

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

...Angry red blades clawed under Mariotte's skull and she shook her head to force them away. Her knife weighed heavy in her clenching fist. "Wait. A moment." Cedric paused in the step he took toward her. "I need to be sure I understand everything."

"Of course."

"You want me to live with you. Like a relation. Only I would be your mistress. And the other gentlemen's."

"Yes. None need know that aspect of our relationship. Best for your prospects that way."

"And who else?"

"Do we three not suffice for you, madam?" Bland mockery offset his ascending brow. His voice dropped an octave, fondled her body through her hearing. "I assure you we've ample talent and experience to sate you."

"And the three of you... How..."

Cedric's chuckle mellowed with promise, deepening as Mariotte's cheeks burned hotter. "We may enjoy you together, singly, whatever combination we choose. You'll not be disappointed nor damaged in any way."

Bargain with the devil, indeed...

ALSO BY MIA CHERISH (WITH JACQUELINE QUAID)

The Garden House

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

BY

MIA CHERISH

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

http://www.AmberQuill.com

THREE DEVILS IN BATH AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

"The Little Dog Laughed to See Such Craft ... "

Without Ms. Catherine Snodgrass's sound editorial assistance, Three Devils in Bath would be a shorter book released much earlier in the year. It would not be a better book. A frank editor who won't accept less than an author's best is a nice problem to have.

Lee Smith, instructor of Louisiana Colonial History, contributed immeasurably to this book's historical accuracy via lectures, assigned and recommended reading, and guidance to primary historical sources to authenticate my work.

Trace Edward Zaber...I'm CRAZY about your cover art. As in "certifiable queen high priestess of hysteria" crazy. A perfect fit in mood and tone for Three Devils in Bath.

My feline friends, Sweet Candyman and Mei-Mei, supervise my writing from beginning to end with inhuman patience. They also remind me when it's time to sleep and don't take "No" for an answer.

Ludwig van Beethoven composed Piano Sonata No. 23 in the early nineteenth century. Present-day music lovers know this powerful, emotional composition as "Appassionata."

T. D. McKinney provided creative contribution to the novel's erotica in its rough stage.

MeriBeth McCombs's feedback and encouragement through Three Devils' metamorphoses kept me active and working. Thank you, always, for your time and your positive words.

Dad, what can I say? You bought the first books I ever owned, and read them to me. You recognized crayons didn't fascinate me nearly as much as notebooks and pens. You bought my first typewriter and never groused about my clacking "Midnight crazies." I love you more and I miss you more. Everyday.

PROLOGUE

"There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans..."—Letter from Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States, to Robert Livingston, special minister appointed to negotiate the purchase of New Orleans from Napoleon Bonaparte, First Consul of France April 18, 1802

* * *

"You've heard, I s'pose, how New Orleans is famed for wealth and beauty. There's girls of every hue, it seems, from snowy white to sooty..."—"The Hunters of Kentucky" war ballad penned by Samuel Woodward in 1824, honoring the 1815 U.S. victory against Great Britain at the Battle of New Orleans THREE DEVILS IN BATH

CHAPTER 1

18 April, 1818, Bath, England

"I'd no idea girls caught your eye whilst they still wore clothes."

"Part of the inducement, *mon ami*." The enchanting Frenchman's accent melted to a purr, turquoise eyes a-glitter. "Pure temptation in human packaging, Seti. We've nothing like her at home."

"Troyes? We can't see her face." Cedric considered the pianist captivating Troyes's fancy. "I allow her playing surpasses typical young ladies' drawing room exhibitions. That's expected here."

The family of Adon daemons operating the fashionable parlorhouse indulged its species' vanity for beauty and extravagance in every regard. Rowan House's architecture, furnishings, and décor pleased guests' eyes, seducing their limbs in sensuous comfort. The kitchens and the wine cellar provided gourmet repasts irresistible to the most persnickety palates.

Men and women peddled company and sexual favors in the front parlors, no less striking and unique than the house's other luxuries. Comely servants attended patrons; not one ill-favored face or form blighted the lot. Cedric guessed the Rowans employed benign cosmetic magic to beautify their staff. Frivolous motive or no, the resultant consistency added to the place's charm.

Superlative musical accompaniment might as well complement the rest of it.

"You're not seeing her, Set." Troyes's gorgeous exasperation—beauty undiminished, dark knitted brow and elegant nostrils expanded into a telltale snort—beguiled Cedric's mouth to curve.

He sought new compliments to appease his companion. Sumptuous ringlets swarmed free of the woman's psyche knot, framed her temples, her delicate ears. "She's got fetching shoulders and I've not often seen such curly hair. Tell me, my love. Why, in this place where beauty's so prized and indulged, your *pianiste* bothers concealing her face?" His question conjured mental images guaranteed to shrivel Troyes's libidinous curiosity. Freckles, pockmarks, or skin eruptions were possible culprits. Perhaps disfigurement beyond enchantment's remedy lurked beneath her white silk mask: deformity, natural defect, or a curse of some kind.

"Sometimes I like things left to imagination." Troyes's undaunted glance fell upon the approaching barmaid, a dainty human female clad in short stays and drawers constructed of the sheerest linen imaginable. He spared her a quick, careless grin before his more predatory gaze returned to his current interest.

"No buying a pig in a poke. Even pokes posh as the Rowan. I've sufficient, sweetheart." Cedric's wave dismissed the barelydressed woman reaching for his glass. After a peek assured her Troyes's drink needed no refreshment the barmaid left them in peace.

"All cats are gray in the night." Troyes's rippling shoulders courted beauty.

"I suppose." Cedric enjoyed centuries of seniority over his younger blood-kind; he could not recall a lovelier male. Or a more single-minded one. "She likes her Mozart."

"So do you."

Cedric shrugged.

Accomplished fingers danced lovingly over the keys; dulcet harmony seeped through Cedric's pleasure zones. He conceded, to himself anyway, it seemed unlikely a creature producing exquisite melody suffered intolerable looks.

For that matter, the smooth flowing notes challenged Cedric not to contemplate how fingers so clever and precise upon a musical instrument might feel upon his body.

"Some beauty thrives naked in candlelight. A rare jewel bears open daylight. Those creatures deserve hours of love." Eyes half shut, Troyes savored the bouquet of fine scotch whiskey laced with beef's blood served in ornate cut crystal. "That one's artistry'll make for better love-play than mere beauty."

"Zounds, my friend, you've waxed poetic. I think Mrs. Redworth needs you to visit her." Cedric's intended encouragement had no positive effect. Troyes's sculpted jaw hardened. "Louisa's not as much available to me these days." Troyes offered no further explanation for his less frequent appointments with his longtime mistress.

"I see." Love affairs with humans often proved so complicated. Defensive tone and expression wrought imperfect barricades to melancholy stalking the center of Troyes's mind. Raw emotions spilled free through kinship bonds between the two vampires and Cedric could not block his awareness of them.

Cedric rose from his seat and leaned across the table to embrace Troyes, enfolding Troyes in the comfort of Cedric's warmth and acceptance, absolute knowledge of Cedric's love.

Troyes's lashes dropped and he muttered, "I'm all right, Seti." Hard lips met. Whipcord-muscled arms tangled over Cedric's shoulders, squeezed their bodies to all closeness possible without coupling.

Their coat buttons clicked and rattled against each other, scraped fine fabric. Cedric's mouth pushed the bow of Troyes's lip, nudged him open so Cedric's tongue could sweep inside, warming Troyes wherever Cedric touched.

Cedric's cheeks hollowed; he drew breath to better savor Troyes's unique flavor blended with the scotch's smooth burn and foreign blood. Troyes's tongue joined Cedric's in an agile dance, teasing and stroking the corners of Cedric's mouth, playing closer to the edges of Cedric's extending fangs until Cedric growled a low plea.

Smothered mirth expanded Troyes's chest. He whipped the edge of Cedric's wicked canines, sufficient to pull Troyes's essence from the tip of his tongue onto his lover's palate.

"Dearling." Cedric threaded his fingers through dense, dark waves at the back of the other man's neck.

"Lover..." Troyes's hands unhooked themselves from Cedric's powerful shoulders, met heavy biceps, and swept down woolen sleeves, grazing smooth knuckles.

Troyes massaged Cedric's flanks, molding hard-muscled thighs through satin breeches. Cedric's eyes closed; his throat worked into a low bass *hmmm*. The heavy bulge swelling at Cedric's groin overfilled Troyes's cupped palm.

"Could love you all night." Troyes lifted him, squeezed until Cedric twisted his hips, ground against snug pressure. "And most of the day."

Crisp ovation marking the concerto's end rescued Cedric from drowning in Troyes's oceanic gaze, the superb pain-pleasure of his grip. The musician, a stately, graceful female, rose from the piano bench to face her applauding audience.

"Ah...We must stop, Troyes." Cedric's half-hearted grasp on the Norman beauty's upper sleeve held the same fevered want and regret thumping through Cedric's ribs and cresting against his heart.

Take you here and now if weren't 'gainst the rules, lover...Troyes's eyes gleamed and his fangs shone, aqua lust and pearl promise in candlelight. Reluctant fingers abandoned Cedric's hardness—one last rub—before Troyes relaxed, leaning back in his chair.

The pianist dropped a handsome curtsey. Cedric chose not to take his seat immediately; he lifted his goblet and finished his wine in two swallows.

"Nothing prettier than two Devils in love." Alannah Rowan half-circled their table in a sinuous glide, beaming down at Troyes while she patted Cedric's arm. "Would you be more comfortable upstairs, gentlemen? Dane is still engaged with Josceline and Catrin." Luminous gray eyes assured them she took no offense at their affectionate display but preferred all assignations remain in the privacy of Rowan House's many sumptuous bedrooms.

"No thank you, m'dear. We'll not interrupt Dane's playtime." Cedric's other vampire son, the youngest in his household, enjoyed two lively flaxen-haired prostitutes who still spoke more German than English after a full year's residence in Bath.

Troyes lifted Alannah's gloved hand and kissed the air skimming her knuckles. Cedric brushed their hostess's rouged cheek with chaste, closed lips and glanced past her shoulder.

Faerie light lamps in the music parlor cast warm, flattering shadows upon the musician's figure. Plump breasts mounded high above her neckline. Tiny puffed sleeves capped firm arms endowed with lithe, feminine musculature master artists would beg to sculpt. Slim wrists and ungloved hands, elegant, long-fingered.

"Beautiful music, yes?" Alannah' s voice grinned with knowledge.

"Splendid. Your pianist exerts greater effort concealing her face than her quim." Popularity of sheer silks and fine cottons convinced respectable ladies to appear almost mother-naked in public and dub it fashion for several decades.

"Seti!" Bubbly cheer colored Alannah's admonishment. "So far as she knows, she's decently covered. Mariotte can't know some Extranaturals enjoy superior vision to human capability."

"And you refrain from advising her, ma'am. My thanks."

Alannah shrugged.

The white satin mask covering Mariotte from her forehead to the tip of her nose comprised the greatest opacity in her toilette; Cedric took no scruple in examining her visible charms.

Long well-shaped legs, a perfect oval navel accenting a slim

waist, and the patch of dark body hair covering her groin formed a tempting silhouette through fine muslin and handkerchief linen. Cedric's gaze raked feminine lines perceptible through the woman's gown as she strolled through the music parlor and crossed the hall.

"Wonderful, thank you, my dear." Alannah's lilting tones carried encouragement, almost tangible appreciation toward her employee.

The opulent lady, revealed and still so secret, paused on the second step and glanced toward Alannah.

"Thank you, Madame. Good night." Her light, French contralto entranced Cedric with its rough, husky imperfection. Clear green eyes peering through the mask flickered over the three of them in casual interest, drifted upon Cedric, and pierced him.

Mariotte's direct look held magic, rekindling recent lust comforting Troyes roused in Cedric. Age-old pleasure attached to drawing a new admirer's notice strummed through Cedric's capillaries until dull, pleasant fever throbbed in his skin and his cock raged for relief.

Cedric's chest birthed one low, soft growl.

Too soon, Mariotte recalled she stood in a parlor-house catering to Extranatural races. Caution seized her actions, cast her glance away from him. Clumsy withdrawal of impromptu challenge, she lifted her skirt clear with one hand—a proper lady—to hurry upstairs. Fluttering silk ribbon garters announcing her rushed steps caressed Cedric's ears, teased his hungers as a doe fleeing for imagined safety tantalized a patient predator.

Alannah's giggle rushed, a brook of sweet clear water. "Stop savoring my pianist like a dish of ice cream, Seti! You scared her away." "How much?"

Troyes didn't bat an eye at his adopted sire's abrupt decision.

"How much?" Alannah did not know Cedric half so well. "Seti...Mariotte's a woman. She is Creole." The inane information reflected Alannah's confusion.

"Quite agreeable." Cedric brooked no offense at his hostess's ill-concealed perplexity. More often than not, Cedric retained interest in the fascinations of his own sex and his own household in particular. An occasional Ganymede whet his appetite for novelty and new blood, but he found marvelous contentment in Troyes and Dane's company.

Alannah's blush spread across her cheeks and throughout her face, pale blue first, warming toward a port stain tone most humans accepted as pink. "Mariotte hasn't a price. She is a paid entertainer and a teacher. She doesn't amuse guests in private."

"The chit's a teacher?" Troyes scowled. "Of what?"

"She tutors some of the boarders in French. Also helps the foreigners improve their English. Aids them in manners and deportment. She's most knowledgeable. I approached her to consider entertaining guests privately. I'm unsurprised she took no interest." A graceful shrug emphasized the pretty daemon's assertions and set her emerald earrings dancing. "She's too delicate to last long in such business."

Troyes's skepticism tarried; dregs of blood and spirits swirled in the bottom of his glass.

"All the better reason she consider private arrangements under a gentleman's protection." Cedric handed his drained wineglass to the barmaid making another round. "Alannah, I've been your guest and your family's friend for several centuries. Haggling's beneath us. No lady accepts employment to play concertos in a parlorhouse unless that lady's for hire. It's been some time since I retained a proper bit o' muslin. Feminine diversion would benefit us tremendously." Sodomy remained a hanging offense in his country. Tongues wagging a-plenty over three bachelors moving a Creole pianist into Cedric's house on Royal Crescent wagged less often in criticism that none of the gentlemen had been trapped fair and square in the Marriage Market.

Alannah's features stilled, but her pleasant tone didn't change. "I'm unable to offer you an answer, Seti. Mariotte's employment with my house does not include the arrangements you mean."

"Seti, you've not seen her face." Troyes reminded him, a hint of naughty sparkling in his eyes as he gave Cedric back his own previous objection.

"I shall. This moment, sir. You and Alannah settle the particulars." Cedric suppressed a wince. Troyes had no talent for bargaining; he took pride in paying well for what he wanted. "As of tonight Mariotte spreads neither her fingers nor her legs to make music for anyone besides us."

CHAPTER 2

What foolhardiness possessed her to stare down Seti Edgard?

Mariotte shook her head as she worked loose the buttons on her mended gown's bib front and freed her arms of restrictive sleeves. She shouldn't want to court notice from Rowan House's patrons, including one so fine as Seti.

The vampire's impressive height must have drawn her susceptible eye at first. Mariotte stood taller than fashionable for women, meeting eyes with most men and obliging an unappreciative handful to raise their heads to look at her. Seti's figure echoed a rocky colossus of a Viking warrior. Mariotte estimated the top of her head might reach his chin.

Height alone doesn't distinguish him... Mirth at her preoccupation with that single attribute tickled Mariotte's lips. Her

gown's heavy folds tugged over her head, she shook out the garment, fingered back pleats to smoothness, and hung it on a peg.

Seti's proportions boasted whipcord muscles and raw power. His broad shoulders and massive chest scorned tame retirement behind well-tailored coats and immaculate linen. Close-fitting breeches defined his trim abdomen and lean hips that would never see an ounce of fat or deterioration related to natural human decline.

Red-golden hair, long and loose waving halfway down Seti's majestic back, flouted current trends for men's short haircuts. His eyes, indigo twilight, arrested Mariotte, demanded she look at him more closely than she should. Amused triumph accented their depths, but his gaze fixing hers commanded self-preservation, pinched Mariotte's ears in screaming caution—*dangerous!*—while her heart quickened and her mouth parched.

Herculean beauty eclipsed Adonian fashion, coppery golden savage conquered brunette urbane sophistication. A *nonesuch* in any sense of the word, no living man on earth hoped to compare to Seti.

He's not a living man. He's a vampire...

She shrugged out of her short stays. Vampirism deterred Seti's appeal far less than his preference for male love over a woman's touch.

Her mask consigned to the small bureau, Mariotte's broadest smile greeted open air stroking her face. A modest bath waited in the room's one free corner beside its empty fireplace, the lukewarm water a promise of welcome refreshment though English nights were cooler than Louisiana.

Pearls and gold gleamed upon her hand, reminding Mariotte to return the borrowed jewelry to Josie. She dismissed the temptation to keep the baubles overnight and give them back the following morning; the foreign girl trusted her to return the loan upon her concert's end. Reluctant fingers retrieved the mask, fastened its ribbons behind her head. Draping a wide oblong shawl over her thin chemise, Mariotte gave the tub one longing sigh before abandoning her sanctuary.

After a cursory glance through her cracked door assured Mariotte's clear passage, she padded down the hall in stocking feet past a half dozen closed doors. She pricked her ear to the noises related to sex, both pleasurable and strange. Movement of bodies, the rustle of bedding, moans, sighs and cries, or wild screams and sometimes weeping.

A stream of rough curses provoked blushes sufficient to blister Mariotte's cheeks; her grip on her wrap tightened. The past four months she'd lived in Rowan House had exposed her indirectly to more kinds of sex than she'd dreamed possible. Guests and boarders alike entertained preferences. Slow and quiet, hard, loud and fast. Pain. Pleasure. Variances in numbers and genders of partners set Mariotte's head swimming. No shame attached to any of it.

Her curiosity thrived in the permissive atmosphere despite inhibitions of her upbringing and her efforts to curb the urge for greater knowledge. Too strange, her immersion in sensuality, surrounded every which way by it, without tasting it herself. Erotic pleasure seemed language of which Mariotte suffered ignorance; all around her enjoyed fluent communication.

Respectable society closed its doors to her forever if she sought carnal pleasure beyond the marriage bed with or without compensation. She neared six-and-twenty, almost on the shelf, and had survived two broken engagements. A marriage bed seemed an unlikelihood, but the rules stood firm.

Even with the threat of social ruin why could she not quell the excitement of sexual possibility?

Her swift rap on the door of Josie's suite garnering no answer, Mariotte turned the knob slowly and slipped inside the suite's handsome parlor. The lights were off; Josie slept or she and Kate had gone downstairs. Dane Melbourne, one of their chief patrons, visited them earlier and they eschewed other appointments when expecting him.

Cloudy night cast gloom over darkness and Mariotte groped her way through the sitting-room, shuffling around a broad sofa and a claw-footed coffee table. A lamp or candle from the halfclosed bedroom door directed a sliver of dwindling light toward the fireplace.

"Mmm, Dane. Please, once more." Josie's heavily accented whisper, chock full of luxurious exhaustion, alerted Mariotte the suite was not as unoccupied as she suspected.

"Greedy girl. You can't lift your head. Katie's asleep already." Dane's baritone whisper conveyed mirth and casual affection most patrons expressed toward the prostitutes during assignation.

They were kissing, the sounds intimate and slightly wet. Mariotte forced herself to ignore their distorted shadows as she slid the rings off her fingers and placed them in the velvet-lined brass box set upon the mantel. Wavering light played games with her eyes and she found herself fumbling with the bracelet, turning her hand this way and that, seeking the catch.

"Once more, please, Dane?" Linens and bedding yielded to bodies pressing close and twining against each other in the parody of love.

"Such a pretty ass."

The compliment swept through Mariotte's belly, not meant for her. She nibbled her lower lip, pressed the catch too hard, and scraped the inside of her wrist. The strand of pearls spilled away from her arm; Mariotte clutched the bracelet in her free hand.

More shifting in the bedroom, an abrupt decisive slap of warm flesh and yielding mattress accompanied a masculine grunt and one decadent female sigh.

"So good."

Mariotte longed to glance back over her shoulder. One quick look to identify what constituted *so good*. Imagination tightened muscles in her private parts, coaxed her sex to ripen. She tucked the bracelet into the box and latched the lid. Turning away, she caught the lovers' image framed in the half-open door.

Josie lay prone beside her drowsing roommate, her face hidden in the pillows and ungainly hands knotted in the sheets, her ample bottom raised high to cradle her lover's hips. Dane knelt behind her and gripped the generous pale globes in both hands, his nude figure a splendid upright column of muscular planes and shadowed mystery.

Candlelit shadows distorted his expression; Mariotte thought he looked grave, perhaps stern. He eased away from Josie's rump only to push harder and closer against her pillowy hind cheeks, rear back and plunge forward again. The movement inspired Josie's breathy little cries of "Oh!" and "Yes!" smothered against the pillow and Dane's severity softened to wolfish smiling.

"Good evening, precious." His head tilted a fraction of an inch toward the doorway. Mariotte's heart drummed inside her ribs; she retreated several paces, bumping her hip on a chair's high padded back.

"Please, Dane!"

"Like it, lovely?" Dane tilted his head back to draw deep breath. One hand swept over the girl's flank in an affectionate pat. "So tight around me."

"Fuck me harder!"

Mariotte felt and heard her blinking eyelashes brush the eyeholes of her mask. She'd grown accustomed to coarse language in her tenure at Rowan House, but Josie's clear enunciation startled her. Dane certainly taught Josie more precise English than Mariotte's decorous tutoring sessions.

Dane leaned over Josie and quickened his pace against the woman's pale haunches. Josie's cries sang counterpoint to her own movements, pushing back with her hips when Dane drew away, writhing to welcome his return.

Mariotte admired their joined bodies, Josie a picture of submission, her naked flesh quivering beneath hardened male sliding home to possess her. Their motion lacked grace, but their primal symmetry touched Mariotte, light fingertips penetrating scanty clothing, slipping past rooted notions of propriety.

Her nipples blossomed into taut buds jutting against her worn chemise while her sex clamored for greater experience than visual observation afforded.

"Well, sweetheart?" Dane's prompting held no rancor. His smile followed her retreat. Perhaps he mistook her for a bath nymph, visiting the room to assist patrons with cleansing or grooming. Mariotte's groin cramped, swollen labia kissing empty air, as she navigated the suite's parameter and let herself into the hall. The couple's rhythm broke not one whit.

She shook her head at her fascination on her way back to her room. If she'd brought herself to accept casual invitation of a man she knew by sight, she might be cocooned in Josie's bed this moment, warm, bare bodies all about her. Mariotte's wrinkling nose shifted her face's stiff fabric covering. Desire's lure wrestled certain social ruin until liquid flame ebbed low in her sex, throbbing like a bruise or a healing wound.

Who would find out if she returned to the suite, shut herself inside with the others, stripped off her clothing, her mask, and allowed herself naked closeness as a substitute for sincere attachment?

It would not be the same. Not the same as making love.

That assertion quieted Mariotte's racing pulse. Her experience, limited to stolen moments of her fiancé and she groping one another through their clothes while they first learned to kiss, lacked refinement. Honest affection compensated for awkward, hurried effort. Mariotte understood instinctively the actions without love lacked an essential ingredient.

If she ruined herself she meant to have more than satisfied curiosity and a gratuity from her despoiler.

Mariotte's gnawed lower lip curved when she reached her room. She'd soothe away lingering tension and swelling in her secret lips with her fingers and mental pictures of Cedric's splendid form joining her in her bath. She might read a little before she went to sleep.

Best of all, she would live a few hours free of the mask; its anonymity disturbed her more the longer she wore it.

Well-oiled hinges hardly drew the door shut before a man rose to hulking height from an easy chair that had seen its best days in someone else's parlor.

"There you are. Where've you been? I've decided you should be my mistress. I'll see your face now, m'dear."

CHAPTER 3

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, sir." Mariotte's slow blinking intrigued Cedric. Her eyelids fluttered twice, remained closed several seconds before opening at a leisure pace to fasten upon him. Cedric's brow furrowed at the gesture's indefinable attraction.

"I am not. Will you unmask now, please?" Concealment of her other features made her eyes a greater focal point and fascinated Cedric. They competed with her mouth, full and dense natural pink in tone, for his admiration.

"I'll not, no. It's Sir Cedric, isn't it?"

"Lord Cedric Edgard." He made her a neat, precise bow. She reciprocated, more perfunctory in style, and tugged the width of her shawl around her form.

"Milord Cedric Edgard." Her raspy French pronunciation

lengthened and softened vowels in his name. She clutched her shawl closed in front of her. "Since rumor has it you are a gentleman, I'm sure you understand why I expect you to quit my room at once." She stepped to one side, clearing his path to the door.

The chit had cheek. "Forgive me. You're expecting someone else." He smiled at her body's subtle indignation, fine nostrils flaring against their silk covering, breasts heaving from the deep breath she forced herself to take. "I'm told you don't entertain guests, so I'd no reason to believe you expected anyone."

"The one appointment you interrupt is my toilette, milord."

Cedric flashed her a game smile and gestured toward the tub, indication he'd no intention of impeding her from beginning her bath immediately.

"It is not the action of a gentleman—"

Cedric saw no need to stifle the chuckle her objection spurred. "You're quite right. Permit me." He extended one hand and reached the expanse of shawl draping over her arm.

"Sir! This is ridiculously improper!" Mariotte fled the narrow space allotted by the room's parameters and insisted, "I'm sure you have the wrong room. I see no guests in private."

"I know. I already told you."

"Then why're you here?" Mariotte half-turned away from him to rummage through the top drawer in her bureau.

"I've a proposition concerning your comfort. I'm no thief, ma'am, leave your money."

"I wasn't fetching you any money." Mariotte tugged out an oblong black leather sheath and whipped it free of a broad-bladed knife nearly long enough to be a short sword. Her fingers curled over the handle in a companionable grip as she faced him again. "What proposition do you mean?" Her pulse increased; the quicker cadence in her voice denoted stress. Cedric stared at the wicked gleam of polished steel before his laughter rolled, hearty and strong, from deep in his belly.

"If you're willing to listen, we'll do well for each other, ma'am." His grin avoided rancor. Should nothing result of their current intercourse, Cedric had to own the experience an unique one. He didn't mind working to entice the colonial. Her acceptance of his offer merited his trouble. "Well indeed."

* * *

Laughter lent Cedric's blue eyes deeper color beneath gilded satin brows. Mariotte's heavy hunting knife trained in his direction increased his amusement, and he lacked the manners to hide the fact from the fuming Creole. Mariotte, on the other hand, could ill afford his nonchalance. She'd used the substantial blade to kill trapped bears back home in Louisiana. If she could extinguish adult bears, she could fend off a vampire with it. But violence or threatened violence might be a ghastly error on her part.

She couldn't expect the Rowan family to endorse her holding a respected British peer intruding on her privacy at knife point. Visitors to Rowan House held to particular decorum, but straying from those standards didn't permit employees to maim or kill them.

"Well, ma'am? Do we talk, or will you keep pointing that oversized dinner knife in my direction like you mean business?"

Her fingers clenched the handle harder. "Tell me what you mean."

"I mean to hire you to serve in my household. My sons and I

require a lady in the house to attend our needs."

"I thought you attended each other's needs." Distrust hardened Mariotte's features beneath heavy satin.

"We're very happy, we make wonderful lovers and companions to each other, but a woman's touch isn't unwelcome." Cedric's rocky shoulders rippled. "You've no need of the blade. I'll not touch you unless you agree."

"Why do you ask me? I'm not one of the..." Mariotte licked her dry lower lip. "One of the ladies you ought to ask."

"You're the one lady I shall ask, as you're the one lady we want. You've gone wet. Despite your reservations. I think you fancy me as much as you appeal to us. That's a fine beginning for a love affair, madam."

Guilt burned Mariotte's cheeks. So he smelled her desire, kindled by their meeting and fostered by her recent fantasy.

"Your music's excellent—your technique wants polish but you've exceptional skill. In my home I'll send a proper instructor to further your talents and you'll play pianoforte for us."

"Your home, sir?" How far did this harebrained scheme go? Gentlemen normally kept their lightskirts in separate residences.

"Alannah tells me you're a colonial. I take it you don't know anybody in town, nor do you wish to be known given your pains to hide your identity. I expect you've your reasons." A new shrug communicated monumental indifference. "Since no one knows you, and you've not bothered to garner any popularity for yourself in this illustrious establishment, there's no reason you shouldn't live in my house indefinitely. Say as my ward. You may enjoy our lifestyle and we'll enjoy you far better at home than if we have to travel to some other house should we desire your company."

Absolutely brazen! "And where shall I live once you're

prepared to give me my congé?" What use lay in cutting the man since he imagined his proposition flattered her?

"M'dear, living in my household as part of my family shall secure your standing among the better circles in town. I don't doubt we'll be plagued by callers seeking to court you, and we'll muddle along well as we can. You'll receive an income through my household and, should we decide the situation doesn't suit us after all, I'll provide you with a severance settlement, funds sufficient to see you through your immediate expenses and to secure you a comfortable retirement, either singly or through marriage to your chosen candidate."

Too far... Mariotte huffed. "What do you consider satisfactory severance, milord?"

"What do you regard as adequate, ma'am?"

She widened her eyes at his complacency. A droll smile playing along his lips and eyes, he cleared his throat to disguise laughter. Mariotte tamped down resentment at what he must think of her. Evidently her demurring prostitution at the Rowan didn't earn Cedric's respects; he considered her a bauble, eligible for purchase like any London streetwalker.

"A hundred thousand pounds," she began.

"Done. Your home with us, your services at our disposal, your musical talents. You'll receive your pin money and anything you wish through the household accounts. Upon ending our association, I'll draw you a draft for one hundred thousand pounds." Cedric's smile broadened.

"You misunderstood me, sir. Permit me to complete what I meant to tell you. One hundred thousand pounds is a suitable dowry for me to contract an advantageous marriage, despite any unwholesome rumors connecting me to female frailty. A most

generous settlement for a woman leaving an illicit alliance once her patron wearied of her."

He nodded, unblinking. "I've stated I'll match that sum."

"And that would be agreeable in an alliance between us two. However, you are not offering me your sole protection; you require me to fulfill a woman's obligation to two additional gentlemen. If I'm expected to provide thrice the services and attentions—endure thrice the risk to my health and to my reputation—in all fairness the settlement itself ought triple."

Dukes married off daughters with more meager marriage portions. Mariotte met his eyes and waited for his conceit to fade.

"I confess I'm embarrassed for not taking your extra labors into account." His mouth quirked over *labors*; he wanted to laugh at her! Certainty drove scorching heat up her neck and face. "Three hundred thousand it is. I admire decisiveness, Mariotte. You'll come home with us this night, please, and might I see your face now?"

"That's terribly short notice for my employer."

"Commendable trait, loyalty. Tomorrow, then, once you've spoken with her."

Angry red blades clawed under Mariotte's skull and she shook her head to force them away. Her knife weighed heavy in her clenching fist. "Wait. A moment." Cedric paused in the step he took toward her. "I need to be sure I understand everything."

"Of course."

"You want me to live with you. Like a relation. Only I would be your mistress. And the other gentlemen's."

"Yes. None need know that aspect of our relationship. Best for your prospects that way."

"And who else?"

"Do we three not suffice for you, madam?" Bland mockery offset his ascending brow. His voice dropped an octave, fondled her body through her hearing. "I assure you we've ample talent and experience to sate you."

"And the three of you... How..."

Cedric's chuckle mellowed with promise, deepening as Mariotte's cheeks burned hotter. "We may enjoy you together, singly, whatever combination we choose. You'll not be disappointed nor damaged in any way."

Bargain with the devil, indeed. "Meanwhile we'll move and visit with society and when you or I wish to end this you'll give me three hundred thousand pounds for my trouble?"

"Do you doubt your value?"

She put the knife down. Not a hair of sense existed in continuing to hold it since they would not fight. The chipped porcelain clock adorning her bureau ticked louder than usual, measuring Mariotte's struggle to understand the nature of this bargain.

"You're vampires, though. What if you do me injury?"

His mouth thinned with insult. "I've already guaranteed your safety. I don't require you to feed us. If you choose to invite any of us, we'll take care you suffer no harm from it."

"What have you to you gain from this?" Her frantic mind scoured the details. "The arrangement offers me opportunity to change my circumstances, but it seems to offer you little you could not have at less commitment and expense elsewhere."

"I gain an attractive companion with a gift for music which I love. Those more disposed to discuss my continued bachelorhood will be less inclined to look toward my sons as a likely reason. We can benefit each other a great deal, Mariotte. You'll want for nothing reasonable. I'll see you curtsey at St. James's next winter and hand you into the circles of all the best people. The wealth I settle on you guarantees you independence, or a decent marriage if you wish for that." His eyes brimmed with the hint of a storm. "And I'll gratify that wanting in your belly you pretend isn't happening while we look at each other." He extended one arm and pinned her in place with an unwavering gaze. "Right now, if you'll come to me."

"I'm convinced that'd be imprudent."

"Pledge of good faith." He raised both hands, an eloquent expression of surrender. "I promise I'll take you no further than you wish to go tonight."

CHAPTER 4

Mariotte opened her mouth but hot words of condemnation would not come. Cedric's voice gentled.

"How can you know your own mind all muddled up with heat oozing between your legs?" He sounded almost compassionate. "Come, I'll take the edge off. No one need ever know beyond this room, and if you decide I'm not to your taste after all, you'll have lost nothing but a corner of time." Mariotte hung back from the majestic male and he sighed. "No further than you wish."

However charming and obliging Cedric's manner, his proposal should never be entertained by a respectable woman. Firm-seated practicality pushed aside her indignation. No matter its indecency, there was no question she benefitted from the arrangement if his lordship proved sincere in all particulars. "What're you doing?" she whispered as he adjusted the gas control.

"I thought darkness might be easier for you. If too much light discomfits you." The flames reduced to barest traces of light, Cedric sat upon her narrow bed, a picture of well-dressed patience too fine for shabby furniture, and drank her in with his eyes.

He could wait forever. Literally.

Mariotte crossed the spare yards of open space to reach him he, accepted his proffered hand guiding her nearer. The hard muscular arm surrounding her body sheltered her.

"Your passions run deep. Through your music, through you. That's a good thing, Mariotte. It's one of the reasons I want you." Fingertips swept under her chin, met her neck.

"Seti..." Heat rose beneath casual touch, followed its trail along nerves in her skin.

"Mm-hmm." His hand hardened on the small of her back, pressure absent of real force. He drew her close enough his knees brushed her clothing. Too awkward standing stiffly apart from him, Mariotte climbed upon Seti's lap. "Yes, come sit astride me."

Her throat locked around her breath as he guided her into place, thighs separate, knees framing his hips. He claimed her left calf, fingers surrounding the topmost part of her ankle, his palm cradling the curve. Cedric rubbed her in slow repeated circles, his naked hand rumpling her chemise, awakening sensitivity in the place where the hollow of her lower back met the top of her buttocks. His touch soothed a secretive animal coiled and curled at the base of her spine, transformed Mariotte's vertebrae to liquid. She sank closer to him, lower, stopped once her groin landed upon rock hardness straining the crotch of Seti's satin breeches.

Through clothing's barriers his body rested flush against hers,

supported her without strain. Her breasts bumped smooth planes of a powerful chest and her nipples budded into aching firmness, poking against worn linen, reaching for him. Her shawl drooped, slipping over her arms. Blood simmered under her skin as Seti unwound the fabric's broad length from her quivering limbs and dropped it alongside them. Mariotte had never been this naked with a man in her life.

Facing him, she saw none of the lascivious satisfaction or lustful glaze she dreaded. Inevitably those sentiments walked hand in glove with well-meaning contempt in the patrons' dealings with the house's prostitutes regardless of their popularity or cost. Seti's eyes opened windows of pure admiration and wanting so profound Mariotte suspected his sentiments transcended desire for simple satisfaction. Impressions wrestled her awareness before one vanquished its fellows.

Hungry...

Her voice betrayed her effort to speak, forming a low incoherent moan unknown to her.

"You've the loveliest mouth." His words close enough the breath composing them brushed her lips. First-kissed sweetness flowed through blood vessels and nerves until Mariotte's hands released their convulsive grasp on Cedric's jacket at the shoulders. Her fingers drifted behind him, sank beneath the dense warm sea of his radiant hair, curling over whipcord power in his shoulder blades.

You've wonderful arms... She'd tell him so were her mouth not filled with kisses. Mariotte savored well-molded biceps against her forearms through his sleeves.

Her lips admitted him deeper; drawing in breath to moan availed her of Seti's scent and taste. Sandalwood blended over clean musky warmth. His velvety tongue tricking and tangling with hers held a trace of wine.

She didn't know she had begun rocking against Seti, riding him, until he gave vent to an appreciative groan. "Ah, yes." The slow rhythmic sway of her hips concentrated on grinding her throbbing nether mound against the granite lump Seti's cock made through his satin breeches. Irresistible friction added erotic shock to the contact, striking deeper within her inflamed quim than the touch of their bodies allowed, teasing the delicate kernel of nerves hidden within her secret lips until it swelled into a sailor's knot of drenched burning want.

"Find pleasure, Mariotte." Whispered advice kissed along her jaw, lashed upon her lobe with that knowledgeable tongue. "Move in the way that appeals to you." Seti's arm anchored the back of her waist, creating resistance so she had no reason to fear her rotating hips would throw her off-balance. His cupped hand shaped and prodded her bottom, kneading the curves and tracing the cleft, dipping into the sweet hollow at the base of her spine. Her soft short cries begged and she arched her back into his caresses.

Lips, hard and well-defined, falling silken smooth upon her neck opened new realms of sensation. Fresh desire coursed through her blood; her sex leaked aromatic, liquid heat. Chaste pecks blended with more lingering open-mouthed kisses, soft sucking, the faintest scrape of blunt teeth.

Her breath waxed more labored, breasts swaying with her movement's force. Her hair bounced against her shoulders and sweet fever quickened her pace. Ruthless pleasure stabbed her, crippling her limbs and exploding into sweet blossoms of white lightening Mariotte visualized behind closed eyes.

"Seti!" She plunged down upon him.

His hand smashed her bottom, crushing their loins together. Cedric's features softened, his head falling back. A gasp of mutual tension's quivering release fled his lungs.

"Mariotte ... "

His low, dense growl emanated; its vibration rumbled through his body against hers. Tightening her thighs against his hips, Mariotte buried kisses in the lush thickness of Seti's hair and kissed his ear.

"Wonderful." She thought aloud, offered his chuckle a rueful grin.

"Exquisite." He raised her chin, planted a fresh kiss on her mouth. "We make beautiful pleasure together." He cradled her body, a-quiver from ecstasy's aftershocks. "I'll see you never do without it whilst you remain with me." Large fingers separated her smaller ones; their digits interlaced, yet another form of possession. "Unmask." Entreaty laced his whispered command.

Sweet Heaven! Seti's offered *carte blanche* and the intimacy they'd shared were all the more peculiar for his having not seen her face. She did not hesitate to gratify his wish, yet her fingers shivered and faltered over the ribbons behind her head. Once the mask came away, she abandoned anonymity's safety.

What if he disliked what he saw? Why hadn't she revealed herself before she permitted her would-be patron to quench her desire? She would not face anxiety at present when Seti's offer finally held value to her.

The ribbon knot yielded at last and Mariotte peeled the mask from her sweat-dampened hairline, baring her visage to the man still embraced by her thighs.

"Ah." He plucked the fabric from her hands and cast it away. Stiffened silk and ribbons floated upon the counterpane. Mariotte shut her eyes for a moment and imagined herself under Seti's discernment. Did he reconsider now he saw her face was broad and rather square, that her prominent cheekbones matched her mouth's fullness but dwarfed her delicate nose? Seti had the pick of the loveliest women in Europe, if he wanted them.

His hands cupped the sides of her face, fingers skimming feather-light over fine acne spraying her cheeks. "This will go away once you stop wearing the mask. I've never seen such long eyelashes on a female." His harsh mouth quirked. "Not without cosmetic artifice. They curve, like your hair." His careful touch grazed the tips of her lashes and glanced her eyelid so softly her mind registered pleasurable sensation as a recollected daydream. So sweet, too quickly ended to be real. "Such distinctive beauty. Not a one will forget you. When we sit at the theater or drive in the park such a stir we'll make." His manner's earlier hunger gave way to grinning repletion.

"I'm glad I meet your standards."

"You met them before. I'd not offer for you otherwise." He unfolded her knee, leaned to one side so that her body rolled onto the mattress's barren comfort. As he rose Mariotte suppressed a pang at the bed's familiar emptiness. Cedric's hand swallowed hers, parting her fingers to lace with his.

"You decided more hastily than I."

"I had advantage." His smile broadened and his fingers squeezed hers. "I must leave you now, dearling." Did he sense her loneliness and pity her? His tenderness could not be sincere; they knew each other so little. Mariotte stopped herself from saying anything foolish that sounded like she wished him to stay. "Rest after your bath, think of how I've made you feel this night. When my carriage comes on the morrow, you must decide whether you come to us or no."

Mariotte coughed on her astonishment. "Of course."

His look betrayed nothing of what they knew, that her decision was already made. Seti's kiss seared her palm; his eyes crinkled into smiling brilliance sensed the tremor jolting Mariotte all the way to her shoulder.

Mariotte found coherence to return his whispered, "Good night." Several minutes elapsed before she trusted her limbs to support her enough to make her way to her tepid bath.

Financial freedom, entrée into the charmed social circles Cedric inhabited...The proposition would have been hard enough to resist had it not included Cedric's sexual favors.

But it did include them. She could leave the shadow life she lived at Rowan House and enjoy a privileged sphere more suited to her station. She could cease fearing exposure and her half brother's interference. She could have a lover—three lovers, in fact. All handsome and well-liked. All gentlemen. And Cedric.

It wasn't love, but it was damn near everything else that mattered in the world.

CHAPTER 5

"You've made the best decision, Mariotte. I'll miss you, of course. You've been so handy in the house, is adaptability an American trait? Or a Creole one?"

"I couldn't say, ma'am."

Alannah swept her forearm over a stack of correspondence and rescued her inkstand before it spilled more than a few drops of ink on the desk blotter. "Drat!"

The vain daemoness glared at spatter on her sleeve's edge, raised her handkerchief to her lips, spat in it, and blotted the black flecks with her own saliva. The fabric smoked slightly; sizzling acidic effects burned away the ink and left Alannah's cambric dress pristine as new bleached muslin.

It had taken greater show of nerve than Mariotte owned to

continue working at Rowan House upon recognition her employers, the bulk of the guests, and not a few staff were far from human. Elven folk, wood spirits and faerie creatures, daemons, trolls, ogres, shapeshifters, and the infrequent angel sat in Rowan House's sumptuous parlors and card rooms. Drinking, dining, gaming, listening to concerts, or availing themselves of more intimate human company upstairs.

These beings, the stuff of legends and superstition, became more ordinary to Mariotte the longer she stayed in Rowan House. Mankind lived in an enlightened age and utilized scientific discovery and rational thought to explain the world's mysteries. Someday, existence of these others would all make sense and be commonplace to everyone.

"You owe me nothing, ma'am." Mariotte protested Alannah's cheerful provision of severance wages. "My notice's so sudden and I'm paid through the quarter, already."

"One extra quarter's salary. Pure bad luck if you say no." Alannah tsked as she counted the notes into a crisp neat stack and pushed them toward Mariotte. "I need you to sign the ledger to show I've paid you." She flipped open the heavy accounts book and pointed out the entry in question, complete but for Mariotte's signature.

"News travels quickly." Mariotte concentrated on scrawling the alias Alannah and she had agreed it best she use in their professional formalities.

"Seti advised me he intended securing you last night."

"Had he not convinced me it's easy enough to cross out the entry, I suppose."

Exotic birds perching in enormous golden cages throughout the room ceased blithe chatter and song, outdone by pretty Adon

daemoness laughter, a soft, sexy gurgle. "Sweetheart, had he not convinced you I would have still paid you and dismissed you. Not due to dissatisfaction with your work or character, dear." Alannah hastened to divert Mariotte's furrowing brow. "I'd be a fool to stand in Seti's way on this matter. Or yours. You don't belong here, dear, though you more than earn your way. You ought to be with your own people." Alannah's eyes twinkled. "No matter how well I pay you or how nicely you make my boarders speak, you're not really one of them."

"I've tried not to be high in the instep." Mariotte pressed her lips together.

"You're hiding here—or at least hiding who you are—and getting by. With Seti, you won't have to hide and you'll more than get by. I'm almost three hundred and Seti's never kept a mistress I remember."

"What, never?"

Alannah's fingertips rippled over her desk's edge, the distinct quiet thud of each digit following contemplative silence. "You understand, I'm sure, though Seti's protection offers you great advantage and you might be very happy, you shouldn't expect more beyond what this kind of offer implies, you know."

"I understand." Mariotte hoped her quiet confidence dispelled Alannah's worries Mariotte harbored romantic notions concerning her pending...protector.

Alannah's features brightened and her posture relaxed. "Do right by him and he'll do right by you."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"I'll send one of the parlor maids to help you pack. You look unrested, you ought to lie down this morning until Seti's people come for you." "Yes, ma'am." She welcomed offered help. Memories of the past night's excitement played upon Mariotte's anticipation until sleep grew fitful at best.

"I wish you always very well and happy." Sincerity brimmed over Alannah's smile. "Mariotte? I've instructed the other boarders they're to have nothing else to do with you. As your employer this past year, I order you have no additional words with any of the boarders or other staff while you remain in the house. Or any time after. I know this may seem hard but you mustn't take offense." A rueful nod insisted Mariotte see reason. "When you live in Royal Crescent, it won't do for you to have any lingering ties here."

Plain truth slapped Mariotte. No matter what good qualities she'd come to admire in some acquaintance she'd made, practicality demanded that acquaintance's abandonment once she left Rowan House. A lady would not visit parlor-houses or retain friendships with their boarders.

"I understand. Thank you." Regret stung her eyes and she blinked to soothe discomfort. Abrupt changes and farewells became natural occurrences since she'd left home. This one meant to convenience her although it did not feel so.

* * *

If Mariotte changed her mind, he'd drive to Rowan House and fetch her himself this same night.

"Seti?" Dane's dark eyes, warm and concerned for Cedric's distraction, returned him to present matters. Cedric thanked Dane with an almost imperceptible nod.

"You've presented a grave matter concerning your family alliances, gentlemen." Best he eschew sharing his more detailed opinions regarding the Cheltenham tragedy carted before him this afternoon. The Lykeion litigants might shift to wolfish form and rampage in his library. "Based on the arguments presented me, I cannot endorse a death sentence upon Macksim Daivorack. His common law claim of marriage to Gretchen Raymond stands and invalidates the adultery claim. Raymond's testimony of her voluntary participation in their planned flight from Saxony and their subsequent elopement to Gretna Green indicates he is guiltless of her abduction."

"Macks!" Gretchen, the fair young Lykeion inspiring all the fuss, whisked past the two Amazon guards flanking her vampire spouse. The vampire's plain face shone with the beauty love bestowed on all young people who cared for each other. He hugged his wife against him and curled one arm over the gentle swell of her belly protruding at the front of her gown.

"Lord Cedric, this is unconscionable! Gretchen's betrothal to a Lykeion knight has my full consent and approval. What of Sir Veikko's prior claim for my daughter before this upstart ever despoiled her?" Aksel Raymond's fine quivering and the hardening lines of his upper body spoke the outrage hidden by his flat baritone.

