever, if he could just get it right." She frowned and smoothed her wrinkled apron, then said quietly, "He believed in that nonsense. He really did. When he was not obsessed with it all, he could be a good Master. He let slip once his heart wasn't right, and he wanted to fix it. Guess that's what the potions were for,

only one of them killed him instead of saving him. Mayhap it was a mercy in the end; he were never happy alive."

Ceadda pursed his lips. "He wanted to live forever?"

"Aye," the woman said. "Said he wanted to be as powerful as the long-lived races, whatever that meant, and couldn't if he were to die young. Mind you, he was closer to fifty than forty when he died."

Midnight shared a look with Ceadda as the woman continued to ramble, then caught the same look of comprehension in the faces of the others. Live forever, was it? He was beginning to see the whole of the tapestry, now. Draugr lived until something killed them. Whatever frailties he suffered while alive, were things of the past while dead. He did not get sick, he had no weak organs or body parts—and his power grew and grew. There was no telling what he would be able to do ten years from now. Even five. Combine the powers of a draugr with the powers of a sorcerer...

Except that he retained practically nothing of his life. Only snippets that came to him in dreams, little more than impressions—an inability to breathe, the gold of Devlin's hair...no draugr retained his life. The life he had now belonged to Devlin; it was not his own.

If Silas were trying to make himself into a draugr to live forever...was that what he intended? Had he killed himself to that purpose? Was it something he had thought of later? Except, if he was dead, then he could not be controlling the draugr—or doing anything else for that matter. Dead was dead. The only other nonliving creature to exist were ghosts, and those were confined to a specific space. They retained all memories, ability to think—it was a spirit, functioning without a body. So if he were a ghost, then he would have no body.

He could not be both. A ghost or a draugr; each had its peculiar strengths, both had a host of weaknesses. Dead was dead, unless a black witch cheated it to give a draugr as much of a real life as possible.

"Why you want to know so much about him, anyway?"

"Merely curious," Ceadda interjected. "I met him once, and was passing through this way again. I thought to visit him, but learned of his death."

She frowned at him, then nodded slowly. "Thought you looked a mite familiar."

"Yes," Ceadda murmured, and Midnight wondered if perhaps the woman, around forty or so herself now, might have been Ceadda's dinner twenty years ago. "I do not suppose you would be kind enough to point us to where he is buried? I should like to pay my respects."

"Oh, yes," the woman said, flushing as Ceadda continued to watch her. "Um, it's not far off, not at all," she said, and rattled off the precise

location in the graveyard of Ceadda had earlier spoken. She bit her lip, and lowered her head, then looked up again after a moment. "His grace—is he all right? I notice he has not been with your party. He has no complaints as to the rooms?"

Midnight smiled, stepping forward a bit to bow. "Nay, milady, he finds the rooms most excellent. He was called here on business, and it keeps him well occupied. He will return shortly, do not fear. In the mean time, we appreciate your hospitality."

She nodded. "If there's nothing else you need to be asking me...?"

"No, thank you for your time," Neirin replied. They stood or sat in silence until she had left them alone in the dim parlor.

Midnight tapped his cheek thoughtfully. "I wonder if we might not try to speak with the mother at some point. It seems she knew a bit more about Silas, if not the full truth. They make him sound as though he were not a bad sort."

"If you were a peasant, and your master left you his house, would you not be inclined to remember him in a positive light?" Ceadda asked idly. "We need to see that body, because I am not convinced it is where it should be. I do not yet know entirely what is going on, but I do not like the bits of the whole that I am beginning to put together. Let us go pay a visit to Master Silas' new home."

Nodding, Midnight led the way to the door, glancing briefly at the clock on the far side of the room to double check what he could feel anyway—that he had a few hours left before weakness overtook him. If only he could endure sunlight, then he would find Devlin faster.

Outside, it had resumed raining, falling a bit harder now than it had before. Midnight closed his eyes, focusing on the rain, feeling it almost the same as he could feel the mist. Almost. It was there, at the back of his mind. A few more years, he thought, and he might be able to control the rain to some degree.

Setting that aside for the time being, he pushed onward, walking back the way they had come, taking the necessary turns, walking up a steep street until at last he came to the graveyard. An iron wall wrapped all the way around it; the gate was closed and locked. Reaching out, Midnight grasped hold of the lock and tore it off, casting it to the ground before pulling the door open with a hideous squeal.

He did not wait for the others, but pressed quickly on, following the directions the woman had given them to wend his way through the enormous graveyard. Rain pattered down, cold and sharp. Snatches of moonlight broke through the clouds here and there, never for more than a

second or two at a time. Without it, everything was miserably dark, but he could see—all of them could, he supposed, save perhaps Neirin. If the lack of light gave Neirin any difficulty, however, he had never shown it.

Some of the stones were little more than piles of moss-covered rock; others were enormous statues or massive rectangles rising from the earth to proclaim the good deeds of the deceased buried below. Others were more modest, with little more than name and date, a simple farewell.

He heard things flutter and move, scramble to get out of the way of their unwelcome presence. Death brushed at his skin, made it crawl, made the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Too close, here. He was far too close to what he was—what he should be, instead of the walking, breathing, living thing Devlin had created.

Midnight put a hand to his chest, felt the beat of his heart, summoned up images of his heartbeat, forgetting for the moment that Devlin had told him to quit using the endearment.

Normally he avoided graveyards. His presence threatened to stir others from their slumber, drive them to seek out their loved ones and be assured all was still well.

The Walmsley crypt was where the woman had said it would, well made and even elegant, the smatterings of moonlight accenting it perfectly. Latin was carved across the top, but Midnight did not bother to read it. Striding to the door, he broke this lock as easily as he had broken the first, casting the broken casing and shackle to the ground.

Pulling the doors open, ignoring the teeth-grating creaking, he stepped inside. It smelled of must and mildew, dust and death. A hint of beeswax and incense lingered, fresher than the deeper, more unpleasant smells. Flowers, as well—roses, and now he saw a dried bouquet of them upon a small altar set against the far wall, beneath a pretty stained glass window portraying an angel.

It took only a moment to locate the proper coffin amongst those lining the wall, and another moment to move the coffin from its shelf to the floor.

By then the others had caught up to him, but they said nothing as they crowded into the crypt around him.

Midnight knelt and threw back the coffin lid, and stared down at the body within. It was well-dressed, or had been, once. Whoever had laid the body out had cared, that much was obvious. Impossible to tell at a glance, however, if it was Silas who had been laid out here. But with the body so well-tended, who else could it be?

One way to tell for certain. Midnight stripped off his glove and laid his hand over the face of the skull, then closed his eyes and concentrated.

The older the body, the harder it was to pull out the shreds of the spirit that dwelled within. Contrary to popular belief, the entire soul did not depart at once. Much of it leached away slowly, reluctant to leave its dwelling place. A ghost was one product of an immediate and complete departure.

Draugr functioned because of the bits that remained, and leached away slowly. Without that, the corpse could not, would not move. Midnight shared Devlin's soul; otherwise, he would be no better than the bag of bones in the box before him.

He withdrew his hand after a moment, and said flatly. "It's not Silas. This fellow was homeless, used to beg for food at the back stoop, spent his coin on gin.

"Magic could have made the corpse look like Silas long enough to fool everyone who required fooling," Ceadda said thoughtfully—almost sounding impressed. "He even fooled me, I suppose. I definitely saw his dead body, and I would have sworn it was him—he smelled right, he smelled like Silas. That is a hard thing to mimic. I wonder how he did it."

Midnight shrugged, and did not protest as Troyes moved forward to help him put all back to rights. When the coffin was back where it belonged, he pulled his glove back on and flexed his fingers to settle it perfectly into place. "So he is alive?"

"Perhaps," Ceadda said slowly, then shook his head and scowled in frustration. "I would have bet my own life he was dead; that it was his corpse I saw. I cannot imagine he would have lived this long. He would be around seventy or so—even a powerful sorcerer begins to lose his strength at that age, unless he finds some way to defeat it. None has managed that in a very long time. He was weak of heart, I cannot believe he would have lived this long."

"The woman believed him dead," Neirin said slowly. "She did not lie. So, either he is dead, or he managed to convince even the only people who cared about him that he did, in fact, die twenty years ago."

Barra stirred from where he stood next to Troyes, both of whom looked than pleased with life. No doubt their extremely sharp senses disliked the smells surrounding them. They did not bother Midnight, but death never bothered him. "She did not see him die, though. That was her mother. We should, perhaps, go and speak with her. It sounds as though she was closer to Silas, and dealt with his 'insanity'.

"I doubt the woman will let us at her mother," Neirin mused aloud. "So, we shall have to find her another way. No doubt she lives in the house; I cannot see why they would live anywhere. So, a backroom."

Ceadda smiled, his sharp teeth white in the moonlight slipping through the clouds. "I will see to it the woman stays out of our way. She

tasted fine at nineteen, and I bet she has only grown finer with age. Find the mother, I will rejoin you shortly."

So saying, he turned away and vanished into the graveyard, making his way swiftly back the way they had come.

Midnight looked around the crypt to make certain that all was well, then led the way out to go track down the old woman who would hopefully have the answers they were so desperately seeking.

IX Snow White

Day was drawing far too close, making him itch, making him angry. He did not want to go to sleep, not when they were so close to saving Devlin.

At least he was still alive, though Midnight felt sick to think of all that could be done to a person while still keeping him alive.

They returned to the house quickly, and were greeted only by silence as they stepped inside.

Barra's nose twitched, and Troyes gave one of his low, inquisitive growls. "Blood drinker is drinking," Troyes rumbled, and nodded toward the parlor where they had earlier sat with the woman. Then he turned away, and growled again before slinking toward the back of the house, vanishing through a doorway.

Neirin followed after him, hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword. Midnight went second, with Barra bringing up the rear.

Troyes led them to a small set of rooms at the very back of the house. They were simply but neatly appointed, all dusty rose with cream and pale green touches, good lace that normally he was sure would be beyond their means. A feminine room, rife with the scents of tea and flowers and other delicate things. A small white cat was curled up in a plush armchair, at a tea table where an old woman also sat.

She was as neat and tidy and simple as the room, gray hair pinned beneath a white cap, dressed in a blue gown patterned with little white flowers at the bodice. She was shockingly thin, the way all old people tended to get. Her movements were slow as she lifted her head to look at them, let go of the tea cup she had been tightly grasping—but her eyes were sharp and alert, a clear, piercing brown as she looked at them one by one. "You are nightwalkers."

Midnight should have been surprised she knew that, but somehow he wasn't. "Your daughter is not one," he replied.

"No," the old woman replied. "Ginny would not be able to handle such a world. I keep her firmly from it." Her voice was thin and raspy, but steady. "Do not drag her into it, nightwalkers."

"We will not harm your daughter," Neirin replied. "However, you will give us the answers we seek."

Midnight wondered dryly if making her daughter a vampire meal counted as harming her, but decided he did not want to ask. She was still alive, and Ceadda wasn't cruel—close enough.

Though, he also knew he would have harmed or killed whoever required it to get Devlin back.

"Answers to what?" the woman asked. "I've had nothing to do with nightwalkers for years."

Neirin moved closer to her—not quite close enough to loom, but close enough she was likely too aware of his presence. "You live in the house of a nightwalker, you worked for him until his death twenty years ago. You saw him die. Is he really dead?"

The old woman's eyes widened—then narrowed, as her face closed up. "Aye," she said. "He's dead. I stood witness while the deed was done. A Snow White potion, he called it. Dead as anything."

Midnight exchanged baffled looks with the others. He knew the tale, of course, but he had never heard of a Snow White *potion*. Meant to kill, he presumed, but surely there were finer points he was missing.

"You don't know it?" the woman asked, obviously unimpressed. "I thought you were nightwalkers."

"Are all normal people the same?" Neirin asked. "Can you honestly tell me that you would understand the ways of every person you encounter? What is this Snow White potion you speak of?"

"I can answer that," Ceadda said as he stepped into the room, lips wet and glistening from where they had obviously just been licked clean. "It's an alchemist's elixir, meant to kill immediately and painlessly. It sort of...stops, or freezes the body instantaneously. Leaves the corpse *snow white*. It is also a preservation spell, leaving the body unchanged for years—decades. Some say centuries, but the bodies thus far have always been destroyed before it can be proven. So it was Silas I saw twenty years ago. Dead, and carefully preserved."

Midnight frowned, troubled. "So he could become a draugr, you think? But he obviously did not rise—and if he is dead, there must be someone else casting the magic now. Who?"

Neirin returned his attention the woman, voice sharper than Midnight had ever heard it. "From whom do you now take orders, old woman? Who helps your former master in his endeavors to rise a draugr?"

The woman scowled at him "I serve only Master Silas, and you'll get no more from me, nightwalker. I owe you nothing."

"You will do what I say," Neirin said, voice deceptively soft. "Because of your master, a friend of ours is in great danger. If he dies because of your master, do not doubt we will make you suffer. A life for a life, and it will be your daughter's life we take."

"Do not touch her!" the old woman snarled. "Ginny's done nothing! Bloody monsters, all of you!" She choked, voice clogged now with tears. "Don't hurt my daughter, she's a good girl."

If Neirin was affected by the emotional display, he gave no sign of it. "Then you will help us. Tell us what your master planned, and how he is managed to cause harm though he is dead."

"He prepared for it," the woman said with bitter weariness. "I was little more than a girl when I came to his employ. My husband worked for him first, you see. A nightwalker, my husband. Was him what dragged me into this nightmare." Her hands, thin and spider-like, curled and uncurled in her lap. "His family were eaten, you see, by goblins. Never did a thing wrong, and they got eaten. Never wanted our daughter dragged into this nightmare, we've managed to keep her out of it."

She reached out to life her teacup, but set it down when her hand trembled too much to hold it steady.

Midnight grimaced, not liking to terrify an old woman—but he would, to get Devlin back.

"It took him years," she continued, staring at her hands. "He practiced and studied and increased his knowledge—he didn't want to die, you see. Not forever. He didn't want to die at all, at first, but then he figured out...he said there was a way to be more powerful in death than he would ever be in life, if he could just overcome the few weaknesses. So he did it, or tried." She sighed. "Then his heart problems got worse and worse, so he could scarcely get out of bed, though he did anyway. I think he truly was mad, toward the end there.

"He gave me my final orders, that night, told me what he intended. Then he drank that damned potion, and here we are—waiting."

"What was his plan?" Neirin asked quietly, but that steel of command still present.

The old woman shivered. "His body preserved, his spirit to continue the work, until he could unite them again into a form that would have all the power of the Greater Nightwalkers. Don't know what they are, exactly, but he hated them, wanted to be them. Said they kept humans subjugated, kept them weak and incapable of reaching the same level of power."

"His spirit to continue the work..." Ceadda echoed softly, mouth tightening with obvious dismay. "That cannot be. Ghosts....ghosts cannot work such spells. I have never heard of such a thing."

"Master Silas was always the smartest man I ever met," the old woman said smugly. "You cannot possibly compare, nightwalker. He'll outsmart every last one of you. He obviously already has."

Ceadda regarded her coolly. "I notice he was eager to preserve himself, but he did not save your husband. Nor does it appear he will save you from the same aging that so plagued him. How smart is a man who leaves his only faithful to wither and die while he prospers? Nor did he mind, when I visited him twenty years ago, that I fed upon your daughter." He bared his fangs, causing the old woman to cry out and recoil.

Barra stepped forward to stand between Ceadda, Neirin, and the old woman. "We just want our friend back, ma'am. That's all. Your master was a nightwalker, too. If you hate us, then you have to hate him. Let us retrieve our friend, and we'll leave well enough alone. If you stand against us, then we've no choice but to do all of you, what he's done to us. Understand?"

"That does explain the house," Midnight said thoughtfully. "If he knew he would need it again someday, it makes perfect sense to leave it to those who are loyal to him, and bid them keep it until his plans come fully to fruition. Not to mention that, as a draugr, he would be vulnerable during the day. He would need trustworthy protectors."

Though, one protector probably had difficulty standing, and the other was still a normal and at her age probably would not take well to an introduction to the nightwalker world. That meant Silas was running out of time; he must have been working on how to be something much like Midnight for a very long time.

He must be furious that Midnight was beneath his nose all the while, that the answer was there and he had always been ignorant of it. Midnight wondered if he knew that what he wanted was right in his house, and had been there the whole time. He didn't think Silas did know that; otherwise he would have managed to snatch Devlin much sooner, and likely with less flash.

Slipping a hand into his pocket, Midnight curled his fingers around the rune which he still guarded fiercely. Devlin's rune, and if Devlin realized it was missing, he was probably devastated. If the set was not complete, the power was broken. If he had found a way to use his runes to help him out of his bind, he would not be able to use them—that would upset him like nothing else.

Well, they were close to finding him—so very close.

The old woman was silent, staring at her hands, mouth pinched with anger.

"Where is Silas hiding?" Neirin asked.

When the old woman remained silent, Neirin repeated in a tone that brooked no argument, "Tell me where he is, now."

The old woman's shoulders sagged, and she said faintly, "Check the kitchen. That is all I will tell you." She fell silent, and they turned away, but as they reached the door, she spoke again, angry and wretched. "You have no right doing this! We did nothing to you! Master Silas was a good man—is a good man. So what if he wants to live forever? Better him than those nasties that *ate* my husband's family, than you despicable creatures that drink blood." Her eyes flashed as she glared at Ceadda, then moved to each of them in turn. "Vile, all of you. Master Silas was like none of you. He worked, and he harmed none but himself."

"Of course you would think that," Midnight said contemptuously. "You take care of him. Only a fool would mistreat those who help keep him safe and cozy in his tower. You were manipulated, and made to like him. He had you convinced he was golden, the one good nightwalker amongst thousands of evil. Yet he let that blood drinker have your daughter, when he had the power to prevent it. He did not keep your husband alive, he will not keep you alive, he will not keep your daughter alive. He convinced you he was good, because there is nothing better than a willing slave. I am sorry to be so harsh, for you should be respected and cared for, at your age—and no lady deserves to be so maligned. But your *good* master is harming someone dear to me, for the sake of his own life. He will kill a good man to restore his own life. He is a nightwalker, but he is not one of the good ones. I bid you goodnight."

He turned sharply and left the room, but before he could go in search of the kitchen, Barra joined him and swiftly led the way.

It was tidy, as kitchens went, or so Midnight supposed. He seldom bothered to go in any of the kitchens in Devlin's homes, and had seen no others that he could recall. Still, it was tidy, with everything neatly put away, and the things upon which the woman had been working for dinner still carefully arranged on a large table in the center of the room.

The floor was dark tile, obviously recently swept and scrubbed clean. He felt guilty for trekking across it with his muddy boots, but not guilty enough not to do it.

He could feel no magic, and surely they must feel it if Devlin and the strange, aggravating Silas were close by. Why would they be in the kitchen?

It was then he saw it, just as Barra spotted the same. They moved nearly as one to the massive table and shoved it roughly aside, heedless of the jars and crockery that took offense to the sudden movement and fell over the side. They shattered on the hard tile floor, flour and spices and honey combining in a sticky mess upon the recently-cleaned floor, adding sharp, not unpleasant spell to the air.

In the floor was a large, wooden trap door—but when Midnight attempted to touch it, he snarled in pain and snatched his hand back.

"Heavily spelled," Ceadda said, kneeling and muttering. Lights and colors shimmered for a moment, displaying all the intricate work that otherwise was not visible to any of their eyes. "Impressive," he murmured, shaking his head in reluctant admiration. "This must have taken him a very long time. He has the patience of one of the long-lived; that is hard for a human. Every step of this plan would have taken weeks or months or years. I wonder when he really began to work upon it. He spent more time preparing for his death than he did living."

"That is unfortunate," Neirin said. "How do we get past these wards, then?"

Midnight bit back his frustration, fisting his hand to still their angry trembling, hating how helpless and pathetic he felt. Devlin was *right there*, only a door away, and he could not touch him.

"I do not know," Ceadda said with a grimace. "I have never seen such intricate wards—and there must be wards against damn near everything here. As I said, this probably took him years, laying one piece down at a time, braiding two pieces together before laying in the third, and so on and so forth. This is the work of a genius or a madman."

"Wonderful," Neirin muttered. "If I ever hear someone accuse the clans of madness for rejecting nearly all magic, I shall be most annoyed and forced to act out in extreme manner. So how do we get through these wards?"

Ceadda shrugged, and raked a hand through his hair. "I shall have to consult my books, and see what I can do. Such magic is beyond my ability to easily break—it is human magic, and I've never had cause to study that on this level, and necromancy is quite different."

Barra sighed. "Well, we all need rest anyway, and Midnight will not be able to remain awake much longer. Tomorrow night is soon enough to make our first real attempt, even if the waiting makes me sick."

Midnight said nothing, merely glared angrily at the trap door, hating the sorcerer, hating himself, hating everyone and everything. If he had to tear the wards apart with his own hands, he would, and then he would tear the sorcerer into a thousand pieces."

"We have another problem," Ceadda interjected. "That old woman said he was a ghost, now. I have never heard of a ghost doing all that Silas has managed. Nor do I know any way to defeat a ghost. A ghost, typically, is a harmless spirit residing in the place where its body expired. They can do trivial things, and are the only race in existence which can go truly intangible without ill effect—but I have never known one to use true magic, or

summon draugr..." A thoughtful look passed across his face. "But, the dead call to the dead, do they not? Perhaps...I must consult my books. The women will sleep until I wake them, so have no fear either will cause us trouble. Rest, gather your strength, and tomorrow night we shall see what we can do, hmm?"