"If Sir Veikko wishes he can pursue a breach of promise claim. Against you, sir. You and he contracted this betrothal prior to Gretchen's achieving full majority. Your daughter made no consent or promise in good faith to wed Sir Veikko and endow him with her dower goods." Cedric met the rangy tow-headed knight's icy gray stare. "Given the longstanding friendship between your families, I'd think you prefer to forgo that route. It is up to you."

"I'll not pursue such a claim." Sir Veikko held excellent command over untoward emotional display. Cedric guessed the knight didn't relish pursuing additional litigation to acquire a bride who hadn't wanted him in the first place and carried another male's child.

"It's well." Cedric nodded. He turned his attention back to the elder Lykeion lord. "Sir Aksel, your disappointment in your daughter's choice is a useless barrier between you now. You've no other child. You must act according to your conscience, but how you act influences your own happiness, your family's happiness, and the well-being of your daughter's unborn child." Aksel's grittoothed silence and narrowed eyes did not bode well for Cedric's advice. "I forbid any additional action against Macksim Daivorak on these charges." Cedric rapped the edge of his desk with one closed fist. "*Res judicata*."

Res judicata...The Thing is Decided.

His declaration had its predictable desired effect. The parties moved individually in a body, their civilities in their farewells conveying varied degrees of gratitude and resentment, relief and disappointment. Tucker, Cedric's manservant, and two of the footmen waited in the hall to return hats, walking sticks, and weapons to those who'd brought them.

Dane waited until the litigants and their respective retinues were out of the home and well on their way before clearing his throat to speak. "There'll be trouble with Aksel. He wants Macksim's head."

"Then he should have taken his head in Northumberland, beyond my jurisdiction. Aksel's furious, but he's an honorable man. With time he may reconcile to the match."

Dane's utilitarian nod indicated indifference with the outcome. "It was a brave idea, Macksim's run to Gretna Green."

"Resourceful, not brave. Macksim knew if Aksel and his men

caught up to them he'd run out of options. Eloping to Gretna Green and marriage in a human service among human witnesses made it much harder for Aksel to arrest them without facing repercussion from the local authorities. All he could do is petition me to charge Macksim. Human marriage is legally binding whether or not Lykeion tradition reviles Vampires as prospective mates. If your love's forbidden, flaunt it to the public and have it accepted as normal." He glanced up from his notes to give Dane a hasty ironic smile, then continued recording his opinion on the issue in his legal journal. "An effective gamble. I wish them luck in the colonies. You'd think in all the years I've lived I'd have exemplary penmanship by now."

"Don't rush. If you knew the case favored the defense, why were you in such a brown study during the argument?" Dane spread his own notes on the desk above his sire's book, meticulous shorthand with nary an ink blob on the page.

"Thank you, dearling." Cedric raised his mouth for Dane's kiss, love precious in its lack of complexity. "As to my doldrums, Miss Sabrier's not arrived and I expect I'll need to fetch her myself."

"I thought you'd given up going a-viking once it became illegal." Dane helped himself to an apple from the silver footed bowl on one corner of the desk, drew out his pocketknife, and began paring it.

"Carrying off the hapless object of one's lust in the moment doesn't end well, particularly with ladies. I did once take a splendid Romanian boyar, though. Our fist fights were nearly as exciting as our fucking."

"I take it that fared ill." Dane tucked a wafer-fine sliver of apple into his mouth.

"Very. Though we grew fond of one another-I daresay

enamored of each another—I never quite lost concern he'd stake me and take my head should proper opportunity present itself. So I wouldn't free him. He resented it and..." Cedric shrugged. Dane offered him a piece of apple. Cedric eschewed accepting it with his ink-stained fingers. Instead he nibbled the fruit out of Dane's hand in three bites.

"Must've been good while it lasted."

A grunt accompanied Cedric's nod before a spontaneous grin breached his mouth. "More than worth the thrashing his Amazon grandmother gave me. A one-woman rescue party and one woman too many. I hibernated through winter and most of spring to recover."

Dane rarely swore. "Demme, half a year? She beat you to pulp and leave you for dead?"

"No, sir. She beat me to pulp and I had enough sense to stop moving so she thought me dead." Cedric's smile broadened at the plain astonishment sculpting Dane's features. "I was younger, then—nearer your age in vampire years—but even with the stamina I've gained through the centuries since I'd not want to face that woman again. Never, never trespass against an Amazon, Dane. Ares is the patriarch of the entire Amazon dynasty. Damn it all, if his descendants haven't inherited his bloody-mindedness. I mean no disrespect, ladies." Cedric inclined his chin in the direction of his statuesque, well-muscled guard and her equally impressive younger protégé.

Chione tossed her head. "I'm not insulted, milord. As to your earlier skirmish, that Amazon was obviously so relieved to get her kinsman safely back she neglected to make good your death like a proper warrior."

"Indeed." He returned her grin, unruffled. Lamplight gleam

upon Dane's small blade working over the apple recalled Mariotte's great hunting knife. Mariotte accepted them. Him. Despite genuine anger and fright at his intrusion her arousal held strong throughout their encounter. At the end he'd been hardpressed to keep his promise not to take her beyond the simple intimacy they'd enjoyed.

Her interest in his proposition spoke volumes of her own loneliness. He offered her an excellent situation, better than marriage by human standards from a practical standpoint, not so good by the moral one, but proper discretion assured she'd not suffer the moral disadvantage.

They both stood to benefit in their own ways from the arrangement, and if she reconsidered he expected to know why. He also intended to change her mind.

"This is the worst part of serving as Justice for the Extranatural Court." Cedric scrawled dutifully into his journal. "I look forward to my term's end."

Faint extra white framing Dane's dark eyes hinted at his doubt. "You've been hearing justice since before I was born."

"I've served fifty-six years. Four more to go. I'll not take another term until at least the end of the twentieth century. Hopefully neater pens exist then." Cedric tucked Dane's notes into the book behind Cedric's entry and gave his youngest son his full attention. "You're considering serving at some point, are you not?"

Humor lit up Dane's face. His was a quiet handsomeness; sensitive good nature emphasized his appeal. "My practice in English human law keeps me occupied. Near as much as yours keeps you."

"Consider it. At some point you'll need to resign your practice before your colleagues and friends wonder about your longevity. In future you might be glad to serve. It's an entirely new form of practice and yet not so different. Extranatural codes influence human laws." Cedric swept his arm over Dane's shoulders and guided him toward the study door. "Let's have supper at the club. Later I'll go fetch Mariotte."

"You truly haven't noticed?" Merriment danced in Dane's eyes.

Cedric paused, hand resting upon the doorknob, evaluating the other man shrewdly. "It occurs to me you're more amused than you should be, Dane. Don't be stingy, share the joke."

"My dear sir, the young lady you invited is already here. She arrived during this afternoon's proceedings and is in the house this moment." Dane's firm nod punctuated the information and he continued to address Cedric's scowl. "Tucker showed her to her rooms and I guess that new maid is helping her put her traps in order." The laughter in his voice softened to mild tenderness. "You must have been so focused on the case you didn't note her arrival. Tucker cautioned her to silence as not to disturb the court."

Cedric nodded, opening the double doors to let them out of the library. In past centuries cases were heard during specific times of the year in outdoor locations sacred to that purpose. Later, keeps and castles offered a large main hall suitable for hearing and dispensing justice without interruption from domestics and other residents in the buildings' private apartments. He'd enlarged his handsome townhouse to triple its original size and still missed the convenience of a proper hall.

"Is your new toy what kept you more solemn than usual today?" *Kept you so distracted you missed her arrival?* Unspoken teasing blended with its vocalized counterpart, too well-intentioned for Cedric to resent.

As he strode down the hall her scent struck him at last. Cedric slowed his step to savor the hint of feminine presence over the myriad odors of furniture and silver polish, the tarrying body heat of the departed Lykeion petitioners, and the more familiar scents of his own staff. A bare hint of Mariotte's aroma lingered among all those others—she hadn't remained downstairs long—but Cedric drew it into his lungs, soft and clean.

In the foyer her fragrance waxed stronger and Cedric frowned at its potency in the more open space. He strolled the perimeter, mounted the bottom of the stairs and examined the broad rounded cap of the newel-post.

There. Cedric leaned closer to smell the fingerprints embossed into the wood's polished surface. Nervous perspiration clung to her hands when she entered the house, and she'd clutched the handrail for courage as much as support on her way upstairs.

Cedric touched the smudged crescent of Mariotte's thumbprint and raised his fingers to his face. Impulsively he brushed his fingertips with the tip of his tongue. Sweat over soap and water clean and Mariotte's own personal bouquet galloped upon Cedric's senses and pulled the memory of how she'd felt in his arms to the forefront of his mind, jerked his body toward restless wanting.

"My lord." Tucker's expression retained its usual imperturbable lines, but astonishment sharpened his tone.

"Tucker?" The older servant witnessed multiple peculiarities in Cedric's household; his master tasting fingerprints struck Tucker as beyond the pale if he broke protocol and addressed Cedric first.

"May I bring you anything? Do you require refreshment?"

Dane coughed into his handkerchief, not the least convincing, his cheeks puffed with laughter.

"Thank you, no. Mariotte arrived safely I see. The new maid's

looking out for her and all that?"

"Yes, sir. I sent up tea and sandwiches. Serena brought the tray back down and said Miss wouldn't be disturbed. Unless you'd need of her." Tucker delivered the qualifier with his customary professional aplomb.

"I see." Asleep. So that was why no trace of Mariotte's distinctive raspy tones drifted through the landings. If he loitered in the hall outside her closed bedroom door he might hear her breathing, soft and relaxed with rest. Or would her sleep be nervous and fitful? The concept of Mariotte uncomfortable under his protection set Cedric's teeth on edge.

"Have you need of her?" Dane pocketed his handkerchief, eyes gleaming with mischief.

"Not at present. I'm still for the club." An imperious motion and the turn of his head to one side commanded Dane's company. Cedric's pursing mouth enticed Dane with promises of secret kisses they'd both enjoy.

No need to impose upon Mariotte bare hours after she arrived. If her excitement matched Cedric's, she'd not slept a decent four hours yesternight. Besides, it wouldn't do to appear too eager for her in the beginning. Time enough for them to better their acquaintance later. Perhaps tomorrow, more likely later in the week once Mariotte tasted the life Cedric offered her and traces of pungent apprehension eased free of her scent.

CHAPTER 6

"I'm surprised, Miss Sabrier. For the better. I own I was uncertain what to expect. You weren't educated in England." The instructor's gaunt face shaped itself into dour disapproval. "I take it you had earlier instruction in music and use of a quality pianoforte?"

"Oui, Monsieur." The man's open anti-French sentiments pricked Mariotte's temper and she found herself going out of her way not to hamper her speech or her natural accent. "Maman performed on the stage."

"Gracious." He patted her hand. "I've Scot relations, through my grandmother." The confidence seemed an effort to commiserate.

"Papa loved music. We both played for him and he joked if a

hurricane ever took down our place we'd earn a new fortune as minstrels." Her face tightened on an angelic smile, determined not to giggle aloud at the maestro's flinching repugnance.

"I expect you to continue daily practice. You've no need to improve your posture but your grasp of technique is instinctive. You require more fine-tuning to accept the natural order of music and acclimate to a traditional style." His bony hand waved, a meaningless gesture matching his instruction.

"Certainement. Of course." Some of her earliest happy memories revolved around that point. She'd excelled in music and acquired additional instruction at the Ursuline convent school in New Orleans. The same holy order established a famous girls' school in Saint-Cyr l'école under Louis XIV's patronage a century ago. This grouch of a tutor viewed her competence as miraculous given her birthplace and background. He'd not set foot in Louisiana, had no clue musical instruments and qualified teachers existed in the region. She curtseyed to him, relief unfeigned, when Mr. Filmore rose to take his leave. "Merci bien. Thank you, sir."

Tucker closed the door on her new teacher and Mariotte savored lightness returning to the atmosphere before she fingered the keys of the well-maintained Gibson pianoforte. After a few seconds of warm-up she redirected her attention to the sheet music open on the rack and plunged into a sweet Bach concerto.

Melody wafted through the room, chasing away Mr. Filmore's residual self-importance. Triumph and liberation flooded her heart with pleasure. Playing music for one's private enjoyment designed a kind of freedom. True, no audience applauded or admired her, but no critical ear judged her or took catty notice of a missed note or two.

"You've a gift." Not as free of listeners as she'd assumed.

"Thank you, sir." Mariotte folded the instrument's lid over the keys and used the moment to gather a little courage before she rose away from the pianoforte to face Dane Melbourne.

Mariotte noted they stood near the same height with a slight advantage in Dane's favor. The gentleman appeared not the least annoyed by their equality. She recognized his handsomeness, understated beside his comrades but nevertheless striking. Hair the color of polished walnut wood, cut into neat short curls, surrounded a pleasant face. His dark eyes contained warm depths that must be termed winsome.

"For you." He held out a simple dark gray umbrella, smiled at her brief hesitation in accepting it. "One always needs one in Bath."

"Thank you." The gift's handle fit her hand, solid. Sturdy.

"You've good hands for Bach."

"I was reared on him."

"You interpret him well." He favored her thanks with a brief bow before his smile cornered formality and tucked it away. "Seti's taken to leaving his office doors open to enjoy your playing. Should you witness his outrage from unwanted interruption you'll understand the concession he's making to your accomplishment."

"I see." It occurred to her the Englishman hesitated to take a seat since she remained standing. "Do, please, sit if you wish. I've spent the past hour seated at lessons."

"If you'll forgive my impertinence, I'm doubtful the maestro has much to teach you. Despite impressive credentials, I'm convinced he's queer in the attic." Dane tapped his temple and made circular motions with a finger.

Mariotte took a moment to digest the implication. "Perhaps it's

mere artistic temperament. Lord Cedric secured him."

"You're a diplomat." His wolfish grin brought to mind the last time she'd seen him. Stark naked and tangled with one woman's body while another slept beside them, exhausted by previous copulation.

"Is that a bad thing?" She fell into an aimless stroll on the side of the room that permitted her to retain sight of him as they talked.

"Not in an attorney and certainly not in a mistress. But you know a fine show of temper's not always wrong. At the right time it makes all the difference." He crossed his legs with a negligent air, and his smiling handsomeness suggested more existed to his meaning than one easily discerned.

"Lord Cedric is an attorney?" She had never heard of the like. If Seti practiced law, he thumbed his nose at the *ton's* dictates proper gentlemen did not stoop to such an undignified profession.

"No!" Dane assumed an expression of mock scandal, his irrepressible smile reaching through the facade. He leaned on one hip, lolling with liquid grace. "I used to be a solicitor. Now I'm a barrister. However, since I'm an excellent barrister I consider the stigma of having been a solicitor worth the trouble."

"I...had no idea."

"Perhaps it leaves you disinclined to socialize with me?" His eyes locked upon hers in challenge and he drew himself upright in his chair. The abrupt alteration in his manner startled Mariotte. She paused, her skirts swishing against a large brass planter housing a modest palm tree.

"I've no scorn for working men, sir. My father and my grandfather and my great-grandfather worked alongside their hands on our plantation. They had to. There's always more labor to be done than hands to do it."

Dane rose from his seat and the lithe grace of his movement spurred Mariotte's heartbeat. The more she observed the vampires, the more striking and unique their differences became to her. He did not move so quickly she couldn't follow his progress across the room, but his glide seemed too smooth, incapable of impacting the ground.

"So you don't despise work for its own sake." Dane lifted her chin, tilting her face the slightest bit to level their gazes.

"I worked playing pianoforte at Rowan House, sir." Mariotte shrugged. "I answered an advertisement to procure the employment." His eyes burned through her and she swallowed for calm. She understood Dane wanted something from her, needed it if the desperation lurking in his look indicated anything. "I don't object to your pursuit of a profession. No matter your reasons."

"You're more than good for that." He continued to support her chin, fingers soft, eyes fixed upon her.

She gave him another shrug, disregarding her dress's objection to the unladylike gesture, and lent him a rueful smile. "In a way, I suppose I'm still working." She regretted her last sentence the moment it left her mouth. A gentleman probably disliked being reminded a mistress's favors were purchased. Distance crept into his expression and left her not a little woebegone to have disappointed him. "I apologize. That wasn't diplomatic, was it? I've offended you."

"You have not." Dane planted an impulsive kiss on her lips, charming in its softness; his remoteness dissipated. "You aren't working at this moment. Cedric schemed to bring you to us, I'm told on Troyes's whim." Wicked grinning suited Dane's looks quite well. "You may recall my occupation in other affairs the evening negotiations for your placement occurred." Mariotte blinked, took her time searching for response and found none. She glanced over his dapper figure, stark contrast to his equally splendid nudity twined with Josie's, his satisfied moans and compliments. His invitation to Mariotte.

"Well, sweetheart?" Tenderness invaded his teasing reminder and Mariotte liked him despite the blood scorching her cheeks. Laughter swelled beneath her heart, bubbled free, and Dane's humor merged with hers, ripping through awkward space between them.

"I've hardly seen Troyes the entire fortnight I've been here." He'd joined them twice for dinner and Mariotte hadn't seen him since.

"Troyes is wearing the willow for Mrs. Redworth, his *very dear friend* of long standing. Troyes enjoyed being the great love of her life for forty-odd years and cannot concede defeat gracefully." Dane's mouth quirked at the absurdity of his dashing kinsman caught up in Cupid's trap like more common folk. "Though Mrs. Redworth resolves to retire with dignity and no longer admit him as her lover, old customs are difficult to break, so they divide their time between unhappy estrangement and passionate reconciliation." A graceful wave emphasized his point.

"Mrs. Redworth is vampire? Like you?"

"Not a bit. She's as human as you."

"Goodness." Over forty years? Troyes pined for a female in her dotage? "He must have formed sincerely genuine attachment to her."

"Genuine as the diamonds on his cravat for all good it'll do them. I think Cedric hoped you'd prove diverting, but poor Troyes hasn't time to notice you, yet. Pity. You're worth noticing and I like your voice." "Thank you." Mariotte loathed her graveled tones, a permanent souvenir from a bout with yellow fever she'd survived a decade ago.

Dane's lip curled. "And your angel is beautiful."

"My angel?" Her knotted brows pinched her forehead. "You must forgive me, I don't understand all English small talk."

* * *

Dane smoothed away Mariotte's frown; her creased brow relaxed, skin soft as rose petals on his fingertips. She did not flee his touch but her stiffening body and clenching hands betrayed ambivalence. Why should he resent it? She barely knew him.

"You've no reason to fear me, Mariette." He spoke French and gentled his voice as he would in addressing his high-strung mare or a particularly nervous client in the office. "Your life's sacred to my family."

"My name's Mariotte."

"A family name?" Dane let his voice smile for him. He'd mastered questioning uncomfortable people and persuading them to answer years ago.

Her dark ringlets danced around her face, subtle negation not forceful enough to throw off his touch. "I'm christened Marie-Charlotte after my mother, but my family combined the names to differentiate us."

He nodded understanding. "Look." He gestured at the enormous floor-to-ceiling looking glass edged with an unfashionably slender brass frame. Positioned in the center of the wall, the glass reflected over two thirds of the room and part of the foyer beyond the room's open door. Mariotte followed Dane's direction. Her jaw slackened, tension stiffened her limbs, and amazement widened her clear green eyes. She turned this way and that. Staring at him, at her empty side, at the ceiling and the floor, her suspicious gaze returned to their figures reflected in the glass.

"Something is wrong with the mirror." Dane recognized her mind's frantic search for explanations. At last she grasped one. "Perhaps the fall of light in the room creates an illusion."

"The glass has an uncommon enchantment. It reflects any life before it, corporeal or no. Angels routinely escort and protect live beings. The misty aura surrounding you and myself is their common form while on this errand." Amusement bent his lip. "Or non-form, as it may be."

"That can't be, Dane. I know what angels look like. I met one at Rowan House." The solemnity of her admission indicated what an impression the experience had left.

"Angels take multiple forms. Your guardian angel most often is non-corporeal, surrounds you and travels with you in the incandescent energy you see in the glass. He's always with you, but you don't sense his presence all the time. It's sad because most angels care deeply for their charges and like to have relationships with them." Dane admired her full lips quivering in effort to take in the information. An impulsive longing to tell her *you're a beautiful woman* floated through him, courtesy of his own protective spirit, no doubt. Dane nodded a little to acknowledge his reflection. The right time would come. "You might speak to him if you liked."

Her tongue snaked over her plump lower lip. Raspberry pink, velvety. His mind's eye visualized her warmth softening his mouth, his skin. She blinked—so slowly! —before facing the

mirror. Lost for words for several minutes, she resorted to simplicity and addressed their reflected images in a quiet voice.

"H-hello. I'm glad you're here. I'm sorry I don't always notice you. Ooooooh! I feel him! Her! Them?" Her arms folded protectively around her own body as the mantle of energy shifted, its edges fanning into a brilliant cerulean fringe. "I feel him he's—"

Dane smiled at her amazement, but her response didn't surprise him. Once upon a time he'd been an ordinary mortal who believed in angels all his life but could not credit their existence until he saw them himself.

"It's grace. That warmth you feel. You can't always notice it since too many things distract your attention in normal life. In good times, hard times, if you filter out interference, you'll recognize angelic presence." Dane tapped the mirror's frame. "Moreover, this knickknack contributes to our security immeasurably. Be cautious of a visitor without angelic escort. It means the creature is purely evil, or it's an artificial being."

"Artificial?"

"I mean a being created by magic, or a reanimated being without true sentience. Angels rarely abandon live beings, unless the creature's wickedness extends beyond grace. They've impressive tolerance levels, however, so angelic presence alone doesn't determine a person's goodness." Dane smoothed her newly furrowing brow; he followed her eyes, taking in their reflection. Ethereal energy surrounding their respective forms pushed and merged against each other like young animals at play, rising and twining, blending and separating.

"I thought vampires were reanimated beings." Her voice softened over the point as though she worried it might offend his sensibilities.

"Contaminated vampires are revived, not reanimated." Mariotte's beauty did not follow conventional fashion, Dane decided. Her figure pleased him, but he liked her face's character, the wide prominent cheekbones and pretty tapered chin. Her complexion held some touch of exotic warmth he could not place, fine ivory beginning to age. Interested wonder in her clear green eyes intrigued and alarmed Dane at the same time. What was Cedric thinking to have brought her into their lives, their household?

"Contaminated?"

"One initiated by a natural vampire. Like myself."

"I see." Mariotte's consideration of his revelation hummed into an otherwise awkward silence. "So now are you not human at all?" The seasoned barrister with a deserved reputation as one of the most cunning minds in the legal industry felt his own jaw sag. Mariotte's eyes closed and opened, too slow to blink. "Forgive me if my question sounded impertinent. It is not my intent to violate your privacy."

"Shall we go for a drive, Mariotte? Do you like Sydney Gardens?"

Anticipation of a pleasure outing lit her eyes and her unrestrained smile revealed clean healthy teeth. "I've longed to visit the gardens for some time."

"Miss." Tucker waited, imperturbable, in the foyer beyond the drawing room's open doors. A woman clad in a sensible gray pelisse and a black silk bonnet hovered behind him.

"Miss, the carriage's brought round and we're to do your shopping." The maid braved Tucker's frown at her breach of protocol. "I beg pardon for interrupting." "More shopping?" Mariotte's open confusion warred with regret. "I'm afraid I'm not as free to visit the gardens as I'd hoped, sir."

"It is well, Mariotte. The gardens will still be here when you have enough clothes." So would he. Dane made a deeper bow to Mariotte than he had at the commencement of their interview.

"You're very good." The slight tilt to the outside corners of her eyes grew further pronounced with her smile before she sighed in resignation and joined her waiting maid. Serena didn't slouch; it took all of a minute to help arrange Mariotte's bonnet, throw a shawl over her shapely arms, and thrust an oversized reticule into her hand before directing her outside where the coachman waited.

"I'm very patient." Compulsion demanded he correct her impression despite his lightness of heart. "That does not mean I am good."

CHAPTER 7

"Surely I've enough things to last the year, Serena." Mariotte did not dare move for fear she'd insert a foot or an elbow into stacked parcels and hat boxes overfilling every bit of spare room within Cedric's landau.

"Miss, you're not understanding Bath." The mountain of boxes in Serena's lap hid her face and muffled her voice. "You're not understanding the Quality. Living in the colonies and all, you don't pay great attention to fashion, and why should you? More important things to worry about having to survive in that wilderness."

"Ah." Mariotte hoped the verbal nod sufficed as a tactful response.

"Once you're introduced among his lordship's set you'll have

all kinds of appearances to make and you'll need to be dressed. Or his lordship might invite a party to his big house in the country. Those can last weeks and you mustn't be seen in the same dress twice. It's so important to have *dernier cri* and not be behind in fashion. You'll be talked about otherwise."

"His lordship might appreciate our not emptying his pockets in the name of fashion."

"Never you mind about that unless his lordship tells you something about it." The stack of boxes concealing the maid swayed in sympathy with the landau's tight turn. Serena stretched both arms almost straight into the ceiling to steady her burden. "And, Miss? You needn't have all your reticules made so large to carry that big knife everywhere with you. It isn't suitable in polite society. There aren't any Indians or wild animals or other dangerous creatures in Bath."

"Ah."

Mariotte waited until the footmen unloaded enough boxes to facilitate her descent without incurring a minor avalanche. A puff of cool breeze against her back prompted her drawing her shawl higher upon her shoulders. English weather amazed her; midsummer hadn't arrived, yet the temperature compared to Louisiana's mild autumn. Mariotte hoped she acclimated before Pere Noel visited Bath.

Tucker ushered her into the foyer and Mariotte wondered would he take it amiss if she requested he stand nearer the drawing room's magical glass so she might have a glimpse of his angelic companion. It seemed indelicate to ask, so she offered a simple greeting instead. "Good afternoon, Tucker."

"Miss, his lordship is waiting for you. He wishes you'd play for him."

"I'll be glad to, of course. Tell him I'll be down in a short while." Her calm reply belied the monsoon erupting in her abdomen. At last Cedric wished to see her.

"Not downstairs, Miss, if you please. His lordship had the pianoforte moved to his suite so he might enjoy music in his bath." Nothing in Tucker's expression or tone found the situation extraordinary.

"Ah."

* * *

"Pray don't stop your playing, m'dear. My bath's ready."

"Yes, sir."

No one undressed as carelessly as Seti did. Not that Mariotte watched men disrobe often, but she doubted most gentlemen emulated Seti's blatant untidiness. Tucker aided him as needed; garments Cedric removed himself he dropped once he freed his body of them. A second servant, a young Hindu page liveried in emerald green, hurried to collect discarded clothing and give it to Tucker.

"The song's finished, milord." A sidelong glance from the sheet music drank in more of him. He came from a fencing match and bore the charming dishevelment of glowing good health related to exercise. Traces of perspiration accented his personal aroma, blending with the odor of clean hot water emanating from the giant tub it had taken the better part of half an hour for two servants to fill.

"Play another. Anything you like. Do you sing, Mariotte?"

"I cannot, sir." Her ruined voice had increased her attention to music in her younger days. Shuffling through the sheets, she located a favorite Mozart concerto. Seti's dishabille stoked fire in her face and she stumbled over simple notes. Seti continued undressing.

Sinful nakedness redeemed itself in full through Cedric's majestic height, whipcord-muscled limbs and powerful shoulders, a broad smooth chest and a flat fit abdomen tucking into trim hips. Firm, high buttocks and a cock well matched to the rest of him in terms of proportion prompted uncontrollable quivers in Mariotte's nerves.

His hardness beneath her plunging body the night Seti invited her to live at Royal Crescent imprinted her mind's eye, vivid and indelible. She'd understood since then his body had to be beautiful, but confirmation erupted into thunderstorms, whirling electrical awareness within her heart.

A nonesuch. Not human, not a dead being roused from eternal sleep by demonic forces to glut itself upon blood and evil. *He has an angel, like me. Not a monster.*

Nothing remained for him to take off and the servants departed with Seti's clothing. Mariotte forced herself to concentrate more upon the sheet music, the keys beneath her hands.

She had no wish to appear foolish to this man, silly or weak and replaceable. He'd lived politely alongside her the past two weeks and, beyond sharing meals and a few odd pleasantries, had been content to let her settle into the rhythms and schedules of the household. Courteous accommodation or waning notice?

She had his interest now. Best make the most of it.

The tub's high sides permitted Seti to lay back, his bent arms draped upon its curved edges. Seti's handsome face relaxed, eyes closing in pleasure, and he gave a little half-moan half-sigh at the song's finale. "Lovely, m'dear. You're fond of Mozart. I think you interpret his compositions more prettily than anything else you play."

"Mozart's a great favorite of mine." She grew better accustomed to vampires perceiving attributes unnoticeable to humans. Seti couldn't read her mind; his ear discerned variances in her technique and drew his conclusion. Mundane compared to mind reading, perhaps, but hardly lacking its own fascination.

Cedric's relaxing features painted his expression boyish; eyes closed, he tilted his head back into the bathwater.

"Milord, the song is finished. Shall I play something else?" Mariotte found herself whispering, unwilling to disturb his tranquility. Dear Heaven, such a landscape he made with his angelic visage and his Viking god's body. The more she looked and tried not to look—the greater awareness of her own body struck her. Her nipples tightened to tenderness, resentful of their confinement within her stays, swollen and pleasingly achy.

Such a pity he preferred men. What made him decide he wanted her?

"Stay, m'dear," he urged, voice quiet. "I want your help with my bath."

Mariotte hesitated. "Tucker may be better accustomed to aiding you."

"I want you, m'dear, please." His eyes remained closed, his tone pulling her with invisible strands of compulsion woven of her own willingness. His lips twitched but did not quite smile. "You cannot become better accustomed to me by sending for Tucker."

"I'd rather not disappoint you." She lingered at the pianoforte, closing its hinged lid with care. Cedric's eyes opened, lazy darkest blue of twilight, pinning Mariotte in place. Muscles rippled on his shoulders, a sensual movement passing for a shrug on men gifted with less beauty.

"I'd rather you didn't worry." His cultured tone resonated, a subtle reminder he was master of the household and a peer of the realm and not at all accustomed to people declining his requests.

Mariotte turned and took two steps around the padded stool toward Cedric, automatic response to his natural authority. Soft knuckles tapped the bedroom door and Mariotte skipped to a startled halt.

"Your ice cream, sir."

With an inward curse at her own caprice—did she want the man or did she not?—Mariotte paused and waited for Tucker to open the door. The gaunt valet carried the frosty dessert in a large footed dish on a silver breakfast tray. He set the tray upon a folding table beside the tub at a comfortable reaching distance for Seti.

Tucker removed his jacket and folded it over the chair beside the tub. He unfastened the cuff of his pristine white shirt, and folded his sleeve to his elbow.

Cedric accepted his proffered wrist, cradling his valet's hand in both of his and lifting Tucker's wrist to his mouth. Mariotte couldn't see his fangs extend. Tucker relaxed; a faint groan indicated possible discomfort before his face slackened, lips parted and eyes soft.

She'd expected trauma, reluctance on Tucker's part to fulfill his master's need. It had to be painful—for heaven's sake it involved biting!

Pleasure weighted the air in the room. Mariotte closed her eyes and opened them again, shaking her head to try and clear it of the spell. Seti's feeding had not inspired the least disgust in her or quelled her desire. Nothing soothed the gooseflesh creeping along her upper arms and her nipples' hard-pointed petulance. Moisture ripened between her legs.

Cedric rubbed his valet's knuckles as he licked his wrist clean, then pressed a linen napkin firmly over the wound. "Thank you, Tucker." He met his valet's eyes, warmth in his gaze more profoundly affectionate without a smile.

"Sir." Tucker fondled his master's striking red-gold hair as he rose from his seat and began putting his shirt in order. Back in his jacket, collar neat and straight, Tucker met Mariotte's glance with his usual calmness and gestured she take his vacant chair before he left.

Mariotte drifted around the massive tub and sank beside it. Steaming water concealed nothing, softening Cedric's clean, powerful lines.

Cedric waited until the servant closed the door behind him and his firm footsteps measured distance down the hall. "You made the wise choice. If you didn't remain you'd miss dessert." A pale hand squeezed water from a sea sponge onto his shoulder. "Mariotte? Do you prefer not to keep me company at my bath? You seem disinclined, but I smell you want to remain very much." Water beaded and trickled onto his well-shaped hand. Her eyes crashed into all the knowledge and temptation within his indigo gaze.

The ton didn't call him a devil for nothing.

Sandalwood soap steam, starkly white towels, the palest brown ice cream softening a bit on the table. So many pleasing aromas, temperatures, and textures combined with Cedric's muscular planes, arresting eyes, and commanding voice. Mariotte never experienced the sensual in such a personal way.

"I'm glad to remain." Did she whisper to prevent disruption to her expanding hungers? "Tell me how best to help."

His finger caught the pointed peak of whipped cream on his

dessert and he licked it away. "You're lovelier than when I saw you unmask."

"Thank you." Mariotte's pulse sang; feathers of indefinable pleasure stroked her mind along its edges. She'd not donned a new mask since she left Rowan House. Not even to defend her complexion from harsh noon sunlight. Open air and judicious use of a mild face tonic cleared the trace of acne rash upon her cheeks. "I'm content here. Bath's an elegant city. You've a beautiful home. And it's..." *Safe*. Her wretched half brother would not think to seek her in Bath. "I'm most comfortable."

"Excellent." His pleasure in her reply enriched his tone. "The whole house is open to you. Of course my library's sometimes needed for private business, but you may read anything you like and all the instruments in the music room are at your disposal. We've a beautiful garden and I want you to enjoy it."

"Thank you, sir."

"Address any wishes or needs you have through Tucker. Serena's a good, experienced lady's maid, defer to her instructions concerning your upkeep. Never go out without your maid, it's seen as indelicate."

"It's seen as indelicate in Louisiana, too."

"I'd prefer you bring a manservant as well. It isn't always safe on the streets." Seti scrubbed under his extended arm. He gave both arms the same treatment, submerging them and squeezing water from his sponge to rinse soap traces from his armpits.

"Yes, milord." Water highlighted Seti's sinewy back, whipcord muscular grace clad in lily-fair skin. He picked up his ice cream, and Mariotte swallowed primitive longing to kneel beside Seti, trace water trails on his spine and shoulder blades with her tongue.

"Take off your jacket, love, you don't need sleeves to help

me."

"Gladly." Bathwater's steam warmed the room. She slid free of her spencer's extra-long sleeves and draped the stylish cropped coat over the back of her chair.

"Your frock is lovely." His gaze held frank appreciation of the thin muslin gown's tiny puffed sleeves, close-fitting bodice and deep square neckline.

Mariotte laughed. "I'm glad you think so. You paid for it."

"I hope I bought more for you." A smile played in the corners of his mouth.

"You did. Thank you." It had been some time since she'd been free to visit a modiste and have her pick of the fabrics, trimmings, styles, and accessories she liked without concern for cost. Thus far, Tucker hadn't raised a brow or counseled her about the dress bills. If she must be a kept woman, just as well a generous wealthy man did the keeping.

Cedric gestured Mariotte to come closer and she knelt obligingly beside the tub. He dipped his spoon into the ice cream and offered her the first mouthful.

"Mmm." Mariotte closed her eyes. Creamy comfort followed chilly sensation. The frosty treat, smooth in her mouth, tasted like iced café au lait. "There's coffee in it?" She opened her eyes in surprise.

"Cook's best recipe in my humble estimation. The addition of strong coffee prevents it from being excessively sweet. Most refreshing." He gave her another bite, this time with part of the whipped cream topping, then ate some himself. "Good, eh?"

"Delicious."

"I think your complexion is almost a match to dessert, dearling. You are a lady of color, are you not?" No judgment in his expression or tone. No repugnance.

"I do not know." Hardly anyone seemed to notice in England. And no one had ever used that term, lady of color. In Louisiana one said woman of color. As though a person's heritage robbed one of gentility.

"You do not know?"

Mariotte shrugged. "You're not the first person to ask."

"I doubt most notice." He fed her another spoonful of the delectable icy treat. "You've the curliest hair, and your skin makes your eyes clearer. Greener."

"Thank you." Question lifted her voice.

He grinned. "You disbelieve me. You are one of the loveliest women I've ever seen. My sons think so, too. My invitation to you was as much at Troyes's behest as my own inclination. I find you exquisite." Ice cream dripped from the spoon onto the top of her breast swelling above her neckline.

"Cold!" Mariotte shuddered.

"Apologies." His wet hair brushed her chin and her neck as he licked the melting ice cream away with swift broad swipes of his tongue. Every stroke warmed her further and her pulses pounded a delighted tattoo at the contact. "Yes, near the same color. Paler, softer, so much warmer. But the same. Beautiful." Fun and pleasure shone in his eyes.

More and more Cedric proved not to be the stiff upper lip she'd anticipated, nor some otherworldly dangerous creature with a gorgeous exterior. He seemed to be of all things a normal man, likeable as well as desirable. It should have made things less complicated, not more so.

Mariotte lowered her eyes and wondered if she'd ever understand.

CHAPTER 8

A faint smile touched Cedric's ruddy lips. "You've never helped bathe guests at Rowan House?"

"No, milord." Sense of the ridiculous overwhelmed nervous butterflies waltzing in her stomach. "I'm adept at bathing myself, however, and anticipate no difficulty assisting you."

"You've leave to call me Cedric. You're our companion, not our servant," he reminded her. "Apart from my blandishment, why did you agree to come to my house?"

Mariotte heard herself sighing. "You've compelling powers of persuasion." Each night she retired wondering if Seti would join her, introduce her to additional pleasures akin to those they'd explored so briefly in Rowan House. Embarrassed blush scorching her cheeks, Mariotte filled the copper bowl with water from the tub and poured it over Cedric's head, lifting his hair into the flow to saturate it. "It helps the three of you are rich, lovely to look at, and bathe regularly."

Cedric laughed at her forthrightness, unoffended. "Come kiss me, dearling."

She leaned forward and kissed Cedric's smooth forehead. His skin warmed her mouth, and she kissed him a second time for her own pleasure.

He laughed. "Now is that how you wish to kiss me, dear?"

"Not entirely." Lower still, Cedric's mouth tasted of coffee and cream.

"I appreciate your frankness. Much better." One damp hand stroked her cheek. "You'd do me monstrous kindness if you washed my hair. And, Mariotte, it isn't wrong to feel desire for me. My kind provoke desire in most humans."

"Yes?" Mariotte doubted her attraction to Cedric had much to do with his otherworldliness unless his handsome looks were a direct result of it. She drew up the cake of soap and worked it to creamy foam in her wet hands. "You think a human man of your appearance wouldn't draw feminine interest, sir? Your modesty's a greater credit to your kind than your attractiveness to humanity."

A chuckle accompanied his appreciative look. She massaged the fragrant soap into Cedric's scalp and squeezed it through his hair. The smooth planes of his chest gleamed above the water's surface.

"That feels so nice." He sounded like he meant it, and Mariotte's heart warmed to him. Perhaps the intimacy of bathing him promoted familiarity beyond her crasser expectations. Subtle bliss existed in caring for another. "Thank you." She fingercombed his hair to smooth away tangles and draped the generous length over his shoulder.

Her soapy hands landed on his back—*at last!*—and satisfied her pet desire, using the soap's glide to experience every inch of wet skin. Cedric leaned forward without a word, the forgotten sponge idle on the water.

Realization stained Mariotte's face; she didn't wash the man at all but pawed him to satisfy her want. His spine bisected shoulder blades harder than she'd imagined under supple flesh. Mariotte rotated her hands in circles, fanning lather over his rocky muscles. His build appealed to her immensely. Beneath his ribcage his body tapered to a trim waist and when he knelt to facilitate her exploration Mariotte could not forbear admiring his most private attributes aloud.

"Dear Heaven. You're beautiful." She took a deep breath and spread more soap over his lower back. Her fingers in the small hollow at the base of his spine intended to caress rather than cleanse. Mariotte's insides jerked as she took in his hard chiseled buttocks and his generous cock nestled in hair a deeper red than what covered his head.

She applied more soap, covering him with foam, pressing it across hard toned hips and squeezing it against his rear cheeks before collecting the sponge to wash him more thoroughly within the cleft. She rinsed him more than needed for the delight of watching water flow over his skin and hearing his sighs of enjoyment.

Her peripheral vision registered his perfunctory cleansing of his sex before he announced, "The can of clean water is over there. We can rinse my hair and I'll be done."

Mariotte fetched the last can of lukewarm water. Shielding Cedric's forehead with her hand she poured water over his hair in a slow stream, urging sweet smelling foam free of the strands. The can clinked on the floor and Cedric used his hands to sluice away excess water. He rose in lithe movements, rivulets streaming down his limbs, jewel-like water beads clinging to his body hair. Mariotte seized two towels, handed one to Cedric, and blotted his hair with the other.

Cedric buffed his body free of moisture and dropped the towel to sop up water on the floor. "There's no better feeling than right after a bath." He relieved Mariotte of the other towel "Do you not like me better this way?"

She laughed aloud at his sound assessment of what she thought. Cedric's naked form lived up to all beauty implied by his wellfitted suits.

Even freshly bathed he retained a scent particular to him; Mariotte's memory opened arms, welcoming his pleasant, warm musk, let it suffuse her senses until she'd recognize Cedric in pure darkness. Her untouched sex ripened.

"I can see more of your face, with your hair smoothed back," she replied at last. "You've a handsome neck and I do like your looks better."

Low laughter greeted her statement. "Such a ladylike little thing. Still so refreshing." A half step and Cedric's lips claimed hers.

Mariotte moaned, no longer willing to conceal her own desire, and allowed her lips to part.

"Cedric, I..." She reached for him, hesitant fingers whisking over his nipple, feather light.

"Mmm, yes, do that. Touch me." The vampire's nostrils flared and he drew her closer to him under one arm, his other hand cupping Mariotte's breast, squeezing it through the layers of her clothing. Cedric teased her, catching her lower lip and suckling it, brushing the bow of her mouth with his tongue.

Quiet fire built upon her lip and swept through dozens of nerves beneath her skin, igniting a slow gentle burn. Cedric's hold around her body tightened until Mariotte quivered.

"Yes, let pleasure take you so you can give it back."

Mariotte couldn't answer. His cupped hand fondled her hard enough through her dress to locate her nipple and squeezed it until it rose into a firm nub of flesh throbbing against her dress. She fanned her fingers over the corner where Cedric's arm met his shoulder, gripped him before she consciously recognized she wanted to feel the hard-muscled contours and warm skin beneath her gliding hand.

Blissful complexity of a male body's different textures clouded Mariotte's mind like a half-remembered dream. Solid and strong, yet softened with comfort's promise as well as sensual delight. She could find satisfaction in seeing him, touching him, in her own body's want before her flesh ever received him.

His hand blanketed hers, her knuckles cradling his palm while Cedric lavished kisses on her face. He guided her hand down his chest, the patch of ruddy golden curls springy on her fingertips, soft with bathwater. His flat belly boasted smooth rigid contours and Cedric drew her hand lower, past his navel to his groin.

Mariotte's opening fingers curved to surround his cock in tenderness. Cedric's low groan proved as great a stimulant as the heavy shaft Mariotte gently kneaded and squeezed. She frowned at the unique feeling; he was so hard, hot to the touch, yet the skin covering him had the texture of unblemished silk. His throaty gasp drew her gaze back to his face; raw need upon handsome chiseled features stole breath from her lungs, lent smoke and glitter to his narrowing eyes. She tightened her grasp and watched his mouth soften, his chin rising, head dropping back to expose a vulnerable throat.

It feels so good to him.

Mariotte kissed his neck, the softest place above his collarbone, and her eyes watered. Her tongue snaked past her lips, swept over the velour of warm skin.

"Don't stop, m'dear." His voice waxed downright breathless, devoid of former calm detachment. She placed each new kiss higher, molding her lips over the resistance of his Adam's apple nearer the middle of his throat, licked it. Cedric's whispered, "Mariotte," gripped her stomach and their mutual longing turned palpable, a live entity within the room.

Cedric threaded fingers into the knot of curls behind Mariotte's head, drew her to arm's length. "Undress now, m'dear. I'm persuaded you'll look lovely stretched naked on my bed, but I would like to be sure of it." His smile bestowed wicked contrast upon his speculation, eyes aflame with indigo demand.

"Help me." She gave her back to her lover as she made the appeal. Swift movements loosened the back drawstring fastenings, setting Mariotte free of her dress. Cedric helped her lift the folds of muslin over her head and dropped it carelessly as he did his own clothing.

Free of her stays, Mariotte sighed, a pleasure in itself. Her breasts swelled against the fine handkerchief linen of her chemise.

One hand covered her buttock and squeezed.

"Cedric!" Her voice roughened.

"You've a remarkably pretty ass, Mariotte."

"Thank you." Her cheeks flushed warm as she drew her chemise over her head.

Cedric unfastened the drawstring of her pantalettes and she stepped out of the fancy trimmed linen fallen around her ankles. "You're far prettier naked than clothed."

"I'd say we're a good match, milord." Her wanton smile and speech lightened her heart with surprise. A mistress enjoyed curious liberation, permitted fondness for her lover's body, why not say so?

Cedric turned Mariotte about so he could survey her face, her hard-nippled breasts, and the thick thatch of dark hair between her legs. "Yes, far prettier."

"Seti..." Parting thighs admitted his touch.

He twined fingers in her nether hair, petting and stroking before he embraced her close, her body flush to his own. "Such sweet quim."

The whispered compliment's erotic language transformed Mariotte's legs to pudding. Cedric's kisses hardened, less a tenderness than an imprint of his mouth upon hers.

Viewing Cedric's impressive body couldn't compare to feeling him. Pressed close against his rocky limbs and powerful chest, Mariotte shifted and worked until the delicate curves of her high, pointed breasts molded to his hard planes. His cock pulsed against her drenched private curls; restless, squirming hips sought to placate him. Cedric's hands wandered her flesh, enlivening her, searching for sensitive places where his touch spurred moans or soft cries.

Cedric pushed her down into bed and lifted her arms above her head, pinning her beneath him. Mariotte caught an excited breath and struggled against rising panic that he might be too much for her. His gaze crept over her exposed form like a predator eyeing cornered prey. "Seti..." A small explosion of pleasure rippled through Mariotte's limbs.

"Sweet." Cedric caressed gorgeous sensitivity hidden within her sex and Mariotte struck a plaintive wail, her thighs slipping farther apart while her hips danced upon Cedric's skilled fingers.

Cedric's mouth closed over her breast and began to suckle and nibble without mercy.

Mariotte squirmed, pushing up against her lover, groaning endearments and compliments, her language lapsing to love words in her lyrical Creole dialect, and kissed the top of Cedric's ear. Cedric delved deeper, compelled pressure between her legs. She could not stop writhing against Cedric's chest, his mouth teasing Mariotte's nipples into aching buds.

"Please Cedric, I feel so..." She mewled.

Busy fingers increased their efforts, sliding over her burning clitoris in swift, pressing strokes. Mariotte's senses soared, her world narrowed to the man in bed with her and his irresistible touch.

It...felt...soooo good.

"Come for me, darling. Just let go." Cedric's words roughened, growling, lacking the polish and finesse of his natural speech.

Her insides shattered first, pulsing into spasms of pleasure. She couldn't control her thrusting hips, and those agile fingers didn't slacken, forcing her back up past the plateau, convincing her to fly again.

She sobbed Cedric's name to the high ceiling above them in surrender.

"Perfect." Cedric rose to his knees between Mariotte's thighs. Grasping her ankles, he lifted her legs high until her ankles rested upon his massive shoulders. She glanced down through hazy eyes and took in his heavy cock, swelled to full, flushed arousal, as he guided it toward her drenched entrance.