He stood and without further word, abruptly vanished.

Midnight sighed, and slowly made himself stand. "I hate that I must sleep. He's right here! Why can I not get to him?" He never had been inclined toward tears, but right then he was so very close to succumbing to them. When would he have his heartbeat back? When?

Barra and Neirin spoke to him, and he sensed the words were meant to be reassuring, but he heard none of them. He heard only his own doubts and fears, the terrible silence that spoke of his inability to feel the man right below his feet, and felt only a numbing cold as he allowed Barra to lead him to bed.

II. X Reckless

The pounding of the rain greeted him as he woke. The steady drizzle of yesterday had turned into a relentless downpour. Midnight slid out of bed, absently tugging on a robe, and pushed back the curtains. Outside, the world was a dark blur; it was impossible for him to see anything clearly in the deluge.

At least they would not have to worry about being attacked tonight—ordinary draugr would not be able to withstand such an onslaught.

Then he abruptly recalled what had transpired last night, and forgot all about the stupid rain. Devlin! He was finally going to save Devlin, and lord grant mercy to the fool who tried to stop him.

Moving quickly, somewhat surprised that Barra did not appear to fuss over him, Midnight found clothes and quickly dressed. Black, head to foot, for he had not time to spare on frippery and coloring and final touches. To the devil with all of it!

Hastily tying back his hair, scarcely pausing to comb it first, he pulled on his boots and hastened downstairs. In the kitchen, the others were already assembled. Barra and Neirin sat side by side near the fireplace, seeming perfectly at home sitting together on the tiled floor—amusingly enough, the food they ate was arranged on fancy-looking china. Troyes was curled up in front of them, in dragon form, looking all the word as though he were taking a nice nap. Midnight did not doubt he was wide awake and ready to lunge at the first indication of danger.

The rest of the kitchen had been turned into an impromptu library. Books and papers and all sorts of miscellany were scattered about. He saw notes and charts and spell circles carefully drawn out with various things jotted alongside.

In the middle of the mess, looking more at home than Midnight had thus far seen him, was Ceadda. He was bent over at least four books, with still more forming a half circle around him, a pencil clamped in his mouth even as he muttered to himself.

Troyes might be ready to attack at the first sign of threat, but Midnight doubted Ceadda would even notice.

His mouth twitched with reluctant amusement, but when he recalled the reason for the mess, his brief levity died. Weighing his options, he finally moved to join the others by the fire, loathe to break Ceadda's concentration. "How is it going?"

"Not well," Neirin said with a sigh. "So far we have only learned that there fifty layers to that ward—basically, fifty wards braided together into one. My impression is that to get through them, they must first be unwoven, then broken one by one. This is far easier to say than to do, alas. Ceadda is trying, but what we need—"

"Is Devlin," Midnight said with a sigh of his own. "We need someone of his caliber, and we do not have the time to find someone like that."

Barra waved a hand in the air, gesturing vaguely. "Even that may not be good enough, Midnight. Silas knew what he was doing—it took him years to make this. It could very well take years to undo it."

"We don't have years," Midnight said despairingly. "Surely there must be a simpler way?"

"No," Ceadda said, looking up. "I said last night—this is the patience only a genius or a madman can muster. This spell can be broken from the inside, and the inside alone, unless we break it down piece by piece. I am close to understanding how the unraveling might be done, but that is all. I am sorry Midnight, but I do not at present see any other way." He motioned to the door. "You also forget that beneath that door lurks a ghost who can use magic like the living. I *did* figure out that has been done before, but not for an extremely long time—and that ghost was sealed away, because to do date there is no known way to destroy a ghost. Only the ghost itself can will itself to no longer exist."

"How," Midnight demanded. "How the hell does a ghost still use the magic he possessed while alive? That should not be possible. I want to know how he does it!" He was shouting, and didn't care, and he dared anyone to tell him to cease—even Neirin merely shook his head and resumed eating.

"Ghosts have powers," Ceadda said calmly, unruffled by Midnight's temper. "As I mentioned before, they are the only creature in all of creation which can go truly intangible. It is a trick that magic users the world over have sought to master, and always failed. But they can do other things—the most powerful, and often violent, of these are frequently called poltergeists. Few nightwalkers become ghosts, especially those of us who are long-lived. Humans make up the great majority of ghosts. Practically none of those were ever magic users. They're almost all ordinary humans dragged into the nightwalker world, though some knew nothing about nightwalkers before becoming ghosts.

"Though I cannot say for certain, I would surmise that most magic users do not become ghosts simply from habit—any part of them which lingers could be used, and magicians like to use, not be used. It is not a field I have ever studies; I never felt any compulsion to dwell around those few

spirits I have encountered. But hasty research provided the conclusions I have explained to you—perhaps magic lingers with the ghosts of mages. Such a topic bears further study. However, our friend Silas seemed to realize this, or at least hypothesize. I wonder if perhaps he conducted experiments to prove it, though I cannot imagine what such experiments would have entailed. I do not think I want to know.

"Whatever the case—it would seem it is quite possible for the ghost of a mage to retain his powers. Perhaps because magic is not the same as physical strength, or even mental, exactly. Magic takes fortitude of spirit, in addition to everything else. It takes heart, and belief. It takes will. All these are similarly perquisites in existing as a ghost after death."

Midnight frowned. "If magicians can use their powers after death, don't you think more of them would have made full use of that? It seems an immortality all its own, really. That would make plenty of humans happy."

"I disagree," Neirin said. "I do not look forward to dying, someday, but I'm young. Plenty of clan elders seemed more than happy to lay down the burden of life, at the end. It wears down that spirit which we have been discussing. Other races, perhaps, have the fortitude and will and desire to live for centuries, but humans do not. The decades we do live seem plenty enough for us to handle. I think that to retain all their magic as a ghost, a mage would have to want to, yes? And most, by the time they die, want no such thing. So I would think, anyway. Those that die suddenly or unexpectedly, probably have other issues on their mind? I am no expert, of course. Quite the opposite."

"But quite accurate," Ceadda said. "There are humans granted immortality—those who are taken as consorts to the demon lords, for example. They are a rare breed, however."

Midnight shrugged irritably. "So, Silas was stubborn enough for a hundred people. I'll figure out how to deal with him once we get Devlin back—which we can't do until we break this damned seal, and I will tolerate waiting years for it to happen."

He wouldn't. If he had to tear himself apart destroying the magic with his own hands, he would do it. He would stay here, in this bloody kitchen, in this wretched house, waiting *years* while Devlin slowly rotted to death in the basement.

There had to be another way. There just had to be.

Unable to bear the stifling confines of the kitchen, and all that the amassed books represented, Midnight strode to the back door and threw it open, then threw himself out into the rain. He could hear the others calling after him, but ignored them. He didn't want any of them right now—he

wanted Devlin, he wanted his heartbeat, he wanted everything to be right and it seemed it never would be again.

He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes as the rain poured down, soaking him to the skin in a matter of seconds. His hair ribbon, drenched with water, could not withstand the addition weight and slipped from hair. Freed, his hair plastered to his cheeks, the back of his neck.

In such a mess, he appeared perfectly ordinary. Mad, perhaps, but a normal madness. It had been raining, he suddenly recalled, when they had received the note from Devlin telling them of this adventure. He'd been so hurt when Devlin had ordered him to remain home, though he had tried to laugh it off.

Still, all the while he had remained obediently at the townhouse, he had felt Devlin's misery. As much as Devlin tried to deny it, he did love Midnight deeply. Maybe not romantically, maybe not passionately, but Midnight knew Devlin needed him.

He'd felt the way Devlin missed him, and had defied his order to remain simply to ease Devlin's pain. Now, here he was, so close and so far—and if he had not come, then Silas would never have known about him, and Devlin likely would have figure it all out and returned home by now.

It was all his fault, and he should have realized that sooner—or maybe he had simply been hiding from it, because it was bad enough that his heartbeat was lost to him, but to know it was because of the choices he had made?

Midnight wished he had stayed as Devlin had told him; Devlin had done it for Midnight's own safety, because Devlin always put others first, even if he grumbled and complained about it.

Feeling wretched, Midnight walked on, wandering aimlessly through the village, wishing—willing—that Silas would send someone or something after him. He wished he knew how to contact the bloody man himself, make some sort of deal. Hell, if his choice was never seeing Devlin again, or giving up the secrets of his own making...

He would surrender the secrets in a heartbeat, if it meant he would have his own heartbeat back. So what if the bastard became a draugr? Midnight could kill him easily—he was experienced, and as a new made draugr, Silas would be no match. Did he not realize that the powers he apparently retained as a ghost, would vanish once he became a draugr? Because that was the defining difference between the two versions of undead—the draugr retained the body, the will to exist, some small shred of its humanity. The shape, not the soul. The ghost retained no body, but all the memories and wants and regrets—it retained everything, but nothing.

Neither could really function with the living, and most often had an adverse effect upon it.

If he'd had a choice, he likely would have chosen to be a ghost. Thankfully, he'd had none, and Devlin had taken pity on the sad child he must have been. If he were a true draugr, he would have counted it a mercy to be burned to ash.

Really, it made perfect sense. Let the damned bastard become a draugr. Midnight would kill him in a moment.

Of course, Ceadda and Devlin would never agree to such a plan. They would tell him to cease his nonsense at once

He paused beneath an overhang, and worried at his bottom lip, reluctantly conceding that perhaps they had a point. Silas had already proven himself to be entirely too clever. It was not unlikely that he had worked out how to be a draugr with all his memories and abilities intact—but if he had figured that out, surely he would have figured out the rest?

But, no, that wasn't true. Devlin had been forced to turn to a necromancer. Midnight was a blend of two completely different breeds of magic. Given his solitary nature, there was no way Silas would have had access to such knowledge—his one attempt to speak with Ceadda had not gained him much.

Perhaps that was one of the things Silas had been attempting to master—retaining memories as a draugr. It made perfect sense the man would want to be one; they were perfect for what Silas wanted, if he could keep his memories and powers intact.

Maybe, just maybe, he thought Midnight had retained his? There was no reason to think otherwise, if he knew Midnight to be as close to alive as it was possible for a draugr to be.

It was a massive gamble to take, but standing there in the rain, Midnight could see no other recourse. As reckless as it was, it was their best chance. Besides, even if he retained all his memories and powers, Silas would *still* be a draugr. That meant he would no longer a ghost, and that was the key. A ghost could not be defeated, but another draugr could—and against all of them, especially Devlin once they retrieved him, even Silas would stand no chance. He would be dust before he could adjust to his new form.

The bastard would turn to dust, to nothing.

Nothing.

A frightening concept, that. A fear Midnight preferred to avoid as much as possible. When Devlin died, he would turn to ash. Nothing. He no longer had a soul of his own—so would he cease to exist altogether when Devlin died? Winsted had been fond of calling him an abomination, a thing

of hell. Midnight had always privately hoped so, because if he went to hell, he could find a way out and make his way back to Devlin. If he turned to nothing...

It was only then, as he was nearly back to the house, that he realized the one major flaw in his plan.

Even if they told Silas how to do it, even if Devlin and Ceadda agreed to turn him into an aware and fully functional draugr...it required binding him to someone. As a draugr, Silas did not retain enough of his own soul to exist. He would need to be bonded heart, breath, and soul to a living person.

Now that he thought about it, Midnight wondered if some sort of bond between the two was necessary. Of course he and Devlin had not really known each other—but Devlin was his treasure, his obsession, and Devlin had cared enough for the pathetic child he had been to give him a semblance of life. That was a bond, if a strange one.

It would have to be one of the women. He would do it, but it made Midnight feel low to resort to it. He supposed it was pointless to deny being a monster any longer—and he wondered, as a monster, what gave him the right to judge and condemn another monster.

Then he recalled said monster had stolen Devlin, had his heartbeat locked away in a basement, separated from him by years and years of labor—and stopped caring about anything but tearing the bastard's head from his shoulders.

Decision made, he stalked back to the house—but avoided the back door to go through the front. He checked the parlor, as well as the other front rooms, but found them empty. Abandoning the front of the house, he made his way to the backrooms and quickly found there that which he sought—rather, whom he sought.

Ignoring the faint niggling sense of guilt, he gently lifted their landlady—Ginny, the old woman had called her—from her bed, blankets and all. Turning, he carefully carried from the room, back down the hall and through to the kitchen.

Everyone turned to look at him, and their questions and demands started all at once, creating a brief cacophony before Troyes' sharp growl drew it all to a halt.

"What in the bloody hell?" Barra demanded. "Midnight, have you gone mad? What in the devil are you doing?"

Midnight stood firm, even against that fierce, intimidating look of Neirin's which made him want to do as he was told. He would not be cowed, not when Devlin was at stake. Moving to the table shoved off to one side, he gently laid Ginny down upon it, then turned to face the glares.

"We are going to give the bastard what he wants. At this point, it seems to me the only chance we have."

Before they could argue with him, Midnight began to stamp hard upon the floor, as hard as he could—then he started shouting. "Listen to me you bloody bastard! Silas! We know who you are! If you want to be a draugr like me, drop the bloody wards and let us in! We're the only ones who can do it, and if you don't let us in, we'll ensure it never becomes possible! Do it now, or I'll kill myself here and now, and take my secrets with me! Now!"

Ignoring the looks the others were giving him, he dug one of his own nails into his throat, feeling hot, sticky blood begin to trickle. He could, and would, do it. If he had no choice but to live without Devlin, then he would not live. It was as simple as that.

But he thought this might work.

For a second and an eternity, there was only silence.

Then, just as Neirin drew a breath, no doubt to begin yelling at him—the impenetrable ward vanished.

II. XI Draugr

Troyes threw back the trap door, letting it fall to the floor with a house-shaking bang.

The stairs then revealed seemed somehow anticlimactic. They were not dark stone steps leading down to a pit of darkness, which would have seemed melodramatic but apropos. No, they were simple, well-made wooden stairs intended to make the trip down into the gloom of the basement as painless as possible. He could also just spy the places on the wall where lanterns could be hung to light the way.

Nearby, Barra was lighting the lanterns in question.

Midnight did not feel like waiting. Turning, he carefully picked up Ginny again. Making certain she was well settled, for he did not in fact *want* to cause her any sort of harm, he began his descent down the stairs.

Ignoring the others, he continued on his way—but just as he reached the sixth stair, there came a flush of magic, and he heard the others cry in dismay. He turned back, and saw with chagrin that Silas had somehow raised the wards again.

"Damn it, Midnight!" Barra snarled, a bit of wolfish whine in it. Beside him, Troyes growled and rumbled in dismay.

"I'm sorry," Midnight said, then turned and continued on. There was nothing else he could do, now.

Still, it had been stupid to be that hasty and careless. It should have occurred to him that Silas would try something like that. He had exactly what he wanted now—why bother with the others? He could not possibly know that he needed Ceadda to cast the spell.

Readjusting his grip on Ginny, fervently hoping this would actually work and he had not just consigned every last one of them to death, Midnight kept walking.

The floor at the bottom was stone, dusty but otherwise remarkably clean. At present, he was in what seemed to be an entryway of sorts, empty save for a dust-covered table on which rested a forgotten lantern.

Two doors, made of some dark wood, were on either side of the table. As Midnight stood there, one creaked open, the rippling flash of magic telling him some spell had just been deactivated.

"Heartbeat," Midnight whispered in the dark, then made his way to the door, toeing it all the way open before striding through it.

The first thing he saw was the spell circle, and the figure trapped within it. "Devlin!" he cried, nearly dropping Ginny in the hot rush of joy that came at finally seeing Devlin.

"So you are the draugr I have sought these past days—my whole life, really," said a cold, whispery voice.

Midnight jerked, and finally saw more than the spell cage and the man trapped within it. The whole room looked like a greater variation of the kitchen floor upstairs—books and papers, charts and guides, candles casting flickering light upon all of it.

None of the light seemed to reach the man standing amidst the clutter. A silvery, uncertain figure who in life had probably been a somewhat handsome man. Now that he was paying attention, Midnight could also see the body stretched out on a cot a few paces behind the ghost.

"You are Silas," he said.

"Yes," Silas replied. "So why are you smart enough to give me the secrets I desire, when your master seemed certain that you would never do such a thing?"

"My only desire is to retrieve my master," Midnight said, and even with all the fear and uncertainty, he could not help but make note to call Devlin 'my master' for a very long time, to drive him crazy. "If I must trade the secret of my making to reclaim him, then so be it."

Silas moved closer to him, and Midnight wanted to shiver, because he could sense Silas—but not in any way he normally sensed creatures. Ghostly fingers brushed his skin, and Midnight resisted an urge to lash out only because he knew it would be wasted. Ghosts could not be touched or held—only felt.

It was a cold feeling, yet hot at the same time. Much like sensing Silas, it was nothing Midnight had ever felt before.

He did not like it, not one bit.

Silas frowned suddenly. "Why did you bring Ginny down here? She has nothing to do with any of this."

"I could hardly bring down her mother; she's too old. Ginny will work just fine for making you a draugr like me."

"What do you mean?" Silas demanded.

"I mean, you have no idea what actually goes into my making, but you are about to find out. However, we cannot do it without Devlin—he knows the spells, not me. I had not part in the casting, obviously. I am only the product."

Silas pursed his lips in annoyance, and looked toward Devlin—who had not stirred, and Midnight would be hurt, except that it did not surprise

him Silas had put Devlin to sleep. "I do not trust you or him, and I most certainly will not let him out of the cage."

"I'm certain he could do it from within the cage," Midnight said lightly. "All he has to do is guide Ginny here through the casting. Hell, maybe you can figure out how to do it while she still sleeps. You're obviously clever."

"I am far more than merely *clever*," Silas said contemptuously. "Put her down, damn it. You've no right to touch her. Why should she be necessary to my spell?"

Midnight spoke before good sense could tell him not. "If you're so much more than clever, should you not be able to figure it out?"

Silas narrowed his eyes. "Watch it, boy," he said coolly. "So close to me and my power, you would stand no chance against my siren songs. You are special, but not that special."

As this was true, Midnight wisely kept his mouth shut this time. He looked around the room, then finally spied a chair—why would a ghost need a chair?—and gently set Ginny in it, making certain the blankets were pulled up snug and secure.

Then he strode toward Devlin, unable to help himself. At present, Devlin faced away from him, and Midnight moved around the circle until he could look at Devlin's face.

He looked tired and strained. Devlin must be worried sick, trapped in this living nightmare. Of course he'd get no rest, even fast asleep. Midnight reached unthinkingly to touch, and swore as the magic burned his fingers. Putting them in his mouth, he simply continued to stare.

Even strained, Devlin was beautiful. Being able to look at him once again soothed every ache, even the ones he had not been wholly aware of until that point. He wanted Devlin to wake up, and smile at him, and then promptly grumble about needing tea and where was it, already? He wanted his soft-hearted grouch back, and right now Devlin looked far too much like a Snow White himself.

"So we need him to cast this spell? I doubt he will cooperate," Silas said, reminding Midnight that they were not alone. "He will no doubt require persuasion."

Midnight's head snapped up at those words. "If you hurt me, you can be certain he will kill himself before cooperating. If he dies, I go with him. If you kill me, he will see no reason to keep himself alive. All we want is to go home. We give you what you want, Silas, you give us the same. Fair is fair."

Silas pursed his lips, but slowly nodded. "So how long, draugr, have you been this way?"

"Just past fifteen years," Midnight said.

"Fascinating," Silas said. "You are perfectly preserved." He glanced briefly toward his own body. "A spell, no doubt. Suffer you any drawbacks?"

"I can't handle sunlight," Midnight replied. "If I expend too much energy, I require human blood to regain my strength. Otherwise, I am hale and hearty."

Silas nodded, then gestured impatiently. "Your memories? Draugr lose all knowledge of their former lives, typically, save the barest shreds of the treasure they seek to guard. How did his grace overcome that?"

Midnight wanted to laugh—Silas really did not know! He prided himself on being *far more than clever* but he truly did not know that turning into a draugr would cost him everything!

Well, he certainly would not be the one to break it to the bastard. Let his arrogance come back to haunt him.

"I do not know how Devlin and Ceadda overcame it," he said casually, reluctantly standing and moving toward Silas once more. "I remember meeting Devlin, fifteen years ago. I was enchanted. Then someone killed me. I remember nothing until I woke as you see me now—aware, with all intact, but neither alive nor dead. Devlin saved me, but I remember nothing between the dying and the waking."

Silas nodded again, then his eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, Ceadda? I know that name—he is, or was, the Alucard's lover. I met him once, decades ago."

"Devlin did not create the spell that gives me life alone; half of my making is witchcraft, but the other half is necromancy."

Anger flashed across Silas's face, but also begrudging admiration. "Brilliant. I should have thought of that; likely would have, shortly. Human magic is hopelessly limited. As a draugr, I will have far more options."

Midnight said nothing, save, "Ceadda is upstairs. If you want this to work, you will have to let him through the barrier."

Silas' mouth tightened, but he gave a terse nod, and snapped his fingers.

A couple of minutes later, Ceadda came through the door. He scowled at Midnight, and stalked toward him, grabbing his shoulders hard and shaking him. "What are you thinking, you bloody fool—"

Midnight gave a shaky laugh. "You didn't tell me you and Seth were lovers, Ceadda. Shame on you."

Ceadda froze, then roughly let him go. "We are not," he said coldly. "Once, yes. No longer. I refuse to be with a man who allows himself to die slowly because of *honor*. Not that it is any of your business."

"I cannot believe I let you go so easily, vampire," Silas said in his whispery voice. "Right beneath my nose the whole time, and I let you get away after a spot of tea and conversation—and I even let you have a taste of my little maid, as well. Tsk, tsk."