Cedric slid in deep, neither slowing nor hastening until he filled her to the hilt. Her body opened, blossoming like a flower to engulf him. She felt, more than heard, her innocence snap under Cedric's entry. At last he lodged within her, his scrotum brushing her where the tops of her thighs met the bottom of her buttocks.

"Åh..."

Cedric caught his breath and he met her eyes in a tender smile. He massaged her thighs and calves until she settled into the unaccustomed position, then his hips eased back and he thrust.

The jolt galvanized Mariotte through the haze of her recent fulfillment. She reached up dreamily to caress his jaw as he rode her.

"You're very sweet, my dear." He turned his face into her touch to kiss his fingers. "So snug. And so very wet."

His quickening pace pulled a groan from Mariotte as fresh fire kindled within her womb. He opened her legs wider, hammering into her, striking her deepest center. His thrusts pushed her into the featherbed and she sprang back, automatic counterpoint to delectable friction.

Mariotte felt helpless, almost like a tool Cedric used to pleasure himself, deliciously free of the responsibility to please him. Her mind floated along in the dreamy haze of desire, taking in every aspect of his expression, the sensation of his grip, the force of his body ramming into her own.

Some of Cedric's wet hair slipped over his shoulders, serpents of red-gold flame uncoiling and spilling between them, flicking water on her breasts and on her stomach.

"You feel so good ... inside me... Seti ... " She reached up,

cupped his face in her hand.

Cedric's eyes narrowed, then widened and the tight contact of their joined bodies sent his burgeoning growl's vibration against Mariotte's body before it grew audible. He plunged deeper than ever, throbbing to explosion within her private depths, his essence blending with her own.

He fell against her, panting, "You're wonderful," and lay still with her for some time before their bodies softened and eased enough to separate. He dropped beside her and lifted her chin to plant leisurely kisses upon her mouth. His plundering tongue seemed another kind of sex to Mariotte, entering her mouth, claiming and possessing all he touched.

So much more than I expected...

Precious lassitude engulfed Mariotte like she'd gone riding on an arduous hunt that took up most of the day and yielded substantial prizes. She twined her legs in his and rubbed his flank, murmuring contentment.

"You want to rest." Kisses softened his whisper.

She smiled as he picked some of her stray curls away from her face. "It's better than I thought."

"Is it?" Faint frowning pleated his brow. Mariotte nodded. "You'll make a very proper companion to us, dear." He sealed the promise with delicate kisses upon her eyelids.

Mariotte sighed wordless agreement. She could not have hoped for a better wedding night in her younger, dreamier days. Far more exhilarating in some ways, less so than others. She buried her face in Seti's chest, unwilling to riddle present joys with apprehensions of the future.

He left the bed and she bit back disappointment. She mustn't reproach him if he wished to leave her. He emptied clean water

from the pitcher in his washstand onto a square of toweling and returned to her with the damp cloth.

Mariotte started to sit up when he blotted gently between her legs.

"You're bleeding." A gentle hand splayed on her stomach. She swallowed, lay back. Submitting to his gentle cleansing seemed far more intimate than their former lovemaking.

"It feels like we've been on a lengthy journey, doesn't it? Like we've gone...somewhere else. But we've not left the room." Her inquiry sounded far away to her. Warm lips brushed her forehead.

"We'll lay quietly a while. I'll wake you for your bath. We've church tomorrow morning."

"Yes, milord." Dreams already clouded her mind.

"Seti," he coaxed. "My name's Seti."

CHAPTER 9

"You're a picture, Miss." Serena finished building Mariotte's hairstyle, an intricate knot pinned high near the crown with plenty of loose ringlets framing her face and dangling almost to her shoulders. Despite the coiffure's careless, random look, it took some time for the maid to position and pin her hair into place.

"Lovely, Serena." Mariotte had not thought the classical Grecian hairstyles suited her wide face, but the servant's careful adjustments in the knot's tension lessened its severity and the artless curls in front lent symmetry.

"You look like a beautiful English lady." Serena sounded delighted in achieving her aim. "Nobody you meet'll say you haven't a lady's maid who won't turn you out right."

Mariotte broke into a grin. "I hope I'm a credit to you."

"You are, but try not to smile so broadly, Miss. 'Specially when you're out. Not that your mouth isn't pretty and you've good teeth, but frequent smiling fixes lines and wrinkles in the complexion."

"I'll try to remember."

"Diamond of the first water."

The maid's triumph altered the moment she recognized Cedric leaning casually in the open doorway, a lazy smile fixed upon his well-cut mouth. Serena bobbed into a brief, stiff curtsy, her eyes riveted to the floor. She avoided looking at Cedric and scurried out of the room once he excused her.

Serena's afraid of Seti. Wonder struck Mariotte. Seti's dangerous reputation notwithstanding, he treated his servants with greater civility than rumor alleged he sometimes showed his fellow peers.

Mariotte looked back at him over her shoulder. "Will you come in?" Did she seem ordinary, normal, or did heated longing from the previous evening linger in her eyes? Discretion formed a vital aspect of their bargain.

"Good morning." He glided across the room toward her dressing table.

"Gracious, had I known I'd be in company with a beau this morning I would've dressed more smartly." She admired Cedric's tailored coat, the vivid blue of peacock feathers, exaggerated lapels or collars unnecessary for his figure to show to best advantage. His cravat boasted a handsome garnet pin gleaming in its foaming lace. Palest fawn trousers clung to thighs bulging with saddle muscles and tucked into Hessian boots buffed to glossy perfection.

Cedric offered his ironic smile to her compliment. "You wrong yourself, ma'am. You'll do well enough to be seen in company

with us. I like this." He gestured at her pale blush muslin gown. "I know white's all the fashion these days, but that color seems to soften you. You look as fetching as a strawberry ice."

"Thank you, sir." She refrained from laughing outright at Cedric's fondness for iced desserts. Exuberance extended from his genuine relish, not the *ton's* desire for decadent living.

"You want a gewgaw to go with that." He slid a long case out of one pocket. "I've the thing."

He'd bought her a gift of jewelry. An entire schoolroom of girlish nervousness fluttered within Mariotte's insides. It shouldn't surprise her; gentlemen gave their mistresses jewelry and subsidized their wardrobes. Important men took pride in a well turned-out mistress.

All the same, intimacy haunted his presenting the gift to her. Cedric hadn't involved himself with her clothes and the new furnishings she'd ordered for her rooms beyond paying the bills for them.

"It's beautiful." Was it a form of payment, his thanks for the previous evening? Mariotte lowered her eyes. Their embraces and twinings and joinings meriting reward at Seti's whim lay stale, an unpalatable morsel on her tongue. Mariotte squared her shoulders and willed herself to smile. "It's beautiful," she repeated. A bargain was a bargain. "Thank you."

He arched a pale golden brow and one corner of his mouth quirked. "Yes, most attractive case. You'll find its contents more wearable, though." Cedric eased the lid away and Mariotte caught her breath at the milky gleam of some of the largest pearls she'd ever seen.

"Extraordinary." She brushed fingertips over the air above the luminous necklace. "Their color's so rosy."

"They're an Indian import. Quite the thing for you." He lifted the strand of pearls from their silk velvet bed. Their cool first touch warmed to her body heat as Seti settled them around her throat and fastened the catch. "See how fine your skin makes them?" He played with a loose ringlet swirling behind her neck.

Mariotte sought a witty rejoinder to rouse his humor; a proper mistress would break the moment's strange gravity, not simper like a schoolroom miss. *Zut alors!* Instead of flirtation, she whispered honesty, "Thank you, Seti."

"A pleasure, m'dear, providing a trinket with a superlative wearer." His compelling eyes had fun dancing in their depths. He seemed pleased enough with her responses. "Now come. You've all your required fripperies? We'll be late to church."

She rose, conscious of time again, and collected her shawl, an elegant paisley design in soft shades of violet, blue, and forest green. Cedric shook his head as she settled a charming poke bonnet of creamy pink silk striped taffeta over her complicated hairstyle and knotted the wide satin ribbons into a bow on the left side of her face. Her large reticule, looped on her wrist, hung awkwardly due to the weight of her hunting knife.

"I find it remarkable your maid spends a good half hour assembling your psyche-knot for you to cover it up." Seti waited long enough for her to settle one gloved hand upon his offered arm before steering her out of her room and down the gallery toward the stairs.

"That's the beauty of this bonnet, though. It's shaped so's not to crush my hair." Mariotte tapped the raised blocked back. Her demonstration sent Cedric's brows climbing.

"Sensible idea."

They moved down the stairs at a moderate pace, hastening

toward the bottom.

"I have a question, milord." Mariotte draped her shawl over one shoulder and wrapped the opposite end over her arm.

"I'm at your service, *mademoiselle*." He smoothed one of his gloves and planted his hat squarely on his head.

"Is it safe for us to attend church? I mean with your unique condition?" She watched his golden brows knit, corners of his deep set eyes crinkling. "The unique condition of your family. Can you be comfortable during the drive to church? It's a very fine day out."

"Why Mariotte." Cedric burst into laughter. He threw the door wide open.

"Seti!"

Sunlight bathed him from head to toe, including his irrepressible grin. "There! Don't see any smoke or sparks, do you?"

"No, sir." Her heart galloped. While I'm delighted you don't combust upon exposure, you might've employed greater tact in explanation!

"I'm relieved to hear it. I'm fond of this coat and would hate to see it ruined. After you."

Mariotte trailed past him, crestfallen at her own foolishness. Indeed, Dane and Troyes stood outside the landau, handsome and well-dressed, like Seti. Neither suffered burning agonies or dissolving into ashes folk wisdom asserted a proper ending for vampires exposed to daylight.

Troyes probably deserved the title of the family beauty, matching Cedric's height with a slender hard-muscled build. His elegant facial features almost cost him masculinity; his strong jaw and well-defined brow compensated their delicacy. Aquamarine eyes blazed, brilliant jewels in his fair complexion, and glossy raven hair gave smart contrast to both.

Dane stood the shortest of the three, a bare hand taller than Mariotte, superbly proportioned and fit, with thick, brown curling hair and warm dark eyes. His style adopted conservative fashion, but his dimpled smile exuded mild charm. Mariotte could not completely place Dane's appeal; perhaps it had to do with him being so much younger than the other two.

"My dear." Cedric guided Mariotte through the landau's open door. Mariotte settled upon a comfortable padded seat upholstered in supple leather and arranged her skirts as Cedric took his place beside her. Dane and Troyes sat opposite them.

One of the footmen shut the door and Mariotte's pulse raced, heady as a child in a sweet shop. *Why, God's own angels could envy the Three Devils their looks!* Mariotte tsked inwardly. *I'm becoming a heretic as well as a strumpet.* What if the angels surrounding them all accessed her thoughts and took exception to them?

The landau gave a little start and rolled past the front of Cedric's house. Mariotte spared a moment's admiration for the Circus's imposing, curved shape as the horses picked their way through its circular drive.

Bath's architecture spilled splendor into beholding eyes, rife with fanciful, Roman influences. The honey golden limestone utilized in constructing virtually all the buildings in Bath endowed the city with an opulent, gilded appearance. Mariotte found it graceful, pleasing to the eye, but somewhat repetitive.

"Beautiful morning." Dane offered the smile she liked so much, his warm eyes roving over her figure, more appreciative than impudent. "Beautiful woman." Troyes's rakish look crossed the line to insolence.

"Mariotte is pleasantly surprised by our ability to brave the daylight and enter a Christian church unscathed." Cedric offered the subject with as casual an air as he might discuss a pending engagement.

"Ah, the power of that fiction is remarkable to us as well." Dane's fingers spread on his knees. Troyes endorsed the assessment with a hearty chuckle. "We're much stronger after sunset. Our senses sharper. We've a nocturnal nature. But if we were unable to function in daylight we'd be piteous creatures indeed. As for religious sacraments, the only people I've ever known to reject God or to suffer harm from exposure to religious relics are people possessed by demons. There's an atheist movement in the city who enjoys debating the local theosophical society. A possessed human may be behind it."

"Sometimes a witch casts a spell inviting demons into a host to curse a particular individual or family. It's the messiest affair imaginable." Cedric shook his head. "Most of the wretches end up in Bedlam or confined in attics where their families try to forget them. A few others seek qualified practitioners to exorcise the demon, but the process is difficult and can harm or kill the host. Best to leave magicians and witches and the like as unoffended as possible." His rippling shoulder brushed Mariotte's sleeve. "Or slay them if they happen to be offended. In any event, we attend church regularly. The whole of Bath would talk about anybody who avoided services too often."

"I see."

"The folklore of missing shadows, the absence of reflections, aversion to garlic and wolfsbane." Cedric drummed his fingers upon his walking stick's ivory handle. "All of it makes for eccentric storytelling and inspires superstition, but I imagine most creatures would not survive under such limitations. The truth of our origins is much more prosaic. We are a natural occurring species and, I presume, since we share close resemblance to and are able to procreate with the rare human, must share common heritage with humanity." Another shrug accompanied an expressive look.

Procreation? A montage of how she spent the night with Cedric before retiring for her bath and sleep struck Mariotte's internal eyes in vivid detail. One of the most permanent consequences of illicit relations hadn't troubled her mind since she'd believed that outcome impossible. Seti made it sound like an unusual occurrence, but what if she conceived with him? Or any of them?

"Beyond some striking physical and psychic differences and our smaller numbers there's not much to tell."

"You've always been a paragon of modesty, Set." Troyes's brusque tones relieved Mariotte's fruitless search for rejoinder to Cedric's understatement.

"And you, my love, are ever a paragon of pride." Leaning forward, Cedric planted a kiss upon the handsome man's mouth.

Troyes's arms closed over Cedric's broad back and pulled him as closely as room in the landau allowed. Troyes's brilliant eyes shut and his cheeks hollowed as he moaned aloud, drawing upon Cedric's mouth until the redhead's lips parted so they might enjoy a more intimate taste of each other.

Cedric's hat fell away; reflex prompted Mariotte to catch it. Now she could easily see the red-gold head tilting and moving against the dark one; lips fitted and re-fitted to each other to offer comfort and love. Close enough to hear the plump smacking sounds of their lips, the affectionate tableau touched something within Mariotte, quickened her heart until her laces slackened and small, quick shocks of excitement ignited in her groin.

Their passion agreed with her, more than agreed. Not disgusting at all. Knowledge knifed Mariotte's brain. *Good grief!* It's supposed to be evil, something sinful, but it's only two men kissing.

Though unable to tear her gaze completely away from the lovers, Mariotte glanced at Dane. To her relief he seemed no less fascinated with the couple than Mariotte herself. His dimples deepened when he caught her eye and his wink conveyed affectionate humor.

"There are so many ways to love, Mariotte." His pleasant bass caressed her.

"Yes." She vented her concurrence in a longing sigh, less knowing than he but no longer truly ignorant. When Troyes released Cedric and the two men parted, Mariotte waited until Cedric settled himself before returning his top hat.

"My thanks, dear Mariotte." His eyes glowed, mellow velvet, as he replaced the accessory.

"My pleasure."

"So it is. You smell scrumptious. I do believe if Troyes lifted your skirts he'd find fresh nectar to enjoy between your thighs." That lazy smile curled his lip once more and he brushed Mariotte's blushing cheek with his fingertips before capturing her hand and holding it in his lap.

"We're close to church now and the windows are open." Dane waved fingers gloved in palest dove gray to acknowledge an acquaintance strolling outside their carriage.

"We mustn't make a scandal of my American cousin." Cedric's

lassitude morphed to less flexible posture. "I am introducing you among my acquaintance as my ward, an orphan of an American family with whom I've enjoyed past connections. It's much more in keeping with your manners and far more believable and acceptable to the *ton* than my recruiting you from service in a parlor-house."

"I understand and thank you." Though she hadn't dared broach the subject to Cedric, Mariotte quailed at the thought of the reception to which she'd be subject if the full circumstances of her relation to Cedric and his household became known. The man was such a puzzle. He had no compunction at blatantly hiring a woman to be his mistress or inviting her to share his opulent home—a thing unheard of among the *bon ton*—and Mariotte doubted he cared a fig about public opinion's judgment of his actions.

"Don't thank me."

"Why not?" She clutched the end of her shawl as the landau glided to a stop. Bath Abbey loomed before them in all its Gothic splendor and the footmen hurried to open their doors so as not to impede the traffic behind them.

"M'dear, we've not concluded treaty with the United States for our last war, yet, and we're constantly scrapping with the French. Were it possible I'd introduce you as a wholesome Englishwoman, but your accent disavows the notion." His gentle grip on her hand tightened for a moment before he raised it to his lips. "You may not find your reception more hospitable than were every particular of our connection known." He pressed a kiss upon the back of her glove, the pressure firm enough to push lightning through kid leather and into her pulse. "But you can believe none'll dare complain about your origins to my face."

Dane sprang out of the landau with Troyes close on his heels.

A bluff man with a rounded upper back expressed familiar congeniality.

"Hades! Lucifer! Where's the third devil?" Tolling church bells supplied irony.

Mariotte's eyes flicked to the open door and back to the gentleman squeezing her hand.

"London nicknames, dear. Common in our set. Now no need to be afraid. You've as good breeding as many of the humans here and a vastly more agreeable disposition than several." Cedric squeezed her hand again, released it, and descended from the carriage, turning at once to offer her his hand as she made her way out.

"And there's Seti himself, and egad! He's brought Persephone with him!"

"Good morning, Flavius. My dear, allow me to introduce Sir Flavius Ludlow of Wilshire. Flavius, my ward Miss Sabrier, lately of Louisiana."

"Where's that?"

"The colonies. Bonaparte sold it to the Americans a few years ago." Cedric waited for the knight to consult his deficient education before he made suitable reply.

"Of course. Delighted, my dear."

"Good morning, sir." Concentrating upon the formalities of exchanging courtesies with Sir Flavius aided Mariotte in concealing her disquiet with Cedric's casual remarks regarding Napoleon's sale of Louisiana Territory to the United States.

Mariotte had barely entered her teens when the transfer occurred—half her present age—but Cedric's mention brought to mind the habits of older people recounting long past events as recent occurrences. How old was Cedric Edgard? His appearance depicted a man in his prime years, but vampires enjoyed exceptional longevity. He could have witnessed the passing of centuries, seen things and events Mariotte couldn't imagine, and look forward to seeing still more.

"Come and meet my wife, my dear. I married a wonderful woman who'll expire of curiosity if she's put off to meet you 'til after services." The well-meaning knight offered his arm.

"Thank you." Mariotte couldn't meet Cedric's eyes as she accepted Sir Flavius's escort into the mammoth abbey. The arm beneath her hand felt flaccid and frail compared to Cedric's hard muscular planes and contours. Sir Flavius's deterioration meant human, though, and for all Cedric's nonchalant downplay of the differences between their respective species, the differences existed.

CHAPTER 10

"How do you like our friends in Bath, Mariotte?" Dane broke a shortbread biscuit in half and spread clotted cream on it before gnawing its rough edge.

"I'm sure I'll like many of them as I get to know them better." Mariotte dipped her spoon into her dish of lemon water ice. The smooth citrusy confection struck her tongue with instant refreshment.

"Don't be certain of that, *cherie*." Troyes relished a glass of port, standing with his back to one of the stained glass panels decorating the summer house. "With some society distance lends enchantment to the view."

"I see how that can be the case. I didn't always know what to make of some people. Lady Ludlow and Mrs. Featherstone are

very gracious." Introductions and a few cordial exchange of pleasantries after church services had resulted in small wellmeaning attentions. Several of the ladies she'd met left their cards at Royal Crescent and a civil few took the trouble to call within a few days.

The slim stack of prettily written invitations on the desk in Mariotte's private parlor boasted quality over quantity, but it seemed to Mariotte the denizens of Bath loved their parties and balls as much as New Orleans did. And scheduled them as frequently if not more so.

"You tolerated Mrs. Dearbourne's snobbery with more patience than her rank deserves." Troyes tossed his head in a manner that would have seemed arrogant in other men.

Mariotte offered a diplomatic smile. "Mrs. Dearbourne was a bit high in the instep at our introduction. I found she improved with better acquaintance. She warmed up later when I met her daughters. Miss Julia Dearbourne's most charming."

"Mrs. Dearbourne's been hoping Dane will make love to one of her daughters and take the chit off her hands. An attractive young lady's an unwelcome addition to our household in her eyes."

"I'm not that young." Mariotte swept her glance over the table's elegant spread of sweetmeats and sandwiches.

Dane's chuckle held the warmth and strength of his coffee. "You're not on the shelf yet, Mariotte. I suppose we'll have to contend with an occasional caller or two seeking to sweep you off your feet."

"I'm flattered you sound a trifle doleful at the prospect, Dane." Mariotte softened her automatic flippancy with a genuine smile. In the few weeks she'd lived at Royal Crescent Dane spent the most time with her, attentive and polite, accompanying her on walks through the neighborhood and strolling with her through the elegant Pump Room in Bath.

Being a proper mistress to three men proved more challenging than Mariotte supposed. How could one know where duty ended and what, if any, sincere affection for her patrons was appropriate? Her admiration for Dane grew from respect for his manner toward everyone. The barrister's sound use of argument compelled the most resistant ears; no one seemed beyond Dane's reach in sensible discussion. Pity, the *ton* scorned his good use of his education.

"Do you not think of marriage, Mariotte? You might be happiest married." Dane's eyes warmed her as she scraped the last of her ice.

She frowned at him, drew a cherry from the dish of fruit in the center of the table and ate it. "Why do you think so?"

"I mean you were born and lived in a sphere where marriage is your most appropriate resolution to prolonged courtship. If you find a man you care for."

Any prospective suitor would have found himself hard-pressed to surpass the luxury and sensual gratification Cedric offered her, but marriage's security trumped retirement into social ignominy once these gentlemen wearied of her.

"Perhaps one day." She pouted as though in a muddle before allowing flirtation to curve her lips. "Unfortunately, I can't marry all of you."

Hearty laughter from both men brightened the summer house despite its shade.

"The day you marry, I wash my hands of you." Troyes shook his head. "Married women are nothing but trouble."

"Trouble has its allurements but over time I imagine it can be

wearing." Mariotte chose her words with care. Since Troyes had been in residence at Royal Crescent as of Sunday last it seemed probable he and Mrs. Redworth weren't on sympathetic terms at present. His rougher manners and speech did not match his aristocratic elegance and gregarious reputation.

"Come, *chère-amie*." Troyes set his half-finished port on the table, brilliant eyes all a-sparkle, his smile pure wicked seduction. "My *very dear* beautiful friend." He draped an arm over Mariotte as she rose from her place at the table. His lips landed upon her mouth at the bow, then drifted to either corner, back and forth. "We do so like having you home with us."

"Why?" If the husky whisper did not sound exactly like her own voice, Troyes's kisses held the blame; his kisses and his hand smoothing the bibbed front of her bodice a little too roughly.

Fingertips fanned over her throat and her breast. "Because you want us. You were so damn wet the morning we went to church. You like fucking." Coarse language meant to stimulate fell, distorted and offensive, on the air. "You'd like it if I invited you for a drive, eh? Long slow drive through town. Or out to the country. You'd need to leave your fancy drawers at home to enjoy the trip, though." Turquoise promise burned in his gaze. Lithe fingers pushed so hard against her breast Mariotte whimpered, certain they'd leave a bruise.

"Stop. Please." Mariotte's hand landed upon Troyes's with a decided slap of bare skin on bare skin. Perhaps her pushing him away surprised him too much to prevent it or he did not care. Mariotte swept his hand off her body and retreated what appeared a safe distance beyond his reach.

"Christ's blood!" Troyes did not pursue her to the opposite side of the summer house but the venom he hurled reached the distance. "See, Dane? Even the wanton won't have me!"

"Troyes. You're not yourself." Dane rose from his place and stood close to the other man. His quick exchange of glances with Mariotte communicated a need for caution.

"Not himself? Dane, he's foxed." Mariotte's vision slanted. Adrenaline pumped her full of breathless panic. "I'd no idea a vampire could become foxed."

"It's not easy," Dane admitted after a reluctant pause. "On an empty stomach—I mean no feeding for several weeks—the system becomes more susceptible."

"Ah." Mariotte wrestled the impulse to move. The situation seemed more volatile than when she'd made the decision to leave home and for comparable reasons. She gulped in a constricting throat. She had more to lose now. "That explains his mistaking me for a whore."

"My girl, what do you think Seti brought you home and set you up for?"

Mariotte sucked up courage in a deep breath before answering the vampire in frigid tones. "To study music and enjoy your company. I cannot enjoy your company if I fear you being unwell at any moment." It's true, her mind rebelled. If she tolerated Troyes's degrading addresses now, they would no doubt become a chronic burden of embarrassment. "You leave me no choice but to decline your—your invitations until you're quite recovered, thank you." She braced herself for whatever effect her words must have, forced herself to shrug off a wish for Cedric's presence. Breeze fingered the tree limbs surrounding the summer house and adjusted their shadows. The stained glass panels dappled the ceiling with gaily colored light.

Troyes's glare felt as tangible as his more seductive glances.

He looked to Dane and croaked, "There's something to what she says, yes? Hard to enjoy good conversation when a man's in one's cups. Much less a good fuck."

"Indeed." Dane held out his arms. "Why not let me feed you and you'll sleep off the port."

"And later we'll seduce Mariotte." The smile stretching his elegant mouth held honest anticipation and Troyes welcomed Dane's arm around his back.

"Yes, it can be a pleasure for us all." Dane ruffled Troyes's hair at the back of his neck. "I love cradling a female between us and feeling our arms meet across her body. Our cocks touching inside her and plowing until she bucks against us both and squeezes us dry of seed when she spends. You like that, too, do you not?"

Troyes snorted. "Silver tongued, British, barrister bastard."

"I object, sir. For my late mother's sake." Dane chuckled without resentment. "You'll like the idea better when you're sober."

Mariotte made no comment, but she privately agreed with Troyes. Dane's compelling tones painted vivid pictures in her mind that, despite current circumstances, did not lack appeal. She had no desire to consider Troyes's erotic possibilities after the gorgeous Frenchman showed her insult.

Dane nipped his finger and held it up to Troyes's lips, slipping inside Troyes's mouth the moment he opened. Mariotte forced herself not to flinch or whimper her concern for Dane. The ministration struck Mariotte as the equivalent of an animal handler sticking his limb into an unhealthy lion's mouth. Troyes's rumbling moan reassured her he had no intention of ripping Dane's finger from his hand with his powerful fangs. The Frenchman's lips puckered around Dane's bloody digit and suckled him. Dane muttered soothing nonsense and patted the taller man's shoulders to coax him to sink upon the wicker ottoman tucked in the corner behind them. Woven reed crackled and muttered beneath Troyes; he wound his arm around Dane's waist, holding them together. Dane voiced no protest when Troyes released his finger and nuzzled under his sleeve, licking Dane's wrist before sinking fangs into Dane's flesh. Mariotte started at Dane's openmouthed hiss, the sound distinctly inhuman to her. It faded into pliant moans from both men, blending into Mariotte's aroused senses with traces of birdsong, rustling tree limbs, and the regular tranquility of flowing water from the fountain in the rose garden.

A kind of lovemaking. The act held depth she hadn't witnessed when Tucker fed Seti at his bath. Mariotte found nothing of violence or terror in the sight of them; their embrace's beauty struck her.

"Troyes." Dane's dark eyes warmed with tenderness. A glance in her direction assured Mariotte Dane recalled her presence and wanted to reassure her. A hesitant smile hovered behind her face; it slipped free and Dane smiled back. Troyes's whisper, muted against Dane's skin and blood, pronounced a French endearment, *my heart*. What did the blossoming warmth beneath her ribcage mean?

"You're awfully good to me, Dane, I don't deserve it."

"Sometimes goodness is best given to a men who needs it, Troyes. Whether he deserves it or not's immaterial." Dane yawned. "Come into the house. You'll need more feeding."

"Oui." Troyes's liquid glide to his feet revealed the smooth coordination he'd lacked before tasting Dane's blood. Identifying vampire's subtle differences from human grew easier for Mariotte the more she observed. Prior to his feeding on Dane, Troyes's

movement appeared more human.

How much starvation and ingestion of spirits would be required to impair Troyes's abilities until he functioned as an inebriated human? Mariotte decided she preferred not to find out.

"I ask your pardon, *mademoiselle*." Troyes did not ignore her as she accompanied them down the brick path curving past the garden to the house. "I'm an unwell cad but I am not customarily what you have seen today. In time, I'll make it good." Troyes strode a pace ahead of Mariotte, made an about-face and continued walking backward in front of her. Eyes of clear aqua brilliance met her gaze with a solid nod. "You've my word, lady."

"Thank you, sir." She did not want to respect Troyes in that moment, but her reluctant sympathy for his unhappy romance and his own manner commanded it. His upright bearing contained pride, more dignified than arrogant, utterly undaunted. He embodied the squire's son tossed by a horse, rising from the dust with confidence he'd master the beast in good time. The prince who'd lost everything in battle, standing on ground he planned to conquer and rule once more.

Troyes glowed with satisfaction as he whirled around to face his path. "And believe I'll make time to take you for that ride. It'll be worth it."

Mariotte could not prevent her sigh. Although she wished Troyes no harm, she held the unpleasant conviction the striking vampire so long accustomed to victory in matters of love might not know when was best to concede defeat in an unwholesome affair.

Tucker met them in the music room.

"Tucker, we're in for the night. Troyes will go to bed and he needs feeding. Is anyone available?"

"I'll send the lad for beef's blood, sir. His lordship is looking for you."

"Dane." Cedric's lean strides headed in their direction as they made their way through the music room to meet him in the hall. He took one look at Troyes, then his eyes flicked to Mariotte before looking at him again. "What's this?"

"Troyes felt indisposed, milord, and now he's going to bed." Mariotte interjected before Dane began to explain. "Dane has ordered him food."

Cedric's mouth thinned and his visage grew stern. "Troyes. Do not ruin yourself over that woman." The unpleasant note in his words matched his narrowed eyes.

"Be all to rights by morning, Seti. My appetite's off." Troyes dismissed Cedric's concern. He didn't linger and followed Tucker's lead upstairs, calling, "Good night," over one shoulder.

Cedric's arm slipped over Mariotte's shoulders. "Are you all right? Was he untoward to you?" He kissed her mouth and cupped the side of her face in one hand.

"No, milord. Some unpleasant words were spoken, but Dane recognized his situation and fed him at once."

Seti nodded. "My thanks." He captured Mariotte's chin and tilted her to face him. "A vampire suffering intoxication becomes unpredictable. Dangerous in the worst circumstances."

"He seemed not so dangerous as in ill temper, sir." Seti's tone confirmed Mariotte's unpleasant suspicions.

"Stop calling me sir." Seti's reminder sharpened.

"Seti." Mariotte enunciated each syllable with exaggerated pronunciation.

Mollified, he turned back to Dane. "I've had an urgent message

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

from Alannah. We're going to Rowan House at once. Aksel Raymond's dead. Someone or something beat him to death in his room."

CHAPTER 11

"Awfully quiet."

Cedric's clipped nod seconded Dane's wonder. Rowan House had never been shuttered since its doors first opened during Henry Tudor's reign. Tonight, not a window facing Great Pulteney Street remained uncovered to admit one sliver of sunset. No whiff of voices or music emanated through the stout oak doors, and the aromas of delicious hot suppers and desserts waxed fainter than usual since fewer guests dined in the establishment.

Cedric lifted the shiny brass knocker, rapped three times, and turned his head to meet the houseboy's cool stare in the door's glass front so he'd recognize them and usher them to Alannah's office. Even her beloved birds perched, preened, and groomed without chatter or song. "We've operated Rowan House for over three centuries without a drop of bloodshed on the grounds." Alannah's distress shattered the proprietess's human façade. Green tinged her complexion. Her lips and the whites of her eyes took on dehydration's icy blue cast. "Every guest to cross the threshold respected our law and the binding magic has always held..." Resting her elbows on her desk, she covered her face with scaly hands and remained silent several minutes. Her throat worked noisily as she cleared it.

Dane poured water from a hand-painted carafe into its coordinating cup.

"You've gone into dry shock, Alannah. Drink this in slow little sips." Dane held the gleaming porcelain before her until Alannah grasped the cup in both hands and drew it to her mouth. "That's good. Feels better, eh?" He gestured to the junior footman standing at silent attention near the door. "Fetch a bowl of crushed ice from the bar or the ice house."

"Do you know what time it occurred?" Cedric waited for Alannah to drain the cup of water and refilled it. Water spots appeared pink on her bluish mouth.

"I sent for you right after I found him, but I don't know when he—when it was done to him." She drank another half cup of water in two swallows and rubbed her temples. "Trissa had gone to his room to see if he wanted help with his bath, or if he needed any other conveniences before he departed tomorrow. And he was there on the floor. Dead on the floor." She dipped her fingers in the water and touched her flaking cheeks and forehead before drinking again. "I locked the room and sent for you."

Cedric nodded. "You did the right thing. Do you or someone else in the house recall when and where he was last seen alive?"

"He stayed upstairs mostly, except for meals or to go out." That

made sense, Lykeions tended to keep their own company. "A few times he and his friend strolled in the courtyard. They played cards with some of the gentlemen downstairs but never requested any private company."

His friend. "Is Sir Veikko in the house at present?"

"I don't know what to say to him. He ran up to London two nights ago, we expect him back tomorrow. He'll probably declare a damn vendetta oath and want to slaughter my whole family for not securing Aksel's safety." Her tone rose to a whiny hiccough.

"Not in my Bath." Cedric had no intention of tolerating the potential danger to human and Extranatural citizens related to blood feuding. "Alannah, Sir Veikko is a Lykeion knight. While honor bound to investigate and avenge Aksel's death, he's equally obliged not to vent his rage upon innocents."

"I don't understand how he could think we didn't have some part in it. No one ought to have been able to kill Aksel in the first place if our guardian spells worked properly!" She sobbed, her fear's pungent musk souring the room.

"Alannah, try to remain calm. Magic's not infallible."

"Here." Dane rolled a linen napkin around a handful of chopped ice the servant retrieved. He held the cool mass to one side of her face and positioned the bowl within easy reach. "Let some pieces of ice dissolve in your mouth. You need the moisture." Alannah obeyed his instructions. "How long has it been since your guardian spells have been reworked?"

"All current. They were last proofed in eighty-nine by a High Master of Craft." The vampires exchanged glances. The killer had resistance to magical compulsion or had the acumen to thwart witchcraft's highest academic level.

"Has anyone else been in Aksel's room besides the bath

nymph?"

Alannah shook her head. Fragments of dry scalp sprinkled her shoulders. "I locked it all up since she found him, but I don't know who else may have gone in before her."

"Where're all the guests?" Cedric noticed the downstairs parlors were mostly empty.

"Many departed. I asked them to at least wait until you got here but some wouldn't stay. I've got boarding lists of overnight guests but the names could be aliases."

"If the killer stayed overnight he used an alias. Alannah, I need you to answer me as your Justice. Do you have anything to do with the murder or know who might have?"

"No." Her drooping mouth and filling eyes touched reluctant pity in Cedric. The last thing he wished was to inflict greater distress on the buoyant pleasure-seeking Adon daemoness. He detected no abrupt alternation in her body chemistry suggestive of dishonesty, but he hadn't expected to do so.

"We need to go and see Aksel now." He and Dane must examine the corpse and the scene of his death. Alannah locked both arms across her chest and choked up a piece of ice. It landed on her desk blotter, its cold rough edges melted smooth from the heat of her mouth. "You don't have to go up with us. If you have a more trusted employee or representative, they can attend."

* * *

"All right?" Despite his dutiful nod, the houseboy's looks convinced Dane the human would faint at any moment. His complexion faded to the color of fresh skimmed milk and the stink of his fear competed with the murder scene's odor. Alannah inspired excellent loyalty in her employees; human establishments could learn a lot from her policies. The parlor house's residents remained in their quarters or attended their duties downstairs with the paltry few guests who hadn't opted for departure.

"Dane? What is your assessment of the remains?" Cedric's inquiry broke through Dane's focus upon inanities and pulled him back to the matter at hand.

The matter at hand was grotesque. Disturbing. Although Dane wished differently, it also intrigued.

"The room's in good shape. No upset furniture or displaced items. No gouging or scuff marks on the floor. Doesn't look like Aksel fought." He took in the body, lying on its right side, all four stiffening limbs bent and extended in random directions. Dane squatted near the pulpy mess of what had been Aksel's head. "I don't smell the chemical components of fright. There are traces of his body starting to change, but they're unpronounced." He gestured at the thick stubble coating Aksel's cheeks and chin. "There's a little hair on the back of his hand. He appears to have died not knowing he needed to defend himself until it was too late."

"Attempted shifting might have been his body's spontaneous reaction to repair itself after he was incapacitated. Death interrupted the process." Cedric hunched over Dane. "Bludgeoned alongside his face at first, near the ear—note how flat his head rests on the floor? His tongue's partially severed; a substantial downward blow literally slammed his mouth shut. That first blow laid him out, perhaps already dead or dying. The killer pulverized the back of his head and neck to make recovery impossible. I doubt there's sufficient intact brain left in his skull to tan a pair of buckskins." Dane gave a low short whistle and winced at his own habit. "Why's his blood so dark and thin? It hardly clotted."

"Lykeion blood oxidizes slower than human blood. It remains bluer in tone though it still reddens upon exposure to air. It stopped clotting because it's dead. You can see the less traumatic injuries did partially heal before he expired."

"Wasteful."

Cedric grinned at his morbid humor. "It's awful. Lykeion blood's most nutritious but it tastes sour. The killer's quite tall I'd say, beyond human range. The blows on his crown hit square before he collapsed. Lykeions don't break down easily. It took muscle and weight to smash bone."

"The weapon's left at the scene." The club looked like some care went into making it, but its battered condition added to the disturbing mental picture of Aksel's murder. Generous silver plating, cracked and broken in places, revealed solid wood darkened with blood and bits of hair, bone, and brain tissue clinging to it. "That should help."

"Why should it help, Dane?" Cedric's steady gaze encouraged him to continue.

"Can't we take it to a reader? One of the local covens should have at least one accomplished reader. To insure better accuracy we could consult the Witchcraft Academy." Dane had not yet seen a reader perform and he was interested in observing the process.

"We can inquire, yes, but we'll not find many readers willing to read the weapon. The psychic residue will make for a traumatic read and the human may suffer emotional damage from witnessing it."

"How about a non-human reader?"

"Elves won't market their talents. Faerie folk are more adept at

enchantment magic than prophecy or divination arts. There aren't many vampire readers. Readers are usually human or of human descent."

"The Lykeions? Wouldn't they want to help expose the murderer?" Dane grimaced at the flecks of stray silver plate shining in the sodden spongy mess of Aksel's head. Time to stand up and dust his hands. If nothing else, additional distance and idle action granted the illusion of death not being so horrible.

"Lykeion readers are about as rare as vampire ones, but we'll ask. Another contention is that the weapon might be trapped to prevent successful reading. No one wants to read an item that might wipe their minds clean as a slate and leave them catatonic for months." If the club had sentience it quailed at Cedric's glowering displeasure. "With the weapon abandoned at the site—I suspect intentionally—we can't hand it over for reading without some risk to the reader."

Dane growled in frustration and Cedric hugged him under one arm. Dane's upper body swiveled into the embrace and both men welcomed the comfort of close contact.

"Your theories?"

"Someone Aksel knew. Or at least someone he didn't fear and admitted into his room. Someone with a well-coordinated plan of attack to make a quick efficient kill and confident in his ability to walk out of here unnoticed. Someone with less stomach for bloody work would not have continued to hammer at him 'til his skull caved in, but the remains lack the artistry of display in which a pleasure-murderer would have indulged. None of the room's trappings are out of place. Aksel's pockets were rifled, but his signet and his medallion remain on his person, so theft seems an unlikely motive or the killer knew possession of the jewelry would identify him as the killer." Cedric licked his upper lip. "Assassination seems most certain, but I don't know many candidates able to make such a hard kill so easily."

Dane lowered his voice. "A Lykeion knight might fill the parameters."

"We must investigate thoroughly. Be absolutely sure. But I see no reason not to suspect."

Dane knelt as far from the body as he could and leaned forward to examine the pocket of Aksel's unfashionable loose-fitting trousers. He fished a handkerchief out of his pocket and shielded his fingertips with it before carefully plucking several cinnamoncolored fibers from the pocket's ripped edge. Folding the square of linen in half, he stood again and offered it for Cedric's inspection.

"Boar bristles." Cedric's scowl deepened. "From a hairbrush. Or some magical use. More work for the librarian." His yawn recalled the lateness of the hour. "We'll send a sketch artist to make drawings of the room first thing in the morning." The Justice turned his attention on the houseboy clutching his bottle of smelling salts at what appeared to be a permanent position near his nostrils. "Until then, absolutely nothing must be moved. When the artists completes their work, the body may be removed and Miss Rowan may order the room's cleansing and purification. I'll send private constables to see these orders carried out and I want to be informed the moment Sir Veikko returns to the house." Cedric paused; neither his bland expression nor his tone suggested any inner turmoil. "Miss Rowan is not subject to my orders unrelated to this incident, but I respectfully suggest she consult with her physician if she's yet unwell on the morrow."

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106

"There, sir. And will you need anything more?"

"I've had more'n enough, *merci bien*, sweet *chere*." Troyes lolled back, a properly helpless invalid with a devastating smile, and allowed Serena to plump and fluff his pillows until they lofted into snowy clouds behind him.

Oh Dear Heaven. Mariotte kept her uncharitable thoughts to herself. Two hours ago Serena gritted her teeth at the prospect of allowing a vampire to feed directly from her veins and now she simpered over Troyes like the pair of them were old familiar sweethearts. It must be an aftereffect of the feeding. Mariotte hoped it wore off soon; her no-nonsense maid didn't deserve residual embarrassment haunting her memories of the evening.

"You do look more pert than you did earlier, sir, I'm so glad."

"Thanks to you. I've never tasted such sweet English."

Serena beamed at the compliment.

Mariotte cleared her throat. She must either wait on Troyes herself or listen to continued absurdity. Troyes might seduce her excellent, respectable servant into fornicating with him. Serena smoldered and Mariotte reconsidered her opinion. Perhaps Troyes faced greater risk of ravishment.

"Serena, that will be all. Thank you." Mariotte pretended to disregard Serena's mutinous look and sharpened her tone when the maid lingered, smoothing the counterpane over Troyes's lap. "Good night." Serena's retreat finalized itself in her heavy footsteps upon the stairs, and Mariotte drew the chair formerly occupied by her maid a respectable distance from Troyes's bedside. "You're looking improved. Cook warmed more beef's blood gravy."

"Merci." He accepted the mug she offered him. *"I'm* fine. It's a pretty night, eh?"

"It's pleasant." The house's emptiness weighed upon her mood. "The gentlemen haven't returned yet. Perhaps they'll remain for the night."

"Alannah keeps nice rooms and she's an old friend."

"Yes." She turned her attention to the novel in her lap, opening to a random page.

"That a good book?"

"Yes."

"Bon. You'll like it better if you turn it right side up. The words make more sense."

"I suspected this didn't look like regular French." Mariotte adjusted the volume.

Troyes's chuckle resonated soft and deep, like the center of caramel beginning to set. He let her read in peace for about three pages before he indulged a gusty sigh.

"Were you never in love before?"

Hasty retorts rose to her lips but could not break free; she recognized melancholy's shadow creeping over Troyes's exquisite features. "I was twice engaged." Her contralto tones disguised any protracted regrets attached to the fact. She hoped.

"I asked if you were in love, not if you were affianced."

"I believe I was during my original engagement." Why couldn't she look at him?

"Then what'd you jilt him for?"

Mariotte's teeth scraped her lower lip as she examined Troyes's perplexed scowl. The embroidered edge of his sheets draped over a lean muscular body. Glossy black hair waved upon his cambric nightshirt, framing a face devoid of imperfection in proportion or coloring. His hands peeked from frilled cuffs, elegant but strong. Milk white, smooth and unlined without a trace of calluses or other hard wear. He looked every inch the aristocratic Frenchman he was, imperious, assured. He'd probably had his pick of women since birth, yet the one he wanted now spurned him.

If they had nothing else in common, Troyes understood rejection.

"I did not break my first engagement. Or the second." The admission coated in implied failure tasted bitter on her lips although time eased some of its sting.

Troyes's sharpening gaze looked more blue than green in lamplight. "Your birthplace must be hip-deep with extraordinary beauties for two different men to relinquish you, *mademoiselle*." His nostrils flared as he considered other possibilities. "Either that or some regional defect has left the male population cork-brained." Lengthy consideration coveted her face, her figure, and the book in her hands. "Not man enough for a woman like you."

Raw, sexual power in Troyes's words and looks knotted underneath Mariotte's belly. She employed brittle humor to dispel its effect. "Nothing so fantastic. Better alternatives in terms of fortune and valuable social connections compel all gentlemen, *monsieur*. No matter how in love they believe themselves. Ladies, too."

"Valuable social connection? In America?" A potent harrumph and a graceful shrug punctuated Troyes's disinclination to credit the concept.

Quiet flurry of action downstairs pulled Mariotte to the edge of her chair with unseemly haste; her unread book kissed the carpet. She pricked her ear to low, masculine conversation in the foyer, at the stairs.

"They're home." She glanced from the open door to the vampire's bed.

"They do reside here." Troyes's twinkling eyes deepened the warmth in Mariotte's cheeks. "How'd Bath talk if the latest *on dit* mentioned Seti spent all night out sporting and left a respectable unmarried lady to the tender mercies of his dissolute friend, eh?"

"Will you be all right on your own if I—"

"I'm more than enough fed, Mariotte. In fact, I'm rather tired out from all Serena's coddling. I ought to sleep. You ought to leave me. I can't sleep with a *belle* like you in my room. *Allons!* Go see your lovers. They've spent the evening less pleasantly than I have."

CHAPTER 12

"I'll leave written orders for Tucker to send first thing in the morning. The sooner the murder room's taken care of, the better. Alannah can move on with business." Cedric deposited his walking stick in its tall brass stand.

"Do you think she'll be all right?" Dane's hat landed on the narrow credenza. "She looked ready to cast up her accounts tonight."

Cedric shrugged out of his coat. "Adon daemons love consistency and it's not unusual for them to abandon a den if they feel it's been violated or tainted in some way. She may sell up and try her luck elsewhere. Hope not, but it could happen." He loosened his cravat and wished he'd made it home for supper, or at least dessert. The foyer offered gloomy welcome, devoid of life and music.

Mariotte's footsteps rushed above them, turning past the landing before her form became visible on the stairs. First her small feet in delicate kid slippers laced with ribbons tied around neat slim ankles. He gave her dress little notice beyond its flattering exposure of her bosom, mounded high at the deep neckline, and the sculpted column of her throat.

"Seti." Eager tones pulled his gaze to her face, glowing from brief exertion, her eyes lively with welcome. The foyer lost dreariness, though she hadn't brought a candle with her. She neared the flight's end; both hands rose before their owner abruptly drew them back and stood in front of him. "We weren't sure to expect you." Her smile curved—mild, soft and almost secretive, her lush mouth closed.

"And you're glad to see me." Heaviness in his chest dissipated into tenderness at her caution. He captured her waist in both hands, lifting her free of the steps and drawing her against his heart, allowing her body to ease slowly down the few inches needed for her feet to reach the floor. "I'm glad to see you, too, m'dear." He surrendered to sentiment before he kissed her.