Stiffening, Ceadda slowly turned to face Silas. "Indeed," he said coolly. "All of this nonsense proves that it was fortunate I had nothing to give you. I shudder to think what you might have done with real power in your hands."

"I have all the power I need," Silas replied, smirking, "and will have all that I desire once you give it to me. Which you shall, or I can make the lot of you suffer for a very long time."

Midnight willed Ceadda to trust him, to see he had something else afoot. "Ceadda, I promised him we would make him draugr. I just want Devlin back, and he has promised to let all of us go, if we will just make him into a draugr like me. That's not so much, right? I promised."

Ceadda glared at him, then turned away with a rough oath. "Fine," he said. "Let us get on with it, then." He motioned to Devlin. "We can hardly do it without him."

Silas nodded, and once more snapped his fingers, barking a sharp word as he did it.

Midnight realized he was holding his breath, as it came out in a sharp gasp of relief as Devlin groaned.

Forgetting everyone and everything, he moved to the spell cage and knelt. "Devlin."

Devlin froze, then whipped around—and stared in wide-eyed disbelief. "Midnight—" His voice cracked, obviously from neglect since his capture, and he roughly cleared his throat. "Midnight. What are you doing here?"

"I'm glad you are all right," Midnight said softly, biting back the 'heartbeat' he wanted so badly to say. He was still deathly afraid Devlin had meant that part, though, about never using the endearment again. He'd been so angry, and they had never really resolved—

Midnight tried to smile, and thought it horribly cruel he could not reach out and touch. He settled for curling his fingers around the rune in his pocket, and pulling it out. Then he let his hand rest at the edge of the spell circle.

Devlin's moved to the same space, and they would be touching, save for the magic that kept them more apart than even an ocean.

"Midnight—what is going?"

"I told him that if he would set you free," Midnight said, looking into Devlin's eyes, knowing that Devlin would see what Ceadda may or may

not—that he was up to something. "Then we would turn him into a draugr like me. All of this is not worth the price we have paid. We will change him, and he will no cause to hurt us, and all will be well again, hmm?"

"I suppose we don't really have a choice," Devlin said, sighing.

Midnight nodded, and rose—but not before letting the rune he held slip free. Unlike him, it had no problem slipping past the barrier of magic, not when its brothers were on the other side, with Devlin. Runes, Devlin had told him more than once, had a will all their own. They may or may not follow all the rules men thought they knew about magic.

Then he forced himself to move away, returning to the chair where Ginny still sat, fast asleep under power of the spell Ceadda had cast over her. Pulling the blankets away, he unbuttoned the myriad buttons of her sleeping gown down to her waist, pulling the fabric away to bare the space above her chest where the anchoring marks must go.

"You'll have to do most of it," Devlin said to Ceadda. "I cannot do much from here, and I do not think our new friend will let me out 'til the deed is done."

"Precisely," Silas said, then moved close to Ginny, frowning as he watched Ceadda work. "Explain all of this to me."

Ceadda nodded. "Seeing as you're dead, your body needs a living anchor—someone who can share life with you, as it were."

"So I am to be chained to my maid?" Silas demanded in outrage.

"We didn't know of any friends upon whom we could intrude," Ceadda said cuttingly, and Silas for once had nothing to say. "I'm certain if you take issue with being chained, you can develop some other way to survive. Our time was limited, and it was the best we could contrive. Devlin and Midnight never saw a need to find an alternate method."

Silas looked between Devlin and Midnight, who had resumed starring at each other. "I can see where it would be useful for the master to have complete control of his minion."

Devlin choked, eyes snapping to Silas, bristling with outrage. "How—"

"My master is not so strict," Midnight interjected, mostly to see how red Devlin would get. When Devlin was around, so was his mischief, no matter how dire the situation. He was already in trouble, he knew it, so he may as well get in all the mischief he could.

Or perhaps he was simply giddy with the knowledge that Devlin was *there* and able to glare at him again. He'd missed those blue eyes, the way they flashed when Devlin was annoyed or exasperated or trying hard not to be amused.

Midnight finished, "My master simply sees it as less troublesome than trying to find another way. Why change something which does not need fixing?"

"Do you always speak for your master?"

"He is too modest by far; if I did not speak for him, no praise would ever be spoken." Devlin, modest. Ha. Devlin either pretended not to possess a trait, or lorded his title and wealth all over the place. Midnight rather thought he deserved a prize for calling Devlin modest with a straight face.

Silas did not look terribly convinced—but he did look too bored to bother pursuing the matter. "What comes next?"

"Midnight," Devlin said. "Draw the proper runes for me on Silas' body." He glared at Silas. "It is deucedly difficult to do my portion of this when I cannot move, you know. If this goes wrong, it shall be no fault of mine."

"If it goes wrong, I will kill those who wait for you upstairs, and then the villagers, until you get it right."

He rather thought Silas was underestimating their friends, but Midnight did not voice the thoughts. Instead, he picked up the necessary ink and drew upon Silas' body the marks that decorated his own body—what parts he knew, anyway. Some of them, he did not.

When they were done, he stepped away, setting aside the special ink used to mark them—once the spell was cast, they would be a permanent part of his skin. Then Ceadda came forward, and drew his own portions, flawlessly weaving together witchcraft and necromancy.

Midnight stared in wonder, utterly confounded that he had never realized what all the marks upon his skin really were—he had always taken them for runes he did not recognize, and had never cared enough to puzzle them out. It was necromancy so skillfully blended, no one was likely to recognize them as that unless told to look for it.

Ceadda really was a master of his art; so too Devlin.

When he was finished, Ceadda stepped away. "All that's left is for you to become a draugr, and then for the spell to be cast."

Silas frowned.

Midnight spoke. "The spell is to give life to a draugr. Right now, you're a ghost. If we were to cast the spell upon the corpse, it would not work, for the corpse is just that. It's an empty thing, not a draugr risen to some thin imitation of life."

With a grimace, Silas sourly conceded, "I had not thought how to make myself a draugr."

"I can do that," Midnight said quietly. "I can compel it—but you will cease to be a ghost. You cannot be both."

Silas scowled. "You have set me up for some trap."

"No," Devlin said from where he still stood trapped. "You can check the spell work yourself, as you undoubtedly already have. It is sound—but it is to give a stronger semblance of life to something which already has it. We cannot give life to a lifeless corpse, but we can give it to a draugr."

For several long, agonizing minutes, Silas stood in a ringing silence. At last, when Midnight was about to scream only to break the tension, he gave a terse nod. "So be it—but if you do *anything*."

The threat was an empty one, but Midnight did not call him on it. Silas was ultimately nothing more than a greedy fool who had finally gotten in over his head.

Moving the corpse once more, Midnight laid a hand over its forehead and closed his eyes. Then he simply let his will to live, he need to be assured all was well—his fear all was not well, his desire to walk and check, his craving for life, for blood, for flesh, pour into the corpse of Silas.

And, little by little, he felt the corpse change, and begin to wake.

II. XII Reunited

Silas made a beautiful draugr. As the ghost faded, and the corpse took on the telltale markings—the blue hair, blue nails, the white-skin that made snow look like cream—Silas really did begin to look more beautiful in death than he had in life. Strange, but Midnight had seen stranger.

He also realized, as Silas sat up, eyes vague but wild as he searched feverishly for flesh or his treasure, that he had made a mistake somewhere else in his calculations—he did not need to wait for the completion of the spell to end this.

It was as easy as he had pictured it, to reach up and tear the beautiful head from the pale shoulders. Dark, thick blood poured out, but it did not spray—it never did with the walking dead.

Trembling with relief that his plan had worked, and without a single hitch, Midnight dropped the head he realized he still held, then sank to the floor. He fisted his hands in his lap to still their trembling.

"You goddamn bloody fool!" Devlin bellowed, all but shaking the foundation of the house. Midnight swore he heard a few of the glass bottles clatter and clink. "What in the fucking hell were you thinking, doing something that brash and reckless. I'm going to kill you myself, Midnight—"

Midnight remembered too late that with Silas dead, his spells broke, and found himself roughly jerked to his feet and spun around. Devlin's eyes blazed like lightning. "You are a fucking fool, Midnight. If you ever do something that stupid again, I'll—"

Ceadda coughed, breaking into the tirade. "I think I'll take the woman back, and tell the others you are all right. This is the last time I get involved in your nonsense, Winterbourne, I vow it."

Devlin nodded, but did not spare him more than that before he returned the whole of his attention to Midnight. "I should wring your neck right now," he said, shaking Midnight hard. "What if something had gone wrong? What if he had been pretending his ignorance? What were you thinking, Midnight? This was the height of stupidity."

"Thinking?" Midnight demanded, tearing away, shaking with anger now. "I was thinking that you were *gone*. I was thinking that you were furious with me, and then suddenly not there anymore. I was thinking I could not sense you, or find you, no matter how hard I tried." He shoved Devlin hard, then wrapped his arms around himself. "I knew only that you were alive, Devlin—that is all. There was no clue to finding you, no matter how hard we looked. We had to go to the Dracula for help. Then we were

attacked by hundreds of draugr—and I tore them apart, and I enjoyed it, and I was *thinking* that I would do anything, kill anyone, to have you back because without your presence I'm nothing but a monster. *That's* what I was thinking."

"Midnight..."

He said nothing more, merely stared miserably at the ground, thinking this was not how their stupid reunion was supposed to go at all—there was supposed to have been Devlin apologizing, and Devlin kissing him, and Devlin finally admitting he was in love.

Instead, true to Devlin, he was yelling.

Then gloved fingers cupped Midnight's chin and forced his head up, and there was anything but anger in his eyes as he looked at Midnight. "If you are a monster, dark angel, then you are a monster carefully and lovingly made, and I would have you no other way."

"Oh," Midnight said, unable to manage anything. "Devlin—"

Hurt flickered across Devlin's face, as he interrupted to say, "Is that all you will call me now, Midnight? Surely—" But he bit the words off, likely too stubborn even now to manage one simple *I'm sorry*.

Midnight considered making him suffer through it, but in the end decided teasing him would suffice. "Oh? Would you prefer *my master*?"

Devlin scowled and released his chin—but only to sink his hand into Midnight's hair and tilt his head back just so. "Stop being a brat, Midnight, I'm in no mood."

His heart was pounding in his chest, and he knew that Devlin's beat the very same. "I'm happy to see that incarceration has not dampened your sunny disposition, heartbeat."

"Perish the thought," Devlin muttered, then closed the space between them and kissed Midnight as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Midnight held on for dear life, dizzy with relief, with joy—with pure shock that Devlin was actually kissing him, for no good reason at all, and without any coaxing whatsoever. It was much like the first time Devlin had kissed him—hard, rough, guided more by anxiety, perhaps, than anything else.