Her arms wound over his shoulders and her fingers glided over the thick braided queue behind his head, slipping beneath it and spreading along his nape until nerves tightened, sang within his skin. Their lips brushed, pushed together, and molded against each other when they achieved perfect fit, separating to initiate the heavenly seek and find again. Mariotte opened to him with a moan of sweetest need and Cedric's tongue swirled inside the pink interior of her lower lip, met deep velvet softness, and her tongue massaged his.

Her hand flattened over his back between his shoulder blades,

pushing him closer to her until nothing could pass between them.

"Seti." Her rasping whisper quickened his blood with appetites another body would not assuage.

Cedric released her slowly, eyes riveted to her face to watch everything, her maddening slow blink, the softest roses blooming in her cheeks, and the darker red of her mouth swollen from his kisses relaxing into her real smile, full lips parted and pearly teeth.

He felt his face shaping into a comfortable grin. Uncalculated, his picking an unruly tendril tangled against her lashes and smoothing it at her temple. "I prefer being at home, m'dear. Everything I truly want I've brought here."

* * *

"You needn't wait on me, Mariotte." Despite his objection, Cedric appreciated her attention. Leftover lavender ice she fetched from the ice house wasn't unwelcome. "Thank you."

"Your bath was drawn at its normal time, I'm afraid the water's cold."

"It's fine." Cedric had bathed in ice water in the past if he was dirty and no hot baths were available. Kneeling in the tub, he attempted to dismiss vexation at leaving his clothing strewn on the floor. He preferred not to wake Tucker for aid in the middle of the night, but he disliked the idea of making work for Mariotte to do. Ridiculous, Mariotte hardly fagged herself to death collecting his garments and draping them over a chair; why should he feel less of a gentleman?

He collected the soap and began a hasty wash.

"Am I intruding if I stay?"

"No m'dear." He quelled a request she play for him; she must

be tired and music would wake the help, some of whom routinely rose at daybreak to make his home comfortable for his family.

"May I ask about where you went tonight?"

"What would you like to know?" He regretted his short words as he lathered his armpits. The soap's sandalwood fragrance and creamy texture, the scent of clean water, the citrus and rosewater of his dessert, and Mariotte's own private complexity of sweetness chased the odors of death and decomposition from his nostrils. Cedric had no wish to revisit the past hours.

"Why did Miss Rowan summon you to the house to, ah..." Her mouth and brows puckered while she groped for suitable speech.

"Investigate murder?" He rubbed the sides of his neck with the sponge.

"Yes, that."

"I'm Justice in Bath." He splashed and sponged soap off his skin, uncertain what to make of her confusion. She knew so many things about him, casual likes and abhorrence along with secret intimacies lovers alone should know. Why hadn't he informed her of his obligations, a commonly known fact, earlier? Careless of him, and perhaps it injured her feelings. "Specifically in Bath, but I can be called to serve anywhere in Somersetshire or beyond if I'm needed."

"You're a judge who investigates murders?"

Cedric shook his head. "I'm Justice. Being Justice means—" Cedric frowned at his perplexed hesitation. He buffed his back too hard with his dry towel. "In Extranatural society—society beyond human establishment—I hear issues and utilize the law to resolve disputes. When a crime occurs within my protectorate, I gather facts and record information helpful toward solving the crime and I administer justice. Sometimes I'm required to submit an opinion to our Supreme Justice Counsel favoring or opposing enactment of new law or amendment of existing law." He unpinned his hair and loosened the braid, let it flow free. "I'm not unlike most human nobles who hear cases and decide justice in matters occurring upon their estates or other holdings." Mariotte hadn't moved from beside the chair where she'd sorted and stacked his clothes. "It's an honorable position, but it does make undesirable demands upon my schedule at times."

"Yes. Yes, I can see that might happen."

"Mariotte?" She stayed too quiet, too courteous and still. Too uninterested in his naked form mere yards away from her. She clapped a hand over her mouth, laughing heartily into her palm and completing his astonishment. "Mariotte?"

Her free hand rose, entreating forbearance. Her eyes waxed radiant with mirth and pleasure. The squeal muffled into her palm sounded suspiciously unladylike and a croaking hiccough followed her fight for composure.

"I feared with some of the odd people coming in and out of your library you were involved in more clandestine activities. I thought you might be a smuggler." Mariotte sucked in a deep breath before humor claimed them both.

"M'dear, I can't afford piracy. The situation I'm in pays too handsomely for me to involve myself in crime." He claimed both her hands in his and drew her nearer. Her intoxicating scent whispered perverse invitations to his senses; clean, but her bath several hours old, her private musk overpowered soap and water. He pressed a playful kiss upon her forehead, impulsive and so right. "Troyes acquired his impressive fortune funding smugglers and privateers."

"Did he?"

"And *now* you're surprised!" What a delight. His scolding didn't deter her grin and she let him draw her to bed where he sat on the mattress edge and turned her round to undress her.

"I'd be no less amazed had you revealed he made an honest living as a blacksmith. Troyes strikes me as a confirmed gentleman of leisure."

"He is not always what you have seen, though I don't defend his dissipation. Troyes lost most of his fortune and his closest family during the riots in Paris. He emigrated to England and used what monies he had to outfit several privateer ships. With war going strong he cleaned up a tidy profit." He caught the pleats in the back of her gown in one fist and raised it high. Mariotte lifted the garment over her head.

"Did his participation advance beyond financing the operations?" Free of her dress and petticoats, Mariotte bent to slip her stockings down her legs.

"If you question Troyes about it, he will inform you he toured the continent off and on for several years."

"Like any proper gentleman." Mariotte shook her head, but her gleaming eyes suggested admiration.

With the removal of each layer of clothing her form grew more distinct and Cedric savored the details of her beauty. Lithe muscular lines merged with graceful curves. Breasts rounded and firm, the puckered nipples framed in areolae of deep brownish pink. The dusky shadow of her body hair beckoned him to touch her and open the privacy of her sex, compare springy softness of the tight curls to creamy smoothness of deep ivory skin.

So lushly made, his Mariotte.

Cedric enfolded her in his arms and rolled her down onto the pillows. If her heavy lower lids didn't demand his restraint, he would make her cry out for him for several hours. Nibble her, kiss her, lick and suck her, scrape her with blunt teeth, and spur her to writhe in their embrace.

"I'm so glad you've come home." She spoke in a pink yawn as she caressed his face. Her eyes darkened as she swept fingertips over his jawline's rough shadow. He'd no inclination to shave tonight. "That feels pleasant."

He *hmmed* soft agreement into a kiss meant to soothe excitement rather than build it. "In my youth full beards were customary." Her blinking, sleepy and slow, demanded the lightest brush of his mouth upon a silken eyelid.

"When was that?"

"I'm much older than I appear." Nervous abdominals clenched around his gut. "It's so late, m'dear. Close your eyes and rest."

"But don't you—would you not like to—"

His next kiss lingered but remained feather light against her hairline. "I'll still like to come morning." He brushed her bare arm and frowned at the prickled texture of gooseflesh before he drew the covers over her.

"Not too late in the morning. I've a music lesson." Another yawn and deeper relaxation into the pillows indicated Mariotte needed no additional convincing. Her long lashes fluttered shut.

Cedric reclined beside her, waiting for her breathing to ebb into the relaxed pattern of restful sleep. Her face held too much fascination to him given her other endowments. Her bone structure reminded him of an icon he owned portraying a handsome Persian princess. The wide rounded cheeks created an expression of permanent sweetness in repose.

"Share your bath, Set?"

Cedric raised one hand in a gesture for quiet before motioning

Dane into the room. Dane strolled toward the tub and dipped a finger in the cool water before shedding his dressing gown and stepping gingerly over the tub's high edge. Cedric set his jaw.

Dane caught his glance and one corner of his mouth curved. "It's not like you spent the day farming pigs, Set. Water's hardly dirty."

"The Romans had running hot water. My father says they built an immense bathing facility right here in Bath. It remained in use a good four centuries. Natural hot water flowing from springs beneath the city; they set up pipes and a drainage system to regulate its flow. Cold baths, too. Excavators have dug up remains of an old Roman temple. The baths themselves ought to be found eventually. Once the English relearn Roman technology we'll be able to use running water ourselves in town." His sigh carried exasperation at the slow going of that matter. Extranaturals with excellent plumbing skills could furbish his town residence with running water, but it wouldn't do to draw human attention to that fact.

"Heavenly. We'll not have to rough it when we don't stay in York Park." Dane didn't waste time, though he tried not to splash or hit the edges of the tub as he gave himself a brisk scrubbing. He rinsed longer than he would have in fresher water before rising and toweling off before Cedric's appreciative gaze.

Dane prowled across the room, halting beside Cedric's broad bed. Cedric reached for Dane's hand.

"I love you." Dane's adjustment to vampire life brought Cedric great pride. A pragmatic and capable man, Dane had taken his change in stride as he'd taken successes and disappointments in his human life.

Dane's kiss held hard pressure and familiarity, its charming

heat withdrawn with woeful haste. "Troyes fed well. He's resting fine. The maid took to him without fuss. Troyes could charm the habit off the most devoted nun in Christendom."

"And probably has at some point." Cedric nodded, grinning. Soothing a nervous servant into offering her first donation would have been a merry May game for the ailing vampire.

"She's fond of you." Dane turned his attention to Mariotte.

"I hope she's fond of us all for what she costs." Cedric's whispered quip amused the younger vampire. Dane's chuckle and intent gaze expressed guileless knowledge, *you don't care about money*. "Come to bed, dearling."

Flaring nostrils betrayed the younger vampire's surprise. "Perhaps it's not the right time."

"No? You look tired out to me." Cedric opened both arms and crept back toward the bed's center.

* * *

Mariotte blinked in the fading darkness of early dawn, yawning and cuddling closer into the warm security of Cedric's arm and shoulder within his sumptuous bed. Cedric slept on his back, a wonderful position for her to enjoy his face's profile, brow a trifle prominent and the nose straight elegance. In particular, the line of his throat held unusual appeal for Mariotte, a clean substantial line neither scrawny nor thick.

Vampire with a gorgeous neck. She smiled at the irony in grayish darkness. He slept bare, undisturbed by predawn chill while Mariotte huddled in the bedclothes.

All man. Massive chest and powerful ribcage tapering to a flat stomach.

She didn't want to wake him; everything was so comfortable and wakefulness had yet to grasp her. Closing her eyes, Mariotte let her mind drift; her drowsy hand skimmed Cedric's heartbeat and her fingers draped loosely over another man's knuckles.

Waking startled her then and she bit her lip to crush the need to jump upright in bed. Mariotte wedged a bent elbow against her pillow's plump bottom and rose as quietly as she could.

Scarce inches raised her vision past Cedric's chest to reveal another man, equally naked beauty relaxed against the taller male's side. Dane's features bore a look of youthful ease in repose, his head half-turned onto Cedric's upper arm, cherub lips brushing the edge of Cedric's shoulder in an unconscious kiss.

Mariotte did not see Dane stir awake. Instinctively she understood it happened too swiftly for her to recognize it, but her comprehension did not cheapen the effect. Strong fingers threaded between her own, clasping over the man between them. The brief, sleepy-eyed smile ebbed back to restfulness after he mumbled, muffled and kissed upon Cedric's bicep.

"M'riotte ... "

She couldn't be startled by the presence of a third person in Seti's bed; Dane's whisper carried tenderness sufficient to melt her stomach and weaken her knees when Mariotte wasn't even standing. He squeezed her hand—or perhaps she squeezed his the contact flowing through Mariotte's perception like water touched by sunlight as she sank upon her pillows, plucked her warm covers back over her body. Dane smiled still; she knew it, close-eyed, slipping into slumber's welcome embrace.

CHAPTER 13

The *ton* normally took its fine time evaluating outsiders thrown into their midst. An unknown lady of indefinite prospects merited thorough consideration and criticism before she might be considered worthy of particular notice.

Speculations ran wild concerning Mariotte's heritage, her fortunes, and her history until anyone less in the know of the *ton's* caprice would have thought a beautiful young woman from the colonies equivalent to a dangerous wild animal requiring careful study to determine its weaknesses, lest one need defend oneself in event of rampage.

Some termed Mariotte's appearance *attractive* and yet *too exotic* to blend well with the beauties of reputable British families. Her manners and education were considered *very fine for a lady*,

but those doubting her pedigree's worth argued these attributes affected her.

The foreign flavor of her English was pronounced *charming* by some and *defective* by others, though everyone pitied the ragged huskiness of her voice wrought by tropical fever.

In the eyes of those who cared about such things, her equal deference to the gentry and the aristocracy made for bad tone. The aristocracy in town took it less amiss than the gentry, sizing it up as an American affectation. Well-bred gentry folk took keen exception to such egalitarianism. The woman was but one generation removed from revolutionaries!

In time, however, gossip reached the good citizens of Bath via a banker's son wealthy enough to gain admittance into a more exclusive London club that Seti Edgard prepared a monumental settlement for his ward. Three hundred thousand pounds, no less.

Upon careful reflection, Bath had to allow that Mariotte's looks, while unconventional, were *well enough*, that her gift for music was *extraordinary*, that her accent was genuine after all, hardly resultant of perverse pretentiousness, and one scarcely noticed her height when she stood up to dance, although her partner's stature courted greater scrutiny than before. A gentleman looking for a polite moneyed wife not born of shopkeepers *might do very well* for her.

With that in mind, civilities passed into intimacies and stacks of cards and invitations overfilled the engraved tray on Mariotte's desk much more hastily than they should have.

* * *

"Mariotte, you don't mind me ordering the same red

kerseymere for my cloak as you did? I'm not trying to copy your fashion, but it's such a breathtaking red."

"Ought I mind?" Mariotte smiled to reassure her friend. Scarlet hooded cloaks had been a common fashion statement for years; few ladies of means did not own several.

Steady rain rapped the carriage; its melodious tattoo and the slow sway of the conveyance induced sleepiness Mariotte resisted. Across from the two ladies, Serena sat upright beside Julia's maid, every hair in place, her expression the neutral mask servants wore when custom required their physical presence include no personal interaction with their betters.

Julia's maid cast baleful eyes on Julia's gloves smudged with newsprint. "Miss, I and Mrs. Dearbourne have told you leave off handling newspapers when you're out so you'll not dirty your hands." She reached imperiously across the carriage and snatched away Julia's meekly surrendered newspaper.

"What if it does blacken my gloves?" Julia tossed her head in defiance. "William Wilberforce is speaking out against slavery, and there's talk a new abolitionist society will be formed."

"I thought Mr. Wilberforce already supported the abolitionist movement."

Julia shook her head. "Mr. Wilberforce supported elimination of the slave trade itself and campaigned for the Slave Trade Act back in, oh, before 1810, I believe. Mr. Wilberforce is too conservative, ever lobbying for gradual change, I imagine he expected forbidding the slave trade would ultimately lead to slavery's demise, but of course it hasn't. Too many people profit from it. Rumor has it he plans to promote new reforms advocating emancipation of all slaves in the British Empire. I hope he presses forward with it, accounts of slave mistreatment in the West Indies horrify me. I daresay some situations in Louisiana might be different, though." Her weak smile apologized for her outspokenness.

"I think the United States would benefit tremendously if it reformed policies concerning servitude. American legislation narrows a servant's abilities to better his lot."

"How can a slave hope to better himself? He's a slave, isn't he?"

"Yes, but *coartación* and other liberal manumission policies create opportunities for a servant to move beyond servitude. Since the United States purchased the territory, government has done everything possible to limit manumission and curtail servants' rights and *libres*' rights to own or inherit property, where they may live, how they may earn a living." Mariotte's annoyance with the counter-productivity articulated itself in a swift hand gesture across her skirts.

"Coartación?"

"Self-manumission. Iberian policy permitted a servant to compensate his master for his value, to free himself. Or another servant."

"But the slave hasn't recourse if his owner declines to part with him."

"He did under Iberian law. An appointed magistrate ruled on the servant's or servants' value. If the servant, or another person sponsoring the servant, provided payment, his master had legal obligation to accept it."

"That's a strange sort of slavery." Julia's dour maid couldn't resist interposing. "Where the slave gets some decision to stay enslaved or not."

Mariotte bent her mouth. "For certain, the United States

government thinks so."

They commenced into a flurry of movement as the carriage stopped outside the Pump Room. Mariotte hitched her skirts in one hand, pulling the hems well clear of her ankles as she climbed down. The large umbrella Dane gave her shielded both women as they crossed the walk to enter their destination. Serena followed, shaking her own skirts and furling her plain black umbrella at the door.

"I can't imagine why Seti insists you take music lessons four days a week. It's tyrannical and you already play so well! We might've shopped yesterday in finer weather."

"I enjoy lessons. They amuse me, and Mr. Filmore smells better these last weeks. I suspect he's taken a fancy to a neighbor's French maid. He wears cologne water and has ceased tutting any time I speak French." Mariotte ignored her maid's brightening eyes; Serena's hand smothered laughter disguised as an unconvincing cough.

Curled ostrich plumes danced atop Julia's lunardi hat, prelude to her kittenish giggle. "Madge Grey wanted to scratch your eyes out at the Featherstones' last party. You played her own selection so much better than she."

"Julia Dearbourne, I believe your satisfaction is motivated primarily by your grievance that Edward Wilson danced twice with Miss Grey at that same party and only once with you." Mariotte laughed at the younger woman's pet anyway. She liked Julia despite suspicion Mrs. Dearbourne sanctioned their friendship to secure closer acquaintance with the gentlemen of Cedric's household.

"Can you imagine it? I'm still reeling from the shock. Some rich man's by-blow and a common curate willing to adopt her to give her a respectable name. If she hadn't an annuity, no one'd want her in their circle."

"I suppose not."

Julia's voice grew silky and her fingers bit into Mariotte's arm. "Can you excuse me one moment? I see Viscount Finchley and I must say hello."

"Certainly." Finchley's appearance in the Pump Room coinciding with her and Julia's habitual promenade no longer surprised Mariotte.

Viscount Finchley happened upon them in the Pump Room every morning they visited. He always escorted his aged aunt in her wheeled chair to a table near the musicians, always excused himself for the time it took to escort Julia and her maid twice around the Pump Room, and always returned to his aunt without deigning to meet Mariotte. A pleasant-looking young male, Corinthian in style, Finchley respected his aunt's conscientiousness of rank and avoided introduction to folk unpresented at Court.

Julia returned beaming, a jubilant angel. Mariotte visualized wheels in the girl's mind calculating whether she could set her cap for the man and what fun it would be to be a viscountess, enjoying rank and position above her married sisters.

"Do you think I'd look well in a turban, Mariotte?"

Mariotte set her untasted tumbler of pump water upon a table. "I think it might be a bit exotic for your looks." Julia had a china doll's prettiness and her figure was perhaps a hint plumper than fashion's dictates.

"I think Turkish fashion's glorious. The viscount's toured Turkey before and seen them firsthand. Something in red or very pale blue perhaps. Let's take one more turn and then stop at Lunn's on the way home. I'm famished." "Let's do." Mariotte's mouth watered at the prospect of Sally Lunn's famous tea buns.

* * *

Justice, I am researching more thoroughly into magics utilizing boar's hair as component. In general, it appears to have very little use beyond as a tool to carry other magical components, such as treating the hairs on a brush to produce some magical effect. The librarian will keep you apprised of additional findings...

Justice: we formally oppose the detention of Sir Veikko Carstensen in your home and demand his immediate release and dismissal of all charges upon confirmation said charges have no grounds...

Dear Seti, the instrument you ordered is near completion and you may expect shipment before the end of next month. We hope it brings your family joy...

"You've an attractive home, Justice. From without I thought it appeared smaller." Sir Veikko lolled upon the narrow sofa in Cedric's office after shedding his jacket and his shoes. The Lykeion knight enjoyed possession of singular otherworldly beauty and his second nature revealed itself in Veikko's graceful motions and stillnesses, the ease with which he held his own body.

"The house was originally built as three separate residences within Royal Crescent. I purchased three and had them modified into a single home." Cedric tucked the correspondences he'd received in their envelopes. "The Lykeion knighthood formally opposes your detention." Veikko neither moved nor spoke, his pale grayish blue eyes communicated nonchalance. "It's expected, of course."

"Of course." Veikko's echo held no rancor for his present condition.

"Are you aware Aksel Raymond designated you alone to inherit his entire estate in the event of his death?" Cedric tamped down petty satisfaction; the revelation provoked startled blinking. Mild tension gripped the knight's lithe upper body

"I did not know that." Veikko's halted words and bouts of silence between sentences bespoke his discomfort with English. Cedric had given up addressing him in German. The knight used the language of the country he inhabited while he resided there. "Aksel must have done so expecting Gretchen and I would marry. Or perhaps he disinherited her for accepting Macksim as her mate."

"His will predates Gretchen's marriage and likely predates any known or suspected involvement with Macksim."

Veikko's torso rose a fraction from relaxed indolence to alert attention. "Aksel has been my friend and comrade my whole life. He sponsored my trials into knighthood after my own father died. I don't need his wealth and if I had he would have given me help."

"Nevertheless, Aksel's death leaves you heir to a wealthy man's fortune. Your confirmed presence in London proves you did not kill him, it does not absolve you of suspected involvement."

Veikko's smile avoided his eyes. "You will not recover evidence demonstrating my involvement." He yawned and stood up to stretch his entire body, rolling his neck and his back, bending to one side to flex his ribs, leaning to the opposite side. The knight made no effort to mimic the more inhibited movements of humans. "You should get rid of this furniture, Justice. No wonder humans suffer excess stiffness and painful joints as they age. No one could be comfortable sitting upon that."

Cedric didn't quench his grin. "It's what we have for now. You're kind to make do with it." He rose from his desk.

"Padded hides and sheepskins on the floor would be more comforting." Veikko's insouciance remained undiminished. "I'm grateful for your hospitality, Justice. Your home isn't crowded and the free room and board are a welcome relief to my travel expenses. The guards you've provided are pleasing to look at." He spared one brief male smile for the Amazon mercenaries standing idle at the library's doors. "Once you retrieve Aksel's killer I will be within a stone's throw of your discovery. We all benefit." Infinitesimal changes in expression revealed Veikko's interpretation of the plan. His eyes narrowed, almost silvery, and his patrician nostrils distended. Strong white teeth edged past his parted lips.

"Yes we do." Cedric expected no different; with their pitiful birth rates, the Lykeions imposed death sentence upon a murderer. "But remember, you surrendered your weapons when you surrendered yourself into my custody in accord with local law."

The Lykeion shrugged and his brows arched high in silent question, *do you really believe my weapons are needed to destroy a murderer of wolf-kind, vampire?*

"I ask you to restrain retribution until we have better understanding of who the murderer is." Cedric appealed to Veikko's good sense. "A creature capable of ending Aksel's life cannot be a common foe."

"Even uncommon foes die when one kills them."

Cedric determined the futility of pursuing the point to his semivoluntary houseguest. Mariotte was home, arrived from her visit with Julia Dearbourne, and he indulged in the pleasant distraction of her husky tones greeting Tucker, thanking Serena for whatever help she provided, making her way upstairs. A trace of pastry and sweets clung to the air; the friends must have stopped for a dish of tea. The woman's happiness spurred a soft burst of longing within Cedric; he hadn't seen Mariotte the entire day.

"Your bitch is lovely."

"Thank you." Impossible to take offense with Veikko's matterof-fact intended compliment. "Calling a human female a bitch is offensive in the English tongue."

"She's beautiful and healthy. Hospitable to your guests. You plan to wed her in the human custom? Human society sets great store by public marriages." The Lykeion knight strolled through the library doors with a succinct nod to his escorts. The Amazons fell in step behind him.

"She is not meant for my permanent use." Why did his upper body stiffen and clench with outrage and his mouth taste sour from the words?

"She isn't your whore. Whores don't live with their men. Besides I've met human whores and she isn't such a one."

He swung his arms the slightest bit to stretch the tension in the backs of his shoulders. "Mariotte lives in my home as a companion. For me and for my sons." Cedric's tongue shriveled and his brow creased at his mental scrabbling to explain his circumstances. "I provide for her and have arranged a settlement for her when we decide the arrangement is to end."

"A bride-price is an honorable act." Veikko's respectful nod indicated Cedric's rise in the Lykeion's esteem. Veikko stopped and turned in a short circle, allowing the Amazons to flank him while he faced his host. "But you aren't impoverished. Nor are either of the gentleman in your bloodline. There isn't any famine nor scarcity of females, human or vampiress. Why do you three share one female? You could easily support one mate on your own. And why would you choose to terminate a suitable union after you've found someone with whom you're comfortable sharing your lair?"

Cedric needed a glass of watered wine. A wet palate might facilitate his thoughts. "I chose Mariotte because I desired her and she pleases me. As a musician as well as a woman."

"Both excellent reasons for selection. And she did not resist your advances, or she received you after you overcame her resistance. She accepted your protection and is part of your home. You ought to consider marriage. In Austria, one of our younger squires fell enamored of a human bitch and gave her all the proper honors of a mate but did not perform a religious bonding ritual in one of the human churches. When she got with child, other humans subjected her to contempt. She endured great humiliation before her male identified his error and corrected it."

"Our situation is negotiated." Why could he not bring himself to say *I bought her*? Not the entire truth, perhaps, but hadn't it been Cedric's intention? The gift of wealth absolved his family of future responsibilities and accommodated potential inconveniences Mariotte might suffer from her relationship with the three of them.

The arrangements sounding so proper and civilized in other company repelled the flaxen-haired warrior and Sir Veikko's unconcealed repugnance rubbed Cedric raw. What could he have done? Mariotte would not have consented to live at Royal Crescent as Cedric's pampered plaything without inducement beyond the Three Devils' filling her body with pleasure.

The scraped velvet of Mariotte's voice played in Cedric's memory: *Why do you ask me? I'm not one of the...one of the ladies you ought to ask.* Not until she'd let him gratify her, holding her close, had he been certain she'd capitulate.

"It's how things are done." Hang everything! That explanation tasted no better.

"So if I offer her more money or a better establishment than you she'd leave you? And you'd let her come to me?" The huff dripped disgusted bass undertones.

"You go too far, sir!" Acid outrage burned in Cedric's belly and shot through his veins, clenching his hands into fists. He parted his lips to accommodate abrupt extension of his fangs, admonishment reverted to lengthy, guttural growling. The Amazons eyed his mild transformation, casual hands ready for their weapons if they saw need to intervene. The damned cocksure Lykeion knight stood within easy reach of Cedric's wrath, not a bit concerned.

"I don't think you'd let her come to me at all. I think you'd kick my arse to the bottom of the Avon for the insult and the threat against your household peace. Perhaps this protocol is not as to your liking as you thought. Don't be ashamed of that, it's proof you're a man."

"You are a guest in my home. I've no wish to sully relations between my county and your clan." Cedric grappled for self possession before he found it. He had no reason to take umbrage with Veikko's words. None of it amounted to anything. "There are differences in how our respective societies view courtship and mating. I've explained to you my domestic arrangements are based upon a negotiation for a temporary alliance rather than more permanent commitment."

"All matings are negotiated." Shaking his head until his silky straight golden hair swung from the movement, Veikko turned back around to approach the stairway. "What eccentricity. You've a marriage you don't regard as true marriage and that you intend to end at some undecided future date whenever it happens to suit you. And you wonder why Lykeions view your people as decadent and debauched. Waste of a perfectly suitable woman over some fancy idea of sport inspired by namby-pamby humans who can't compete to win the best women so they're forced to buy them..." Veikko rounded the newel post and bounded upstairs in four effortless leaps, pausing upon the landing to wait for his glowering Amazons to catch up with him. "It sits ill upon you, Justice. You could make her your own without all those conventions."

Cedric refused to grind his teeth as he watched Veikko depart for the handsome guest room Cedric placed at his detainee's disposal. He waited some distance of time for residual resentment clouding his thoughts to die down before climbing the stairs himself.

CHAPTER 14

"Checkmate."

"Damn. Forgot how convertible those knights can be." Troyes set the black queen on its side upon the checkered board, signifying he acknowledged Dane's win. "What'd you wager on the knight's guilt or innocence? I'll back a monkey he's clean." He flashed a pearly grin at the other vampire's response. "What're you cringing for? You've five hundred pounds. Just won it from me."

"I'm uncertain I'd put money on either." Dane arranged the chess pieces in their starting positions upon the board. "All I've heard about the Lykeion people demonstrates they're a clannish bunch. The inheritance is a good motive, but it's not convincing. There's no existing knowledge of enmity between Sir Veikko and Aksel Raymond. Their own people are firmly behind Sir Veikko and have said so. A delegation is negotiating to travel to Bath so they can claim Aksel's remains and escort Sir Veikko home once the investigation's complete. Obviously they expect the charges to be dropped. But if Sir Veikko is innocent that begs the question who had motive, opportunity as well as the brute strength and cunning to surprise and kill Aksel Raymond." The lightweight folding table fitted neatly back into place alongside a massive armoire.

"Never cared for Lykeions much, but they're all for their own." Troyes yawned at his window. Fun glimmered in his eyes. "You been to the tailor and all? Don't want you looking too workingclass alongside me at Seti's ball."

"I do my best to wipe away the smell of office and sweat." Dane's laughing comparison held no rancor but quickly faded to tentative concern. "Mariotte received Mrs. Redworth's acceptance today."

"I'm sure she'll have a good time. She usually does at a party." Troyes's tone didn't alter, but his posture and his face hardened as though he expected someone to strike him.

"I think it might have been in better taste for her to send regrets." Dane moved to Troyes's side and placed an arm around him.

"Why send regrets? Everyone knows we're all old friends." Troyes shrugged away Dane's concern along with his hold. A winsome smile dazzled into brilliance past the other vampire. "You look like a thundercloud, Seti. Is the dog-wolf proving too high in the instep for your diplomacy?"

Dane indulged in an uncharacteristic snicker. Since his voluntary arrival in Royal Crescent, Sir Veikko managed to set everyone on edge at some time or other. After careful analysis of the situation Dane concluded the Lykeion knight's clinging to his own customs and manners appropriate to his own people didn't stem from desire to demean company around him. Rather Sir Veikko's complacency in his own lifestyle didn't permit him to inconvenience himself with accommodating alternative culture beyond basic concessions. Dane supposed the behavior more commonplace among isolationist Extranaturals. Realization didn't reduce the abrasive textures of Sir Veikko's ethnocentrism, but Dane's dislike lessened.

"I don't regard it. Perhaps if he's proved guilty I'll order him hanged. It takes over a full day for a hanging Lykeion to perish and the end's not a pleasant one. That'll take him down a peg or two before he's gone. How goes it, Troyes? On the mend?" Cedric's open concern on his face belied his casual tone as he approached the two of them.

"I'm good, Seti. Haven't missed a meal and the servants have been as supportive as we permit them to be."

"For certain you're to Serena's liking." One corner of Cedric's mouth curled until the cleft in his chin deepened. Troyes laughed outright, and Dane found himself forced to chuckle.

"I don't know how Tucker sorts them out but he found another good donor." Troyes shrugged. "To look at her and listen to her I thought she'd shriek and flee the house when first called to service. She took right to it and I think it sweetened her temper some."

"He does have a knack for finding good help." Cedric nodded. "I suppose with his own tendencies toward that service he may identify similarities in other potential donors. Tucker's always been quiet and conservative. Most focused on his duties. Sometimes it's the quiet, straitlaced personalities who are more adaptable to donating. And it helps that her emotions are engaged elsewhere. She has a young man in the north country. Probably at sea."

"How'd Tucker discover all that?" Dane's brow furrowed.

"He didn't. I heard Serena discuss the matter with Cook's assistant." Cedric's head tilted to one side in consideration. "If he returns I suppose Tucker must hire a new maid for Mariotte, and we'll have a new donor to enchant should we require her to feed us."

Troyes leaned past Dane to accept Cedric's kiss. He watched Cedric exchange kisses with Dane before continuing. "I owe you an apology. I had no business endangering the house by neglecting my needs. I could have injured Mariotte when she challenged me had I been less stable. You were within your rights to exact retribution and you didn't. Thank you."

"You're nearing your first century, Troyes. You know the dangers related to depriving yourself and how it could end. Abundance lies all around you. You cannot decline to feed." Cedric cupped the side of Troyes's exquisitely molded face in one powerful hand. With proper exertion those fingers could tighten and clutch. Rend flesh and rip away tissue, crumble bones beneath it. Troyes's beauty could be a ruined mask of grotesquerie with little effort and might not heal properly if the damage proved too severe.

Cedric's fingertips weaved into the loose waves draped over the shell of Troyes's ear. "I pardon you, Troyes, my love." Justice spoke as much a loving companion. Without condition or compromise. "You are tied to my bloodline." The words carried the weight of religious benediction. Cedric took his hand away, lifting it to bite his wrist. Dane licked his lips at the heightened sweetness in the air; the scent of blood struck his nostrils. Cedric offered his streaming wrist to Troyes. "Know my sincerity."

Troyes's tongue swept over the flow, gleaming eyes closed. Cedric whispered an endearment in a language Dane did not need to recognize to understand the sentiment. Troyes sighed, comforted, and accepted Cedric's close, one-armed embrace. Cedric turned to Dane and kissed him again. Dane opened, his sire's tongue colliding with his own, brushing and flirting before they both pushed against that precious connection and sucked upon one another's lips. Dane pressed into Troyes's side and reached past Troyes's flank to curl an arm over Cedric's lean hips.

"My loves."

"Amours."

"I love you so much."

"I've been to Lunn's today and I brought home sugar-topped buns—" Skirts bouncing against the doorframe dropped; Mariotte's abrupt pause deprived them of momentum.

"Mariotte." Cedric's muscles contracted under Dane's arm before Cedric turned his head. "Come in, love. Come to us."

Yes. Come. The entreaty sliced into Dane's brain, ricocheting through his body, every nerve stretched taut. Heightened senses conspired with erotic awareness to rob him of control, steal the patience of waiting for her to choose to come to them. Need boiled low in Dane's belly, driving desire's slow burn into aching, swelling want.

Tilting back his head to meet blue flame in Cedric's eyes, Dane recognized hunger matching his own. As far back as his human childhood Dane did not recall Cedric's interest dwelling upon women beyond casual courtship of celebrated debutantes. In Dane's earliest years as a vampire, Cedric counseled him human males were the best choice for loving and food. Men were easier to buy, easier to use in a more casual sense since they enjoyed sensual pleasure without seeking romantic ties females tended to expect. They were physically sturdier and both their blood and semen served as nourishment. Women were a luxury, best reserved for matters of the heart.

Slipping one hand between Cedric and Troyes, Dane palmed the throbbing bulge in the front of Cedric's trousers. Cedric's lids half-dropped and he arched into Dane's gentle kneading, his mouth shaping a gorgeous moan before his tone waxed to a plaintive stranger Dane never met.

"Please."

"I'm here." Her rough whisper didn't jar their clustered embrace. Dried vetiver clung her skirts, wafted with her steps as Mariotte meandered around them. Troyes's low growl trailed into a lighter sound that registered to Dane as a whine. Mariotte did not stop in one place and her expression held as much intrigue as it did uncertainty. "What should I...Where should I..."

Dane knew instinctively the trace of Mariotte's fear stinging his senses was not of the three of them; the odor of sharply sweet arousal overpowered her apprehension at her own lack of knowledge for the complexities of this kind of love. Dane released Cedric. The tall, Viking beauty drew Mariotte amongst their passion-hardened bodies, let her experience their closeness, their warmth, and their strength.

Cedric's body spoke in accents speech could never express, powerful arms winding around Mariotte, cocooning her in closeness and security. One hand splayed on the middle of her back, the other skimmed her dress's high waistline, brushing pleated folds. His groan echoed hers when his grip found Mariotte's buttocks, coaxed her soft curves against his rocky hardness.

Mariotte opened to his kiss at once, leaned into him, caressing Cedric through his clothes and brushing his hair with her hands. Their lips fought mock battles for dominance, tasting and claiming wherever they touched.

Dane turned to take Troyes's kiss, opening his arms to clever hands moving over his clothing, unfastening buttons and loosening the artistic knot of his cravat.

"My Mariotte." Cedric's whisper and the tender smile playing on his lips, the way he smoothed Mariotte's wonderfully curly hair melted Dane's lower back, and he tore at his clothes. Dane kicked away his shoes and forced his slim trousers down his hips, freeing his swollen cock at last, and leaned against Troyes to strip away his stockings.

"Seti."

"My Mariotte...M'dear, Troyes is recovered from the bout of intoxication he suffered. He is well-fed and regrets your unfortunate earlier meeting." Cedric raised Mariotte's hand to his lips and kissed between her knuckles until she crooned. "I wish to take my sons into bed to love them and to love you with them. If you are ready." He kissed the bridge of her slender nose. "If you will come to us without fear."

Troyes's suit presented no great struggle for Dane to remove. The concept of men's underclothes held no more favor with Troyes than women's. His trim, elegant figure and proud posture required no corsetry, padding or other artifice to fill the demands of fashion.

"Troyes!"

Troyes captured Dane's aching cock, pumping him in an ungentle grasp too delicious to hurt. Gasping, Dane hauled his unresisting lover closer so he could crush Troyes's sculpted mouth with his own.

Mariotte rose on tiptoe to kiss her words into Cedric's cheek. "I'm not frightened."

"I know." The edge of joy in Cedric's voice spread to the other men, contagious and lightweight. "You would honor our agreement even if you were afraid. But much as we long to feel your body merging with us and riding upon us...dearling?" His expression veiled itself, hidden in Mariotte's hair. "There is so much more to what this means. You accepting us all helps us all feel more closely bonded to each other and to you. Naturally you must come to feel it, too. Are you ready for this, love? Do you want it?" He kissed her ear, whispered, "Do you want us?"

Dane squeezed the back of Troyes's neck, urging him to slow the determined strokes pulling Dane closer and higher to the precipice of ecstasy. Turning his head back toward the couple, Dane watched Mariotte's gaze, so green and clear in her complexion's unique warmth, dilated with passion and travelling over them, fondling their naked bodies despite the smart blush staining her cheeks. Troyes's methodical strokes continued, and Dane could not completely stop his hips from rotating, pressing his cock against Troyes's sure grip.

What if she declined? A desperate animal howled from the depths of Dane's gut. She deserved the right to choose. Dane tamped down on the knowledge and the sense of right behind it. He craved her acceptance. Her sex and her wanting perfumed the atmosphere and he wanted her naked, wanted to see her couple with his sire, ached to couple with her himself.

"I won't hurt you. Not ever." Dane's throat convulsed as he swallowed, but he did not avoid Mariotte's eyes. Instead he drew Troyes closer, sweeping his hands up the other man's body, cupping his face and kissing him tenderly, a demonstration of the loving she could expect from him.

"Dane." She cupped the side of his face and Dane turned his head to kiss her open palm. Silk against his lips; he touched her with his tongue and listened to her breathe. "Yes." Unprepared for Troyes's kiss, it landed on one corner of her mouth, nudging her lips into a summery smile. "Yes, I want you." Her body twined against Cedric. "I want this."

Combined assistance from the three of them undressed Mariotte in no time, Cedric a minute or so longer. Troyes swore aloud her body was the model for exquisite art in heaven as he heaped the mass of gown, slip, chemise, and drawers in an uneven pile upon one of the chairs. It seemed an afterthought, Troyes's shutting the bedroom door as Cedric led Mariotte to the bed, but just as well. No need for Mariotte to suffer qualms of modesty should she notice the door ajar.

Cedric lifted Mariotte and set her kneeling upon the bed's edge facing outward so he might continue to embrace her. He plied her with soft lasting kisses. Mariotte massaged Cedric's rampant cock, stroking and working its upright length, cupping and squeezing the tightening sac beneath the shaft. She took care, her quick motion practiced to please him. Dane climbed the opposite side of bed and crept behind Mariotte, admiring the details of her so long hidden from his view. Dainty feet, a trifle broad but their beautiful shape gave width harmony.

"Mariotte." Dane whispered her name before he traced the rounded end of her heel and shackled her slim ankle with his fingers. Her pulse beat the sensitive padding on his fingertips, delicate melody, soft simplicity. "I love how you feel." His fingers climbed higher, rubbing the crease where trim thighs joined to full, round buttocks.

"Oh. Dane." Mariotte sighed appreciation.

"I love your ass. Nice and firm and shaped like a woman." He squeezed the splendid heart-shaped curves to emphasize his meaning and *hmmm'd* delight when Mariotte backed closer against his hands.

"You've noticed also." Cedric's chuckle endorsed Dane's good eye. "Wait, m'dear." Troyes slid beside him. "Relax and let us pleasure you." Something in her expression must have indicated a need for reassurance. "My cock loves your hand, sweetheart." A wide smile indicated his sincerity along with a gesture toward his shaft twitching for her hold. "It's easier for you to enjoy yourself without the distraction of pleasing me."

"I like pleasing you." Intense kissing roughened Mariotte's declaration which earned her one more kiss. Cedric's eyes—his entire face—held boyish light Dane could not remember seeing in the past. Look at how he lay his hands on Mariotte, the way one handled fine crystal, without abandoning his hold as though she were too precious to be let go.

"Then please me, m'dear. Come for me. Come hard." Seductive promise darkened Cedric's voice. Two of his fingers eased into Mariotte's quim, gliding through her slickness, retreated and plunged forward in a persistent stroke that wrung mewling cries and writhing hips. Cedric's growl echoed her satisfaction. "I want you brought to crisis so many times you're almost crippled from it. Let us give you that."

Dane crept backward, guiding Mariotte against his limbs as Cedric half lifted her, making room on the bed for Cedric to recline. Mariotte needed no explanation to mount her lover. Astride Cedric's hips, she sank down, impaling her body on his engorged cock. She enveloped all of him, her head dropping back, satisfaction inherent within a single hoarse whisper.

"Seti..."

Troyes knelt alongside the joined couple, bending low to devour Cedric's mouth in a passionate kiss. Cedric captured the back of the exquisite Frenchman's head, snatching control though he lay beneath Troyes, plundering Troyes's mouth until Troyes's inarticulate growl begged for mercy. Cedric deigned to release Troyes, stroking the hair he'd fisted in one hand to hold Troyes captive.

Exchange of hot-eyed smiles revealed neither male grudged the rougher treatment before Troyes snuggled Mariotte to his chest, applied softer, coaxing kisses to her forehead, her brows, the sweet bridge of her nose. Troyes's pause allowed Mariotte to kiss his mouth first, and Cedric's smile held wicked appreciation for his talented lover permitting Mariotte to take that initiative. Troyes murmured encouragement to Cedric; the stunning redhead pumped Troyes's erection in a gentle clenched fist. Mariotte's breasts filled Troyes's cupped hands, and the Frenchman whispered endearing compliments, squeezed the high firm mounds together.

Bending his head, Troyes licked and kissed the cleavage. "Delicious. Better than the sweets you brought home with you, precious dear." He ran his thumbs in rough circles around Mariotte's nipples until they formed hard dark pink buds for Troyes to pinch. He licked one nub and chuckled; Cedric grunted beneath Mariotte's clenching quim. Troyes attended both breasts, alternating between them with open mouthed kisses, lashing tongue, blunt teeth and kneading fingertips until Mariotte's moans blended into lengthy, mewling pleas.

Dane kissed the crown of her head as he smoothed every inch

of her ass's firm half-moons with cupped hands. He loved female bodies, their softness and roundness, the sharp sweetness of feminine arousal in his nostrils or upon his tongue, loved the exquisite otherworldly fever of a woman's climax pulsing from her secret depths and radiating without all the way to the outside world.

Troyes siddled aside, providing Dane sufficient room to kneel behind Mariotte. Dane grasped her ass checks and drew her to sit against his thighs.

Mariotte gasped at his thickness settling in her rear crevice and rubbing against her shy rosette. Whatever Dane lacked in height or handsomeness next to his vampire-kin he was no less well endowed than they.

Newfound sensitivity wrought shivers in Mariotte. Dane licked the edge of her delicate ear, flicked his tongue against the opening. "I only want to spend in your ass-crack. You're too little and unused to take me without preparation." His other arm snaked around her and Mariotte almost sobbed when his fingers settled on her sex. "So creamy and hot. You've wanted us terribly." He played with her swollen nether lips, parting swollen folds and seeking until he found her burning pleasure spot. The base of Cedric's cock slid, thick and saturated in Mariotte's private musk, against Dane's fingertips. "We want you, too. Just as badly. Yes." He buried his nose in her soft hair.

It took time for Mariotte to find the best accommodating rhythm, but she learned to rock between the men surrounding her, covering her in caresses and endearments.

"It...feels so good...All of it..." She clutched Troyes's head, cradling him against her body. He sprinkled her breasts with kisses.

"Yes, my sweet." Dane squeezed her rear cheeks, sandwiching his cock between them and increasing the pressure of his cock against her anus. He buried a smile at her hitching breath behind her ear. "You like that? You'll let me into you when you're ready?" He loved this variation and not all women were agreeable in fulfilling him.

"Y-yes."

Dane worked her clitoris, swift steady pressure of two fingertips. A disordered jerk of her hips gave them the briefest warning before Mariotte fell nearly boneless, mouth wide in soundless, breathy screams slurring their names into nonsense talk.

Dane's ruthless strokes demanded additional surrender. Troyes suckled harder at her nipples and gasped; Cedric's hand, a skilled, knowing lover, commanded Troyes's passion. The Frenchman smothered foreign curses against Mariotte's breast; his hot seed splashed her thighs and Cedric's hard belly.

"Dane...Seti..." Mariotte wriggled, struggling to move on nerveless legs. "Please...I must stop... Can't..."

"You can." Dane nipped her nape and licked the spot to soothe it. His fingers swirled in the creamy heat of her first release and glided over her swollen pleasure spot, spurring ruthless friction until her hips found their former melody.

"You can." Seti's growl charged her to reclimb the pinnacle from which she'd so recently soared. Mariotte fell again, screaming softly aloud this time. Seti caught her collapsing body with both hands, pushing high with his hips as far as he could inside her, howling his own release seconds later.

Bending over them both, Dane seized Mariotte's hind cheeks in both hands, riding against her as deep as he could manage without penetrating the untried orifice. Mariotte pushed back against him and wailed soft affirmation. Dane erupted, abrupt, pulsing, filling her cleft until Dane's flowing passion leaked freely onto her moist thighs.

Dane's hand covered the sweet indentation at the small of Mariotte's back as he dismounted her. She still quivered and whimpered from fine aftershocks while Cedric buried kisses in her luxuriant curls.

You feel wonderful...perfect...I want to do this to you forever...

He whispered praise and comfort, smoothing sweat-dampened hair, assuring her how good it felt to become part of her. Crawling alongside them and easing into the bed, Dane tilted Mariotte's chin, admired wide eyes hazy with new sated passion. Delicious.

He planted his first kiss, humble and soft, upon the delectable fullness of Mariotte's mouth. "Your body's right for loving." Her eyes closed slowly and opened again in a silent smile.

"*Mais oui*.." Troyes's cheery endorsement was almost a purr from the other side of the bed. "Why hurry so, sweet *cherie*? We've all the time we need."

CHAPTER 15

"Miss, please keep your sunshade over your face. The sun's quite fine today, it may scald you. You'll be brown for his lordship's party." Serena's frantic gestures miming how she expected her charge to hold the parasol spooked the dragonfly Mariotte admired hovering above it. It abandoned its perch on the sun-warmed striped silk, flitting away in a streak of vivid blue and green.

Mariotte raised her sunshade and nodded thanks for Serena's reminder. Cedric offered her a glass of watered wine and she sipped it without removing her eyes from the scenery sweeping by as their pleasure barge drifted down the Avon. "I haven't seen so many dragonflies in one place." Dozens of the gossamer insects danced in mid air over silent muddy water.

"They're common to the region through summer." Cedric nibbled a bit of bread and cheese from their picnic basket.

"They make things all the more picturesque, I think. My mother called herself after a dragonfly. When she performed on stage at the New Orleans opera."

Dane finished his modest glass of port. "How do you know that?"

Mariotte squirmed against the heavy cushion on her seat. "At times, my papa joked of it. *La Demoiselle*, the dragonfly. He christened the boat he used to ship goods to New Orleans with the same name. I remember she had a beautiful singing voice. But of course we didn't talk about it much." Troyes and Sir Veikko lounged near the bow, long legs stretched out for comfort in front of them, deep in conversation about fishing in various areas of Europe. "I don't guess she played in theater long or became awfully well known for it, or there would've been scandal."

Cedric nodded. "Actresses are thrown part and parcel into the *demimonde*, whether or no they deserve the appellation."

"I don't know whether or not she deserved it." Of course she'd heard the occasional uncharitable remark concerning the vast age difference between her parents, their hasty marriage after a short courtship and her own birth within the year. But the marriages of childless men in middle age to women half their years weren't terribly unusual.

"I'm persuaded she did not." Cedric's hand covered hers. Blue fire in his eyes read a volume of assurance.

"What do you remember about her?" Dane's expression shadowed and darkened as the barge passed beneath Pulteney Bridge.

"She was born in the German Coast. Most of her family died

off during a round of yellow fever. She liked a tidy house—I don't believe I saw a cobweb in one corner of our home while she lived." Unselfconscious giggles rose to her lips. "She watched her accounts, loved music. And she was beautiful. She looked so whi—she had a very fair complexion." Mariotte understood the gentlemen's silent thoughtfulness. She'd spent comparable moments at her dressing table wondering why her mother's porcelain skin skipped a generation along with her classical oval face. At least Mariotte had her mother's slender nose and beautiful eye color.

"I'd assume your mother would look so." Free of the bridge's shadow, perplexity played on Dane's features. "I'd hardly peg you as someone else's child."

"It is possible—I think probable—Mariotte is not entirely white, Dane." Such a simple idea when Cedric said it. So free of tainted history or concern. His strong fingers spread and stroked Mariotte's knuckles, dipped between her fingers.

Dane huffed. "Well, she's not faerie for certain."

The barrister's brisk matter-of-factness shattered the doldrums. Mariotte lifted her wine to drink and drew it back untasted. Laughter spewed free among the three of them before it swept along the river. Dane's dark eyes brightened with good humor and Cedric's laughter rang, clear bells and thunder preceding a summer storm, music in Mariotte's ears. Cedric's hand on hers offered stability. Odorous marshy river mud did not match the Mississippi, but it held its own grimy charm.

"In the United States people set great importance upon one's color as it relates to racial heritage." Cedric wiped his mouth with a napkin. "It is not simply a social issue as it sometimes is here, but a legal matter. People known to be not born of two white parents

are designated as people of color and they may face restrictions as to where they may live and what kind of work they might do." His shoulders rippled as he thought. "Sometimes they're not legally permitted to be educated or to own or inherit more than a certain amount of property. It's why more well-to-do families of color send their children abroad to study."

The set of Dane's features suggested he took as much amusement as annoyance in the information. "Well she's surely not black." Mild brown eyes rested on Mariotte's face. Dragonflies pirouetted in aimless patterns between them.

"True enough." Cedric traced an imaginary line over Mariotte's profile. "You remind me of the beauties I've seen in eastern Europe and sometimes in Asia Minor. So many different tribes have settled and resettled in those regions over the years. Slaves and hostages imported there from every conceivable place, all interbred with the local populations..." Cedric's train of thought died off and his brow furrowed. He squeezed Mariotte's hand. "It's all a convoluted game, color assignment, my Mariotte. Were humans more long-lived they'd quickly understand the insignificance of the thing."

"What colors are your parents?"

Mariotte wished the uncomfortable subject would complete itself. Dane's evident frustration in grappling the issue for a verdict frightened her a little. "They were white."

"Then you are white." One neat precise shrug reassured Dane a fact was a fact unhampered by social ambiguities.

"I'm white. But some aspects of my appearance lead some to doubt I'm really white."

"Because curly hair is impossible in a white person? Or is it your pretty face?" Dane looked to be growing ever more offended with the custom he could not understand.

"Have you any siblings, Mariotte?" Cedric brushed biscuit crumbs from his lap.

"I have one brother. Half blood from my mother's second marriage." Henri Moulon's visage floated before her memory's eyes. His oblong face, saturnine mouth, and fine blond hair favored her stepfather's looks. Henri lacked his father's engaging manners and inherited in full his father's love of gaming, but no lengthy silent evaluation followed him during an introduction.

Mariotte sipped her wine, turning her gaze toward the bank opposite the city. She had to look at something besides the normally mild barrister's glittering eyes and hardening jaw. If he appeared thus to argue in court it was no wonder he'd earned his reputation. "I don't recognize the specifics of it all, Dane. I don't have the answers for you."

"The United States is the most backward nation imaginable." Veikko's thinned lips marked his disapproval. "Wolves of any color may mate and produce normal healthy pups from the union."

"If you're colored but your parents are white where's your color from?" Troyes's lackadaisical manner said it all, *this is the most preposterous subject ever taking up a quarter hour's conversation.*

"I do not know. If it's true it makes sense my parents took pains to conceal it." Open acknowledgment of mixed race heritage would destroy them socially. Mariotte swallowed the outburst in her heart as the barge glided alongside the bank from whence their party began in such high spirits. "Shall I drive us home?"

The two servants tying up the boat exchanged mystified looks at the effect Mariotte's blithe offer made upon the party of four stalwart gentlemen. Cedric sat very still; though he smiled, the slight working of his lips indicated a search for words he could not find. Dane's eyes widened in alarm. Troyes laughed outright while he adjusted his glove.

"I thought perhaps I'd walk home for the exercise." Sir Veikko's matter-of-factness prodded Cedric to respond as he rose to his feet and extended a hand to assist Mariotte in disembarking.

"You drove us this morning, dear lady. I think you might welcome respite from such an onerous chore."

"I enjoy driving." Mariotte furrowed her brow. "I've been driving since I was in my early teens."

"Yes, but your style lends itself best to open country roads. Without numerous vehicles and pedestrians present." Dane planted one hand on the back of her waist, steadying Mariotte as she climbed onto the steps, long skirts raised in one hand and her parasol tucked under her arm.

Mariotte paused and gave the man behind her a shrewd glance over her shoulder. "One would think, Mr. Melbourne, you regarded my skill with the ribbons a threat to public safety."

"Dear Miss Sabrier, your safety alone merits my concern in the matter. You handle horseflesh well enough and proved yourself one game driver this morning. The streets have grown busier since, and I'd not have you cartwheeling over the horses' heads navigating the business." The corners of his eyes crinkled in a meaningful smile. Sex crept from the depths of his well-modulated speech into Mariotte's skin, scorching her face. "I've acquired no small fondness for your limbs intact. If it's a hard ride you want, there are safer methods with which I'll gladly accommodate you."

"You're most kind. I prefer your limbs uninjured as well." The corners of Mariotte's smile ached a little. Dane's flirtation smacked of impropriety; eyes deep and warm, inviting as breakfast chocolate. Affection blended into desire Dane would not trouble to hide.

His actions didn't set chilly needles of uncertainty pricking the base of her spine; Mariotte's own wish to enjoy this familiarity and return it was at fault. She faced forward once more, drinking in Seti at the top of the bank waiting for her to come to him. His expectant nod made his heavy red-golden queue twitch and his complacent smile pulled beneath her heart.

Mariotte never dreamed her position in Seti's house would be so complicated or her character so inconstant. It was pointless she entertain preferences at all given the tenuous nature of her relationship with either man.

"Are you well, Miss Sabrier?" Dane's inquiry behind her back held a similar velvet concern to Cedric's caressing gaze.

Words neglected her.

"Mariotte?"

It's not possible to love them both. She ought not properly love either one. Perhaps it was not love at all but her irrational responses to the pleasures and comforts they afforded her, coupled with their own not inconsiderable appeal. Her secluded life at Rowan House left her sensibilities susceptible to anyone who showed her attention. They did not love her, either. Mariotte bit her trembling lip.

"Mariotte." Cedric tilted his body backward for balance as he returned to her. His boot heels sank into the lush damp turf with every squelching step.

"Miss looks sunstruck, your lordship." Serena's tone suggested proper attention to her sunshade would have prevented the problem. "Best we get her home. I'll order a nice milk bath to help bleach the burn."

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

"Come, Mariotte." Dane guided her, the back of her arm in his tender grasp. "Just a short distance. We'll help you."

* * *

"Demme, I'm out for the night. Another round of your luck, Troyes, and my pockets'll be to let." A handsome young man set down his cards and rose while Troyes drew his winnings across the table. "Evening, gentlemen." An elegant bow made good his departure.

"Nice smart lad. Loses gracefully and knows when to quit. Who's he?"

Dane glanced at the blond youth nodding to a round of farewells as he neared the door. "Fulverton's son, I think. Grantham nominated him."

"Grantham's in debt to Fulverton's uncle. He had to nominate him." George Dunwoody, Viscount Finchley, turned up aristocratic nostrils flushed from two glasses of port. "Fulverton's nobody. I think his mother had some blood connection to the Croydens that made it all right, but the father's a navy man who managed to distinguish himself and make some money on the ships. You'd think with all that blunt he'd not bother with prudence in gaming."

"Prudence is a virtue." *Loved by the* ton *or no*. Dane exchanged glances with Troyes.

Finchley refilled his glass with the dark reddish liquid and raised the vessel aloft.

"To the woman I love and to the lady I shall marry." He gulped down two-thirds of the glass's contents. "They're not often one and the same, are they?" Finchley's smile mustered all the brittle artifice of his decadent upbringing. The viscount's eyes held the dull glitter of a man seeking trouble. He'd always been the type whose sensibilities turned to sulks or rage after indulging drink. Dane hoped he managed to comport himself with dignity this evening. One of their senior club members had opened his private residence for a gathering to the members not in London and Dane had hoped a round of games and quiet society with other gentlemen might divert his mind of concern for Mariotte's low spirits during their boating excursion.

Vexation hammered Dane's mind from Mariotte's apparent embarrassment and distress over her coloring and its impact on her identity—to herself as much as to society around her—as well as his own incomprehension of its significance. He'd found himself studying his reflection and the visages of others around him, taking in natural variances of coloring and proportions, asking himself a nonsensical question: *what is white*?

"Seti ought to have come tonight. We'd still have four to our table." Troyes pocketed his cash and ran a skeptical eye over a massive gold ring before sliding it across the table to its former owner with a decided hand. "Finchley, take that back. Your papa's going to thrash you for gambling it and call me out for taking it. You can always give me money for it some other time."

"I'll pay you in full next year. Once I'm married I can afford it." Troyes's noncommittal nod satisfied Finchley and he continued. "Had I known of Seti's intent to settle Mam'selle Sabrier, I'd have postponed offering to my own intended. She's got as much money and she's twice as comely. And she and Miss Julia Dearbourne are so intimate I'm sure she'd not mind my regard for her friend." Finchley slid the ring on his finger.

"Miss Sabrier is a lovely lady. It's natural another lovely young lady such as Miss Dearbourne might befriend her. I'm confident Lady Whitethorne will make you a contented man all your life." Dane measured his words. Troyes's attention to the viscount held the smooth chill of a frozen river. The Frenchman held to older etiquette where one refrained from bandying names of respectable women in one's club.

"We'll be well-moneyed and well-landed and our parents will be content the thing came off as they expected." Finchley swallowed the last of his port. "I look forward to standing up with Miss Dearbourne and with Mam'selle at Seti's party next fortnight. Quite a compliment he throwing her a party and her not out to London yet. I hear Seti's fondness for the little blueskin might trump any acquaintance she makes in London this winter, though."

"I'm afraid I don't understand." Troyes folded his beautiful hands before him on the table, aquamarine eyes gleaming, inscrutable. Had Finchley any real understanding of the vampire's courtly smile? Dane had seen it above a bloody sword in more than one affair of honor.

"Miss Sabrier is almost alone in this world." Dane wanted to find out more about that brother Mariotte mentioned. What sort of man allowed a close female relative to travel unattended and live as Mariotte had done? The whole picture made no sense. "Naturally Seti takes his guardianship of her seriously."

"I'm sure he does. If he got more generous with the dowry though, he might be able to look higher for her." Finchley's bony shrug accompanied a knowing look. "An English gentleman should be paid better to give his house and name to a blueskin colonial than he would a wholesome Englishwoman. Look at her. She could be anything. Black slave stock maybe, few generations back, of course, to be so creamy now. Or Indian. The French colonials didn't run off the natives and some even married 'em before white women started moving to the place. Everybody born there must have some savage descent. She could be anything at all." A priggish grin reflected the depths of his seedy imagination. "I've read accounts the mixed blood women are so oversexed they'd take anybody. Do anything to please a man. D'you think—"

Dane did not think of restraining the his fist and barely remembered to open his hand inches away from the drunkard's jaw so his blow would not kill Finchley.

Flesh split, resisting bones in Finchley's body cracked and popped when his head snapped to one side. Blood splashed Dane's fingers, hot, watery, its texture thinned from Finchley's drinking excesses. Finchley's torso followed the blow's momentum, shifting his weight so that the chair beneath him leaned at a precarious tilt. Dane made no effort to save him; the chair and its inebriated occupant crashed to the floor in an undignified, clattering heap.

"You are offensive!" The moment he spoke, all the reason Dane abandoned in abrupt rage bludgeoned him through crimson vision. His violent outburst would be unseemly in the eyes of the multiple gentlemen witnessing it. He had no right to resent slurs directed at Mariotte, no close tie of kinship or affiancement; his open resentment itself could be perceived by some as proof of an improper connection to her. Worse, his pronounced difference in rank with the man he struck upset protocol and might offend friends and enemies alike.

"For Christ's sake, Melbourne." Finchley panted through swelling lips and a bloody mouth. Livid bruising, red and black stood out on the exposed side of his face. He drooled and spat blood on the floor. "What got into you? You can't challenge me."

Dane sucked in a deep breath. Now was the time to apologize,

offer excuses, express regret and retreat. Whatever had to happen to protect his reputation and Mariotte's. A lady exposed in scandal through no fault of her own became fodder for the gossips.

A glance at the table revealed Troyes as comfortable and quiet as though Dane had clapped Finchley on the back in camaraderie instead of striking him so hard he fell out of his chair. Troyes's smile offered neither censure nor encouragement. The words Dane found came out in tones too harsh for Dane himself to recognize as his own.

"I understand you, sir. If you'd rather retract your remarks I'll not drag you outside to continue this disagreement. You will retract or we will continue. Or you may challenge me, sir. Remember the last man I wasn't good enough to fight." He folded his arms and waited for Finchley to make up his mind.

CHAPTER 16

"What a ridiculous story!" Mariotte ignored Serena's admonishing brows. Despite Serena's dire warnings, frowns encouraged facial lines, Julia Dearbourne's breathless account of gossip concerning Dane's confrontation of Finchley prevented Mariotte's brow from smoothing itself. Inflation and embellishment had taken its course on the event until it stood a behemoth of distortion with no further connection to fact. "You don't believe it?"

"Of course I don't. I had it from Finchley himself it's not true. He sent me a note." Julia patted her reticule. "It's true his face is injured. From a bad fall he took whilst hunting with friends in the country. He's very well, but he'll be recuperating most of the month." Her sweet pink mouth turned downward. "He'll miss your party."

"I'm sorry to hear it." Despite her knowledge of Finchley's bad behavior and Dane's retaliation, Mariotte harbored genuine regrets for her friend's disappointment. It shocked her Dane owned to smacking the viscount out of his seat over some ill-chosen words. She couldn't reconcile Dane's natural tranquility and pleasant confidence with his actions. Dear Heaven, what could Finchley have said to offend the imperturbable barrister? "There'll be other dances."

"And we'll go to London this season and the balls will be more frequent there. And Finch'll be able to know you, Mariotte! Once you've been presented." Julia beamed at that prospect and squeezed Mariotte's hand. "We can all be friends."

"It'll be delightful." And a relief. Mariotte had gone through multiple fittings for her court gown and a bandeau headdress bedecked with what appeared to be all the plumage from an entire ostrich. After her presentation she could look forward to making arrangements for her future. She would be officially eligible to receive the addresses of gentlemen.

Already she guessed an admirer or two waited to declare intentions. A well-reputed middle-aged physician whose face retained a trace of past handsomeness singled her out often at the public balls, concerts, and recitals as well as private entertainments whenever they met. A respectable widower with one daughter married and another in her teens. Either could offer her a comfortable life. An ordinary life.

The fortune Cedric settled upon her, though, might open doors of opportunity higher upon the social ladder, and if she meant to look out for herself she had to consider them. Just as she had to consider the truth of her relationship with Cedric might become known. How might that scandal impact her unattained husband or any children they had?

Mariotte glanced out her window. Through streaming rainfall, Bath's dull, wet, gilded streets and buildings blended before her view. A chair made its way down the far sidewalk, carrying an invalid to the Pump Room, no doubt.

"Do you think of Seti at all, Mariotte?"

"What do you mean, dear?" Mariotte took in Julia's pink blush and restless rearrangement of her long shawl. "Seti's most dear to me, of course. My family's lucky in his friendship." The longer she remained at Royal Crescent, the greater difficulty would be attached to leaving. Late at night and through the morning she lay in Seti's arms or draped upon his body, his beating heart a lullaby soothing her to rest. Dane often slept beside them, his strong hand clasping Cedric's over the small of her back. Troyes sometimes joined them, though more often than not he chose to steal away after love and sleep in his own bed.

Her body and her mind accustomed themselves to their presences, their shapes and habits and voices surrounding her. What would she do when changing times dictated she sleep alone?

"I mean only that—some people think you and Seti exhibit signs of sincere attachment. I confess I think it myself at times. He shows such particular attention to you, perhaps more than a guardian's interest for a charge."

"Why Julia!" Mariotte could not imagine what sort of gossip had reached her friend. "Seti's manners toward me are above reproach."

"They are. Perhaps that's what's led to speculation." Julia's cornflower eyes dropped with some embarrassment for the subject. "In the past, you know, Seti and—all the Three Devils—were known for being such a wild set." She lowered her voice to a whisper as though she feared the footmen strained to hear her words. "Troyes has been the subject of gossip for years, bracketed with one lady." Decorous wrinkling of Julia's button nose implied Louisa Redworth's designation as a lady lacked qualification to Julia's mind. "And Mr. Melbourne was involved in a scandalous confrontation with his late wife's fiancé after Mrs. Melbourne left him and sought to dissolve their marriage."

"Scandal?" Of all the Three Devils Dane seemed fondest of domestic life.

Julia winced. "I hardly credit the accounts, Mr. Melbourne is too refined and his disposition too agreeable, but one never knows what even refined agreeable people do when they're being divorced and scandalized, do they? I don't mean to bring up distasteful matters, Mariotte." Julia's gloves creaked as she wrung her hands. What an anomaly Julia Dearbourne was for her society. She disliked gossip, meat and drink to all the *ton*. "I'm only pointing it out to you that all the gentlemen have changed since your arrival to Bath. Surely it's at Seti's instigation. For all Seti's close friendships with them and their previous carousing, Seti's name isn't linked to another lady in any way that might give a prudent woman pause. In evaluating a gentlemen's eligibility."

"Bachelors might expect to change some aspects of living when a female relation comes to live with them." Mariotte made the point with a casual air she could not feel.

"But it's true, certainly, that Seti doesn't show attention to other ladies he deigns to show to you."

"Perhaps."

"If he proposed, would you accept?"

"Julia, really." Mariotte could not help huffing.

"Well, is there a reason you would not? For a man past fifty he's exceptionally well-looking. And it's not unheard of for a man and a ward to form an attachment and marry. He has so much money and no one to leave it to besides Troyes, who's plenty rich himself. I cannot help but notice—perhaps—I sometimes think I observe you dance more lightly with Seti than any other man at a ball." Julia's discomfort in discussing such intimate matters did not prevent her from meeting Mariotte's eyes. "I hope I'm not interfering, but if the two of you entertain comparable sentiments, there's no good reason for you and Seti to ever part company."

Mariotte giggled at Julia's prim observations, but the young woman's final remark sobered her. Did Mariotte show too much open favoritism toward her lover? Could she help it that she enjoyed holding Cedric's hand and facing him, chatting, and promenading with him?

The delights of bedding the Three Devils might prove more forgettable if their involvement did not extend beyond the bedroom, but they were almost always with her or she with them. They took most of their meals together, attended church together, took drives in the park or strolled the broad garden taking up the back of Cedric's house. Many of their evenings they attended the same entertainments, and rare was the day Cedric did not open his library doors after a morning devoted to negotiations and correspondences to entreat softly, "Mariotte, please come and play for me this afternoon."

It grew harder and harder to remember she was their bought woman; they functioned so much as a family. An uncommon family, to be sure, but the involvement and social bonds took firmer root with the passage of time. How could she separate her dreams of independence from her growing feelings for these remarkable men, for the life they all lived together, and return to the mundane world where she belonged? Why hadn't she considered the impact closer acquaintance with Seti would make upon her life, its touch so deep Mariotte sensed it would remain part of her?

I never expected to love him. Any of them.

Mariotte managed another forced smile for her younger friend. Not for the first time, she wished she'd more carefully considered personal cost as well as the benefits attached to her bargain with the Three Devils.

* * *

"Afternoon rain's too common in Bath." Mariotte and Serena made good use of Dane's handsome umbrella, fleeing the Dearbourne carriage and scurrying up the walk to Royal Crescent.

"Chillier than usual for August, Miss!" Serena blew relieved observation behind Mariotte, shut them safely indoors. "Winter might come early."

"Let's hope it's only a passing draft. Winter already lasts so long here."

Tucker rapped on Mariotte's bedroom door as Serena helped her undress. "Lord Cedric is pleased you returned before the weather took hold, Miss Sabrier, and asks if you'll join him in the red drawing room."

"Of course. I'll be down shortly." Mariotte changed to a wool dress of blue so dark it looked almost black in some lights. After scrubbing her loosened hair with a towel and combing it out, Mariotte decided to leave her hair alone, tying it away from her face with a wide black silk ribbon. "Shouldn't you hurry, Miss? His lordship's waiting."

Mariotte bent to remove her damp shoes. "His lordship will not mind waiting for me to get dry feet, Serena." She peeled off her wet stockings, ignoring her maid's silent fuss as she buffed Mariotte's feet with the towel and helped her don clean hosiery. "Those new black slippers, the quilted ones? I'll wear those."

Draped in a fine paisley shawl, Mariotte made her way downstairs to the eclectic drawing room, its walls covered in deep crimson brocade. Cedric lounged against velvet cushions on a low empire sofa, one languid hand draped over its gracefully curved arm, the glide to his feet upon sight of her an afterthought of motion.

"I missed you, m'dear." His eyes glowed, lips shaping into soft welcome.

How this man continued to affect her, Mariotte pondered as they exchanged bows. Anticipation crowded her senses anytime they were together. Meeting him alone magnified those feelings. Impossible to credit the butterflies guiding her heartbeat strictly upon Cedric's good looks and desire's novelty anymore; pleasure existed in their spending time together.

"You're not unwell, Mariotte?" The faintest frown indented his golden brow. His softening mouth thwarted the illusion of dissatisfaction.

"Not at all. I've missed you, too." Mariotte offered him a smile as she approached, admiring the fine embroidery upon his open waistcoat, a dainty pattern of ivy leaves. Varied shades of green imbued startling realism into the design.

"But you must feel chilled." His expressive glance indicated her dress.

"It's cooler today." Evidently his lordship did not feel so. He'd

removed his coat and his unknotted cravat revealed more than a hint of his splendid throat.

"You're more accustomed to a tropical climate, I suppose." He shrugged. "I've ordered a new pianoforte. Will you try it? Come see it." A courtly gesture redirected her gaze from admiring Cedric's dishabille to the new instrument filling the gap between two enormous potted ferns.

Mariotte felt her mouth relax in honest surprise. "I'd no idea you intended to buy a new pianoforte." Wrinkling her nose, she flashed a wicked grin. "Does this mean you're keeping the Gibson upstairs?"

Clear pure laughter answered her, accompanied by that soft appreciative glance and another gesture for her to inspect the replacement.

She half-circled a wingback chair and stood before the pianoforte. At first glance it appeared to be made of marble, but Mariotte's examination confirmed it as wood buffed to ice-cream smoothness, painted to a finish imitating marble.

"Milord. Seti." Swallowing, Mariotte lifted the polished lid to reveal gleaming mother-of-pearl inlay. Unique medallions worked in gold adorned the sides of the instrument and its legs were swirls of intricate carving in a pattern mimicking filigree. "I've never seen anything finer. Is it a special commission?" Mariotte fingered one of the medallions. Such elaborate ornamentation required hours of labor.

"It's a Dragonova." Cedric smiled at her questioning face. "A private family of Greek and Russian origin. They don't trouble themselves to market with humans."

"They're Extranatural, then?" How odd the term seemed so much more normal to her now than the human equivalents. "They have human relations but primarily they are Lykeion. Wolf-kind."

"Like Sir Veikko."

"M'dear, I nurture hopes no other creature on the planet is like Sir Veikko. Same species, yes."

Sweet shocks of lightning coursed under Mariotte's skin; Cedric's light broadcloth sleeve brushed her forearm as he bent beside her. Myriad fragrances meaning *Cedric* permeated her conscious in one deep breath: sandalwood, soap and water, and knee-weakening subtlest spice of male, musky warmth.

He drew the padded stool from beneath the pianoforte and Mariotte murmured a grateful noise, sinking down and arranging her skirts. Cedric's fingers eased beneath her hair and stroked the side of her neck.

"Lovely."

"Supreme craftsmanship. A great deal of effort goes into their designs. An occasional human client might be fortunate enough to beg or bribe his way into a deal for their products—or if the Dragonova house views a musician as exceptionally skilled, a family member may opt to gift him with an instrument worthy of the talent."

"What do all the decorations mean?"

"These are symbols of prayer and good fortune. Blessings if you will. They bind magic into the instrument to connect the musician more closely to his work. To avoid distraction or error. Some of the symbols are for the player's protection and long life. Music is a sacred art form to the Lykeions and their craft reflects that."

Mariotte could not resist rippling her fingertips along the edges of the keys, eliciting clear tinkling notes unlike anything she'd heard before. Cedric planted both hands on her shoulders. Mariotte arranged her hands upon the keys and played a familiar riff of her favorite Bach. Celestial sound, beyond any magic conjured by composition's power and technical skill in interpretation.

"Do you not care for its sound? Why did you stop?" Cedric kneaded her shoulders.

"It's too much. Too great a gift." Why should her voice tremble?

"It's a splendid gift for your skill. It pleases me a great deal to imagine our enjoyment of it. You in playing. Myself in listening." Lips kissed away an impromptu tear on the side of her face. "I believed in your talent since I first heard you play. In all my years, my Mariotte, I've never made purchase of this kind before." Another kiss, spun sugar and light, grazed her temple. "I've not known anyone worthy."

"Sir..."

"Will you play for me, Mariotte? Only a short piece. Try it." Cedric's words measured calmness, asked she do an ordinary thing.

"Of course." Her eye fell upon the sheets arranged upon the music stand. "Some Lully?"

Large hands smoothed her hair. "Lully's excellent."

Mariotte took a deep breath and released it as she began to play again. She fixed her eyes upon the familiar notes and summoned the peace this activity always brought to her. She didn't care much for Lully, found him pompous and overbearing in comparison to Bach and Mozart. Perhaps that made it easier to focus upon playing and less upon incredible resonance and rich mellow tones she solicited from the pianoforte. Cedric lingered behind her, no longer touching her but close enough to be felt, his expression of rapt admiration reflected in the instrument's sleek surface.

She stopped, abrupt at the end, lifting both hands to examine them. *I've played piano most of my life. And I've just discovered I have hands.* Music, her solace since earliest childhood, reintroduced itself, a new entity.

Behind her, Cedric's hands came together. Over and over. Faster and faster. His blue eyes darkened to twilight passion, his mouth hardened to gorgeous cruelty.

Mariotte whirled out of the stool to embrace him. She heard the swiftest warning noise as she clutched his biceps and pushed herself to tiptoe, leaning against his body to assail his mouth with her own.

Sharp fangs met her lips.

"Oh!" She drew back.

"Forgive me." One of his arms surrounded her. He lifted her chin and winced. "Poor dearling." He brushed her cut lips with the soft sweep of his tongue. Warm, velvet ribbon caress, pleasant and healing all at once; the fine cut edges knit themselves together. Cedric nudged her lips apart and lapped the inside of her cut mouth, soothing away the injury.

Their arms imprisoned each other, eyes meeting a fraction of time before their bodies collided.

"The music. It's beautiful." She panted into his shirtfront, breathing in his scent through fine cotton.

"You're magnificent." His mouth traced her hairline.

"I didn't know I could sound like that."

"You always have. You have a better instrument that makes it more easily heard." Warm kiss in her hair. "Your music touched me so, m'dear. From our beginning."

He stopped speaking then and they cleaved together for long,

glorious minutes. New music accompanied them, the light swish of Mariotte's hand on cotton as she rubbed Cedric's back in circles through his shirt, the sweep of her curls against her woolen dress under Cedric's hand, and infrequent, quiet kisses.

Mariotte savored the warmth of Cedric's skin against her cheek; the fine broadcloth of his sleeve more a filter than a shield between them. His shoulder formed an ideal rest for the side of her face. Her head's slightest pivot elevated her glance to the huge looking-glass taking up the middle of the wall, and her breath stilled. The angelic energy of Cedric's personal guardian reflected the rich green of new spring lawns. Where her face brushed his shoulder and her arms curled over his back her rosier aura merged with his into the shade of fresh sliced peaches.

"You are so beautiful to me." Tears burned her eyes and Mariotte banished their trespass with rapid blinking. This sense of utter contentment and absolute security in Cedric's arms. Sleeping with him, awake with him. How could she hope to attain this comfort elsewhere?

Cedric opted to move at last, guiding Mariotte toward the small oblong table situated opposite the fireplace. He seated her with grave courtesy and took the chair across from her.

"Come. We'll have whist." His well-groomed hands collected the deck and began shuffling.

CHAPTER 17

"You've no fondness for gaming." Cedric's observation held no judgment.

"It's not a favorite pastime of mine." Mariotte sipped her watered wine.

"Chance doesn't excite you?"

"You've more money than I, milord."

The cleft in his cheek deepened. "You declined Lady Edminton's whist party this week. Naught good comes of snubbing my friends, m'dear. Whatever your feelings for cards."

"I intended no snub. I thought she would most enjoy guests with a partiality for cards." Mariotte spread her fingers. "I like Lord and Lady Edminton a great deal."

"This afternoon we play for truth." Cedric tossed cards back

and forth between them.

"Pardon me?"

"The winning hand may ask the losing hand questions which the loser is required to answer truthfully." A smile played on his lips. "Any questions at all."

"I'm for you, sir. But you needn't engage me in cards for this. I've always answered your questions truthfully." She blinked slowly, the gesture she knew he found so enticing. "And I've always given your assertions benefit of the doubt."

A round of cheery laughter started the game, and when Cedric lay down the winning hand Mariotte had no rancor in facing him.

"I know your competency frightened you, but you do love the Dragonova?"

"I never imagined music's possibilities as the instrument allowed." She'd remember this gift long after she must leave it behind with her handsome protector. Or would he insist she take it with her when time came for them to part? A pleasant souvenir and bittersweet reminder of their alliance.

"Why do you dislike cards?"

"I've seen the harm in them." His question relieved her, chasing away sentimental pangs wrenching her heart more than they ought. "My stepfather and my mother had a weakness for them. It impoverished our family and it affected my eligibility. A neighboring family who'd enjoyed close bonds with us for years cancelled my engagement to their son. They doubted our estate could honor my dowry promised in the wedding contract." Mariotte dismissed the old attachment she'd held toward her former beau; it couldn't compare to her more recent experiences and seemed more and more a schoolgirl's dream. "Upon my stepfather's death, my half brother inherited control of what had been an impressive property. He managed no better than his father, nor did he regard prudent advice if anyone offered it. After I had the audacity to survive the yellow fever, my second fiancé—a decent man though not our equal in education and rank—broke our engagement since he feared the fever might ill effect my ability to increase. Henri couldn't pawn me off to the local convent since they required a higher dowry than my first betrothal. Henri's gambling disgusted me. Any expectations I could have out of life were all curtailed around games." She glared at her sweating fists, then looked back at Cedric before admitting, "I detested the embarrassments and the disappointments. But nothing frustrated me worse than inconsistency, the uncertainties it brought to my life."

"Mariotte..." Cedric mused. "You couldn't have thought a parlor-house in a foreign country resolved your troubles?"

"My brother lost the deed to our plantation in a frivolous bet. A land grant my father's family had owned for four generations. Henri inherited one quarter's ownership in the property from our mother."

"No code of primogeniture protected your claim to your father's home?" One corner of Cedric's mouth curled downward.

"In Louisiana, Napoleonic law creates forced heirship. A person cannot disinherit a spouse or children and leave them financially destitute. Upon my father's death, my mother and I inherited equal shares of Beaulieu Place. My mother bequeathed her half in equal shares to my half brother and myself. Henri also inherited a cottage in New Orleans from his father. I've no claim to the cottage since it belonged to my stepfather."

"I see." Cedric took several minutes to consider the information. "Such a policy would normally benefit most families

as well as the region. There are no impoverished family members for the state to maintain. I see it did not avail you in this case, though."

Mariotte moistened her lips with her drink before continuing. "Henri wagered Beaulieu Place upon a horse race and lost. He'd no lawful right to gamble the property in the first place, but in order to redeem his debt I relinquished jewelry to compensate the winner. Valuable heirlooms that belonged to my grandmother." Cedric's nod acknowledged the obvious; she might have successfully challenged the wager's legitimacy in court, but the action exposed her family to scandal. A single woman twice betrothed but never wed, with an actress for a mother and suspected to be of questionable heritage, did herself no favors denouncing her brother's indiscretions. "I sold the rest of the jewelry I owned and used the funds to leave."

"Why choose Bath, though? There are other cities not so far away from your home." Cedric's grin lent their conversation sorely needed humor. "You don't need to take the waters, and the town isn't so fashionable as it was twenty years ago."

"I travelled to London first. I had an acquaintance from school who married a Londoner." Mariotte sighed, shoulders slumping. "I did not make my plans as carefully as I should have. I'd thought to visit my friend and examine opportunities in employment. As a governess, perhaps, or a companion for an elderly person. I wanted to build a new life for myself and it seemed easier to leave home to accomplish that."

"Your friends couldn't help?"

Mariotte's smile ached. "I'd sent a letter to Miss Mailly—Mrs. Endicott, she was, by then. I had not seen her for three years since she married. I arrived to the house in mourning and no one expected me. Mrs. Endicott had passed away in childbed." She steepled her fingertips together over the cards. "I answered several advertisements for people seeking help, but of course I had no proper references or recommendation. I wasn't local and I admitted to being Catholic. London loathes Catholics." She wrinkled an indignant nose.

Cedric tilted his head; a red-gold strand of hair spilled past his shoulder. "The Prince of Wales married a Catholic widow, and the whole of Parliament set to work concealing the matter. The Crown declined to acknowledge the union's validity due to the Royal Marriages Act, and poor Prinny made himself a bigamist once he wed Caroline of Brunswick. Parliament's satisfied that, by letter of the law, the second marriage is legitimate. "

"You sound disapproving."

His nostrils flared. "I do disapprove, as a British subject and as Justice. Mrs. Fitzherbert and Prinny were both of majority age and in sound mind. Their right to contract marriage ought not be impugned by prejudiced legislation. The Prince Regent's second marriage is a farce. Caroline and he loathe one another and won't live together, vastly more embarrassing to the Royals and to the nation than a Catholic Queen Consort. It's expensive as well since Caroline requires an enormous pension for her separate maintenance."

"I answered Alannah's advertisement for a musician on a lark and moved to Bath after she engaged me. Once I realized some of the purposes of the house, I insisted on appearing masked to protect my identity." Mariotte tsked at her former delicacy. "I wonder why I bothered. I doubt any guests would have contacted Henri and advised him of my whereabouts. Some of the boarders paid me to tutor them in French. Had you not liked my playing I might still be at Rowan House or not. I've seen enough of harmless gambling, but I've also seen people beggared because they or their relations lacked sufficient self-control to abandon the tables."

"It still offends you, though."

"Yes." Mariotte's hissed vehemence surprised and relieved her as she enjoyed the luxury of sharing her resentment with another soul. "It frustrates me another person's failings impact the fortunes of blameless relations. Had I legal control of my own assets and funds and I gambled them away I'd have no one but myself to blame and should swallow the consequences. But when my money and property are in the possession of a person of too frail a character to handle them honorably, why must I resign myself to respectable spinsterhood and no prospects?" She raised her chin parallel to the table. "I deserved more than that. I'm no fool and I knew the world is a hard place for a woman of limited means seeking to make her way in it, but any choices I've made since I've come to England have only made consequences for myself."

Cedric's hand covered hers until it stopped quivering. "Whatever social convention might make of your decisions in how you came to be part of our household, you had a right to expect more of your own kin."

"Thank you."

He nodded and handed her the cards. "Your turn to deal."

Their next hand took longer. Mariotte's concentration on the rules baffled her; it took time for her to understand her hand won.

She met Cedric's gaze. "Why are you and the others named after the devil?"

The cleft in his left cheek deepened in amused recollection. "My sons and I were imprudent enough to seduce an elegant duchess from a popular family. Her duke enjoyed regular

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

philandering but could not countenance our own impertinence toward the wife of a leading peer." Cedric shrugged. "To demonstrate our lack of snobbery, we also enjoyed his live-in mistress. Prinny tagged us devilish interfering for our offense." His boots crossed under the table and he helped himself to a sip of Mariotte's watered wine. "Our more specific nicknames are products of the *ton's* indefatigable imagination. Troyes is Lucifer, for his pride and great beauty, I suppose. I'm called Seti for my hair." His shirt flowed under his rippling shoulders. "I don't know why Dane's Hades. Either it's because he tends to be the least likely of us to involve ourselves in scandal or because the *ton* likes matching nicknames. Some of them are already taking to calling you Persephone." His full smile surfaced. "Who knows where the *ton* gets its quirks or what quirk they'll get next?"

Mariotte licked her lips for a more delicate question. "Why do you call Troyes and Dane your sons?"

His facial lines hardened into arm's length courtesy. "Troyes has distant ties of kinship to my house and I adopted him after the French revolts decimated his family and ruined much of his fortune. Dane is contaminate, once a true human and not a born vampire. His family was my friend."

"Oh."

"In terms of my own culture, Troyes and Dane are my sons. They are my lovers and they share my position and place. The ties between us are familial ones, not incestuous."

Mariotte understood Cedric's scowl reflected no personal displeasure toward her. "What is your true age, Seti? You're much older than you appear."

Perfect white teeth. "I'm near an even millennia, my dear. I was born in Jorvick, a former Roman settlement overtaken by

Viking colonists and at present known as York. My parents still own a house there. Does it distress you to be in such an old man's keeping?"

Flimsy insects flittered inside Mariotte's ribcage but she shook her head. "Is Tucker your lover?"

"He is not. He was once, in his youth he believed submission to me in that manner was—required." The tall man shifted his chair. "I do not touch a man or a woman who does not wish me to do so. Tucker has been in my employ for many years. My regard for him is based on the passing of years and his pleasing character."

"But you've bitten him."

"A form of love between us," he allowed. "But that isn't the same as his being my lover."

"You haven't bitten me. On purpose." The side of her mouth still ached where she'd bumped into his fangs.

"You've not offered me that pleasure." Temptation's promise broadened his smile.

"Your preferences...for men and for myself..." She could not stop her voice from shrinking. "How do you have such tastes?"

He drank more of her wine and caressed the rim of the glass until it sang. "I recognized my interests centuries ago. Men and women appeal to me in different ways. It's common among my own kind to enjoy the loveliness of both sexes though most entertain a preference. I loved vampiress women in my early youth, but I targeted human males for feeding. Over time, I came to enjoy pleasure beyond blood with a male lover. I appreciate a man's sturdiness as much as a woman's delicacy. Loving a woman, becoming part of her body, is an exquisite experience. There's a sublime complexity to it, like melting into someone's soul. The closeness you and I reach is different than that I share with my sons."

"I suppose, with a man, things are much simpler."

"Yes. And no." His fingers abandoned the goblet, drifted over her knuckles and wove between her digits. "At times, I prefer watching women completed by another I love and trust. I can observe all of her, hear every whimper, watch her writhe and succumb to ecstasy."

"I understand." Mariotte's wonder roared in her ears; she squeezed his hand.

"Do you, my Mariotte?" Their entwining fingers enlivened her pulse.

"When I see you. Holding Dane. Loving him. Troyes..." Her mind groped for explanations. "I see and feel how much you love each other. And your desire touches me. I anticipate becoming part of it."

"Yes." He stood, bending across the length of the table to kiss her lips. Mariotte manipulated his kiss, molded and worked against it, lengthening the sweet intimacy until they both sighed. Cedric returned to his chair, eyes aglow with passion and pleasure. "Yes, you understand. It's how I feel and it would not be the same for us if you couldn't enjoy it as well. For many women, that's a demanding expectation."

Cedric's revelation pierced the more cynical layers of a shell her mind had constructed to protect herself. "Then it's not disgusting to you that I like serving your sons as well as you?"

"I'd be disgusted if you disliked serving them." Cedric's sculpted lips parted in the faintest sigh. "I'm far older than you and I value the honest pursuit of pleasure for its own sake. Your society dictates a proper lady is to be educated, refined, gentle, and delicate. You are all those things. But you're not a cold woman.

Whatever your inhibitions, nothing you've experienced here has truly frightened or offended you. Your enjoyment is the component bribery and ambition cannot buy. Time for a new hand, love." He shifted the drapes and glanced into the heavy rain. "We'll have one more round before dinner. You'll want to change."

"A good half of the *ton's* schedule devotes itself to changing." Wardrobe etiquette still confused Mariotte and she relied on Serena's regular assistance to understand it. Simple morning dresses, donned for breakfast, gave way to a more decorative day dress if she meant to receive callers that day. Paying calls or shopping mandated walking dresses or a driving dress. In the evening she wore a fancier dress for supper with Cedric and the others in the candlelit dining room. Varied gowns did for afternoon parties, dinners, suppers, balls, and attendance at the theater.

The complexity of understanding the purposes of all the gowns, the suitability of particular colors and fabric for certain events and the coordination of accessories comprised enormous undertaking and Mariotte had a new respect for the maids and valets of the English well-to-do.

She found herself staring blankly at Cedric's winning hand spread on the table. "I thought I had the higher hand. I should have drawn more cards."

Cedric grinned. "Who taught you to drive?"

The unexpected question drove Mariotte to sputtering laughter. "My mother's old coachman, Georges, taught me. I learned mostly on country paths, not city streets. I like driving and it's wholesome exercise."

"You're a four-in-hander in the making. Is Miss Dearbourne as foolish as she appears?"

"You're unkind, Seti. Miss Dearbourne is no more silly or

flirtatious than any other seventeen-year-old with a decent dowry and a respectable name." She tucked a curl behind her ear. "Lately she's set upon meeting Viscount Finchley as often as possible in the Pump Room. I suspect he may return her affections sincerely."

"That won't do, m'dear. Finchley's mother has him sold off to Whitethorne's daughter. Sons of impoverished noble families have rough luck in love."

"Oh." Charlotte's mood dropped at the thought of Julia's disappointment when her hunt for Finchley came to nothing.

"Have you never desired a woman, Mariotte?"

"I do not believe so."

Cedric considered her. "The afternoon we all loved you together, Dane mentioned his preference for your sweet ass. Did you enjoy what he did to you?"

"Yes." Though she blushed to recall Dane's panting need, his thick member sandwiched between her hind cheeks, the heated lava of his seed filling her sensitive crack. Why must Cedric bring up such a sensual memory immediately before dinner?

"Do you trust me to help you indulge his preference?"

Her heart thudded too loudly. She hadn't forgotten Dane's anticipation to take their intimacy further. Her own imagination growled in appetite to know just how well their bodies might fit together. "You know I trust you." An image of Dane swam before her, quiet attractiveness so pleasing to the eye and his spirit so warm the thought of him cosseted her. "I trust Dane, too."

"Come to me for Friday afternoon in my rooms. I've no cases or audiences that day and we won't be disturbed. I'll help prepare you so you can best enjoy it." He glided from his seat without bothering to collect the cards. "Shall we go up and dress now?"

CHAPTER 18

"Master Troyes invites you to take a drive with him, Miss. He prefers you not wear drawers beneath your dress." The manservant's expression and tone retained their typical neutrality; he may as well have consulted her on a change for a supper menu.

"Ah." Mariotte lingered at the pianoforte. The Dragonova had to be the most exquisite instrument she'd ever enjoy in her lifetime. Rich notes and melody she played almost took physical shape and beckoned unseen couples to dance. "Did Troyes say where we'll be going?"

"He does not say, Miss."

She shut the instrument and rose from her fancy padded stool. "Tell him I'll be out front shortly. Thank you."

Her stomach indulged in a wild fluttering of expectation,

threatening to escape her body as she climbed the stairs. Cedric's voice, carrying from his office, drew her steps to pause. He'd been shut in since late morning in a conference with Dane, Sir Veikko, and the two haughty Amazon guards who followed the Lykeion knight everywhere.

Troyes's promise during his illness the previous month stroked Mariotte's recollection. You'd like it if I invited you for a drive, eh? Long slow drive through town. Or out to the country. You'd need to leave your fancy drawers at home to enjoy the trip...

"Yes, Miss?" Tucker awaited her order at the foot of the stairs.

What if Seti did not wish her to accompany Troyes by herself? Her heart squeezed against the complications her duty to the three men implied. During her residence at Royal Crescent Seti appeared at any interlude she'd enjoyed with her patrons. Their agreement had been for her to gratify them all at their pleasure, but that had been before...

Before what? Mariotte wrestled her conscience. Your regard and deeper sentiments toward one gentleman of the house notwithstanding, you accepted a situation here to perform specific service for all the gentlemen. But what if Seti's own feelings match yours? Her stomach skipped though she hadn't stirred. If he feels as I do, would he not say so?

"Please inform his lordship where we've gone, Tucker. If he asks." Her throat constricted around the words. "Inform his lordship I would have invited him had his office not been closed."

"Yes, Miss."

"Thank you." It was the best she could do, the closest she might come to apologetic explanation should Seti require it.

Fevered blood roses warmed Mariotte's face as she continued to her room. Troyes Pellerin's exceptional beauty lacked nothing of sensual appeal, so why did treacherous inhibition swamp her desire? She wanted to go with him—ah yes, dear Heaven, she did.

Tastes of Troyes's passion were sparing when he joined Seti and Dane in her bed. He seemed content to limit his participation during those interludes. She'd sampled lengthy, moist kisses from Troyes, enjoyed his lips and his fingers upon her face and her body. Sometimes she and Dane worked in concert to rouse Troyes's cock, covering Troyes's swelling shaft in kisses, nibbles, and sweet, dense suckling. Dane completed that intimacy, however, savoring the essence as nourishing to a vampire as blood. All the while Seti caressed and praised them both.

Seti had not forbidden her to do this. What if he took offense? He said he would not, but didn't men sometimes say things they did not mean?

I have to trust Seti.