It was a good enough start, so far as Midnight was concerned. He dug his fingers deeper into the fabric of Devlin's coat, smelling him, feeling his body heat, and now he had *taste* to go along with everything else. The taste of Devlin this way was so different from the flavor of his blood. A familiar bitterness was there, but there was something there that took the edge from it. Midnight did not think he would be able to live without it, now he had finally had it.

"Heartbeat," he said softly when they finally broke apart. "You—I—you're all right?" He felt stupid, because that wasn't what he had wanted to say at all.

Devlin chuckled softly, and brushed a gloved thumb over Midnight's bottom lip. "I am fine, Midnight. A bath, a good meal, and a bit of rest will set me straight. You are the one I am worried about. What is all this about you being a monster?"

Midnight turned his head away, though he immediately missed the new and strangely intimate caress. He lay his head against Devlin's chest, and closed his eyes, and for the moment was content simply to be there—he could feel their hearts beating, could smell and feel Devlin, and after too many hours wondering if they would live...

Arms slid around him, holding him tight, pressing him closer still, and Midnight rubbed his cheek against the soft, warm velvet of Devlin's jacket. It smelled of dust and chalk and stale magic, but also like Devlin.

"It's all right, now, Midnight," Devlin said softly, and Midnight felt lips brush the top of his head. "Thank you for saving me."

"Like I had a bloody choice," Midnight replied with an unsteady laugh, still not moving from the warmth and safety of Devlin's arms. "Next time, don't go running off to pick fights with—" He abruptly stopped, and tensed.

"What's wrong?" Devlin asked, relaxing his hold slowly as Midnight pulled away enough to look up at him.

Midnight replied, "Winsted is dead. Silas turned him into a draugr. I made certain he stayed dead."

"I see," Devlin said quietly, then reached out and stroked Midnight's cheek. "You have had a rough time of it, haven't you?"

In reply, Midnight merely returned to embracing Devlin tightly. He wanted more kisses, but for now, it was enough to be held.

They broke apart only when there came a sharp, pounding noise from above.

Midnight managed a laugh. "I think Barra is demanding our presence. He's been worried about you, too."

Devlin nodded, and slowly his arms fell away. "Come on, then. I want that food and bath, and then we are going to stay in bed for a very long time."

Swallowing against an urge to ask what exactly that entailed, afraid that Devlin might suddenly change his mind against all the things that kiss had promised, Midnight turned to lead the way out of the basement.

They were silent until they reached the kitchen.

"Your grace!" Barra exclaimed. "It's good to see you well—well enough, anyway. Are you all right?"

"Quite," Devlin replied. "Thank you for saving me." He flicked his gaze to Neirin and Troyes, then to Ceadda. "All of you, especially those who had no real investment in my continued existence."

Neirin said nothing, merely nodded, but beside him Troyes rumbled in contentment.

"I am glad that all is well," Ceadda said. "I hope this is the last time we must worry about the matter of Midnight."

"It will be," Devlin replied. "My thanks to you, and to the Alucard."

Ceadda waved a hand in the air. "You owe me one, Winterbourne. Until such time as I can call that favor in, I bid you good evening." With that, Ceadda was gone.

Midnight frowned. "Heartbeat...how did you know we spoke with the Alucard?"

"What?" Devlin asked with a frown of his own. "He is more or less in charge these days, my dear. The Dracula is not, shall we say, fit for company? He has gone mad, in a uniquely vampire style. The Alucard tends him loyally, but it is a battle that was lost long ago."

"I see," Midnight said, not seeing at all.

Devlin waved the discussion aside. "I should like food and a bath, if someone would please. I am damnably tired of feeling as though I have been locked in a basement."

Barra rolled his eyes, but squeezed Neirin's hand before darting off to see to the demands.

Neirin drew himself up, and Midnight nearly rolled *his* eyes as the two immediately set to some sort of staring contest. Honestly, Devlin was wasting no time in reasserting himself as the most obnoxious person in the room.

Finally, Neirin broke their locked gazes with an unimpressed sniff. "I believe we will take care of the basement. Is there anything you want preserved?"

"His books and notes," Devlin said. "I've no doubt most of those will be sought by many a magic user. Better to control who gets the ones I choose not to keep."

Neirin nodded.

For a moment, it almost seemed as though Devlin was going to say 'thank you'—but of course he immediately recovered himself and asked only, "I assume you are sufficiently healed? No further beatings pending?"

"I am well," Neirin replied, then turned away and approached the trap door, Troyes on his heels.

Midnight did roll his eyes then. "The two of you are the most absurd thing I have ever seen. You are obviously friends, if you would just concede the point—friends enough I think I should be jealous, did I not know better."

Devlin stepped close, removing the space between them, stroking the line of his cheek with one finger, moving oh so slowly down until he was able to cup Midnight's chin again. "But you do know better, don't you, Midnight?" His voice held a...something that Midnight had never heard from him before. It was husky, but also...it made Midnight shiver. "You always knew better."

"Well, no one else can put up with you," Midnight said, trying for levity, but not really managing it. He licked his lips, feeling nervous—and realized suddenly what was so different. He was the focus of definite *interest*. Something he had hoped for at least a thousand times a day.

Now that he finally was the object of such attention, it was more than a little overwhelming.

Devlin smirked, but for once did not voice whatever smug thought had occurred to him. Instead, he merely lowered his head and licked Midnight's lips himself.

Midnight made a startled noise, eyes going wide, and he made another noise as teeth nipped at his bottom lip. Before he could remember how to speak, however, the teasing had turned into another kiss. He sighed softly into it, opening easily as Devlin demanded full access, holding fast to the soft fabric of Devlin's coat.

"I should see to it you are locked in basements more often," he managed when they finally broke apart.

Devlin narrowed his eyes. "Do not even think about it. I hated every last bloody moment of being stuck in there." He suddenly paused, then said, "Thank you, by the way, for finding my rune. I was less than pleased to find it had been left behind in the church."

In Devlin speak, 'less than pleased' meant horribly crushed. The runes, if lost, could never be replaced, and Devlin loved his runes dearly.

"Of course," Midnight said mildly.

Devlin nodded, and shifted to kiss him again—but then Barra suddenly popped back into the room, and Devlin froze.

Barra looked between them, then smirked. "Bath is ready, your grace. If you'll both remove yourselves to your rooms, I'll see about that food."

"Thank you, wolf-elf," Midnight said before Devlin could reply. Then he took Devlin's hand, half-afraid Devlin would pull away—but Devlin held

fast, and went easily when Midnight led the way from the kitchen and up the stairs to their rooms.

Devlin sighed as he saw the bath, and immediately began to strip.

Though this was hardly the first time he had seen Devlin naked, for some reason it now seemed far from harmless. Heaving a mental sigh of annoyance with himself, Midnight moved to a chair and sat down, toying with the buttons and lace of his clothes until he heard Devlin slide into the water.

"So tell me all that I have missed," Devlin said, as he sank into the water with a groan of relief.

Still not quite looking at him, save for the occasional glance from beneath his eyelashes, Midnight told him all that had transpired since Devlin had been kidnapped.

Barra appeared toward the end of it all, and added a comment here and there as he set down a tray of food, then moved to assist Devlin. With brisk movements, he lathered up Devlin's face and set to shaving him.

When he was finished, and Devlin washed completely clean, Midnight found it more difficult than usual to stop staring. In the firelight, skin wet, hair clinging, Devlin looked completely himself again—and completely irresistible. The thought was all the sweeter for the knowledge that it seemed Devlin had given up on any sort of resistance entirely.

Midnight tore his eyes away, and pointedly ignored Barra's amusement.

"We will return to the city tomorrow," Devlin said, shrugging into a dark blue night robe. "First thing. I never want to see this bloody village again."

"What are we going to do about the women?" Midnight asked. "The old woman will be crushed to know..."

Devlin grimaced. "There is no help for it, Midnight. What's done is done. He might have been kind to them, but it was no honest kindness. The old woman will live, or not. I could see her memories erased, but I do not see that doing more good than harm. Hopefully it will be enough they are alive, and well, and free to do as they please with this house. If not..." He shrugged. "It sounds cold, but there is only so much we can do. If I have acquired one more enemy, then so be it."

He sat down at the table and promptly began to eat—faster and less elegantly than Midnight had ever seen. "A pity you are not hungry," he teased. "It seems a shame to waste such excellent food."

"You be quiet," Devlin said tolerantly.

Barra suddenly snickered. "Speaking of excellent food, the Alucard shared a fine *vintage* with Midnight when we went to see him. He extended an invitation for Midnight to join him for a drink any time he should like."

Devlin's face turned into a thundercloud. "You are forbidden to go anywhere near that impertinent little upstart. Vampires, honestly. I cannot stand them."

Midnight rolled his eyes, then shot Barra a glare. "Why don't you stop trying to get me in trouble and go play with your knight and dragon, wolf-elf?"

Barra snickered, but gladly obeyed, leaving them alone.

Devlin pushed his plate away. "Now, I want to enjoy a sound sleep that is not magic-induced and taken on a cold floor." He stood up, and strode to Midnight, holding out a hand. "Come on."

"You could say please," Midnight said, shaking his head in amusement—but took the hand Devlin offered, because Devlin had never offered a hand before.

He'd slept with Devlin a thousand times or more. As a child, he had not been able to bear being separated from Devlin for very long. Not until he was about ten had he finally been capable of sleeping through the whole day without nightmares or restlessness.

This was different, and he went through the motions of removing all but his breeches and shirt only by sheer habit, before sliding beneath the blankets to lie next to Devlin—who promptly dragged him close, and buried his face in Midnight's hair.

It was too early, yet, for Midnight to feel like sleeping, but he was more than content to lie with Devlin until daylight forced his hand. "I'm glad you're back," he whispered.

No reply came, save for the soft, steady breaths that told him Devlin was already fast asleep.

Smiling faintly, Midnight curled closer and simply enjoyed being reunited with his heartbeat.

III. XIII Passion

"You never have an easy time of it, do you?" Lady Violet said with a laugh. "La, what an adventure. You should have called me for help. You reside in our territory, and fall under our protection—it would have been within your rights."

"The Dracula requested that you stay out of it," Devlin replied, taking a sip of his brandy. "We managed quite well without demonic interference, thank you very much."

Lady Violet laughed again, and took a sip of the dark red wine she favored when she called upon Devlin. "Indeed. The Alucard sent a note, by the way, extending his personal thanks for all that you and your companions did. He is most grateful, and promises he will gladly repay the debt, should you ever call it in. " Her mouth curved in a playful smirk. "He also asked me to reiterate his invitation to 'Master Midnight' to come and enjoy a drink should he ever feel inclined." She winked at Midnight. "He was greatly impressed by you."

Devlin scowled, and set his glass down on the table with a hard clack. "Midnight will be doing no such thing, and you can tell that forward, uncouth Alucard that I said to bugger off."