She shut her bedroom door too hard and hoisted her skirts. The new fashion of broader skirts required several petticoats. Mariotte scrabbled at the waist tape to unfasten two of them and they swept into a ring at her ankles. Her blush burned hotter as the soft muslin pantalettes slipped down her body.

Speculation on how Troyes discovered her obedience to his instructions warmed her blush. Pushing the discarded lingerie to one side of the bed, she splashed lavender water on her hands and patted her face with it.

"Good morning." Hopefully she didn't look too distracted by her skirts brushing her bare thighs and buttocks as she returned downstairs.

Troyes inclined his handsome head. "Fine day. And I'm tired of the house."

"A drive is a nice idea." What a priggish remark. Anticipation

hung between them. Troyes offered his arm and a secretive smile. He handed her into the carriage with all the ease of a gentleman meaning to enjoy a simple pastime.

"Thank you." Her rehearsed smile yielded to a real one as she smoothed her full skirt. How could the Devil, too handsome for his own good, know whether she wore pantalettes or not? How long could she anticipate his method of discovery?

A footman shut the door. Troyes rapped on the roof, signaling the coachman to drive on.

"You look pretty today, Mariotte."

"Merci. I think your hat becomes you very well."

"I don't care for the sugar-loaf style. My head ends up shaped like a bullet."

"You look fine." She chuckled, wondered who he really was. Surely he had more gentle ancestors than the revolutionaries he'd fled the previous century. She glanced over him. "That's an interesting brooch."

"Last thing I have from my family."

"Oh." She studied it with greater care. "Why is the stag attacking the lion?"

"It had to do with our motto. He's protecting his lands and people."

"But how could he win against a superior foe?"

"The foe isn't superior. The world just thinks he is." Lean fingers, the nails clean and manicured, traced the lines of the brooch.

"Ah." Mariotte glanced toward dove-gray silken shades. A bare hint of sunlight filtered through them and allowed the air to circulate.

"Mariotte." The note entering his voice had nothing to do with

their earlier conversation. "Why don't you come sit with me?" Mariotte slipped across the seat to oblige him. His arm circled her waist, casual, as if it belonged there. "That's better."

"Yes." Her body remembered his from their other interludes.

"Nervous?" Open fingers brushed her dress, idle, repeated.

"A little." Excitement lurked in her intimacy with a handsome man she did not know so well.

"I don't take you out, I know. Not by myself." His fingers petted the underside of her breast. "It'll get better."

Mariotte caught her breath. Witty responses that would make her sound like a prized courtesan eluded her. Her nipples firmed up until the pointed tips pushed against the front of her short jacket. "I believe you."

Pleasure darkened his laugh. "Come sit astride me. Lift your skirts and climb up on my lap."

"*Pardones-moi*?" She started to apologize, then remembered the man understood her language.

"I want you to sit on my lap. Pull those petticoats out of the way." His hand closed around her ankle and began a smooth journey up her leg, her skirts bunching out of the way.

"Troyes..." She gasped as his fingers cupped her knee.

His hand roved higher and his smile spread wide. "You ain't got on nothing!"

Is it cause for celebration? The heat rising in her face didn't desensitize her to the pleasure ocean widening his eyes. A huge smile detracted from his glamorous looks, reduced him to a youth reaching under his first woman's petticoat.

Muscles jerked in Mariotte's stomach. She couldn't dismiss his exuberance; it touched tenderness inside her. "Troyes..."

"I do like that. Decent women didn't wear those things when I

was a young man." His hand landed farther upon her thigh now, stroking gently, his body half-resting on hers.

Mariotte curled her arms around him. "Am I decent, *monsieur*?" Creamy dampness warmed her sex.

"*Non*, but you're an awfully pretty indecent woman." He leaned back on the seat and unbuttoned his trousers. "So why don't you climb up here and be more comfortable." Like Cedric, he wore nothing underneath. His cock sprang free, a firm shaft in a nest of hair jetty as her own.

She clasped him in loosely gripped fingers, hesitant. "How long will it take for us to get where we're going?"

"As long as I want it to. We've no destination. When we're ready we'll go home." He smiled at his own pun as he urged her closer.

Mariotte began hoisting her skirts to accommodate him. She held his shoulders for balance and lifted her left knee, planting it on the padded leather seat outside his right thigh. The tip of his cock glistened with premature moisture. Mariotte closed her eyes and sighed, swiveled her hips, enabling the rounded head to part her secret lips and bump her swelling clitoris.

Longing punched her, hastened her breathing and yanked her farther into the experience. Inhibition battled desire, a clawed, winged chimera indifferent to social niceties.

"Now ain't this a better way to spend an afternoon ride?" His pale eyes glowed in the dimness.

"I don't know," she admitted.

"You will by the time we get home." He petted her under her skirts, confident fingers playing in the thick curls he found. "Kiss me, *cherie*."

Mariotte pressed her lips to the fine chiseled mouth and wooed

him, pecking the corners, teasing, then catching his lower lip in her teeth and lightly tugging. He pushed her bare ass, lowering her body onto his cock.

The carriage lurched, rolling over uneven ground, driving him deep. She wailed against his mouth, not quite prepared for abrupt entry, and clung to his upper arms, panting.

"Shh, it'll be alright." He cradled her close. "Once you're used to it, you'll like that. It takes things a little out of our control."

"Troyes." Mariotte rolled her hips and clenched internal muscles.

Troyes growled, a low animal sound, and his elegant, white teeth extended into sharp, graceful fangs. 'Oui. Keep doing that, *petite*." He poised to kiss her, turning his face to rub her cheek with his, feline, softer than fangs. Mariotte rocked upon him. The landau's gait carried her movements off balance.

"Oh!" His cupped hand squeezed her breast so hard it hurt.

She moaned brief protest to excite his passion, play to the guise she might not be fully willing and required further seduction to succumb to him. He grinned and continued unbuttoning her fine cotton canezou, pushed it down her arms.

"Nothing to be shy about." His face tilted up to hers. "I wanted you before I ever laid eyes on you." His canines retracted enough he deemed it safe to kiss her, a fleeting brush of lips.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." Her voice thickened. Mariotte snorted when his hat bumped her nose and she took it off, tossed it right side up on the seat beside them. Troyes's brief mutter passed for apology as he lay a course of steady kisses down her neck, pausing to nuzzle and cuddle against her chest between her breasts. She swore her heart attempted to reach his touch.

"That night at the Rowan. I heard you playing and I knew you

were for us." Silky waves of thick hair stroked her chin and her throat. "I didn't care what you looked like."

"You?"

"Oui. And Seti believed me." A shallow thrust jolted her and he flashed a roguish smile before he tugged her loosened bodice open. He made harsher work of her slip; Mariotte heard stitches pop when he forced the garments over her head. *"I can't say you don't make my eyes happy as the rest of me."*

Her laughter broke into a high-pitched cry when the carriage executed too wide a turn. Where the hell were they going? "I might not be able to get everything back on—Troyes *non*! *Mais non*! Not my corset!"

He continued fussing with the strings and she reached to stay his hand. To her surprise his other hand met her rear cheek in a smart slap.

"Ow!" She surged forward, impaling herself deeper upon him.

He nibbled her ear. "You're formidable without it," he insisted. The garment fell away. "You don't need clothes where we're going. I told you. I can carry you up to bed in my coat if you need me to."

He caressed the flesh he bared, stroking her stomach until she cooed. The hand that had punished her rump traced her rear cleft languidly. Did he know he frightened her a little? Was it exciting to him? She tightened around his shaft, lifted herself almost clear of him before sinking back down and grinding against his pubic bone.

"God." Mariotte sighed her contentment at being filled with him.

"Now that's better." He raised his hips to meet her.

Mariotte opened her eyes to Troyes's contagious smile. The

hand petting her behind explored each cheek, pressing and squeezing amplified her kisses against the cushioned warmth of Troyes's mouth. His tongue stroked hers.

"Troyes." His fingers trailed up her rear cheeks and began swirling idle circles in the fine hollow at the base of her back. The simple gesture reduced Mariotte to uncontrollable quivering. Tiny firecrackers sizzled in her skin.

She nibbled his lip until he moaned his appreciation. "Haven't wanted to do this in so long. Sweet, sweet girl." His cock throbbed with the rolling rhythm of the vehicle. "Fuck me hard, *cherie*. I want you to feel me all the way down to your toes."

She had to catch her breath and wonder at his ability to heighten sensation through coarse words. His language should insult her; why did it contribute to the experience's excitement?

Gentlemen did not speak so to ladies.

Perhaps...just for now...I don't want to feel like a lady.

Troyes knew how to touch her, how to squeeze her tight against him so his powerful hips could thrust upward enough to lift them from the seat. The carriage continued its unspecific journey, rocking them together. Soft drafts of fresh air touched her bare skin, as compelling as Troyes's hands.

She moaned his name, her voice low, and tightened her thighs against his hips.

He growled his appreciation, rewarding her with deep, powerful strokes. Supreme decadence, riding through the streets in broad daylight, her clothing stripped away piece by piece, impaled on a man. Enchanting perversion, too sensational for shame.

Her groans gained volume, their coupling's rhythm increasing. "Please, Troyes."

The hand stroking her back quickened into purpose. Troyes

whipped her chemise over her head.

Astounded blood raised hot color in her skin, her eyes forced wide. Should the coach stop and a servant open the door, she was mother-naked beyond her shoes and her stockings. Her accomplice remained full-clothed. They could be anywhere in town.

Excited terror burned beneath her heart, fostered fine quivering in her limbs. Any of a dozen incidents could stop the vehicle, expose her. Realization tightened secret muscles, gripped his flesh inside her.

His gleaming eyes flicked over her and delighted comprehension touched his face.

"You like it." Bass growl, for her alone, brimming satisfaction.

She sounded as breathless as she felt. "I... no... I..." She couldn't lie to eyes so bright on hers. "I do. Oh, Troyes!"

He kissed her *a la sauvage*, so hard she felt the shape of his teeth through his lips. He pulled desperate sounds from her as her body sought to meld itself permanently to his.

He swore, called her a name that painted her body deep flushed rose.

"Don't say that!" she scolded, breathless. Her hips never slackened.

He kissed her and whispered the name again.

"I'm not!" She fanned her fingers over his face.

He kissed them in turn, sucking on them, wrapping his tongue about them. "Yeah, you are. But I like it."

Mariotte shrieked soft frustration, her body reduced to a trembling mass of need. She wanted to fight him, insist he think better of her than that. Trecherous, dark desires held her captive, still willing.

"Please ... "

He ran his tongue over her palm and laughed. "Please what, *amante*?" He punctuated the question with a hard upsurge of his lean hips.

Why was he clothed and she bare-assed for his gratification? Why could he utilize gutter language without offsetting an inch of her pleasure? If anything, her nipples stiffened to aching, her quim so wet she drenched his body hair thrust after thrust.

His tongue traced her jawline. "I love the way you want me, little slut."

She surged forward, caught his earlobe in her teeth and gnawed. "It's *Mademoiselle Salope* to you." She struggled to lean back on his thighs, fighting her passion, quivering on the brink of ecstasy. She would not belong to him in the ultimate sense when he spoke to her that way. She...would...not!

He laughed, gripping her hips to grind a little closer, a little deeper. "Then *Mademoiselle Salope*, princess of all whores, ride me the way you've never ridden a man before. Show me you merit the title."

"I'm not sure you deserve it." She clutched him within her slick heat.

Troyes snarled and increased his strokes to furious speed. "Who else makes you feel like this?" His teeth seized her nipple.

Mariotte screamed, her shivering hips lunged toward him. "Who else has made me feel this way? Besides you?"

Fingers dipped between them where they joined, firm and confident; strokes of lightning surrounded her clitoris. "Besides me." His breath burning ice on her nipple.

"No one has. Except..." She broke off and quickened her bucking hips. His eyes flashed and his growl reverberated through their bodies. "Only our Dane and our Cedric," she rasped, frowning.

The fire in Troyes's eyes changed. "Bon." The landau's motion forced her quim against his hand, each delicate collision shooting minor fire through her body. "That makes you all mine, yes?" He increased his rhythmic strokes until she rode them without the vehicle's prompting. "Oui. Only mine and my family's." His hand clamped tight to her hip. "That's the way it should be, *choux d'amour.*" His lips brushed her jaw. Clever fingertips teased her clitoris, swiping the swollen, budded front and rubbing its sensitive sides, unstoppable demand her passion flow for him. "You're ours." Lips softened possession against the corner of her mouth, beside her left eye, on her cheek. "But for right now, you're mine and nobody else's."

Her body yielded the prize he sought and Mariotte choked, "Troyes!" She writhed and wriggled, bathed his hand in honeyed heat.

"Oui..." Troyes tightened his hold. The carriage rumbled on. Mariotte's face drooped into his collar and his long hair blended with hers.

Passion spurred them both. Troyes drove her to the delicious warm place where she couldn't move, couldn't think, do anything but feel.

Her limbs. Her heart. Her quim. His cock. His mouth. His soft hair and his hard shoulder.

"Ohhhhhh."

Her body clenched, spasmed around him, milked him free of seed.

"Way it should be." Troyes's voice thickened.

"Yes."

His forearm tightened against her back, cradling her as close as

he could, guiding her hips down so he lodged deep for the time it took their bodies to soften, relax, and release each another.

"Troyes." Mariotte's whimper carried a note of deprivation. His skill and enthusiasm did not leave her body wanting, but the more precious intimacy she enjoyed with Cedric and with Dane eluded her.

His lips pressed soft consolation on her temple. "That's my sweet girl."

"I'll be twenty-seven in a few months." She attempted to read his expression; did he understand her disappointment despite their fulfilling conclusion? She tightened her arms around his shoulders and kissed his forehead with greater tenderness.

"I'll be ninety-seven. To me you're my sweet girl. Come here. Relax. We've passed an agreeable time, *n'est-ce pas?*" He nudged her cramped legs straight, welcomed her full weight upon him. Light danced in his pale eyes. "We'll take the air more often, I think. If you like. Don't older people do that?"

She slipped beside him on the seat, glanced down at her clothing and left it alone. Her body felt too alive for coverings.

"I should like to be invited," she whispered. Then she assumed a snotty air. "Provided you modify your vocabulary to a gentleman's speech."

"You don't fool me a bit. Stick to truth, you're good at it, like Seti." He chuckled. "I promise never to speak that way the minute you stop burning hotter when I do it." He eased her back on the deep padding of the seat and covered her body with his. His cock stirred, half hard and pulsing against her inner leg.

"Already!" Mariotte marveled at his hasty recovery. Delighted laughter sprang up in both of them.

"It's a long ride back home, choux d'amour. You're not half

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

used up yet, my sweet, sweet..." He nipped at her throat and flashed his devilish grin. "*Mademoiselle Salope*."

CHAPTER 19

"Why you did not think this information important enough to share with us?" Cedric slid the heavy linen parchment and its English translation across the desk for Dane's examination.

Veikko shrugged. "My final arrangements don't make Aksel any less dead or reveal his killer. Did you abuse your authority to procure that copy, Justice?"

Cedric didn't relax his gaze. "You named Gretchen Raymond sole successor to your estate over thirty years ago."

Veikko arched a neatly groomed brow. "I believed Gretchen Raymond would be my heart's mate. Naturally I wished to provide for her and any children we had in the event of my death. Had I died prior to our joining, my estate would have increased her dower value for another mate." His stare absorbed Cedric, guileless gray. "That does not prove I'm guiltless of Aksel's murder, of course. That merely proves I'm a practical man and a considerate husband. My innocence will be demonstrated when Aksel's murderer is apprehended and eliminated." *Why haven't you found him, Justice?* The silent question lay, untasted, on the Lykeion's lips.

Dane scowled at the paperwork. "You'll change your will once you return home, I suppose."

"I shall not. Until I am accepted by a suitable bitch, Gretchen remains my successor." He scratched behind one ear before adding, "Her father's property is to be returned to her regardless of my marital status. Gretchen won't be destitute and dependent upon her foreign consort."

Cedric exchanged glances with his child. Apart from the faint tension deepening a crease between the younger vampire's brows, Dane's expression betrayed nothing.

"Your presence in London during the murder alleviates you of guilt as the actual perpetrator. Unless you used magic abilities or worked with an accomplice."

"Wolves are pack animals." Dane took special care with the documents, folding them along existing creases in the paper and slipping them into their folio.

"Among ourselves." Veikko's rejoinder accompanied a toothsome grin.

"If you were honestly unaware of your designation as Aksel's heir and have no interest in his estate, I see no additional motives for you to kill him. Which makes your continued detention in my home more questionable. You're free to leave with the approaching Lykeion escort. Until then, you will remain in my home under protective custody." "I am grateful for your hospitality." It should have been impossible for any rational creature to convey sincerity while reclining on the floor, one arm slung over its head and both legs bent, resting against the sofa.

Cedric's lips twitched; Chione and Kaiva exchanged amused glances. His peripheral vision caught Dane's displeasure concealed beneath professional veneer. The barrister managed a civil bow to reciprocate Sir Veikko's.

"What's the Minotaur hair for?"

"Pardon me?"

Veikko's elegant nostrils flared and he ignored Dane's defensive stiffness as he ambled around the desk between Dane and Cedric. "You've got Minotaur hair somewhere 'round here."

Cedric's stomach clenched into an acidic fist. "Is this what you mean?" He didn't respond to Dane's sky-high brow as he passed the creamy envelope containing the hairs they'd collected at the murder scene. "We found them on Aksel's clothing."

Veikko's nose and mouth scrunched in tight disgust when Cedric held the open envelope too closely to the Lykeion's face. "It's Minotaur hair. I smell the musk."

"Minotaur bristles are illegal substances." Kaiva's matter-offactness clipped the atmosphere's abrupt stillness. The Amazon's eyes flicked to Cedric's in open concern.

"Minotaurs are an endangered tribe." Cedric concentrated on emptying the hairs onto a clean piece of paper. "Poachers butcher them and market their carcasses. Their body parts are used almost exclusively for darker magic. Look more carefully, please, Sir Veikko, are you certain these are Minotaur bristles? Dane and I thought they were boar bristles."

"There's no mistaking that stench." Turning away, Veikko

sucked in a deep breath before bending to examine the coarse hairs more closely. His lips parted and he drew a shallow breath, then gritted his teeth. "It doesn't smell like boar to me. I suppose boar bristles might be saturated in Minotaur musk to make them smell like that." He retreated with a graceful shrug. Fished his handkerchief from a pocket to scrub his nose and mouth. "You must excuse me."

"Thank you for your forbearance." Cedric appreciated Chione's hasty retrieval of a small wastepaper basket as Kaiva and she flanked Veikko on the way out of the library. Veikko managed a bare five paces into the hall before the retching began. "We might as well eliminate Sir Veikko as a suspect."

"I don't know if that's wise." Dane's mouth tightened. Cedric retrieved his large leather journal and recorded the most recent findings. "Even if he did not kill Aksel himself, there's no proof he's not otherwise involved."

"Dane, I cannot hold a man as a murder suspect because no evidence proves his innocence. I must have proof of his guilt to accuse him." He rummaged through his desk, retrieved a slim length of oak and his whittling tools. He studied the design in progress before he continued carving into the thin wood with narrow, careful strokes. "What evidence exists is more likely to exonerate him than condemn him. Lykeion communities as a rule aren't murderous. They don't have to be; in the event of a dispute, the parties are free to use combat to resolve grievances. They're practical people and prefer not to kill off their neighbors, so they rarely do, but the opportunity's still there."

"But if there wasn't any dispute requiring combat to resolve, what then?"

"It doesn't fit, Dane." The sharp blade's familiar glide over and

into wood pleased his hands; it had been a while since he'd turned his time to handcraft.

"People who're the closest and dearest to another person are more likely to be victims of their wrath than strangers."

"You're right." A hard sliver of ice nailed tender tissues in Cedric's heart. "As far as I can tell, Veikko was Aksel's friend. The Order of Apollo Lykeios insists upon his release and hasn't offered information revealing any known grievance for which Veikko might consider murdering a clansman or a close friend."

"Maybe he didn't consider it at all. Sometimes people who know and like each other can disagree and wax violent." Dane strolled along the far wall, examining book-crammed shelves without seeing them.

"This wasn't an accident. Someone wanted Aksel dead, and they paid for dark magic to bring it about."

"What does the Minotaur hair do?" Dane leaned against the corner.

Cedric grimaced."It has conversion effects. I've decided past matters involving it. Certain spells channel attributes of a token creature to the client or a chosen subject. The Minotaur hair acts as a medium. Its musk is substance for conversion. The user wanted the Minotaur's attributes. Height, physical power, and resilience."

Dane digested the information. "Would it turn the user into a Minotaur?"

"Sometimes." Cedric shuddered. His smile crept out to meet Dane's surprised stare. "Dearling, there are things in this existence far older and more dangerous than my kind, and I entertain healthy fears of them in the name of self-preservation. One reason Minotaur components in magic use are forbidden is their instability. The subject might find himself endowed with a Minotaur's brute strength, but he might also receive animalian intelligence. His face and person may remain normal, or he might find himself with partial or complete Minotaur characteristics. I saw a grown human male who took on the magic. He entertained hopes of receiving the Minotaur's libido and fertility. He woke up in his screaming mistress's arms, sporting a pair of bull's horns." He tapped a temple as he pulled a wry face.

"Did the spellcaster manage to correct the problem?" Dane folded his arms across his sturdy chest. Cedric shook his head. "Ugh!"

"The Arcadia Club petitioned for a ban on hunting Minotaurs decades before the Supreme Council finally upheld their pleading. Yes, Serena?" Cedric glanced toward the doorway to give the maid the impression he saw her before she knocked. "Lud, thank you, dear! I'd forgotten it's past noon, and I'm starving." Genuine appreciation brightened his spirits.

Serena carried an oblong silver tray bearing two goblets, a footed pitcher, and a carafe of dark wine.

"Lamb's blood, sir. Not two hours old. Tucker's already added wine but thought you might like more." She set the tray on his desk and stood back for the gentlemen to pour and sample the diluted blood.

"Dane, you must be famished, come."

"You look well, Serena." Dane spared half a minute to compliment the maid before he drank half a goblet in two ravenous gulps.

"Thank you, sir. My afternoon off, sir. I'll be visiting with friends."

"You'll be a belle among them in that pretty gown." He licked his teeth clean before he grinned. "Thank you, sir." Her smile broke through professional reserve. "Miss kindly gave me the dress and it hardly wanted altering. She said I ought to have one nice dress since all her things were new and it'd be a while before she had anything worn enough to give me. I explained to her it's not right for the help to wear white gowns, but she insisted."

"It suits you nicely." Cedric waved away Dane's confusion. "Don't fret if the help aren't allowed to wear white, if they're not allowed today, they will be some other time."

"Yes, sir." She bobbed a polite curtsey, and departed when Cedric nodded dismissal.

Dane poured a second goblet. His hunger more controlled, he sipped decorously, savoring wine's sweet warmth of wine. "What's this about maids in white dresses?"

Cedric shrugged. "I've given up understanding it, man. Sumptuary laws prevail in human culture; these days, it's enforced by society instead of legal authority. Some well-reputed dame of the *ton* recognizes a domestic looking prettier than her own daughter in the same clothes, and suddenly the domestic is forward and above herself."

"Do you honestly believe Sir Veikko isn't involved in Sir Aksel's murder?" Dane met Cedric's gaze over the rim of his silver goblet.

"I believe it more now than I did previously. If we authenticate the bristles are Minotaur hair, it's impossible for me to believe a Lykeion knight advocated their use. Lykeions don't believe in using magic or chemical substances to affect one's body. They regard it as pollution." He held up one hand before Dane could speak. "Yes, I realize it's possible for a Lykeion to forsake his clan and his teachings. I can't identify any behavior in Veikko to indicate he might do these things. He's as Lykeion as a man-wolf can ever hope to be." He traced the bowl of his goblet and swallowed an empty mouthful of resolve. "It displeases me to say it because it complicates my work. If Sir Veikko is not in league with the killer, I'm farther away than ever in determining the killer's identity or motive. If I continue to regard Sir Veikko as the logical suspect, though, I may never find the murderer. He—or she—could already be long free of the county."

"You're taking this hard, Seti." Dane stood behind his sire's chair. Cedric rotated his shoulders as the other man's capable hands slipped beneath his hair. Fingers curled over Cedric's upper back and began to push and knead in a delectable, easy rhythm. Cedric set his carving down and rotated his shoulders. "Beautiful work. I especially like the dragon, but why is he underwater?"

"It's a sea serpent, they're kin to dragons but live in deep ocean. The Lykeions have endured pinched numbers over the past two centuries, and their loss is a great one." He rounded his upper back, leaned forward. "Mmmm. Yes, that spot right there." Dane squeezed tension free of him. "I care about making this right for them. I care about not having Lykeion knights policing the county determined to pay out a blood oath on an unidentified killer." Cedric dropped his head back, cheek turned for Dane's kiss. Laughter struck his ear and he grinned. "Mariotte's home."

"And in a good mood." Dane chuckled. Together, they listened to the front doors burst open and the foyer fill with lively teasing chatter.

"An afternoon drive with Troyes..." Cedric endorsed the comment with a meaningful shrug and climbing brows. "Carriage'll still smell like sex on Sunday."

"Seti!" Mariotte's rough velvet contralto carried Cedric to his

feet before the lady entered the library.

"Yes, m'dear, what is it?" Cedric drank in every scrumptious aspect of Mariotte's return. Luminous eyes shone above rosy cheeks. Her lush mouth enjoyed kiss-swollen fullness, natural color deeper as though she'd recently eaten moist, fresh fruit. Her hair formed a sumptuous cloud of ebony ringlets. Most of its glossy mass remained pinned back behind Mariotte's regal head, but much of it hung loose, undecided where it wished to belong; smaller tendrils strayed free, softening the effect. Her carriage adventure wrecked her clothing, everything thrown together and fastened up enough she might not cause a stir fleeing the landau for the shelter of home. Troyes carried half her things slung over one arm, a neat mass of white muslins and linens.

She rounded the desk and kissed Dane first, her mouth smacking his softly while he whispered gentle greeting to her. Mariotte lingered long enough to pat his cheek before turning upon Cedric, throwing her arms around him. Cedric embraced her, forcing her body flush with his own, and drew in her luscious aroma. She'd been aroused over and over and its sweet, irresistible chemistry permeated her pores. Troyes's passionate release leaked free of her body beneath her skirts, the odor organic and raw.

"Perfection." Cedric kissed her hard enough to suckle her breath. Her heart beat wild, urgent tattoos against his chest. Cedric slowed the pace, quickening again once she met him properly, opened her mouth to devour him. Cedric's groan dissolved into languid growling as their mouths met and molded together again and again.

As they eased a modest distance apart, Cedric realized his own face felt warm from their mutual exertion.

"What did you mean to tell me?" He indulged himself, one

very male grin at her distracted effort to recall.

"Seti, I could hardly believe it myself! Troyes ordered the carriage stopped halfway down the street while I smoothed my clothes a bit. I saw Serena leaving the house, dressed in her best, and who did she meet but Mr. Filmore and walked past us on his arm!"

"Filmore? Now that's a surprise. Serena could do better than him." Dane half-turned to the window and smirked.

"All the time I've thought Mr. Filmore got so much more sweet-tempered when he came to our pianoforte lessons because he'd taken up with that French maid who works for No. 11, but he's not! He's attached to Serena instead!" The last sentence made the closest effort to a squeal as Mariotte's low, sexy voice could manage. Impossible to forbear smiling into her bright eyes.

"Well, m'dear, I wish them happy, I'm sure."

"Filmore's queer in the attic." The barrister's persistence sent Mariotte's enchanting mouth into a full-blossomed pout.

"Oh Dane, don't be unkind! I agree Mr. Filmore could've expressed himself with greater civility during our lessons, but he's an accomplished musician and a reputable teacher. If he's taken Serena's fancy and they can be happy together..." Her short, violent nod demanded capitulation from her sighing opponent.

"I wish Serena happiness with the music teacher, touched or no."

* * *

"Serena, please for Christ's sake! Need a bit now." He tugged the second pair of drapes closed with an impatient jerk.

"Shh. It'll be all right, Dick. Already put the kettle on. I told

you it's no good overdoing it." Serena kept her eyes fixed on the lamp she adjusted, lowering output until the light bathing Filmore's dreary little parlor barely outshone the dull cast of earliest false dawn.

"It'll be so good, Serena. When we're married we won't need to do all this sneaking around."

"Yes." In semidarkness she forced her eyes up to meet his, cranked her mouth into a smile. Lamplight shadows almost persuaded her some alterations in her suitor's appearance were either unnoticeable or the simple result of natural aging and change among humans.

Other adjustments in his looks weren't so easily explained. The first dramatic alteration she'd witnessed; his lukewarm eye color bleeding to a true brown-black, solid and dark, the hue taking up so much of his eyes the whites scarcely showed. His lashes grew longer, formed a fringe against his face like fast women attempted to do with horse hairs and adhesive or lamp black. His slender jaw widened into a blunt squared shape to accommodate larger wellformed teeth replacing his former tea stained smile.

Cosmetic artifice couldn't account for the fact that Richard Filmore stood noticeably taller than he had before Serena cajoled him to taste magic. She estimated the lanky music instructor gained a good six inches in height, and she'd quailed that others would notice, but her sharp-witted employers seemed indifferent. Perhaps they assumed Dick resorted to benign enchantment to alter his appearance.

"Come on, Serena. I'm dying for you, love. I haven't fucked you all fortnight." His complaint carried no underlying threat; her apprehensions were the product of her own knowledge.

Serena's smile etched cramps into the sides of her face. "I need

to get out of my good frock first, Dick. Won't do for the Devils to see me all rumpled." Bad enough they'd smell her, smell Dick's spunk in her, and draw their smug, sordid conclusions about it. She'd wash up as best she could, but they'd smell it anyway. Thank God they were too caught up in debauching Mariotte and each other to fret about their domestics' indiscretions.

"I know." His unnatural squared face nodded emphatically before he disappeared behind her to unbutton her bodice. "Forgive me. I miss you so much." He lifted the dress away from her body, over her head, and draped it over the parlor's one chair with exaggerated care. "When we're married you'll have new frocks, not that hoity-toity blueskin's castoffs."

Serena didn't flinch at Filmore's prejudice; in a way, she appreciated it. It was easier to use Filmore when he emphasized his loathing of all people and things non-Anglo. It fell beyond her understanding, a man of known descent from people scorned as conquered inferiors by the whole of England expressing comparable disdain toward the Creole's suspicious heritage. As though Mariotte herself could be any more responsible for who her forbears were than Filmore and Serena could be for their Scots ancestry.

No matter. Serena had good use for his unwanted Scots bloodline if he did not.

"That's right. Once this business finishes I'll marry my beautiful man." Surprising sincerity; then again, she told the truth. "Wed my one true love." She beamed at the prospect; pleasure slipped through her words and her smile lost its artificial edge. Money'd be plentiful for all the frocks she wanted.

Serena ignored his grunted endorsement. She concentrated on unbuttoning Dick's trousers and smoothing the tight-woven wool down his legs.

She forced herself not to swallow or scowl. Hopefully Dick interpreted her sharp intake of breath as admiration for his heavy, swollen testicles and his cock, unnaturally broad-based and tapering to a blood-darkened head glistening with premature lust, already upright and eager to nudge inside her.

"Dick." She didn't have to counterfeit awe. Or relief. He was human still. All his equipment looked human or mostly human, anyhow. Serena scooped him in one rough tugging hand. She knew from earlier practice he preferred ungentle treatment, but no real pain. Nor did he care to deliberately bestow any. At least some of the subtle transformation effects of her compulsion potions did away with his prissified lovemaking, using her like she'd been constructed of glass. He didn't match the man she loved, but assuaging his needs became less uninteresting.

She offered no protest, let him shake off her hold and bend her over the narrow divan alongside the parlor wall. Kneeling upon its padded edge, she arched her back and let him bury his face in her bum and between her legs. The preliminaries felt more like examination than love-play with each new encounter, his snuffling constant, repeated, and infinitesimally slow.

"Celestial darling." He breathed the compliment thickly into her quim. Deep swipes of his tongue coaxed her personal moisture to flow.

"Dick." Serena always did her best to prepare, but the dewy knob of his sex pressing against her plump-lipped, secret opening gave her pause. He rammed in to the hilt with an airy grunt. "Oh, Dick." Biting her lip, she raised her hips as he withdrew a good half of his length only to jam back inside. His immense scrotum bounced against her defenseless sex. "Please! Oh!" He rotated his hips against her buttocks, grinding as though additional yielding on her part permitted him to sink deeper. The fingers framing her hips dug into her flesh, bruising grip, raising and smashing her against skinny thighs coated in coarse hair lying smooth and sleek in one direction like cowhide.

"Oh Dick, you're so good! You're the best! Best of all!" She concentrated on praising him to block out the inarticulate rumbling behind her. The noises mimicked speech, and it disturbed Serena that she couldn't understand them. In her heart, she cried out her lover's name and imagined their passionate reunion once this ugly business resolved.

Mac...

She hoped Dick hurried along. If he finished before the kettle boiled over, she could have a dish of tea before she had to head back to Royal Crescent.

CHAPTER 20

It is imperative we meet and speak immediately. I will call tomorrow afternoon before one o'clock. Please be at home. H.J.G. Moulon.

Mariotte swallowed her grimace and kept her tone as calm as possible. So like Henri Moulon to leave her a cryptic message and no card. The clean white notepaper had no local address to which she might respond, but the crabbed handwriting and oversized signature identified as her half brother's.

"No other messages, Tucker?"

"No, Miss."

She thanked the valet and managed not to stomp her way down the hall to the cozy parlor allotted to her personal use. The smaller room had no drafts, its one bay window faced a well-tended rose bed, and Mariotte found the mint green walls and shell pink décor most soothing.

Seating herself at a carved rosewood writing table, Mariotte composed three hasty letters on her monogrammed stationery, one to her modiste to reschedule a ball gown fitting, regrets to Julia Dearbourne that she might not walk with her tomorrow morning, and a gracious acceptance of a post-performance theater party invitation from Lady Edminton at the end of the month.

Mariotte took an extra five minutes to sort out her other mail before resolving nothing else pressed her enough to detain her from her promised assignation with Cedric.

Her confident gaze arrested her through an ornately framed mirror hanging on the opposite wall. Would Henri recognize how much she'd changed since she left America a little over a year ago? Enough time had not passed to alter her looks dramatically and still her own eyes detected differences. Her features and complexion held luminosity born of satisfaction where she'd once looked tightlipped and haunted with uncertainties about her future.

"Mariotte?" Cedric waited upstairs, his call faint but still audible and expectant.

"I'm coming." If Mariotte hadn't accepted Cedric's *carte blanche*, the incandescent woman half-smiling in anticipation would not exist.

* * *

"Good morning."

She found Cedric lounging, leaning against the pianoforte that remained routinely in his bedroom now. He toyed the keys, his touch light, uninterested in picking out discernible melody beyond the celestial pleasantry of sound.

"My Mariotte." Clad in a dressing gown of vivid midnight silk brocade, its cords loosely fastening his trim waist, Cedric looked every inch the Viking lord. His hair, combed to a luxuriant sheen of rippling, liquid coppery gold, flowed down his shoulders and back. Fresh-scrubbed and clean-shaven, the aroma of his shaving soap clung to his face to greet Mariotte's soft kiss.

"You look...magnificent." She fingered the pattern, clustered gold and silver dragons, in the brocade, no longer self-conscious about her proprietary hand. The garment's rich hues reflected in his eyes, deepening their color to pure indigo, and the gold thread embroidery outlining the serpentine dragons pulled out the matching tones in his hair. Mariotte blinked at his smile. Cedric looked like he could belong anywhere. To any time.

"What's wrong?" His fingers caressed the delicate tip of her chin, urging her face back up to meet his eyes.

Mariotte shook her head. "You look like someone from far away. Too far away from here. Me."

He bent to kiss her brow, softest laughter caressing her ears. "In my travels I've grown accustomed to foreign clothing. I've found eastern cultures favor luxury and comfort the most." His amusement broadened to a perfect open grin, too boyish for his exotic garb. "I wouldn't object to dressing gowns passing muster for full dress occasions."

Mariotte shrugged and thrust her left hip in a little flouncing gesture. "Wear yours, Seti. In no time at all everybody will wear one." She made her slow, careful blink and watched his eyes gleam in want.

Hard lips brushed over hers. Molded them. "Mariotte." The

fancy brocade swished against her simple day dress, drapey sleeves enveloped her. "You must be...careful..." He lifted his lips, brought them down again, gentle to cushion lengthening fangs. "You're such a temptation."

"I know." She *mmm'd* and leaned into his embrace, permitted his fingers to brush down the back of her dress, capture her buttocks, squeeze through fabric until she couldn't stop shivering. She nuzzled his neck, savoring the taste and texture of his skin, faint trace of sandalwood in his hair's softness. "Will Dane come to us now?"

"I want you to myself just now, dearling. I want to make you easy, prepare you. Dane will come." His lips fell soft on the bridge of her nose. "If you haven't changed your mind."

"I haven't." She shook her head to emphasize the point.

The corners of Cedric's mouth twitched and he led her past the pianoforte, closer to his enormous bed. "You've come to know Dane as a very caring lover. He needs to give his partner pleasure as much as he receives pleasure from her. But, as with everyone else, there are certain acts that please him greatly. You are perfect for his tastes. Dane prefers the view of a woman's backside to her front, and you have a particularly lovely ass."

The vampire's words conjured memory's sensation; Dane's arms embraced her from behind, his chest's hard smooth planes upon her bare back, and his generous shaft nestled between her buttocks.

"Yes." Warm lava pooled deep in Mariotte's sex.

Cedric nodded. "And Dane loves your asshole more than anything. That particular method of entry is the most sensual for him." He cupped Mariotte's face in both hands. "It is a delicate act, neither dangerous nor painful when you're prepared and aroused for your lover. You would do very well to cultivate a taste for having your anus used. I wish Dane to be comforted by your body. Mortal life mistreated Dane, and he deserves whatever enjoyment we provide for him."

"Yes. Might he prefer a male's gratification? If he best likes that kind of pleasure." Mariotte's thoughts on the Rowan's handsome male prostitutes and their frank remarks of a man's preferences wrought smart pink flush over her cheeks.

Cedric adorned her brow with another kiss, precious and quiet. "Although Dane adores this kind of sex, his preference is for feminine loveliness. Your acceptance means so much to him."

His arms entwined around her, and his mellowed kisses fell in a light rain upon her face. "Let me help you. You always come to me fully dressed, m'dear." He turned her and unbuttoned her dress in unhurried movements.

"It seems more respectful." She offered what aid she could to shed her garments. She no longer repressed a grimace when Cedric dropped her dress and her bodiced petticoat into a careless pile of muslin on the floor beside the bed with his customary apathy for all clothing he removed. "Discreet."

"Don't always respect me so much." The Devil's smile held such tangibility, Mariotte felt it behind her back.

"Haven't you seen enough half-dressed or undressed females at Rowan House?" There had seemed to her a remarkable freedom to that aspect of the skin trade. Prostitutes wore their stays loosely laced if they wore them at all, and the more successful residents had their gowns tailored to fit their naked bodies.

"And smelled them, too. None of those females are you." His chuckle stirred her loose curls, tickling her ear. His shoulder brushed hers; he strolled around her, one snug, curved turn to face her again. "I like you like that. You're gorgeous naked, but there's appeal to a female half-dressed." Lapis eyes drank in her creamy white silk chemise and silk stockings gartered above her knees with embroidered ribbon. Cedric guided Mariotte onto the bed, instructing her to settle on her hands and knees. "Legs wide apart, my dear."

Mariotte knelt in the position Cedric commanded, the most naked moment she'd ever experienced with him. The man who'd held her in his arms and petted and crooned to her now stood beside her, running light hands over her lingerie, loosening the drawstring ribbon at her neckline so her breasts spilled almost free of it. He cupped her ass cheeks in both hands, squeezing the halfmoons, lifting and separating them before kneading them back into place. Mariotte's silk lingerie conspired with Cedric's attentions, its movements a sensual whisper drawing Mariotte's own awareness to how much her skin enjoyed Cedric's touch.

"A gentleman should kiss you. Play with your nipples." Cedric's mouth nudged her lips and she opened to him at once, tongue sweeping over his, velvet over silk. "I always want to be a gentleman to you, m'dear."

Nimble fingers cupped her breasts and pinched the tips until they budded into tightly furled twin invitations for his hands and his mouth. His other hand fondled her ass and reached the ticklish crease where the perky cheeks met the tops of her thighs. Between them he found the back of her quim, the lips already thickening, slick with desire.

Cedric drew Mariotte's loose chemise free of her body and collected a lovely cut glass vial from the little night table alongside the bed. He poured liquid into his cupped palm.

"Seti..." Pleasured pain twisted the vampire's name to a

languid croon in Mariotte's throat. Her body stirred, restless and burning for more fingers, more kisses, a wicked tongue, anything to stoke her wanting on ecstasy's path.

"Your arousal's so beautiful." Cedric's voice was sensual reassurance itself. "Nothing's artificial in you. I wish you saw your own eyes, how your passions darken them. Your breasts are perfection, more than a handful, and when you want the man touching you they blossom like ripening fruit." Steadying her with one firm open hand flat against her buttocks, the hard kiss Cedric pressed into the small of her back seared her skin.

Mariotte swallowed. She felt branded, her body softening for his words as much as his fingertips. Her nipples contracted to painfully hard points; sensitivity lingered long after he ceased plucking at them.

"I love this." Distracted sensation hoarsened her words. "Everything you do to me and how it makes us both feel."

The dark ocean of his eyes lit up in fiery empathy. His next kiss fell harder, bruising intrusion, and she balanced herself upon one hand to caress his face and smooth Cedric's long hair before he retreated once more.

"Touch yourself. As you'd like your lover to touch you." Fingers fanned over Mariotte's neck. "Experiment. Find your most sensitive places, m'dear, where you like pressure or a pinch."

Mariotte rose to her knees and swept fingertips over her throat's softness. Round shoulders. Her breasts were firm apples and she began feathering her fingertips upon her nipples slowly, then hurrying the motion. Wicked little sparks of excitement broke along her nerves and shot through her mind. Sensations and realization surged through her in equal shares of confusion and enlightenment. She knew how to touch her body and pleasure herself, but Cedric's preference to observe her enjoyment magnified the normally private action's heat to lava-like proportions.

"I…"

"You look lovely like that." Cedric's warmth coated her heart and spread through her, leaking free and honey-thick between her legs. "Spread your knees a bit wider. I wish to see more of you. You've such a beautiful quim, so sweetly pink and musky. Yes, love." His soft growl rewarded her compliance. "Lovely, indeed."

His cupped hand covered the tenderness of her open, exposed sex. Mariotte traced her navel, a delicate oval above her lower belly. Her hand sank lower, her fingers twined with Cedric's in her wet nether hair.

"You know better than anyone else what feels best." Cedric dipped Mariotte's forefinger into the liquid warmed in his palm, coating her digit with slickness. "You'll find this adds a lovely sensation." He guided her back to her quim, parting her secret lips so that her fingers bumped her clitoris, swollen and pouting for attention.

Her hips jerked forward at the first contact, and her mouth formed an involuntary *o* of delight. Cedric's nod encouraged her to stroke her own sensitivity. Their eyes retained steady connection; his gaze reached through her, touched her where his body couldn't. Cedric remained near her, fully clothed, and did little more than watch her or speak to her. Did he feel some of the intense enjoyment coursing like quicksilver through Mariotte? The heavy drape of his robe made it difficult to know his body's response.

She knelt beside him, caressing herself as he instructed, varying the speed and direction of nimble strokes as demanded by her body. Her stockings made her more naked than if she'd removed all her clothing, the fine silk knit rasping against the coverlet, a reminder she remained dressed in some sense though still completely exposed.

"Will Dane like to watch me?" Her voice deepened; she sounded like she couldn't catch her breath.

"Oh yes. If you kneel like this with your knees spread wide, playing with yourself and enjoying it, he'll love it." Cedric's considering gaze fell heavy on her flesh and hard hands molded her thighs. "Any of us would love watching you, m'dear."

Mariotte's fingers slid lower, entering her privacy, a burning cavern drenched in her excitement. Wet essence leaked onto her inner thighs and saturated her body hair until it clung to her secret lips.

"What else?" she heard herself ask.

"Lean forward. Support yourself on one arm for a bit."

Mariotte bent toward the pillows, bending her arm in front of her so it sank into feathery softness and helped brace her. She no longer bothered stifling her moans. Priceless manipulation set off miniature lightning bolts in her sweet pleasure spot. Sometimes Seti moaned with her. Delicious, this close brush to climax without its fulfillment, edging her ever closer and closer.

"Excellent!" Cedric pushed her buttocks apart with widespread fingers. Warm oil trickled into her opened cleft.

Mariotte hated the plaintive note that entered her groan. Neither Cedric nor the pleasant rush of new slickness hurt her. No one forced her to do this. She enjoyed it. Her heart might shatter if this new erotic sensation ended too soon. So why did tears burn her eyes and why did a man's toying with her anus leave her so trembling and vulnerable? Where did this helpless feeling come from, and why did it feel so nice? "Mariotte?" Cedric's question carried softness. If she said the word they would stop.

Mariotte caught her breath and whispered, "I'm all right."

"I know you are." Cedric's growl made her belly quiver, and he spread the oil liberally into her crack.

Mariotte's whimpers composed pleasant accompaniment to Cedric's fingers, gentle yet direct, touching a place she hadn't been touched before. How *could* Cedric be so calm when she hovered a single step away from collapse?

"I don't know why..." she started to explain, and then stopped short because she had no explanation.

"Is it too much, my dearling? Do you want to stop?" The tenderness of Cedric's voice melted Mariotte's bones as he kissed her lower back and her buttocks. Blunt teeth closed lightly on her hip, held her for a sliver of time before hot lips soothed the unharmed spot. A broad thumb traced the tight circlet of her anus, pushed gently, traced the puckered opening again.

"No, thank you." The idea of surrendering these sensations was unthinkable whatever her body's fears. Her lover's nearness offered comfort; she trusted him not to hurt her.

"You can also do what I'm doing. Reach between your legs to caress your little hole. It's amazingly sensuous. Dane would love to watch you do it." Cedric's fingertip pressed against Mariotte's rosette. "A manicurist can color your nails with henna before you present yourself to him to make the effect more striking." Muscles melted in her bottom while he fondled and kissed her. "But use caution, love. Wash your hands with soap and water immediately after play. If you touch or enter your quim following anal play, your quim can be afflicted with painful infection."

A harder push sent his fingertip worming past her crinkled

opening. Mariotte inched forward, the movement drew her past the sensation of violated modesty. Bliss simmered in her skin, innumerable nerve endings clamored for introduction to new experience. Her rosette yielded to gentle pressure.

Cedric smiled at her sigh; she heard him. "Much better?" Mariotte bit her lip, easing her hips back until her anus encased the length Cedric's slick digit. Cedric had large hands for a gentleman, but his finger felt huge within her muscular tightness.

"Breathe, Mariotte. Let yourself be comfortable with this." Cedric stroked her back and hip. "You are lovely, woman. So hot inside."

She inhaled and breathed out once. Twice. Cedric slowly removed his finger almost to the tip only to press back inside Mariotte.

"Seti!" She contracted involuntarily around the new invasion. Panting, she forced herself to stillness again, to relax. Now the finger traveled more easily and, after a moment, a second digit joined the first.

"This is a passive kind of pleasure, my Mariotte. Your lover does the main work. You need only submit, trust your lover to gratify you both." Cedric's fingers copulated with her, as he might inside her quim. "Though it sounds simple it is not, is it? To yield and place control of your body and its pleasure to another?"