Midnight caught Lady Violet's gaze, and rolled his eyes. Honestly, he wished it were tomorrow night already. Barra and the others had already gone ahead to open up the country estate. He and Devlin had lingered at the townhouse only to report their adventures to the demon lord—rather, his consort, who had arrived uninvited in their library half an hour ago. As was her usual style.

And, well...he hoped they might manage to do *certain things* before daylight stole him away from Devlin, but he was not certain they would do anything much at all. Beyond a great many heated kisses, Devlin had done nothing.

Midnight attempted to return his attention to his book, but finally gave up when he realized he had been reading the same page for the past two hours. He closed it with a snap and slouched further down on the settee, feeling perfectly lazy and vaguely discontent.

Ignoring Devlin and Violet, not particularly interested in conversation, he stared into the fire on his left sight, thoughts wandering. The estate was about three days journey away, five to account for the fact he must stop and find somewhere safe to sleep. They had chanced the

carriage before, but it had once broken a wheel and nearly tumbled him right out into the sunlight.

So, now they stopped. Three nights, two days. Just less than a week and they would be in the country. He hoped they had no cause to return for a very long time.

The conversation had turned to a discussion of the vampires, and this he listened to with interest. "What is wrong with Seth and his family?" he asked. "Seth seemed so troubled, while we were there. Ceadda, as well."

Lady Violet pursed her lips. "It not necessarily my place to discuss the private affairs of others, but that situation is why you were put on the case to start. The Dracula Ashworth...has gone mad, to put it simply. He no longer craves the blood of humans—he craves the blood of his own. The Alucard keeps his father...under control, shall we say? In addition to running the territory, that is. I fear it is only a matter of time before control is taken from him, but that is a problem for another day." She finished her wine and set the crystal glass down on the table beside her chair. "With that, gentlemen, I believe my business is concluded. When you return to the city, you shall dine with us."

They both rose, and Devlin bowed over her hand, dusting a kiss over the knuckles. "My lady, it would be an honor. My regards to Lord Tamor."

"Of course. Farewell."

With that, she was gone.

Midnight had never been so excited and terrified in his life. They were alone—completely, utterly, no chance of interruption alone. He sat back down on the settee, slouching down on it because it really was comfortable, even if it had only been in the last year or so he'd been able to overcome certain memories enough to lounge upon it.

Of course, he really should not be recalling those particular memories now.

He scowled, and turned to stare into the fire again.

Devlin's weight settled on the edge of the settee, but Midnight did not turn, though playing at nonchalance was perhaps the most difficult thing he had ever done.

Then fingers pushed inside his jacket to stroke across his abdomen. Midnight startled, and jerked his head around to stare. "Heartbeat—"

"Why did you lie to me?" Devlin asked.

Midnight frowned.

"About your experience," Devlin clarified.

"Oh, that," Midnight said, grimacing. "Because you were being a bloody idiot. You seemed so firmly against—" He waved a hand in the air. "I thought, if I lied, you would calm down, and that by the time you figure out

it *was* a lie you would no longer care. It sort of did not work out the way I had hoped. You turned into a bloody contradiction, though I suppose I should be used to that from you, heartbeat."

"Mm," Devlin said noncommittally, making it impossible to tell if he was agreeing, disagreeing, or simply acknowledging that Midnight had said something.

Midnight wanted to smack him. Honestly, Devlin was the most aggravating person he had ever met, and likely would ever meet. "What about you?" he countered. "You cannot be mad about both things. You have refused me for as long as I can remember—I find it hard to believe that being trapped in a basement would have changed your mind. You were furious with me—you said to stop—" He cut himself off and glowered at the settee. "You did not want me inexperienced or knowledgeable. Why do you kiss me now, heartbeat?"

Silence fell, and reigned for a very long time. All that broke it was the occasional snap and pop from the fire, the sounds of their own breathing, the rustle of fabric as Midnight slumped further down upon the settee, irritably shoving his loose hair from his face.

Why had he bothered to ask? This was Devlin, who never said anything if he could get away with not saying it.

Just as he had given up, however, Devlin spoke. "Draugr obsess," Devlin said quietly.

Midnight frowned—then sat up sharply and shoved Devlin off the settee.

"What in the bloody hell!" Devlin snarled, sitting up and gripping the edge of the settee.

Shifting to his knees, Midnight leaned forward, over the edge of the settee, nearly putting them nose to nose. "You are a bastard, that's what. Of course I obsess, I can't help it. You are the reason I turned into a draugr! I cannot help but obsess, just as you cannot help being obnoxious and stubborn and just plain dense! You think I don't love you, because I obsess over you? To bloody hell with you then!"

Furious, he threw himself off the settee and stalked to the door, escaping to the hallways and bolting for the stairs.

Halfway up them, however, he was roughly grabbed and shoved into the wall. Devlin loomed over him, pinning him in place more by the power of his stare than his physical strength, which Midnight could easily overcome.

"What am I supposed to think, then, Midnight?"

Midnight wanted to stay angry, and he mostly still was, but he knew Devlin as well as himself—perhaps better. Stupid, honorable, soft-hearted

Devlin, who would of course distance himself if he thought that Midnight's affection was only a symptom of his draugr obsession.

"If you were thinking," he said sharply, "this would not be an issue. If you were thinking, you would realize I am not the only one obsessed with you. Or, I was not. I am now."

Devlin's brow furrowed in confusion.

"Winsted," Midnight said with exaggerated patience. "Winsted was just as obsessed with you as I. The only difference was the reason for the obsession. He obsessed because he hated you." Midnight paused. "I obsess because I love you. Idiot that you are, you always got it backwards. I am not in love with you because I'm obsessed with you—I'm obsessed because I love you. Though, honestly, I should probably reconsider—"

He was cut off by a hard kiss, Devlin's warm hands cupping and cradling his head, the gentle touch at complete odds with the rough embrace—but Midnight succumbed to all of it eagerly and happily, reaching up to hold fast to Devlin's shoulders, then sliding them around his neck as the kiss only grew deeper, hungrier.

They were panting when they finally broke apart, and he was coming to love the way those eyes looked after such kisses—and he wondered how they would look after they finally did so much more.

"Heartbeat..."

Devlin made a noise that might have almost been a growl, if he had not known very well Devlin would never make such unseemly noises.

Still, he did like the way Devlin seemed fond of his lips, biting and nibbling and sucking until his lips positively throbbed from the welcome abuse.

"Are we going to spend the whole night arguing?" Midnight asked softly.

Devlin made an indistinct noise, then pushed away and hauled Midnight with him the rest of the way up the stairs. "Whatever we do the rest of the night, it will not be on these stairs. I did not survive that bloody sorcerer to be done in by my own house."

Midnight laughed, but distractedly, his mind focused solely on the fact that all his dreams were about to become reality. He was excited and nervous and thrilled and terrified—except, there was no real reason to be anything but ecstatic, because this was Devlin, who was finally seeing reason.

At the top of the stairs, Devlin paused. Midnight feared for a moment that Devlin would send him to his own room—but then Devlin's hand tightened around his own, and they made their way to Devlin's chambers.

The master chambers were marked by an impressive set of heavy double doors, made of dark wood and carved with the Winterbourne snowflakes. Devlin pushed opened one of these doors, and led him inside. He had been in Devlin's chambers any number of times—joining him in the sitting room to read, or play cards or chess. Occasionally, when he was much younger, he'd shared Devlin's bed on those days when the weather was wretched or he simply needed to be surrounded by the comforting presence of his heartbeat while he slept.

The rooms were warm and masculine, with leather, linen, and silk, and precious little ornamentation. They smelled like Devlin, mingling with the leather and brandy and the crackling fireplace. Even here, in the sitting room, books prevailed. Devlin did not keep his most valuable books downstairs, but here in his private sanctuary. They lined two of the four walls, leaving the rest of the space for a couch and chairs, and a small writing desk.

Midnight started to speak, but he was drawn into another kiss before he quite worked out what he wanted to say—and oh this kiss put all the others to shame. The others had been hot, and felt—but this one burned straight through him, not least of all for the slow thoroughness of it.

He had not even realized they were moving until the backs of his legs struck something, and he tumbled back upon the bed with a startled oomph.

And, oh, Devlin had never looked at him that way before—Midnight had always been the one to push, the one to tease, the one to make his feelings plain. Devlin had always resisted, had always kept whatever he felt hidden, minus the occasional flash of something in his eyes.

There was no resistance now, and it was far more than a flash. Midnight could not stop staring. "Heartbeat—"

"If you do not quit looking at me like that, I will not even manage to remove our clothes," Devlin said, fingers moving easily to remove his neck cloth and toss it aside, sending jewels flying who knew where. Then he stripped off his jacket and cast it aside with the same carelessness, before stepping close to the bed.

He captured Midnight's legs at the knees, slowly smoothing his hands up, touch hot even through the fabric of Midnight's breeches. Up and up his hands climbed, thumbs moving along the inside of his thighs, teasing along growing heat until he reached the barriers of his jacket and shirt—and all the while those blue eyes smoldered.

Midnight tried to speak again, but gave it up for a lost art when nothing came out, and settled simply for enjoying that for which he had waited so long. He went easily when Devlin pulled him into a sitting

position to strip off his clothing, unable to resist tasting a gleam of sweat on Devlin's throat—bold, so very bold, but he was finally allowed, right?

If the noise Devlin made then was any indication, he was definitely allowed. Fingers sank into his hair, tugging him back just enough Devlin could turn and take a kiss. Midnight clung, and it was so strange to feel nothing more than thin lawn between them now. If he had thought Devlin hot to the touch before...

Then cool air washed over him, making him shiver—but the fingers that immediately followed drew out shivers and a soft moan. "Heartbeat..." Midnight managed to say, feeling drugged as he stared into the blue eyes that were so very very close.

Devlin gave a moan of his own, then pushed Midnight back upon the bed, climbing up after him. Midnight felt the slightest bit of anxiety, but then the kissing and the touching were back, and a moment later Devlin cast his own shirt away—and wasn't that the prettiest of sights. His heartbeat was many things, but idle and soft were not among them.

Midnight ran a hand along Devlin's chest in wonder, not entirely convinced this was actually happening, that he was allowed. "I really should lock you in basements more often, heartbeat."

"If you try it, you will regret it," Devlin retorted, then pulled Midnight's hand away and bent to put his mouth to Midnight's chest, fastening around one nipple.

Midnight gasped, and jerked, and clung to Devlin for balance even as the torment continued across his chest then slowly up to his throat, where Devlin bit sharply before soothing the mark with his tongue. "This is why I was angry," Devlin murmured. "I might have thought it unfair to take advantage, but I did not like the idea of someone else doing such things to you—of seeing you this way."

"Well, next time don't take forever to make a bloody decision," Midnight replied. "You—" the word collapsed into a groan as Devlin's hand wrapped around him and that was *completely* different from his own hand. Midnight shivered and shook, not at all soothed by the fact Devlin chose that moment to nibble at his ear and it was all so *much* and nothing at all like he had imagined so many times in his own empty room—

Devlin continued to touch and stroke, and bite and kiss and tease, and Midnight came with a startled cry in Devlin's hand, and if he could not breathe for a moment—well, it was the first time such a circumstance did not leave him terrified.