Mariotte whimpered. Her muscles, newly accustomed to the thickness of one digit, now struggled to stretch and accept the second.

"Why do you say life is unkind to Dane?" Cedric pushed until she yielded enough to take the full length of both fingers. "Cedric..."

"Pleasure yourself, dear. It will make it better." Mariotte felt

her rear channel stretch around Cedric's spreading fingers. "As for Dane, my human godson seemed to have the life a man would envy. A successful practice as a prominent barrister, moderate wealth, and an advantageous marriage to a beautiful woman he happened to love."

Her quim's interior felt hot on her cradling fingertips, her clitoris burning, hard as a jewel, responsive to the slightest caress. Mariotte lifted her buttocks back toward the fingers penetrating her.

"What changed?"

Cedric's fingers plunged, more aggressive. "The beautiful wife decided she could look higher than her excellent husband when his success and his connections opened new circles of possibility to her. She began an affair with another man and eventually left the country with her paramour. To facilitate divorce, she charged Dane with acts of unspeakable abuse. I suspect she referred to Dane's exotic preferences."

"I see." Mariotte's frown cleared. She'd become so immersed in the myriad pleasures life with the Three Devils introduced to her, she'd forgotten many of those pleasures were regarded as illicit by most and some acts were illegal. A wife had the right to legally protest her husband using her body in such a way if she dared to live through the scandal and shame provoked by the accusation.

"The charges could not be proved, of course, but the scandal damaged Dane's reputation all the same. Professionally as well as in his private life."

"So he was ruined?" She clenched her inner muscles, clutching Cedric's finger.

"A man like Dane is hard to ruin based on superficiality. His

wife touring the continent offended him into taking a professional leave and pursuing the errant couple. He encountered them in Greece and demanded his wife return to his home. The paramour, a son of a marquis, I believe, resented Dane's interference and promptly challenged him. Dane had the effrontery to defend himself from the rascal's sword, and the offender expired from his injuries. It took some effort on my part to clear Dane of any charges of wrongdoing, but he was eventually exonerated and free to return home. Desolate and friendless, his wife accompanied him. She died less than a year later, delivering an infant who did not long survive her."

"Please Cedric, not so hard!" She moaned. The vampire's quickening strokes drew her attention from Dane's troubled history to her own body. It felt like Cedric attempted to reach her quim through his strokes into her ass.

"It is how a man would feel, dear. You must learn to tolerate it well for Dane's sake, though I would much rather you come to enjoy it." A third finger entered her throbbing heat. "This would be how Troyes or I would feel, though Troyes does not particularly enjoy anal sex."

"And you, milord?" She turned her face to meet his next soft kiss.

"I enjoy administering it and receiving it if my partner is agreeable." Like all his other admissions to his preferences, no defensiveness colored his words. Cedric's simple honesty both warmed and amazed her.

Mariotte nodded, pushing her hips out, willing herself open to this possession. Cedric's fingers followed and pressed deep.

"Ohhhh!" The first realization of pleasure smote her senses. The fingers withdrew and plunged smoothly forward as she raised her buttocks to accept them back inside her. She reared back, let Cedric sink in.

It seemed impossible but Cedric's final finger and thumb joined the others filling her anal cavern. "This is how Dane will feel."

"Cedric!" Mariotte panted with the effort to remain still and admit his strokes, let her body adjust to feeling so full.

"Your quim's run wet as a river from the mere suggestion. Gently, Mariotte. Accept it. Learn to enjoy the feeling. Think of Dane pressed tight against you, and how well his body fits upon yours. Imagine his fingers instead of yours pleasuring your sweet quim." Cedric's free hand replaced Mariotte's on her throbbing clit, and he leaned over Mariotte so she'd feel the vibration of his growl on her back. "And his cock swollen in your ass."

Mariotte quivered all over, her asshole impossibly full, stretched wide. All of Cedric's fingers. She moaned, helpless, trembling.

Cedric's growl softened until she almost didn't hear it. His finger tip pressed Mariotte's clit. "Let go. You're so wet. You're so close to coming; don't let fear block that. Let go, Mariotte." Blunt teeth scraped her shoulder. She arched her back toward the comfort of a body near hers. She had to spread her legs wider to brace herself for the knobby strokes pushing against her oiled passage.

"Cedric." She moaned. Closing her eyes, she summoned a visual of her other lover, the handsome man with warm, kind eyes. "Dane."

"Yes!" Cedric's words roughened as he pumped her. "Let me fuck you now so Dane can have you without reservations. You want him to fuck you like this so badly, don't you?" "Yes, I want him ... want him to enjoy ... "

"Mariotte, I do not accept lies or half-truths." The fingers in her ass and on her clit dogged her, relentless. "When I mentioned his name, your anus clenched on me as if to hold him there. You want Dane to do this."

"Yes but..." She choked, impaled on a deep thrust. "Dane!" She groaned.

"Very good, dear. Call for him. Imagine him inside you. Call for his touch."

Something broke free inside her, and she began to moan. "Dane...oh please, please it's so..."

"Mariotte." She swore she could hear his voice.

"Let him know you want him like this." Cedric's words, as commanding as his diligent fingers working Mariotte's tensionwracked body. The nerves of every muscle in her rear cavern throbbed and ached. Inhibitions warred with desires and fears until she broke free of them with a loud, assenting cry.

"I want you!"

"Cedric, enough." Dane's voice in truth then, his fine dry hands lifting her from the pillows into his arms. "Darling Mariotte."

For long minutes, Dane held her and Mariotte rested, half-conscious, in his embrace.

"I do," she admitted it, a dry, ragged whisper against his neck. Tears slipped past the corners of her eyes, hot on her face. Her arms locked over his back and her anus, painfully vacant now, incomplete, spasmed and gripped empty space. "Since you first suggested it in the summer house."

"I will love you however you want me to." Kisses on her hair, on the hand he lifted to his lips. Mariotte sat up and raised her face from Dane's immaculate shirtfront. Cedric wiped her hands with a

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

steaming wet towel and the maid who'd brought it to him quit the room without a word. It was Serena.

CHAPTER 21

Cedric's hair spilled over one shoulder, a ruddy golden curtain over half Mariotte's vision. He plied her lips and face with kisses before he knelt beside them both. "Thank you, love. Dane needed to hear your acquiescence. Without believing you truly wanted and accepted him, he would never feel free to indulge that preference. And you, precious." Cedric pulled Dane's head toward him for a harsher kiss.

Mariotte observed the two men, intrigued, as their mouths shifted and smacked, pushed and nibbled, tongues touching and tasting each other. When Cedric released Dane, their eyes glittered and the hints of fangs adorned the corners of their mouths. "You know now my Mariotte is not repelled by your preference and is eager to indulge it. There is no reason you need not take that comfort in each other." He grinned. "I selfishly hope you will within my presence so I might enjoy it myself."

"Cedric." Dane's fingers continued tender play in Mariotte's hair.

"D-Dane." Invisible burdens slid away, leaving her shoulders lightweight, boneless.

"I'm here, Mariotte. I heard you call for me." Dane's affectionate smile spilled through his courtesy; he fished a plain, linen handkerchief from his pocket.

"Thank you." Mariotte accepted his proffered handkerchief and blotted her face with it. She wished she'd hadn't wept. Cedric hadn't done anything to provoke tears. "I...I don't know why I'm so confused," she confessed.

Cedric sank down beside them, his robe gaping open to reveal a hint of pale chest hair. "Because I have shown you a side of yourself you did not know was possible." He kissed her forehead.

After a moment she sniffled and nodded. "I didn't want to do it, but I wanted to do it, too." She shook her head at her own inconstancy.

"Women are taught that they cannot desire a man that way or that a proper man wouldn't harbor such desires." Cedric stroked Mariotte's curved derrière. "Women can enjoy it. So can men. And you are made quite prettily for that particular pleasure."

"It's not just that. It seemed more..." She struggled for words. "More intrusive. Like you got deeper inside me than I should want to let you go."

Dane nodded. "In many ways, it is more intimate." He locked gazes with his sire. "Perhaps that's why I like it best."

"No perhaps-ing about it." Cedric's nod sent his loose hair swirling over his luxurious gown. "Your nature is the most dominant of our family, Dane, though you appear the least so to the unobservant." Indigo eyes beamed into warm, dark brown ones.

Mariotte lounged against Dane. Cedric's fingers tangled with hers. Perfect, the three of them touching.

Honeyed contentment expanded her ribcage. She checked impulsive words riding her tongue: *I love you*. They felt easy, so right to say. Mariotte tilted her head upon Dane's solid soldier and clamped her mouth shut. Men didn't care to hear their mistresses loved them, and, besides, it sounded outrageous to announce she loved them both.

"Mariotte." Dane buried a kiss in the curls at the top of her head.

She folded herself against Dane, shy once more in the delicacy of the matter. "I'd like to pleasure you the way Cedric taught me to." She paused to consider her aching knees and then added, "But maybe not right this immediate moment."

Dane nodded, his eyes dancing in uncertain mirth. "And this immediate moment?"

"Can we rest, and wait for the moment so I can pleasure you? Excuse me." She turned, covering her mouth to yawn, and realized there was no polite empty side for her to do so. Dane lay at one side of her body and Cedric the other. Mariotte directed her face forward instead. Let the two men chuckle behind her, over her head.

"My son, I don't believe in your entire life you'll hear another lady offer you herself so."

"We can do so." Dane's kiss rained over her face, softer than Cedric's, more direct, before Dane lowered Mariotte onto Cedric's broad plush bed. "Cedric is correct, I've never had a sweeter offer. You rest for a while? I'll remain with you both, if I might."

Mariotte relaxed with a thankful sigh into the fluffy cloud of an overfilled feather mattress and firm down pillows. She drowsed with half-shut eyes and watched Cedric's silk sleeves surround Dane as the other man turned to embrace him.

Dane controlled the kiss, guiding Cedric's head, claiming Cedric's mouth. Cedric uttered a husky endearment and unknotted Dane's cravat, but the shorter man stopped him.

"Do allow me, please, Cedric."

Cedric's laughter matched the light in his eyes. "Off with them, then, you Beau of Bond Street. If you had no style you'd deserve to be called a fop." He leaned on the curved foot of the bed to watch Dane take off his clothes.

"I like my clothes in decent order, sir. No need to put extra work upon my valet." Dane retreated to Cedric's large dresser and commenced undressing himself with impressive efficiency. He hung his shirt and coat over the back of the nearest chair, shook his trousers, and folded them neatly upon the other garments. He smoothed out his linen and drawers before laying them on top of the dresser.

Mariotte mused over Dane's nudity as he returned to them, his playful smile spilling over his pleasant face. His form boasted squarer lines, less athletic than Cedric's but still rugged and fit. His sex half-stirred in its nest of tight mahogany curls, and Mariotte's belly quailed, fresh moisture warming her nether lips.

Dane opened the frog clasps of Cedric's brocade dressing gown and drew it away, draping it upon the small daybed meant for daytime napping at the foot of the bed. Glorious nudity revealed Cedric's interest as anything but dispassionate. The two men embraced, their kisses slower, relaxed, as though each wished to touch and explore every bit of softness other's mouth possessed. Dane's hands rained adoration down Cedric's back and buttocks, flattening against his lean hips while Cedric's palms capped Dane's splendid shoulders and hard biceps.

"You're incredibly beautiful." Dane seized Cedric's long, silky hair, tugged it in both fists. One searing glance passed between them, and Cedric's kisses traveled lower.

Mariotte watched Cedric kiss slowly down the length of Dane's smooth torso. Moist, open-mouthed kisses interchanged with sucking, a flicking tongue. Sinking to his knees, Cedric even used the sides of his face and his hair to stroke and rouse Dane.

Cedric reverenced Dane's cock in cradling hands, cuddled the firm sac behind Dane's heavy shaft while he rubbed Dane to full glory. Dane stroked Cedric's brilliant hair, and the look they gave each other spoke of more than loving before Cedric encased Dane's cock between eager lips and drew upon him.

"Cedric...." Dane shut his eyes as he moaned his helplessness under the older vampire's skilled onslaught. "I love you."

Cedric released him long enough to cover Dane's thick shaft in kisses and massage Dane's buttocks. "I love you, my precious Dane." He sheathed Dane in his lips, worked him without mercy until Dane's hips would not stop twitching and the younger vampire's low, growling cries worked into a single, continuous sound.

Mariotte's breath knotted in her throat. Mutual passion formed a live aura in the room. She thought briefly of her angel, their angels; short-lived embarrassment heated her face. If angels never abandoned their charges, it stood to reason angels witnessed everyone's tenderest moments of love and took no offense.

Cedric suckled and loved Dane as ardently as he attended

Mariotte during their own lovemaking. The view of the two men flooded Mariotte's mind with hunger to be part of their pleasure.

Part of their love.

"Cedric..." Dane's voice rose in pitch, begging. "Oh, God." Cedric drew harder and Dane's head fell back, his buttocks clenched, hips pumping upon Cedric's restraining hands. "Ah, Seti."

Cedric remained still for several minutes, reaching to support Dane's sagging weight, before rising to his feet and drawing Dane under one arm. They kissed again, no less passionate than they'd begun. Cedric's indigo eyes landed upon Mariotte, and she looked back at them, her heart in her gaze, welcome extending her arms.

"Come, dearling." Cedric guided the spent vampire to the bed. "We must not let my Mariotte become too lonely." He patted Dane, guiding him to climb into bed beside Mariotte. When Dane settled on the mattress, Cedric slipped in at the foot of the bed.

Mariotte smelled her own arousal, smokey-sharp musk. Dane's flaring nostrils and parted lips suggested her personal aroma lacked nothing appealing to him. She reached down with a decorous hand to open her quim, parting the swollen folds to reveal drenched pinkness hidden behind demure, dark curls. Dane's eyes riveted to the beauty she revealed to him, and woman's knowledge swept into Mariotte's eyes and mouth, smiling at his temptation before she spoke.

"I'm ready for you."

Dane's cock throbbed in Cedric's hand, flesh hardening to steel under silk. It would not take long for Dane to be ready again, and since Cedric relieved Dane's first passion, Dane would last longer now.

"Mariotte is such a rarity, my love. So much passion and

sensibility, such a seductive combination." Cedric ran a fingertip over the inside of Mariotte's thigh and licked the moisture he found. "I hope you come to love her as I do."

Love me... Why entertain what-ifs? What they had was wonderful enough, why crave impossibility?

"Mariotte." Dane pronounced her name with a world of longing before tilting his head to give her a soft precise kiss. Gentle pressure deepened to demand, pushing her lips open, sweeping over her mouth to claim her. Dane caught her hair at the back of her head and leaked a burning trail of kisses down her throat. He grasped her shoulder in blunt teeth, growled until Mariotte shuddered, and when he released her she met a smoldering gaze of black fire.

Beautiful beyond human.

Cedric stroked Mariotte's hand. "Recall what I told you about pleasuring yourself?"

Mariotte's ran her hands up her flanks, skimming her ribs, fingers opening as they bumped lightly beneath the rounded contours of her breasts. She cupped her breasts, squeezing them close and releasing them, and plucked her nipples with an alacrity that delighted her audience. Her nipples tightened to hard, dark buds. Dane's quick, sharp breathing prodded her.

"Gracious." She sighed. Wet fire in her quim leaked free, beckoning moisture clinging to her nether curls. Dark eyes, rich and deep, offered Mariotte silent, covetous appreciation. Her nipples adored her not-so-gentle caresses, but Mariotte could not ascertain if her own stimulation or Dane's quiet hunger had the strongest effect upon her arousal.

Cedric crept over Dane's legs and knelt at the foot of the bed. "Turn over, my darling. Show Dane all your loveliness." Mariotte offered Dane a glance of wistful invitation before turning to face away from him, kneeling on all fours. Cedric lifted her hips, cupping her generous rear cheeks in both hands. Gently, he pulled the twin globes and held them apart, exposing the moist swollen aperture between them. "I used a great deal of oil. She'll take no hurt from you." Cedric's whispers teased Mariotte's ears now that she faced away from him. "Look how wet she is."

Mariotte moaned beneath the vampires' scrutiny. Instinct heightened her awareness of their rising interest, building more slowly than it may have before Cedric took Dane in his mouth. She felt their eyes glowing in hunger and their fangs growing prominent as they observed.

Mariotte reached between her legs, opening her quim for Dane's inspection.

"Lovely." The whispered reward suffused her heart with warmth. "Wonderful."

"She is." Cedric ran a finger over her opened wet sex. Mariotte arched her back and raised her hips higher for his touch, her own fingers seeking her swollen clitoris. "And she learned that nothing is more important than our mutual pleasure." Cedric rummaged through a short, square chest beside the bed. Mariotte's eyes widened, breath hitching, when he offered her a phallus-shaped toy covered in smooth leather. "It's not the same as Dane, but it has its own appeal. Play, Mariotte. Let Dane see what pleasures you most."

Mariotte couldn't speak. Was there no limit to variety available in pleasure, if one chose to explore possibilities? She eased the smooth shaft down her belly, toward her groin. Her belly quivered, excited and concerned at the vampire's growl, near inaudible, ermine softness. "Mariotte!"

A glance in Cedric's direction revealed a satisfied smile. Was it this simple, her willingness to please and to explore sensuality with Dane, that made him more her lover than ever?

The tip of the phallus skimmed her private hair. Mariotte sighed as she traced her own pouting labia. Dane's extending fangs shone in her mind's eye, long and gleaming like pearl in the lamplight. Mariotte pressed the toy against her nether lips until they spread, and the dildo opened deep pink flesh.

Mariotte sighed at the smooth intrusion, not identical to a live male, stiffer and less yielding to her form, but its firmness didn't disappoint her.

Cedric's gaze was fixed upon her face as attentively as Dane's must be drawn to her haunches. "Is it comfortable for you?"

"Yes."

Cedric nodded. "The ridges carved into it increase sensation."

Mariotte toyed with her clitoris for a moment, eased the phallus farther within her body. "Oh!" she moaned. "My!" It slipped slowly into her wet channel. Both vampires watched it sink into her sex, assisted by her slick fluids.

Dane's hips gave an involuntary lurch as if he were physically connected to the bit of wood. His longing whine stirred away any lingering sense of foolishness. Her actions were sensual and more than attractive to two irresistible glittering-eyed men who could not wait to fuck her. Mariotte wanted nothing more than to continue toward that end.

Mariotte released a breath she hadn't known she held and met Cedric's knowing smile with one of her own. The magical moment her hips swayed of their own accord wrought gusty sighs from both men.

"Striking." Dane pinched her nipple closest to him until she hummed her pleasure with full open lips. "You look beautiful doing that." His hand closed over his cock, pinching the head to control his surging desire. Cedric stretched out beside Mariotte so he could see the act more from her viewpoint.

"Open your eyes, dear. Look at what you're doing to yourself. You're glorious. Look how slick that fake cock is from you." Mariotte withdrew the toy and looked down. The leather's natural tan color had darkened from her secretions. "And look at Dane. He can hardly keep from fucking you this instant."

She licked her lips, looked up at Dane, and smiled. Cedric's eyes remained upon her as the dildo eased out a few inches, then sank back. Mariotte threw back her head and groaned.

"That's Dane, isn't it? In your mind, you're fucking Dane." "Yes"

"I'll order a new dildo for you, carved to his dimensions."

Dane growled constantly now, low and deep, a thorough male sound.

"Dane wants you. Seeing you fuck yourself drives him mad with want."

The girl offered Dane sensuous eyes. "How would you like to fuck me, Dane?" she whispered in velvet.

"I want to fuck you any way you'll let me." Dane squeezed her nipple a little too hard.

Mariotte knelt up, letting the toy ease free and brushing his mouth with a promising kiss before she turned on her stomach. "And I'll let you any way you please."

Cedric reached out to squeeze the full moon of Mariotte's ass. Mariotte shivered in delight as two sets of male hands caressed her silk-stockinged legs and thighs, her buttocks, hips, and back. Fingertips swirled in the small of her back, and she almost lost her grip on the dildo's handle as she eased it free of its first home and guided it farther south.

"Oh, my God!" Dane's voice trembled now.

Mariotte nudged the toy between her well-lubricated hind cheeks and moaned in despair. Excitement tightened her delicate opening.

"Here, love." Cedric offered Dane the flask and ran one hand down Mariotte's flank. "Relax, my dearest. Dane'll be inside you soon enough."

Mariotte arched and pushed herself against the shaft but somehow couldn't push herself upon it.

Dane took it from her hand. "Enough." His slippery finger eased into her, and Mariotte sighed Dane's name in relief. He spread the oil, his motions opening her, preparing her anew. Mariotte lowered her head and shoulders to the bed, raising her bottom higher for her lover, undulating her hips when his fingers entered her to his knuckles.

Dane's fingers slipped freely through her slickness. "I love the way you feel."

He knelt behind her, moaning answer to her soft, mewling cry. Firm hips met her open thighs. Excitement narrowed his breathing, quickened it until growls rumbled within his body, low and continuous vibration.

"Dane..." His body draped her back; Mariotte snuggled against Dane's warm contours. His arms enfolded her, glorious imprisonment. A masculine chest, smooth, hard planes, kissed her shoulder blades. His slippery cock nestled in her rear cleft, hard want for her.

"I'd love to be part of you. Always." His tongue grazed her ear,

traced whorls, the lobe.

"Please." She mewled as he spread her. Gentle, irresistible pressure insisted she relax, blossom, admit his swollen tip. "Yes..."

Dane sighed. "Oh, yes." He moved against her like a wave, natural and unstoppable. Mariotte exhaled and relaxed, admitting him farther, their two bodies slipping into place.

"M'riotte." His kiss spilled sweet showers of concentrated bliss on her throat. He slid backward, and sank into Mariotte again.

Dane's careful, measured thrusts built layer upon layer of friction, every nerve ending in her ass sizzling like fireworks on the Thames.

"So good, Dane." Stimulation broke her whisper. Mariotte arched her back, rippled her hips against her lover. Her body sucked him deeper; his next stroke caressed her interior, landed him completely inside.

Dane's arm snaked around Mariotte's narrow waist; agile fingers separated the petals of her quim, glided along her clitoris.

"Dane!"

He circled the tender knot of sensitive flesh, stroked her, pressed her. His lightest, flicking touch built fire in her deepest core, amplified pleasurable fullness in her nether channel.

"I belong inside you." Kisses tangled his declaration in her hair.

I know... Speech eluded her. She reared into his plunging thighs, whimpered soft encouragement.

"M'riotte." Ruthless fondling between her legs, he could enter no deeper. "M'riotte! Tell me you want me."

"I am!" Turning her head almost permitted their lips to meet. He drove harder and she cuddled onto his powerful thighs. "Can you not...hear me?"

His mouth scorched hers while his hips slapped her ass in steady rhythm. Her flexing buttocks clutched his cock.

"You'll squeeze my come right out of me if you do that too much!"

Mariotte braced herself to take his thrusts and caught Cedric's smiling eyes. She heard him kiss Dane before he bent farther over to kiss her cheek and her mouth.

Ecstasy cramped her movements, and Mariotte bucked against Dane as she screamed his name. Dane's strokes came quicker, deeper now; her cries spurred him to greater heights of desire.

"Yes...yes...OH! OH! Oh, my God, yes!" Mariotte's anus fluttered, sucking Dane's thickness, contracting as though to lock him within her tight heat forever.

Dane followed her down to the mattress, seed erupting far inside her. They both cried out, wordless articulations of their satisfaction and wonder at the intensity of their joining.

"Lovelier than I thought you could be. Dear Mariotte." Dane buried his face in her hair. They lay still and patient, waiting for their bodies to unlock, relax enough for Dane to crawl to her side, cocooning her in his arms as he turned her to face him.

Mariotte's arms closed over Dane's muscular back, and she shut her eyes to better savor the warm texture and smell of him. She opened her eyes once more and sighed as Dane eased to her side in the bed. "It was even better than I'd hoped."

"So are you." Cedric draped an arm over her until she rolled against his hard-muscled form. His lips lingered over her. "You were a delight. You enjoyed it all."

"Yes." Her throat crackled into brief laughter. "I couldn't help that."

Dane's mouth glided along her temple. "Thank you. For trusting me."

"You've never earned my distrust." Mariotte's fingers wove with Dane's.

He kissed her again. "I mean for trusting me to take care of you. Not hurt you."

Mariotte shook her head at the possibility. "I love how you felt."

"You must wait for me to kiss you, love." Cedric's fangs glinted.

"You're worth delay."

Firm quick raps struck the door before Tucker opened it and wheeled in the dessert cart. "Refreshment, milord. The bath is set up in Miss's room with extra hot water. Cook sent plum ice, and brown bread-and-butter ice cream today."

CHAPTER 22

"What is it you expect of me?" No need to waste too much time on small talk. She doubted Henri had anything pleasant to say.

Her half brother's blank look failed to conceal his surliness though he retained a civil tone. "English fashion's different than the French. I suppose the climate's part of it."

"You've come to Bath to discuss fashion?" Mariotte smoothed her shawl over one arm. Her bombasine walking dress with its wide pleated ruffles embellished in embroidery must appear expensive to his appraising eyes. Her emerald green spencer of fine, Naples silk boasted white satin tabbing and frills of tightly gathered lace foamed over its high collar. Her mother's ring, an immense oval garnet set in heavy Baroque gold, winked beneath the stylish knuckle-length sleeve of her jacket.

Henri looked less prosperous than she recalled. His coat wasn't *au courrant*, and his well-mended gloves bore signs of hard wear as though he lacked replacement pairs. His former lily complexion had darkened and coarsened, weather-beaten from riding his own fields once the plantation couldn't afford a regular overseer. Overindulgence in drink thickened his waist and swelled fine, red veins in his dainty nostrils. Deep, premature lines mapped his forehead.

He was not yet three-and-twenty, five years younger than Mariotte, and appeared several years older. It took effort for her to tell him, "You look well."

"You're unmarried." Colorless gray eyes continued random, erratic travel, focusing upon her and drifting elsewhere. Had he already been drinking this morning?

"I am." Florid warmth stained Mariotte's cheeks. Henri's hardening visage spurred unexpected discomfort. Her half brother became a stranger to her long before she sailed to Europe, but memories of close childhood ties exerted their presence. Mariotte wound clenched fingers into the folds of her wrap, and held her head high.

"Whore." Spiteful venom devoured his appellation. The doors to Mariotte's heart slammed shut to defending her behavior to Henri, or to recriminating him for his failures as her kinsman and lawful guardian. She had the life she wanted, despite its complexities. Quarreling with Henri would be a meaningless exercise.

"What do you want?" She should be grateful for the reminder that childhood closeness lay behind them both. Instead, she tasted iron. "You've nothing to say for yourself? Imagine what *Maman* would think of this." The sofa's damask covering protested Henri's rough palm scraping its surface with petulant force.

"I've had to make peace with many ways the both of us did not fulfill *Maman's* hopes." Mariotte's measured calmness assured her. Henri's eyes darted to hers and just as quickly wandered again; his body jerked in a peculiar fidget. "You're quite well?"

"Fine!" His snarl bared yellowed teeth framed in puffy gums. "I've come on *Monsieur* Phineas's advice. It was unseemly not to."

"You're good to come." So his attorney had urged him to do his duty for his one female relative. Mariotte saw no point in asking how much he knew of her whereabouts and for how long. Henri's lack of sincere fraternal interest in her welfare evidenced itself before she'd left Louisiana. Just as well. Had he shown a crumb of concern, his sincerity might force Mariotte to reevaluate her hardest decisions in the past year. She could not regret loss of Henri's respect; it had been a grudged gift in the first place.

"Are you coming home or not?"

"I am not." He had all right to his astonishment, however unbecoming it sat upon his dissipated youth. "Bath agrees with me." The notion of quitting Cedric's protection set Mariotte's bowels queasy.

"You cannot think this cold English lord'll make things right for you!" Henri stumbled over the carpet's edge. "He's using you up, and he'll cast you off as trash when he's used you enough!"

Mariotte collected her ivory-handled fan, unfurling it to reveal a pleasing pastoral scene painted into its sections. Waving the fan gave her hands employment while she observed Henri's irregular, pacing gait. "What's wrong with you, Henri?"

A thick arm pushed away her concern. "A bad fall during a

race earlier in the year."

"I'm very sorry."

"What does he pay you?"

Each gruff comment increased Mariotte's regret that this unavoidable confrontation had to take place. This callous, angry relative of hers recalled to her that her happiness with Cedric and the fascination she had found in living in Bath with him based itself in business certain to end, perhaps unpleasantly, at some point.

"Did you hear? I asked what you're paid?" Unwholesome color mottled Henri's browned complexion. Mariotte took in his fisted hands and thinned mouth.

"Are you in need?" So that was it.

"There've been bad harvests. All the region is in a decline. Some banks've closed out. There's talk of financial panic. My own monies are tied up. Personal matters." He half-turned away from her to examine carving on the mantel. "We've insufficient capital for outlay on new planting."

"We?" Mariotte could not suppress irony.

"Yes! We!" Emphatic head bobbing accented the remark. "You own half of Beaulieu Place and I own half. Napoleonic inheritance law."

"I know. You communicated your unhappiness on it often." He'd resented her disinclination to sign over her ownership of Beaulieu Place in exchange for his IOU once he'd reached his majority. Mariotte closed her eyes to remembered pain when he'd upbraided her as a deplorable housekeeper and a drain on their home's modest profits due to her need for a dowry. She did not want to think about the life she'd have right now if she'd remained at home in anonymous, politely unhappy respectability. "I can't borrow anything else. I'm overextended as it is. Circumstances are extreme. I've had to postpone my marriage for at least a year." Henri's pockets jammed with his swelling fists. "The place is about to fail."

"I see." Mariotte allowed cautious silence to trickle between them in her little green sitting room. Her tarnished failure of a sibling made the place smell like it needed airing. "So, you've come to ask for funds to support Beaulieu Place." Her clarification stiffened his back.

"I'm requesting you help support your home." He sported a mask of outrage. "It's not asking much of you. You've never worked in the cane fields a day in your life. You don't live on the place to see to housekeeping anymore." His glowering stare pointed out her richly dressed figure and their elegant surroundings. "If you've done well for yourself, Beaulieu deserves something for that." He bit his lip and glared at her in angry mortification.

Beaulieu's welfare had already been the cause of many sacrifices on her part. Broken betrothal. An embarrassed refusal from a New Orleans convent. Pin money and household budgets reduced yearly; Henri insisted upon the need for economy as his personal debts swelled larger. Mariotte bit back useless retorts. Henri grew up in his father's image, blind to his weaknesses contributing to failure.

"I can take you home this instant." Henri misunderstood her silence for stubbornness and resorted to threats. "I have every right to remove you and to sue your fancy English lord in court. What do you think people will say? That you're a common whore and likely imbecile from living in such circumstances. A humiliation to the family name." Scowl lines deepened around Henri's eyes as she smiled at the prospect of her drunkard sibling denouncing her moral character while society accepted his reproof and interference as propriety. "You've been as fast and loose as any colored girl seducing a white man into protecting her."

I've been looser and faster than that. I've three protectors, and sometimes I entertain all of them together. Mariotte gnawed the inside of her cheek.

"I think you really are colored!" His anger gained heat and volume over that matter. "So does half the parish! You damn sure don't look like us!"

"You go too far...sir." Mariotte fought her temper to retain a moderate tone. Indignation wrestled her shock. Her half sibling must be feeling truly desperate.

"Other people thought so. You'd have to be locked up. Perhaps I'd have to put you in a hospital. And you'd be ruined for life. So don't you see how important Beaulieu Place is?" It was the closest thing to begging he seemed able to do.

"I understand your position." Nor would it be a burden upon her to partially subsidize the plantation for a time. "Of course, I want to help. I can offer you a sum for Beaulieu's immediate relief, and I'll make arrangements for more regular assistance to be sent to you until such time as the place is up and running well once more." It hadn't run at full efficiency since her mother's second marriage, and Mariotte doubted Henri would redeem his father's mismanagement. Henri's face sagging in relief that he'd get what he came for with no argument proved a comic ending to the confrontation.

"What can you afford to spare?" He didn't bother to return her bland, civil smile.

"I cannot say. My income doesn't leave me with a great deal

for extra spending." She didn't stumble over the lie; no need for her uncharitable relation to know all niceties of her finances. Since Cedric paid her living expenses, she rarely used her personal allowance. Most of her first quarter and all of her second quarter lay secure in the Bank of England. Realization curdled Mariotte's stomach; Henri would legally claim the whole of her funds, down to the last sixpence, if he knew of them. "I'll consult an attorney concerning the particulars and respond to you through *Monsieur* Phineas right away after. Less than a month, I suppose. Everything will be all right..."

Why could she not bring herself to address him by name? Misguided impulse drove Mariotte to extend her hand to pat his arm, only to draw it back when he retreated in distaste.

"A month's too long," Henri insisted gruffly.

"Then by all means, let us consult now." Dane's expressive dark eyes were frozen coffee. Mariotte jumped; the barrister's crisp accent drew her gaze away from her brother to her sitting room doorway, the entrance blocked with the most forbidding face Mariotte ever saw Dane wear. "I am at your disposal, sir."

"My dear, you're startled." Cedric reached her side more quickly than Mariotte saw him move. "Forgive our haste. Dane and I are returned from Forbes and hoped we might all dine outside this afternoon if you wished." His powerful arm swept new strength over her back. "I believe this is your mother's son."

Dark indigo eyes took in Henri Moulon's full measure and found him wanting. Did instinct tighten Henri's eyes with tension? He seemed to understand the tall, broad-shouldered Englishman's displeasure despite Seti's civility. Did Henri recognize the swift grace and the glittering eyes were a little beyond human? Cedric eyed Henri, unconcerned. "Do introduce us, Mariotte. I'm sure I'm glad to know him."

* * *

"No need to subject yourself to that profligate alone." Cedric swept Mariotte's unbound hair into a pool of inky ringlets flowing over the pillows behind her head.

"I didn't know he meant to bleed me." She welcomed Cedric's kiss, slow, firm and lingering upon her forehead. Calm seeped from a well of mysterious energy within Mariotte, drowned the ordeal's residual tension.

"But you must have guessed he meant no good." Cedric's forehead brushed hers and Mariotte's eyes watered at the gesture's sweetness. So like a real love affair.

Mariotte splayed her fingers upon his temples, ruffled his silken hair. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to savor his skin's warmth. A trace of fresh apples clung to his breath.

"I thought he meant to disown me."

"No such luck." His frank comment so reflected her own opinion she had to laugh. Her mirth continued when his mouth fell on hers and they molded together more closely. "Even your laughter tastes sweet, m'dear."

"I did the right thing." At the moment she felt soft and comforted more than passionate, and Cedric's slower lovemaking idealized her mood.

"You did, dear, though it's galling to admit the ass must be paid something."

"Your honesty is your greatest fascination." All bantering deserted her as she skimmed his sculpted jaw with her fingertips.

"I'm delighted I please you."

"There. See my meaning?" They shared more laughter; fond hands fell over each other. "Dane will see it all gets sorted out. I thought Henri looked sicker than a cushion when Dane insisted on escorting him to his firm this afternoon."

"Yes. I wish Henri could be persuaded to sell his half of the plantation and stay on as a tenant. We could hire an overseer and perhaps see some kind of profit for our trouble."

"Henri can't sell. Beaulieu's all he has that's valuable. He has no other profession."

"I know." The arm beneath Mariotte's shoulders squeezed her bicep. "We'll pay to help support the estate and we'll grease his fists for his noninterference with us."

Mariotte shook her head. "I'll pay."

"How can you object to our assisting you with this?" He tugged the sheet over their bodies a little too hard; muslin snapped smartly against the mattress.

"Because it's enough that Dane can negotiate with him legally to keep us safe of scandal. Henri and I are relatives and Beaulieu is half mine. Despite my estrangement with Henri, I have obligations for the place. If I don't help, Henri might feel pressured to part with assets. He could sell our servants to offset his losses." Mariotte shuddered. The new American slave codes introduced to the territory permitted owners to separate families, sell children.

"I'm obliged to respect your decision. I'm not obliged to like it." After a moment he brightened. "And since your allowance is paid by my estates anyhow—"

She sat upright and worked up reluctant words. "I won't use your funds if you'd dislike it. I can use savings I've kept since I first came here."

"What?"

"I've lived as sensibly as I could since I first decided to come. I sold my *maman's* jewelry after I had to give up some of it to cover Henri's other debt. I used funds to travel, but there's a little left. Then I took work with Rowan House. I saved a portion of my wages, it ought to be enough. Close to a thousand pounds."

Cedric blinked several times; his lips softened but did not quite open, hesitant with speech.

Mariotte frowned. "Seti?"

"Forgive me. You've stunned me, m'dear. I'd no idea you had money beyond my own endowment."

"I had no major expenses while I stayed in Rowan House, beyond my lodging. So I saved it. I don't know what I thought I'd do with it. If I saved enough, maybe I'd be able to buy Henri out if he became willing to sell. Or I'd eventually make a new home for myself. Somewhere else."

"You didn't come to me for money." His eyes opened enough to show more white and his hands trembled on her body.

Ah. Mariotte lifted her shoulders. "Well, you've given me far more than I could hope to earn at Rowan House, for certain." Why did her blood heat now, and creep up her neck and face? "But no, milord, I wasn't in desperate need when you approached me. Not financial need. If I'd not wished to come, I'd have moved on."

"Zounds, Mariotte. You cannot mean it." Gorgeous shoulder blades and upper arms contracted, he pulled himself to sit upright in bed.

"I don't understand you." His physical power filled her palms, flattened against his flanks. Marvelous, beautiful creature. Mariotte pressed her cheek on his shoulder.

"You demanded a king's ransom from me, though!"

"Ah. Yes, I did. I took offense at your proposal. I thought

myself too good for it." She swept loose forelocks out of her eyes. "I assumed if I named a ridiculous sum of money I might set you down. But when you didn't and...when we were first together..." Her throat tightened, fought the breath she took. "I think the most horrible moment that night was when we finished and you hadn't seen my face. I feared you'd change your mind when you saw me."

"Why would you fear that, Mariotte?" Hard arms around her, firm and sure, a harder mouth punished her lips until she gasped for mercy. "Why ever fear that? In centuries, woman, I've wanted no one or nothing like I've wanted you. If you'd refused, I don't know what I'd have done." He bore her back to the pillows, drugged her with kisses.

"Oh, Seti." Slow fire undulated through Mariotte's muscles and her hard nipples begged for kisses. She managed a teasing smile. "I'll settle my affairs with Henri. If I've not enough blunt, I'll seek outside employment in a factory or in a shop."

"Madam, I beg you do not!" Half-mocking distress danced upon his features. "I'd miss you sorely if you did. You'd be gone the whole day. We'll handle your estimable kinsman together. As we've done everything since you first came here." He clasped her form against him, their bodies warming each other before he seated her on his thighs.

"He said I was colored."

"So you are. Many colors and all striking. Quite the gabster Henri. You believe his claim?"

"I don't know."

"Then you're no better or worse off than you were. I, for one, love all your colors, m'dear." Cedric twirled a jetty ringlet in his finger and released it so it bounced upon her ivory skin. "Soft black. And honeyed cream. Neither truly white nor swarthy." Cedric caressed the line of her slim throat. "The faintest hints of blue." Turning her hand over, Cedric traced the curved pattern of veins visible beneath translucent skin. Slow, mellow joy suffused Mariotte's senses. Internal pleasure streamed beyond her breath, quiet and cooing. Cedric's eyes smiled in hers. "And, of course, rose lies underneath it all. You look and smell..." He leaned close to tease her lips, brushing their mouths together, tracing the bow of her upper lip with his tongue until every nerve Mariotte possessed burned and danced. "So irresistible. I love every color you are, my Mariotte." His next kiss bumped her chin. "Wherever it all comes from, God bless it, since I don't want you a jot different. Oh." He kissed a stray teardrop burning one cheek. "Love."

"I want you. To taste me."

Cedric's shoulders tensed. His eye color deepened, near blueblack. A trembling kiss landed upon her lower lip before he whispered soothing nonsense words.

Their embrace waxed leisure, less inclined to hurry, but expectation sensitized Mariotte's flesh until every glance felt like a touch and every caress seemed to penetrate her. Cedric's groan thundered through his chest against hers as her open hands crept down his back, her fingertips swirling in the small hollow at the base of his spine to make him pant and quiver.

Cedric lowered her back to the mattress and licked her lips before he began a sensuous path of quiet kisses down the column of her neck to between her breasts as he cupped them in his hands. His mouth lingered, hot over her heartbeat.

"I can hear you. I love the sound of your life." His thumbs teased her nipples, rolling them into hard pointed peaks to lash with his tongue before he moved lower still, fanning his fingers over her abdomen and sprinkling fresh kisses upon her flat belly. "Cedric!" Mariotte squirmed when his tongue delved into her navel. His quiet laughter infiltrated her skin, the tickling morphed to creamy heat and moistened her pouting nether lips.

Powerful shoulders coaxed her thighs far apart. "All of you is beautiful, Mariotte."

"So are you."

His eyes brimmed with a smile before he kissed her private lips, pushing and coaxing, adoring as though he might seduce her quim into kissing him back. He made creative use of his tongue, one minute tracing her moist cleft with the tip, next delving into her burning folds of wet satin with broader, more flexible strokes.

"You smell and taste so heavenly."

"I want you. Terribly." Mariotte's body leaked copious response to Cedric's compliment; her legs curled over his back, heels resting on his shoulder blades, and her fingers sank into his fiery golden hair.

Arousal enveloped Mariotte in deep velvet folds, her head turning side to side, and she stared, awestruck, at the erotic shadow their lovemaking cast on the eastern wall of the room. Her nipples pointed high, her legs twining over her lover's powerful body bending over her, showering her hips and thighs with his gossamer hair.

Her hips quivered against his hold. Fingers entered her, strong, controlled stroking counterpoint to his open-mouthed kisses, their sensation so different, delicate and wet. Small wild cries strummed from her throat, accompanying her ascent up a steep wall of sensation, eager to embrace it, desperate to prolong it.

"So sweet, Mariotte." Fingers slid into her drenched quim mimicked copulation.

She screamed, her world a perfect crystal sphere of pleasure

shattering into wild throbbing ecstasy.

"Yes, love."

Fangs plunged deep into Mariotte's passion slickened inner thigh. The stabbing entry arrested her completion before Cedric's mouth sealing over her and tugging upon her flesh magnified it. Mariotte jerked a pillow over her face to scream into it while rapture heavy as lead weighted her limbs and carried her, almost floating, half conscious of the world around her through a cloud of shivering, delicious heat.

"Oh. Cedric. It's so good."

Cedric licked the place he'd hurt, quieting the injury. He shifted their bodies, knelt on the bed, and held her astride him, her drenched quim poised above his hard tip. Mariotte sank down upon him, sighing as her empty channel filled with the silken marble of her lover's cock.

"You're perfect, sweet Mariotte." Cedric's hazy eyes smiled upon her. "Now taste me, too."

He cradled the back of her head with one hand guiding her toward a streaming wound upon his chest.

"But I'm not a vam—" She did not think to resist his hold, and then her tongue touched what Cedric offered. She'd expected a smelly iron flavor, not another burst of pleasure. Her mouth closed upon the wound and she drew upon it, licked him clean as it healed with unusual swiftness.

"Mariotte!" He devoured anew with harder kisses, panting as though she'd exerted him beyond normal strength.

Wild energy engulfed Mariotte. She gripped Cedric's shoulders for support and snapped her hips, rotated, ground upon him, and moved. Everything, fixtures and furniture in the room acquired stunning loveliness. Cedric's beauty never changed and she focused upon him, the dark blue fire in his eyes.

"Cedric." Tightening internal muscles gripped him harder as her body came down. His eyes closed and his mouth formed an *o* of appreciation. His hands cupping her buttocks guided her strokes and penetration to please them both and their lips caught each other for more searing, hungry kisses.

Seti! The explosion their bodies made together robbed Mariotte's lungs of breath to scream his name. She admired the exquisite lines of Cedric's throat, his golden head falling back as he roared wild triumph to the ceiling. Cedric erupted deep inside Mariotte, an exquisite flow of wet heat, her body gripping him in spasms to hold him in place.

"I feel you all around me. All over." Cedric relaxed, his body softened enough for them to separate and sink down together into bed.

"I can feel you, too." Instinct guided her reach for one of his hands. "You haven't made me a vampire?" She hoped she didn't sound too worried.

"No. I won't contaminate you without your express wish." He drew her questing hand to his mouth and kissed it. "It is something you should consider carefully if you want it. Many humans do not, or if they choose the vampire's life, they regret it and wish it could be undone."

"Why regrets?" Mariotte buried her face in the downy gold sprinkling Cedric's chest. Her foot played with his ankle, rustling in the covers. Delicious lassitude enveloped her, followed the passion of their coupling, endowing her with a sense of unlimited possibility. She nuzzled Cedric, breathed in his warmth, the trace of sweat.

"I think it's hard for many to accept the condition. Its longevity

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

and permanence. It means you outlive other human family members and human descendants of those family members. You survive things other humans do not, don't suffer their ailments such as illness or aging. It becomes harder to relate to your own species." Cedric's chest expanded when he shrugged. "Other humans sustain the new existence quite happily. Not everyone does." He traced her kiss swollen lips. "We have time for you to consider if you want to ask for that change."

"And time for your consideration if you want to give it to me."

"I am not a man who has trouble making decisions about what I want, lily flower. What is funny?" he added, prompted by her giggle. Indigo eyes glowed bright.

"You growling. It tickles when I feel it through your skin."

CHAPTER 23

"I trust these arrangements meet your outstanding needs."

"You're more than generous."

"Thank you." The half-smile Dane flashed the Creole conveyed none of the barrister's private concern. Henri's grudging civility did little to conceal his disgust and humiliation. The failed planter came from bourgeois, conservative stock, unable to see anything beyond disgrace in his sister's position despite his own benefit from it. "I'm arranging for Mr. Lambton, an associate of my firm, to accompany you back to America. He will be evaluating the estate jointly owned by Miss Sabrier and yourself. In his capacity as my associate, Mr. Lambton will also be placing inquiries with local authorities in your home region and in the German Coast regarding pertinent questions about Miss Sabrier's family history." "You mean you wish to know whether she's a *parda* or not." Meanness bent Henri's crooked lips, and his ruddy nostrils flared before he rose from his seat. "I'm unable to help you."

"You've my assurance of Mr. Lambton's discretion in the matter."

Henri snorted. "And he is certain to find something—at least one thing—not a bit of credit to the family." Belligerence hardened his lumpy shoulders and tightly folded arms. "It's all but a given if you search you'll find scandal in any Louisiana family that's lived there long enough."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean France didn't colonize Louisiana with traditional families, the way England settled America. The original colonists were almost all Frenchmen—some a bit better born than others. Most of them had no wives and families, they formed alliances with the natives and slave women instead. France emptied its prisons and orphan asylums of female undesirables and imported them to the colonies with a dowry to tempt men into marrying them." A rude huff indicated Henri's scorn for the situation. "At one point the colonists complained to the king some women sent to them were too ugly to make agreeable wives. They carried on with the whores, the savages, and the blacks, instead."

Dane nodded; penal colonization was hardly exclusive to France. England had transported convicts to New South Wales for the last quarter-century or so.

Henri huffed again, brow knitting in frustration at whatever he perceived Dane misunderstood. "So, if your man investigates he's sure to find something compromising in nature in Mariotte's past."

"I assure you, nothing we discover concerning Miss Sabrier's heritage will affect her place in his lordship's household."

"I'm going to be married next year. I can't have it brought to light I've got a *parda* half sister born in legitimacy!"