"Mm," Devlin murmured, blue eyes still burning hot and bright. "A very fine start." He took hold of Midnight's breeches, and pulled them off

entirely, cleaning his own hand with them before casting them aside and rejoining Midnight upon the bed.

Midnight's eyes were drawn to Devlin's cock—hard and wet, and to think he was the reason it was so. Embarrassment washed over him, but it stood no chance against years of wanting and waiting. He reached out to hesitantly touch.

Devlin grunted, and closed his eyes—then slowly removed Midnight's hand. "Don't do that. I have plans, and you are disrupting them."

The tone was so hopelessly Devlin and bossy, Midnight could only roll his eyes and obey. He lay back upon the bed, shoving his dratted hair from his face, and looked up at Devlin. "So what are your plans?"

"The better question, my dear," Devlin said, moving atop him, pressing so much of their skin together that Midnight half thought he might catch on fire, "is where am I going to begin?"

Midnight shivered, and met the kiss Devlin gave him, giving back full measure, eager to see where the plans began—and hoping they would not be ending for quite some time.

II. XIV Dance

"What's that you have there?" Midnight asked, looking up from his book as Devlin returned to the library.

Devlin smirked. "I believe it's called a letter."

Midnight cast him a withering look. "Your wit fails to impress me. Give me a real answer."

"Nothing about me fails to impress you," Devlin said at his haughtiest, striding back to the massive work table at one end of the library. While his townhouse library was respectable, at least two of it would fit quite comfortably in the country library—and that was not accounting for the second level.

The lower level was divided into four informal sections—the workspace dominated by a massive desk, a corner overtaken by chairs and settees and other ways of lounging comfortably while one read, another section meant solely for the cataloguing and maintenance of the books, and the last section was what Midnight thought of as Devlin's research corner.

At present, he was immersed in his perpetual study of runes. Those who said he was good at them simply because he was reckless and used to trusting to his temper were only half right. "It's a letter from Lord Tamor. He sent someone to see how Ginny and her mother are fairing, as I requested."

"Oh?" Midnight asked with genuine interest. They were the only part of the entire affair about which he had felt awful. Whatever his motives, Silas had been better to them than most masters.

"They are gone," Devlin continued. "He said the house was sold, and they took the money to relocate. I am certain that granted them enough funds to live happily for as long as they liked. Tamor says his man reports that neighbors said they seemed happy about moving, that both were in 'excellent spirits'. He would have pursued inquiries, but the ladies gave no indication of where they were going."

Midnight nodded. "At least they seemed happy. Maybe it was just relief. I cannot imagine they would want to stay..." He shrugged, not really certain what else to say. He hoped they really were happy. Setting his book aside, he left the comfort of his chair and wandered over to Devlin's corner of the room, pawing over the various books stacked in precarious piles. "So what are you researching this time?"

"I already told you," Devlin said as he set the letter aside and picked up the notes he had been penning before he went to investigate the day's post.

"No," Midnight corrected. "You started to, but then we got distracted."

Devlin snorted, but glanced up through his lashes, smiling in amusement. "Indeed. Go away before I get distracted a third time."

"Yes, heartbeat," Midnight replied, not bothering to point out that he'd only been responsible for the second—Devlin had no one but himself to blame for the first and third. Leaving Devlin alone for the moment, he wandered to the bank of windows that lined most of the southern wall.

Bracing himself on the ledge, he stared out in amusement at the spectacle in the southern lawn. This portion of the lawn was simply field—and currently covered in a wealth of snow. Given the time of year, it would not melt again until spring finally forced the matter.

Or until it was all otherwise obliterated by the dragon and wolf wreaking havoc back and forth across it. With the moon full and shining down on all that snow, it was as close to daylight as it needed to be for Troyes and Barra to run and play until they finally dropped from exhaustion. "Your gardeners are going to have fits when they see what has become of their yard while it was buried in snow."

"They are paid enough to deal with a few minor inconveniences," Devlin replied absently, clearly immersed in his research once more.

Midnight laughed. "What are you going to tell them, that bears ran amuck through it?"

"I don't think we have bears around here," Devlin said, voice so matter of fact and unaffected that Midnight doubted he was properly listening to a single thing being said. "If they fuss, they can find employment elsewhere."

"And then you'll whine when the new lot ruin your mother's roses," Midnight murmured, too low for Devlin to catch—not that Devlin was listening, but it paid to be cautious.

"Don't think I didn't hear that."

Midnight winced, but then turned nonchalantly away from the window and walked slowly back to his corner of the library, calling, "Hear what?"

Devlin merely shot him a look, then pointedly went back to the book he had pulled from somewhere amongst his haphazard stacks.

"You still have not told me what it is you're studying this time," Midnight said after a few minutes.

"How to make purposefully aggravating draugr be silent," Devlin retorted, sighing in exasperation that was trying hard not to be amusement.

Midnight smirked. "Even I know those runes—better than, what do you have there, thirty books?"

Devlin set his latest book down with a snap. "I have half a mind to beat you, I vow it. If the book you are reading does not suit, go destroy my estate with the rest of the wildlife."

"I do not think I could keep up with that pair," Midnight murmured.

"Two?" Devlin asked, quirking a brow.

Midnight pointed up. "Neirin is likely enjoying the spectacle from somewhere extremely warm."

Devlin rolled his eyes, and muttered something uncomplimentary.

"So you still—"

"Oh, for goodness sake!" Devlin exclaimed, dropping his book down upon the table, and abandoning the entire project to stalk to Midnight's corner of the library. "Curiosity killed the cat, Midnight."

"Do I look as though I am in cat form right now?" Midnight asked, imitating Devlin at his snottiest.

Devlin gripped the arms of Midnight's chair and bent until they were nose to nose. "I really am going to be forced to beat you, if I want to conduct my research in peace."

"A smart man would have done his work while the cat was asleep," Midnight replied, unable to resist nibbling at Devlin's jaw with it so close and inviting.

Devlin turned and caught his mouth, kissing him in slow, thorough fashion that started a slow, steady burn. "I am trying, minx, to see if there is a way to keep my cat awake during the day."

Midnight froze in the process of trying to coax another kiss.

"What?"

A smug smile curved Devlin's lips. He kissed Midnight hard, then rose to his full height and strode back to his work table. "I am saying that while we can do nothing about the fact your body loathes sunlight—perhaps we can do something about the need to sleep through it. I have studied it before, here and there, but you never seemed particularly to care—until recently."

"Well, it would be nice not to sleep while the rest of the world is awake," Midnight said slowly. He did not, in fact, care about the rest of the world—he just hated that his heartbeat had a lover whom he only got to see at night. It hadn't bothered him before, well not much, but it did bother him more now.

"I cannot make promises," Devlin said. "I think at best, I will be able only to extend your time a little bit at either end—meaning, you'll rise sooner, and fall asleep later."

Midnight nodded.

"It may not work at all," Devlin continued. "That is why I was trying not to tell you."

"Then next time be more clever about keeping it from me, hmm?"

Devlin rolled his eyes and bent back over his books.

Midnight retrieved his own, flipping to where he had left off, and fell back into reading for a little while. It was pleasant, there in the library, the only sound the crackling fire and Devlin working, occasionally muttering to himself—occasionally swearing.

The sound of the door opening drew his attention, and he closed his book again at the sound of claws, followed by a knock on the library door. A moment later, Barra stuck his head through it. "Safe to come in here?"

"Yes, but not for lack of trying," Midnight called.

Devlin rolled his eyes, and Barra sniggered, carefully brushing off snow before he stepped further inside. "The snow is nice, you two layabouts should come have a bit of fun."

"I have managed not to have a 'bit of fun' since my father finally conceded I was too old to be made to do it," Devlin drawled. "If I am going to gallivant in the snow like a wild animal, I will make certain that I am well paid for the trouble."

Midnight shared a look with Barra. "So what are you planning to fix his Majesty for dinner?"

Barra snorted. "Lamb, though it sounds like he could stand a bit of humble pie, eh?"

"Jealousy ill suits you," Devlin said loftily, closing one book with a snap and digging through his pile for another.

"I think, Midnight, that you finally getting your way has made him even worse."

Midnight bowed his head low in mock shame. "I do apologize, I never intended *that* to happen, I promise you."

"That's all right, I suppose I'd be smug and insufferable if I were him." Barra winked, then closed the door—no doubt to go fetch tea.

Devlin snorted as silence fell again. "The impertinence around this place is deplorable. The whole lot of you needs a sound beating."

Midnight laughed. "I think Neirin might take issue with you beating his wolf-elf."

"Not if I beat Neirin first," Devlin muttered, and dropped his latest book with a sigh. He shoved away from the table and strode across the room, dropping down on a long, dark blue chaise. Almost immediately, he sat up again, to beat a couple of pillows into lying just so—then dropped back down and stretched out as languorous and lazy as a cat.

Well, how was he supposed to resist that? Midnight rather suspected he was not.

Shoving back his hair, which he had given up keeping tied back after Devlin stole his ribbon for the fourth time, Midnight moved to the settee and draped himself over Devlin. "Hullo, heartbeat. Books wear you out?"

"Indeed," Devlin said, smiling briefly before taking Midnight's mouth.

"You'd better not get too distracted," Midnight managed, even as Devlin's hands began to prove that clothing was no impediment. "Barra will be mad if he goes to the trouble to make tea and we do not appreciate it."

Devlin made a derisive noise, then went to work with teeth and tongue on Midnight's throat. "Barra is no doubt working hard in my kitchen, but it is not on tea."

Midnight laughed, though it quickly turned into a needy moan.

The world tilted, spun—and then he was the one on the settee, and Devlin was pressing him into it. Devlin bit to nibble at his ear. "Lord Tamor also sent an invitation to one of his fetes. He insists I should stop hiding you away, and show you off a bit. I suspect between him and that stupid vampire, word of you is well and truly getting out."

Midnight went to work on Devlin's neck cloth, casting it to the floor when it finally came unknotted. "Seth is not stupid; jealousy ill suits you. A ball, really? Are we going?"

"If you want," Devlin said. "You are hardly a secret anymore, so there is little point in keeping you one. Lord Tamor's balls are usually small, private and extremely exclusive things. No one present would give you trouble. They would not dare. It is not for two months, so there is plenty of time to decide whether or not you want to go gossip and dance with a bunch of arrogant, overbearing devils."

"Well, it would be nice to see Seth again," Midnight said thoughtfully, just to see Devlin scowl. Then he laughed, and drew Devlin down for a kiss. "Now, now, heartbeat. You know the only arrogant, overbearing devil I want to dance with you is you."

Devlin bit his lip, and replied, "Naturally."

Then the talking ceased, and further sounds were drowned out as the clock in the foyer began to chime the midnight hour.

Fin