"You've the same mother, sir!" Each word glinted, sharp-edged.

"Yes, sir. Of respectable German peasant stock. May she rest in peace free of embarrassing speculation concerning how she got her daughter. I'm sorry I cannot help you, sir."

Henri turned the doorknob to show himself out of Dane's private office. Dane's hand pressed, gently insistent, against the back of Henri's neck. Stringy blond hair clung to Dane's fingers as he nudged the door shut with Henri's greasy forehead. Henri sputtered and swore into dry, smooth wood.

"I fear you must indulge me."

* * *

"Miss, if you stay in the bath much longer you'll catch pneumonia."

"Not if I order more hot water."

Shaking her head, Serena opened a generous width of toweling to wrap around Mariotte. "I'll not have time to dress you and make up your hair."

Mariotte blotted her face and neck, careful not to rub; her maid would scold a harsh hand might press wrinkles into her complexion. Serena had no similar compunction against buffing Mariotte's back and buttocks with wadded linen until not one drop of moisture lingered. The thin, fine fabrics of Mariotte's underclothes and evening dress might cling to dampness and expose more of a lady's form than current fashion deemed proper.

"Thank you. That helps... Most invigorating." Mariotte

grimaced when she toweled between her legs. Tenderness lingered high upon her inner thigh where Cedric tasted her, a pleasing reminder of this afternoon's interlude. She hadn't wanted to leave him to bathe and make ready for a social event that, at best, struck Mariotte as anticlimactic now. "His lordship may have taken too much."

"It's not that. Everything'll be fine, Miss." Serena fussed and traveled to and fro between Mariotte's dressing table and the bed where all her things were laid out. "I suffered weariness when I first fed a vampire. He was careful not to take too much. I think there's more to it that leads to the tiring. A reaction of sensibility."

Ever the professional, conversation didn't impede Serena's tasks. She fastened Mariotte into her drawers, slipping her chemise over her head, and sinking to her knees to tug Mariotte's stockings up her legs so that the seams aligned, straight and neat up the back of Mariotte's calves. Draping Mariotte's shoulders with a clean towel, Serena began unfastening the curl rags in the front of Mariotte's head.

Mariotte giggled. "Serena, honestly! How many vampires have you fed besides Troyes?"

"One, Miss."

"Who?" She raked her maid's reflected countenance in her dressing table's mirror.

"He was called Mac, back then. A member of my clan, Miss. He'd been newly turned at the time and not comfortable with drinking yet. I think he might've starved himself to death if we hadn't started feeding him. Every hale adult fed him in his first few months before he made peace with who he'd become."

"Where is he now?"

"He's abroad lately, Miss. I've not seen him in a long while,

though I hope to."

"Do you still feel any longing for him? To repeat the experience?"

The maid's impassive features stilled. "With him. Yes, Miss. So much." Ruffles on her betsy collar shivered. "I'm partial to him."

"But I'm sure Mr. Filmore merits your regard."

"Mr. Filmore is a wonderful friend. Very helpful to me since I arrived in Bath." Serena rubbed a dab of pomade between her hands and smoothed it through Mariotte's hair before she began the complicated task of twisting, lifting, knotting, and pinning sections into place to form the intricate hairstyles meant to look so simple.

Mariotte refrained from frowning at her maid's reserve. British custom did not allow for teasing or excess camaraderie with one's servants. Gossip flourished regarding unfortunate domestics being turned out without references for infractions crossing the borders of absurdity. It made sense Serena not divulge much information about her personal affairs or joke with Mariotte about hers.

In the mirror she recognized her hairstyle beginning to take shape. "No one does hair so nicely, Serena." Hopefully, her compliment reassured her maid Mariotte took no offense to her involvement with the music instructor.

"I've never had a lovelier head of hair to work with, Miss. You've got so much I don't need to pad it." Satisfaction resonated in that observation. "You'll do Mr. Pellerin's flowers credit, Miss." Serena twined the larger, smoother curls in her fingers until they fell into pretty ringlets framing Mariotte's face. "Plenty for me to make a coronet in your hair and still a full bouquet for you to carry."

"They're beautiful." Mariotte's pulses skipped; she found herself looking twice at the handsome assortment of roses, carnations, early pansies, spriggy fern, and baby's breath. Troyes's generosity shouldn't surprise her; he struck her as a true cavalier.

Strange, no offering appeared from Dane. Not that her quiet, steady lover hadn't had his hands full negotiating with her wretched brother all afternoon while she and Cedric enjoyed their sweet explorations.

In time, Mariotte smiled into the mirror. "It's wonderful. I suppose I'm still young-looking enough to wear flowers in my hair." She'd disliked her broad cheekbones, but their rounded contours retained curved girlishness. Between her well-tended complexion and healthy teeth most wouldn't guess her past youth's first beauty.

"Flowers suit you, Miss." Serena held open a corset of corded linen.

Mariotte slipped her arms through the shoulder straps and tucked her breasts into the quilted gussets. Serena smoothed the garment around her body before lacing it closed in back.

"M'riotte?" Kid glove softened Dane's rapid knuckles against the bedroom door. She wrapped herself in a broad shawl of finely embroidered charmeuse, let her maid answer his call.

"I'm sorry, sir, but Miss isn't ready to go down yet."

"I won't be a moment."

"It's all right. Come in, Dane."

Serena lowered her eyes decorously and retreated to the remaining clothes and accessories piled to one side on Mariotte's bed.

"You look so fine." Mariotte's admiration drank him in. Dane's

dark hair framed his face in loose, wild curls and his eyes shone, the color of rich, strong coffee. His evening suit, tailored to superb fit, enhanced his proportions. Every nuance in his looks toward her, his movements, called to mind the delicious hours they'd spent in bed together with Cedric.

Wicked laughter sparkled in his smile. He caressed her cheek when fevered blood darkened its pinkness. "Don't be troubled about Mr. Moulon. We concluded our business this afternoon and I've sent an associate home with him to report on the state of your interests. They're en route to Southampton as we speak."

Demurring words flew to her lips, politeness meant to minimize the idea that Henri represented genuine threat to her. Mariotte bit back those sentiments.

"Thank you for everything you've done." No explanation for why her heartbeat quickened and both hands reached out to hold both of his. Mere gratitude didn't explain the precious humming in her veins and how her heels itched to inch close enough for their bodies to touch, their mouths meet.

"I've done nothing, M'riotte." His kiss fell, light and chaste, on her mouth's center. "Except the right thing."

Opening herself up to Dane, giving all of herself to him during their lovemaking, and his subsequent aid in assisting her with her problem relation spurred unrealistic feelings in her. That explained why her fingers spread to weave with his and her eyelashes felt heavy. Affection pouring through her consciousness wrestled with her practical mind. It made no sense to feel this way about Dane; it felt too much like being in love, and she loved Seti.

She turned her cheek for his next kiss. He released her hands and fished a small chamois pouch from his pristine waistcoat.

"I meant to bring you this sooner. This afternoon, before

business detained me. Perhaps, if you've not already chosen all your baubles you might wear it tonight."

"Rather late for me to change my mind..." Not to mention Serena's chronic nostril flaring suggested she'd done all she could in terms of loosening drawstrings and unfastening buttons; the maid now required her charge's participation to complete the dressing process.

Dane inverted the pouch; delicate, gold chain spilled into his open hand. A cross gleamed blood-red in gentle light.

"Dane." Mariotte's eyes flicked from his warm, dark gaze to the pendant in his palm.

"Do you care for it? The jeweler says smaller, simpler trinkets are all the thing these days." His smile grew teasing. "I suppose with dresses getting so fancy elaborate jewelry's not needed."

Constructed of dense, dark, marquise-cut garnets set in gold, the cross's center bore additional decoration, a five-petal rose crafted of warmed pink coral with a tiny diamond center.

"I do. Care for yo—care for it." How could she not when he stood before her, smiling and resplendent, his tenderness a palpable entity? "Thank you, it's a beautiful gift." Formal, polite words didn't belong between them, sprinkling the moment with awkwardness.

Dane's fingertip landed on her chin and traced a random path along her jaw. He fastened the chain around her neck; the cross, warm from resting in his hand, landed an inch past her collarbones. Mariotte knew without glancing down or turning toward a mirror the brilliant garnets warmed her skin with rosy shadows wherever light struck them.

"I mean to wear something else." She had to do something, establish boundaries between them, differentiate between the men

in her life as her relationships with them grew ever more complicated.

Why couldn't Dane's interest in her be more akin to his brother's? Troyes's desire for Mariotte, honest and plain, had little to do with much beyond casual affections and the heavenly inferno their bodies created. He fit neatly into place in her world.

"Your maid will help you change." Dane didn't turn her to face him; he strolled past her shoulder so their gazes met again. "If you like." His eyes drew a soft line down her throat, lingering on the cross, and his next words smacked of satisfaction. "It becomes you."

She had nowhere to go when Dane's arms surrounded her waist; worse, she had no will to flee. Their matched heights allowed their eyes to meet, finest prelude to a kiss. His skin grazed her, fresh-shaven smooth upon her cheek. The lotion he used to soothe his face carried cinnamon hints. Mariotte moaned, opening for his sweet, questing tongue, velvet ribbon softness brushing and playing with hers.

I love you. Sweet Heaven, Dane, I love you...And I can't love you. I love Seti and I shouldn't love him, but I do...

Dane pushed a final kiss against the sweetest sensitivity above the bow of her upper lip. The warmth of the last kiss lingered as he released her, taking in her uncontrollable quivering.

"All right?"

Mariotte's breath hitched. Nodding, she coaxed calm into her words. "You quicken my heart so. My laces feel too loose."

"Some night soon, we'll love you while you're laced snug. You should enjoy it immensely. Its affect on your breathing intensifies your pleasure when you spend."

"Ah." Flirtatious response eluded her; Mariotte managed a nod

before her bedroom doorknob turned to admit another visitor.

"Dearlings, I draw the line at your seductions, Guests arrive in the next half-hour." The room filling with Cedric didn't minimize Dane's presence one jot. "Thankfully you've not dressed yet." Heated indigo gaze seared through Mariotte's handkerchief-fine lingerie. "Wear this tonight. For luck."

"Yes?" What to do if the new offering turned out to be another ornament for her neck? How did real courtesans manage multiple gifts and love tokens from their numerous patrons?

The length of thin wood Cedric presented in one hand banished Mariotte's concerns. Sentiment pulsed in her heart, flowed through her vessels, and warmed her all over.

"What a glorious busk." It would have taken Cedric hours, perhaps days, to carve the wood and finish it so no rough edges or splinters threatened its wearer. Bath's most high-end shops sold nothing so fine. Nary a nick or other flaw marred its elegant scrimshaw. On one side, an enormous serpentine creature coiled beneath a dragon ship mounting ocean waves. The reverse side featured vines of ivy and rose trees twined together, curling and scrolling almost the busk's entire length where they reached a full moon. The date carved at the bottom in elaborate script would serve as a reminder any time Mariotte wore it; a keepsake of tonight's festivities.

"You like it, love?"

"It's too remarkable. It's..." Mariotte sought appropriate praise. "It's something a queen might wear."

"It's the thing a sweetheart wears in favor of a gallant with the proper skill to craft it." Cedric unfastened the ribbon securing the busk pocket on Mariotte's corset.

"Let me loosen the lacing, please, sir. I must dress miss soon,

sir, or we'll not be ready in time." Serena tugged and separated the ribbons with hasty fingers.

"Of course, Serena. One moment, please."

Mariotte held her breath as Cedric slid her plain ivory busk from her corset. Its glamorous replacement glided through the wide casing, over her abdomen and her ribcage. The rounded top settled into place between her breasts, its width separating them into the fashionable silhouette.

Cedric retied the slender ribbons of the busk pocket and tugged them into bows. Behind Mariotte, Serena secured her laces, then adjusted and tightened her shoulder straps until Mariotte stood straight, the firm mounds of her breasts pushed to exaggerated height to accommodate the extremely short waistline of her evening gown.

"Falls into place nicely." Dane's wink indicated the busk itself didn't incur his admiration.

"It's an excellent fit." Cedric's fine handiwork rested against her heart through her most intimate apparel. Perhaps detailed labor embedded a scrap of Cedric's personality into the wood.

Cedric lingered before her, a radiant Viking beneath the fine veneer of slim, satin breeches, crisp linen, and a cutaway enamored of Cedric's powerful shoulders. She must say something to him.

"Thank you, Seti. I'll never dress without thinking of you, now."

How could the large, capable hands cupping her face for kisses be so gentle when he chose?

* * *

Sweetness and heat smote Cedric behind his eyes, despite the

first-time awkward style to their kiss. Mariotte's upper body didn't melt against him due to the rigid support of her clothing; she couldn't raise her arms to embrace his shoulders, opting instead to curl her fingers over the seams of his waistcoat. Her thumbs bumped and brushed against his lower ribs in teasing, repetitive circles. Damn, the stroking pressure emanated through fine quivering muscles and reached his sex.

"Please, sir! Not her hair!" Serena's whiplash appeal arrested his fingertips before they sank into the clouds of soft, shiny ringlets framing Mariotte's pretty face. "I'll never be able to repair it in time, sir."

"Dash everything! It's like having a doll that needs keeping under glass to preserve its fine looks." Cedric forced himself to bow and brushed his lips against Mariotte's forehead.

Zounds, even this light love set the woman trembling. Her wide almond eyes softened with impromptu invitation. Desire clenched muscles in Cedric's thighs and constricted his throat. Mariotte's raspberry pink tongue snaked over her lips.

And then she blinked. Damn it all! What appeal had she inherited beyond beauty? The sluggish descent of her thick, curling lashes veiled sensuous jade fire before they climbed, leisurely indifferent to scheduling. Slow burn spread throughout Cedric's nerve endings until his fingertips ached to touch her.

He lifted her naked hands in his, turned them over so he could kiss her open palms, nibble the plump heels. Her weak moan triggered his own whisper.

"Mariotte..." He said nothing more; words had no place in this comfort of surprise. Dane's arms spread over Cedric's back lent familiar strength. *Yes, my loves, this is where we all belong.*

"Sir. We must begin." Serena hovered less than a yard away,

Mariotte's gleaming satin petticoat raised high to slip over her charge's head.

"I'm too selfish, sometimes." Cedric kissed Mariotte's right palm again, then closed her fingers over the trace warmth left behind. He cleared his throat and met his misty-eyed lover. "My dear, worry about nothing. This will be a tremendous night for you and you're to enjoy it like any other *soirée* we've attended. Revel in your dances and your flirtations."

"Of course. Thank you, Seti."

"You'll begin the dancing with Sir Veikko, since he is our guest. I took the liberty of reserving your other waltzes between myself, Dane, and Troyes."

"Oh?" Her face fell.

"You dislike it?"

"I enjoy dancing, sir, but I normally prefer to waltz with gentlemen I like least."

Dane's face screwed up. "You prefer men you don't like to hold you so closely? The dance is still causing controversy at Almack's. In my day it wasn't allowed."

"It's not that. It's that the waltzes are much shorter than our country dances. They finish more quickly." She smiled. "I prefer spending more time with you."

Cedric and Dane exchanged glances.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I cannot abide half the gentlemen present tonight hugging you against them so familiarly. Tomorrow we'll dine as we always have." He'd confess all, then, admit her grand courtship and successful match to some eligible mortal wouldn't do for him at all. They must strike a new bargain, one where she remained part of him.

"Yes, Seti." Her words muffled into her petticoat as she helped

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

her maid draw it over her head and down her body.

CHAPTER 24

"And it turns out Henry Austen's late sister wrote several amusing novels he promoted on her behalf. He owned it this year, in a note published with her last book, *Persuasion*."

"*Persuasion* reads compellingly, but I found it lacking in places. I could not care much for the heroine; a baronet's daughter ought to do better than engage herself to a naval officer. Still, something must be said for Miss Austen's style. Her novels leave a lasting impression."

"I think female writers are more common than one suspects. They say *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* was written not by Shelley, but Shelley's wife."

"I can't credit that. Have you read the thing? I put it away without finishing, it disturbed me so. A medical doctor assembling

a creature out of human remains? Endeavoring to animate the thing with electric shock?" A pronounced shudder emphasized the speaker's point.

"It sounds like the sort of experiment a confused, human physician would attempt." Sir Veikko spread a generous lump of butter over a morsel of bread.

"Oh indeed!"

The lady seated across from Sir Veikko smiled toward the foot of the table without troubling to meet Mariotte's eyes. "Have you an opinion, Miss Sabrier?"

The salmon Mariotte chewed allowed her to consider her reply. "I've not read *Frankenstein*, I fear what I've heard about it doesn't hold my interest. I don't see why Mrs. Shelley could not have written a novel, though. Is it not true her parents were writers?"

"You're correct." Mrs. Redworth's nod smacked of approval. "Mary Wollstonecraft wrote multiple works concerning proper education for females and how it benefitted society before she settled down to respectable married life and departed in childbed. Her concepts for societal reform proved somewhat influential until Mr. Godwin, her devoted husband, lovingly immortalized her in a memoir guaranteed to crush any claim his late wife had to respectability, or sanity for that matter."

"Ah." The lady seated at her right hand puzzled Mariotte, at first. Far from a miserable, unaccommodating harridan, Mrs. Redworth cut a handsome figure and managed to retain some intangible element of fascination far more valuable than beauty.

Mrs. Redworth's dress marked her as a true Original, the palest, grayish blue it could be without being white. Her gown's waistline, longer than fashionable, suited her matronly form, its wide neckline gleaming with jet beads. Black, silver, and gold embroidered rouleaux embellished the skirt's bottom, and the tiny puffed sleeves were slashed with cloth of silver. Silver fabric slippers drew the eye to delicate feet and slender ankles. An immense golden brooch, a butterfly with sapphire wings, trimmed one side of her dark blue velvet toque covering ashen ringlets, hair so fair age's silvery encroachment created more enhancement than contrast. A trio of ostrich plumes, pale blue and white, curled over the brimless hat's opposite side. Enormous sapphires set in heavy gold circled her neck and distracted one from the reality her creamy throat, shoulders, and bosoms lacked firmness they boasted a decade ago, but twin bands of jet adorned fit, graceful upper arms.

Mrs. Redworth's conversation, her originality, and her indefinable *je ne sais quois* commanded admiring attention from most of the guests to whom she spoke. Round eyes the color of forget-me-nots matched her voice, lustrous with wit and confident good spirits. Troyes's uncooled passion for his longtime mistress made more sense; the beautiful male loved lively companionship.

"Do you care for poetry, Sir Veikko?" Mariotte hoped the Lykeion knight's silence through the first three courses signified contentment.

"I do." The handsome gentleman proffered a brief smile. "I'm grown quite fond of some English romantics."

"I, too." Salmon, broiled to pink perfection, broke into tender flakes at the bare touch of one's fork. Mariotte reminded herself to reward the cook and his helpers the following day.

Mrs. Redworth's widening smile revealed a slight gap between her two front teeth, more charming imperfection than flaw. "Of course you have. It's a marvelous era for poetry and Lord Seti keeps an excellent library. What do you think of Byron?" "I'm none too smitten with Byron's work. Keats catches my fancy a great deal. Have you read *Endymion*, yet?"

Candlelight gleamed on the dark blue stones adorning Mrs. Redworth's throat and dangling from her ears. "I can't abide Keats, I'm afraid. Nor can most critics."

Mariotte had almost brought herself to like Mrs. Redworth. "It seems Keats is unpopular with *The Quaterly Review*, but well-received by his peers. I enjoy the sentimental depth in his expression, with or without strict adherence to form."

"You were born in New Orleans, were you not?" Mrs. Redworth sipped her wine sparingly. "I suppose Bath is very different from what you're accustomed to. Did New Orleans not belong to France before Bonaparte sold it to America?"

"Yes, ma'am, the whole Louisiana territory belonged to France. I enjoyed French citizenship for nearly three years before the handover of the territory to the United States occurred in '03. The first eight years of my life I was a Spaniard, I believe."

"My understanding of the situation was always that the Spaniards owned the territory in name alone. The character of the region remained French." Mrs. Redworth shrugged. "As French as such a place might be."

"In many ways, I suppose that's true. I've not spent enough time in France to know for certain, and I've never visited Spain at all. Louisiana enjoyed prosperity under Spanish rule, but most of the colonists were not themselves Spaniards. Some Canary Islanders emigrated to Louisiana and built a few scattered settlements." A quick glance around the guests seated closest to Mariotte reassured her she probably wasn't broaching an offensive subject.

"I'd always heard the French colonists took exception to

Spanish takeover and revolted against the Crown in their desire to retain French nationality." Artless courtesy shone in Mrs. Redworth's attentive gaze. Mariotte's peripheral vision took in flared nostrils and subtle nods around the closest guests. She almost heard their unspoken anti-French sentiment. No love had ever been lost between the French and English; the French Revolution and the slave uprising in Saint Domingue were only the newest pretext for English contempt.

"The Creole colonists disagreed with Antonio de Ulloa, the Spanish governor sent to Louisiana to replace d'Abbadie. Ulloa's poor diplomacy undermined his effectiveness. He fortified military holdings, and he improved relations with the Indian peoples and with West Florida. He made substantial provision for Acadian refugees who made their way to New Orleans after the British army expelled them from their homes in Nova Scotia."

Guileless, attentive blue eyes comprised Mrs. Redworth's only response.

Mariotte continued, "Despite his efficiency, Ulloa's efforts were disadvantaged by Spanish neglect and local distrust. A paltry seventy-five Spanish troops accompanied him to Louisiana, and Spain could not or would not reinforce their number. The governor dared not take more formal steps toward establishing Spanish rule. He didn't dissolve the Superior Council—the Creole governing body—or strike French colors from the Place d'Armes and raise the Spanish flag. Ulloa preferred residence in La Belize to New Orleans, opting to marry his fiancée there."

"Good heavens, Miss Sabrier! You mean to say the Creoles revolted over wedding invitations and the governor's choice of abode?" Mr. Dearbourne chuckled at the idea and set down his goblet. "He spent the first year of his office at La Belize without once visiting New Orleans. It affronted the more affluent Creole families who already feared Spain's restrictions upon trade privileges undermined their wealth and influence." Mariotte's next bite of salmon didn't taste so nice as the first.

"How did the disagreement—you called it a disagreement, didn't you—occur?" Mrs. Redworth folded her hands in her lap; an attentive servant removed her plate.

Mariotte sipped her watered wine and considered the older lady's expression. Despite her attentive attitude, Mrs. Redworth's countenance lacked some quality of animation unidentifiable to Mariotte beyond its absence.

"Several important Creoles conspired to oust the governor with the intent of restoring French rule. Some visited Versailles to petition Louis XV, but the king refused them audience. Others unsuccessfully sought British support through alliance with Florida. Ringleaders in the conspiracy incited unrest through the German Coast and among the Acadians via anti-Spanish propaganda and threats. The Germans were warned impractical Spanish trade policies would beggar them, and the destitute Acadians were told the Spanish government meant to expel them without fulfilling its promises of aid." Mariotte's mouth curled into an uncontrollable smile. "The conspirators also plied their recruits with drink and advised them Spain would restrict importation of good Bordeaux wine; everyone must accustom themselves to inferior Catalan wine instead."

Mr. Dearbourne's knuckles rapped the table's piecrust edge. "Foxed peasants rebelling over loss of Bordeaux wine... I beg your pardon, ma'am, but I've more respect for Creoles now than I do for Americans revolting over tea taxes. At least your compatriots drank the wine rather than throw it into your big river."

"I dislike government dictating what goods may or may not be bought. Government ought not meddle in people's ordinary business beyond the degree necessary to stabilize society." Sir Veikko finished his last bite of fish.

"I believe Thomas Jefferson once agreed with you, sir. Then he purchased New Orleans."

Riffs of supportive laughter, few nervous titters, and multiple smiles, some open and bright, others concealed in napkins or raised goblets, followed the gentlemen's contributions to discussion.

"I wonder at your assessment, Mr. Dearbourne, with respects. The concept of revolution meets your approval, provided the commoners murdering government officials appointed by their sovereign haven't access to drink?" Mrs. Redworth's aristocratic smile stayed fixed in place. That was the trouble, Mariotte decided; the staid pleasantry of the lady's looks and tone reminded Mariotte of a doll's loveliness. No depth of feeling or experience lurked beyond a veneer of pretty brilliance. What became of her earlier liveliness?

Mariotte observed Troyes seated far opposite, within the first four chairs from the head of the table, comfortable and happy conversing with Julia Dearbourne who probably thrived on the handsome man's notice. Troyes seemed too engaged in chatter with his immediate circle to perceive Mrs. Redworth's cat-andmouse play with her own supper companions.

At the head of the table, Cedric played the impeccable host, attending a venerable viscountess Mariotte hadn't met before tonight. She exchanged glancing smiles with him before returning to Mrs. Redworth.

"No one murdered Ulloa, ma'am. He, his wife, and his staff

took refuge in a Spanish ship when riots broke out in New Orleans toward the end of October a little over a year after his arrival. The Superior Council elected that, because Ulloa hadn't provided them his credentials, patents, or other declaration designating his appointment, he was, in fact, not officially lawful governor, and instructed him to leave the territory within three days. His ship departed on All Saints' Day." Mariotte thought a minute about whatever else she could recall. "To the best of my knowledge, Ulloa enjoyed a distinguished career as a naval officer, and a respected scientist. He lived a fulfilling life. The ringleaders in the insurrection against him were less fortunate, tried for treason and shot to death the following year at the order of an Irish mercenary appointed to replace Ulloa. Spain retained control of the territory for the next thirty years."

"How interesting." The plumes in Mrs. Redworth's toque floated and the silver slashing in her sleeves glimmered from her rippling shoulders. "Forgive me if I don't comment. I confess I'm not so familiar with the matter as you, and a young country's history can't hope to challenge my interest." Her smile fixed itself, pleasant and immobile, extending no farther than rouged lips. "I find most history after the fall of Rome boring."

"Ah." Mariotte held her peace. The footman placed the next course before her.

"You sound poorly educated." Sir Veikko's observation accompanied a direct, unsmiling look at the lady seated opposite him.

Zut alors! Mariotte's head pivoted to take in Sir Veikko's grave visage. Polite phrases meant to neutralize the insult rammed the back of Mariotte's throat. Concern for his health. Sir Veikko, are you unwell? Relish for the food, the wine. Fashion. Or death;

Warren Hastings, the scandalous former Governor-General of Bengal, had recently passed away. Some harmless topic must present itself; she had only to think of it. More poetry, perhaps, even wretched Byron.

Mrs. Redworth's blithe look betrayed no disturbance. "I'm sorry. What do you mean?"

Dear Heaven, what can she think he means? The chatter of nearby guests dwindled slightly, excited ears pricked for hints of quarreling or other salacious ingredients that made for delectable gossip.

Sir Veikko, as ever, answered frankly. "I mean, madam, that your remark is what I normally credit persons possessing inferior education and lacking sufficient humility to own it. Your inquiries, I believe, inferred poor knowledge of Louisiana politics. Our hostess's information did not merit denigration from the person first mentioning the matter. Boredom does not ail you; foolishness—"

"Fuchsias!" Mariotte avoided guests' flabbergasted gazes. "I'd forgotten the fuchsias. You're so good to remind me. Sir Veikko, I meant to show them to you before it got too late for you to see the difference." Veikko's perplexed brow hastened Mariotte's speech. "Remember I told you some fuchsias are much lighter in color, so pale they're almost white. The fuchsias in the garden court have come into bloom, and I meant you should see them. Do let me show them to you now, or I'll forget again."

Veikko hesitated before rising to oblige her. "I'm at your disposal, of course."

Mariotte glanced around a table of askance expressions. Chione and Kaiva, standing a decent distance behind Veikko, traded disbelieving looks. Well, when one and all of them had an outspoken Lykeion knight as their male guest of honor for a supper party, perhaps they'd come up with some better distraction.

Drat! She couldn't leave; a hostess's duties included directing the meal's courses.

The footmen and other servants within Mariotte's line of sight exchanged glances before looking toward her. Instinct directed her vision to the head of the table, her heart turning over beneath her breastbone. Seti's eyes met hers, quizzical and fire-bright with humor, the corner of his wonderful mouth quivering with unspoken words: *well, what next, m'dear?*

Automatically, she turned to her left. "Mrs. Redworth, would you be so good as to take my place until we return?"

Mrs. Redworth's elegant nod graced her response. "I'm delighted to be of help, my dear."

I'm sure you are. Unlike the wayward Lykeion knight, Mariotte concealed her opinion behind civil thanks and a straight-backed bow.

* * *

Cedric all but heard the gears and pulleys work in the minds of his flummoxed guests, devouring every last tidbit of the incident, that they might regurgitate it at their next social outing. Nevertheless, every gentlemen followed his lead, standing as Mariotte rose to leave, taking their places when Mariotte bade them.

Benign smiles and infrequent polite exchanges accompanied her, Sir Veikko, and his two guards on their way out the broad French doors a footman hastened to open for them. Chill breeze carried her personal scent and its accessories to Cedric before the doors shut: soap and water, pomade, and the vetiver used to freshen her clothes filtered the odor of stress altering Mariotte's perspiration, the precious anticipation and pleasure Cedric roused in her earlier long gone.

Julia Dearbourne flushed feverish crimson, embarrassed for her friend, and Troyes took some effort to draw her back to calm, pleasant chatter. Once seated, Dane stabbed his dinner with his fork. Near the foot of the table, Mr. Dearbourne and Alannah Rowan behaved as though Mariotte's departure with Sir Veikko halfway through the meal was quite normal and expected. Courteous pleasantries toward each other and their new acting hostess set a pace for other guests to follow and heartened Cedric; not all the *ton* waited, breathless, for his Mariotte to fall face first into some distasteful social mishap.

He offered a civil nod to the Redworth wench, her serene smile plastered in place, beaming across the table at him. That one hadn't changed her tricks since she left the schoolroom. Cedric's dislike hadn't altered, either.

Troyes didn't bother to notice her, for once.

He should be irked at so much impropriety and the threat it represented to Mariotte's prospects. If he couldn't find it in his heart to censure Mariotte's behavior, he ought to want to thrash that damnable man-wolf for his thoughtless remarks. Cedric could not abolish treacherous laughter riding pleasure's crest, filling his lungs and heart. Something noble lurked in Mariotte's abandoning the table where everybody watched her every move and word to like or dislike it and determine if she really belonged among the *haute ton*. By Odin, he should toss aside his napkin and stride out to accompany his mistress and that nincompoop of a knight!

The woman seated at his right hand approved his mirth,

saluting him with her goblet of wine diluted to rosy clarity.

"I doubt I could have done any better," he confided quietly.

The viscountess's smile revealed teeth too straight, white, and fine for a human of her advanced years.

CHAPTER 25

"There are no limitations to natural variation."

Mariotte grimaced for Sir Veikko's pale satin breeches. The Lykeion knelt in mossy mulched earth to more closely inspect the patches of shrubbery in the western side of the garden court. "The gardeners are still uncertain where the white flowers came from, since the original seedlings were deep purple. They're cultivating cuttings in separate baskets to see what might happen."

"At first glance, they look larger." Sir Veikko compared a sprig of the pale blossoms to the purple ones. "But they're not."

"It's an optical illusion, lighter colors appear larger." Mariotte wished she had one of her good shawls of Kashmir wool or her long red cape. Her silk gown helped fend off the elements, but night's chill settled over her naked shoulders, décolletage, and the back of her neck.

"And they're no different from their parent plants. Same lovely fragrance."

Mariotte puckered her forehead. "How do they smell?"

A low chuckle followed his perplexed glance. "Sometimes I forget you're human. The nectar's subtle, but very sweet."

"I suppose it must be to attract hummingbirds."

Chione's expelled breath concealed none of her annoyance. "Get up at once, Veikko. If you don't make a turn or two round the garden everyone watching the windows will notice and speculate Miss lured you outside to tryst."

He frowned at her over one shoulder before regaining his feet in a graceful glide and brushing his knees free of clinging soil. "These English need to spend more time mating and less time thinking or talking about their neighbors' mating."

Mariotte smothered her giggle in her gloved hand before accepting his proffered arm. "I suppose you think less of me for spiriting you outside."

"Why should I think less of a sensible female who recognizes unfit company for a lady? I'm delighted I had opportunity to aid your escape, though I'm sorry we missed supper."

"I did not mean it like that." They commenced a slow stroll among the narrow brick paths circling the flower beds.

"I understand. If Mrs. Red-worthless had the decency to excuse herself, we'd enjoy supper without fearing contamination via stupidity. She might return to the multiple males and at least one woman she's been rigorously fucking." Sir Veikko did not smile.

"Zut alors!" Mariotte struggled to restrain relaxing muscles in her jaw.

"Don't be concerned." He patted her hand and offered

consolation. "She's bathed and perfumed. The smell's unnoticeable to humans, but I'm not mistaken. She's had so many men recently I couldn't single out the individuals were they lined up before me."

"That's...possible?" Her face should be glowing in the dark, would burst into flame any moment. "Do I...am I offensive to you?"

"Why no. You have your three mates and that's all."

Kaiva's haughty glance over a straight shoulder took in Mariotte's trepidation; the Amazon's slender mouth curled in one corner. "Don't put yourself in her class, Miss. The alliance you honor with Seti and his sons doesn't compare to that Redworth's disease."

"Surely not!" Sir Veikko spat scorn.

"Disease?" Mariotte regretted her inquiry almost prior to its utterance. Care hurried her heartbeat. Dear Heaven, if Louisa suffered venereal disease and Troyes proved susceptible to it...

"Kaiva." Chione's tone and looks in subdued faerie lamplight did not convey pleasantry toward her taller, slimmer companion.

"It's hardly a secret the woman entertains more partners than Haymarket wares." Kaiva skipped over a small frog seeking warmth in three spirited leaps ending in a patch of shrubbery. "Has done so for years."

"How can you know this, though?"

Pausing, Kaiva vented her regard for Chione's disapproval in one languid sigh. "We've worked with Justice since '08, Miss. Part of our duties is gathering information on persons closely associated with the household. For security reasons."

"I see." The Amazons knew about her residence at Rowan House and her family difficulties.

Kaiva seemed to recognize the revelation made Mariotte uncomfortable. "It's not for us to pass judgment on people, Miss, only learn all we can about them and what kind of risk they present to the house's safety."

Mariotte swallowed. "Because of his lordship's position as Justice. I understand."

Kaiva's head bent into a reverent nod.

"And Mrs. Redworth's ailment?" She should not ask. She should not want to know.

"The Redworth's condition expresses itself in unusual sexual predilections." Chione's round, petite mouth furled into reluctance. The thin gold ring adorning the left side of her dainty nose glimmered when her nostrils flared. "Sex doesn't gratify her so much as fulfill a need to command attention and to dominate others. Sex is one of the tools she employs to that purpose. You saw tonight how charming and agreeable she made herself to befriend you, only to later disparage your home and history. But she did it in such a way as to sound like she made polite inquiry, and most people would not set her down. It would be bad tone." Elevated brows and a nod at Sir Veikko indicated Chione's grudging respect of his actions.

The four of them entered the evergreen maze. It always amazed Mariotte what a lengthy walk one could make of its modest parameters if one didn't closely attend one's steps.

"I understand you, but I fail to see why you refer to these faults of character as a kind of illness."

"Because she employs the behavior in a compulsive manner rather than the result of simple vice." Close-clipped yew branches brushed the sleeve of Chione's quilted brocade tunic. "I first assumed she'd accepted Troyes as a lover for the same reasons most married women entertain lovers. Loveless or incompatible marriages, boredom setting in after the first few years."

Mariotte sighed; they reached a dead end. "I knew we took a wrong turn. I'm told they loved each other for a long time, since she was quite young."

"So they did. She loved her husband, too, by all accounts they married for love. And Troyes enjoyed an intimate friendship with Mr. Redworth long before his marriage." Chione cleared her throat. "The three of them remained inseparable. And still, she required other lovers. Frequent lovers. Older men, noblemen, tradesmen, peasant farmers. Over the years more than one attractive footman has left her employment with a tidy sum for his services, or an occasional military commission."

"Here's the right one." Sir Veikko gestured to the left of a particular division.

Mariotte followed without noticing where they went. Supper churned in her stomach. Of course, grand ladies sometimes entertained lovers, usually gentlemen of their own class. Several of the Prince Regent's mistresses were married women. Chione's account of multiple assignations leaped beyond the pale, however.

"Her compulsions don't stop with her footmen." Kaiva tucked a strand of hair straying from her queue behind her ear. "She's meticulous in the hire of her personal maids. Over the years her lady's maid is always a particular type, good height, very slim, and flaxen-haired. She addresses the maid by the same name, Lily."

"Mrs. Redworth's quite fair herself." Queasiness raked Mariotte's belly without mercy. English fashion for renaming servants made little sense to her, but she understood family members did not relish struggling to remember new names or deal with multiple servants having the same name. Women selected their personal maids for attractiveness and efficiency. Prudence dictated the servant have comparable proportions to her mistress, the better to fit castoff garments that comprised part of a lady's maid's compensation. Mrs. Redworth's dainty height and voluptuous figure hardly corresponded with Kaiva's description of that lady's requirements.

"Some stories about the maids have stayed fresh fodder among those inclined to discuss them. One of the maids killed herself while still in Mrs. Redworth's service. Another left, but, despite her lengthy tenure with the household, a handsome severance, and excellent references from her mistress, she forbade a younger cousin from accepting Mrs. Redworth's offer as her replacement. She reentered the home, and a violent confrontation took place.

"The authorities jailed the woman several days. She complained her former mistress made unnatural requirements of her and some of the other servants. Dane's contacts smoothed it out; the dismissed maid received additional payment for her trouble."

Thank goodness she'd eaten sparing amounts of supper. Mariotte's sour stomach boiled into irrational anger toward the Amazon. "All of this makes for some of the most vile tale-bearing imaginable." She could not bring herself to question the validity of the guards' information; they took their assignment too seriously. Nervous spiders ice-skated in the small of Mariotte's back, and her hoarseness roughened. "I ask again, what makes it proof of illness?"

"Wait." Kaiva attempted to warn Mariotte before she plowed into a dead end. Mariotte winced, eyes squeezing shut against thin, stabbing twigs and leaves. A strong, slender hand on one shoulder directed her. "This way." "The proof became evident in the woman's enjoyment of these situations." Chione's impassive tone matched her expression; she relied on the evidence and her own powers of observation. Whether Mariotte believed her wasn't material. "She enjoyed discomfiting you and relished our Lykeion friend's dudgeon at the table. You can believe she's delighting in her role of impromptu hostess in your place without a thought for how it may have impacted your reputation. Or offended Justice. Or troubled the other gentlemen of the house and your remaining guests. I have journal entries and reports from credible witnesses specifying this is common behavior for her. She takes too much pleasure in it, and thrives on any attention she receives. If it comes at someone else's expense, and at her doing, so much the better."

She takes too much pleasure in it.

Muscles in Mariotte's upper back cramped into knotty spasms. She had to stop moving to to accommodate her heart freezing into place; her lungs imprisoned pockets of oxygen like a cloying lover, disinclined to let go. Her three companions paused with her; Mariotte sensed their looks of expectance, speculation, and evaluation.

"I do understand you." The inconsistent strangeness Mariotte perceived in Mrs. Redworth during their interactions made more sense. "You believe, then, she suffers derangement."

"Not derangement so much as abnormal reasoning." Sir Veikko clicked his teeth. "Were she a true madwoman, she'd not take pains to conceal her misconduct. She's sharp enough to function in society. The fulfillment she experiences from her errors is too gratifying for her to eliminate them."

"Yes. Derangement. Abnormal reason. Vast difference exists between the two." Mariotte cast a hungry glance upward; misty clouds veiled the moon, free of the maze's high yew walls. "We should find our way out. We're promised to lead the first waltz and I'd rather not leave my guests unattended." With that creature in the room with them. Creature? Sweet Heaven, arm-in-arm with a Lykeion, two Amazons in tow, and the most frightening person on the grounds to her mind was Louisa Redworth holding court in Seti's dining room? Every course she'd sampled tonight disagreed with her. How had she ever imagined her choices comprised a decent meal?

No one replied. Sir Veikko's free hand brushed Mariotte's gloved knuckles. He pressed a glancing kiss against her curls—scarcely any pressure at all. His low whine emanated, comforting and canine. The gestures endeared him to Mariotte; the affection too casual to perceive it as a liberty.

"I'm fine." Her automatic declaration belied itself as she executed a sharp turn into the same dead end with which she'd collided earlier. Sir Veikko patted her hand on his arm once more, and guided her to the reverse direction.

"Please, Miss, don't trouble your mind much about the Redworth. Her fondest play has been to keep Troyes dangling after her like a lad in calf-love she holds at a distance. Her presence tonight is intended to assure he doesn't forget her." Chione shouldered away more protruding branches.

The laughter bubbling upon Mariotte's lips tasted of gumbo left cold in the pot. "My seating plan disappointed her, I'm sure."

"Yes." Genuine amusement floated in Kaiva's answering snigger.

"Let's not speak of it again. Please." Or I'll return to the house all a-bristle. Her part tonight required agreeable countenance and demeanor, no matter Mrs. Redworth's throwing a rub in the way.

The woman would not receive further entertainment at Mariotte's cost.

One frigid tear splashed her cheek. *Oh no you don't!* Mariotte fixed the sky with a fierce, dry-eyed glare. Unmoved, the moon retreated farther behind dark violet clouds and abrupt, relentless downpour pelted the grounds.

"*Zut!*" Mariotte caught her breath at the rapid drenching, akin to immersion in a bath too cool for comfort.

"Here."

Sir Veikko's wool coat heaped over her saturated head and shoulders obscured her vision before she lifted the garment back, draping the collar over the top of her head like a hood, and blinked into Egyptian darkness distorted by chronic English rainfall. Where'd all the faerie lights gone? Rain plunking against Sir Veikko's coat muffled whatever else he said; he curled her fingers to grip his bent arm, and they kept walking.

Thank goodness she'd taken the time to show Sir Veikko the fuchsias earlier. Mariotte's teeth scraped her lower lip. Torrents swiftly blended garden earth and turf into slick lawn patched with slushy mud. Wherever her satin slippers landed, mud yielded, oozing well past her insteps. Beyond her borrowed coat's protection, rain slapped every inch of satin and muslin Mariotte wore until it molded against her body, sticking to her legs. Hems weighted heavy with water drooped over the tops of her feet, impeding movement until she tugged the lower half of her skirts up to her knees, the fabric clutched in one fist.

Grim knowledge churned through Mariotte's ribcage; this intemperate weather soaking her to her skin and spoiling her toilette ended her part in the evening's festivities. Serena was a maid, not a magician; she'd couldn't tidy Mariotte's dress and hair fit to be seen, much less lead dances.

Bloody damn British rain.

Sir Veikko's firm arm, at least, imparted confidence. Through her grip the Lykeion knight's pace felt as light and well-balanced as his normal movements looked. The Amazons' voices waxed strident ahead of their sluggish progress, competing with the rain, the coat over Mariotte's head, and peculiar disorientation afforded by darkness and their uncertain path. Mariotte couldn't comprehend their words, but they sounded encouraging. They ought to be free of the hedging soon; they could not have gotten halfway through its corridors.

The ball of her foot slid along slimier mud, her body pitching forward, a ship listing, lost at sea a stone's throw from safe harbor. Sir Veikko's arm lassoed her waist so tightly the pressure drove an unladylike grunt from her chest.

Before Mariotte found her footing, balance eluded her once more and she cried out as her escort seized her figure, his sheltering coat consigned to the ruinous elements. Sir Veikko swept her upward, clutching her against his chest in both arms.

"Forgive my liberties, Miss Sabrier, we must get home." His lengthening, quickening strides hurtled them closer to his guards.

"Of course." Mariotte clung to Veikko's neck with both hands, sitting up as straight as possible to avoid drenched yew branches scratching at her tangled hair.

"Here!" Kaiva's triumphant shout meant she must have found the maze's entrance. Perhaps Tucker awaited them with Mariotte's good umbrella. Mariotte laughed at her own irrationality; what possible good would her umbrella do her at present?

"*Wait!*" Chione's warning, too high-pitched in chilly, wet darkness, offered unwanted foreboding.

Had the storm felled a tree obstructing their safe way home? It didn't feel windy within the maze, but the maze's walls buffered them from worse weather. Hurricane might rage beyond the high yews for all they knew. Sir Veikko's pace didn't slacken.

Mariotte sighed; open air and harsher rain embraced them when Sir Veikko raced past the final branches.

"Run!"

Mariotte registered Chione's raucous order. She jerked her head to look around and swaths of her hair escaped Serena's careful arrangement. Thick curls heavy with water, tangled in combs, pins, and sodden flowers, tumbled over her eyes, sliding over Mariotte's kid-gloved fingers as she pushed the mess away.

At the same time, Sir Veikko broke into a continuous stream of ugly, bass growls and turned away.

"What's wrong?" Mariotte gave up trying to smooth her hair back, clutching Sir Veikko's shoulder with both hands for balance as he broke into a fresh dash for the house.

A behemoth slammed into Sir Veikko's back, snuffling and snorting, weighted with heavy bones encased in massive steely muscles beneath coarse, prickling hide stinking of gamey musk.

Mariotte threw out her hands in instinctive grasp to catch herself as the Lykeion knight went down.

CHAPTER 26

"Fiend seize it!" Mr. Dearbourne's grizzled brows shot toward his receding hairline.

"I hope Miss Sabrier and Sir Veikko are all right! Gracious, such a downpour!" Julia stared down the panes in the French doors behind her; forceful sheets of rain beat the glass until gravitydefying rivulets of water distorted the view.

"I daresay the fuchsias could have waited to be seen some other time." An older lady shrugged.

"Tucker, set a maid to fetch towels and wraps to meet Miss Sabrier and the others. Instruct Miss Sabrier's maid Miss Sabrier needs assistance shortly." Mrs. Redworth carved a morsel of roasted fowl, lifted her fork to her lips, and chewed with a delicate air, not troubling to notice Cedric endorsing her cool orders with a nod to his man. Once she swallowed her food she offered her radiant smile to no one in particular. "I'm sure they've taken refuge in the summer house and will return once the worst weather calms."

"Yes." Except the gazebo stood on the opposite side of the maze, a farther walk from the garden court than the house. Cedric exchanged looks with his sons. Dane's bland visage honored his profession, but tension hardened the barrister's hands. Troyes's smiles and courtly talk aimed for keeping Julia and the other ladies within reach of his pleasantries amused, trouble clouded his eyes.

"I hope they're all right and don't take cold in the rain." No one could fault Louisa Redworth's solicitous mien. "Poor Miss Sabrier is an agreeable young lady, and if life in the colonies endowed her with some less usual customs in attending guests... Well, I suppose some might call it charming."

"Miss Sabrier is not poor, ma'am. Miss Sabrier does not want gentility." She wanted him. And Dane. Their bodies wrapped around each other, twining and kissing, entering and joining.

"You see Miss Sabrier through the eyes of a conscientious guardian." Mrs. Redworth adopted soothing tones.

"I view Miss Sabrier through the eyes of a man fortunate enough to know her. Close acquaintance with the lady can result in nothing besides lasting admiration." She disliked that; Cedric exited Mrs. Redworth's charmed circle after the briefest entry.

"I'm sure you're right, Seti." Round blue eyes remained open and empty above the smiling mouth. "We're all in danger of forming attachment to Miss Sabrier, were we fortunate to enjoy her society as you have."

Several seats from Mrs. Redworth, Alannah Rowan forked her fowl so hard the silver tines chinked against her plate.

Why had he opened his house tonight to all these people? He could be in bed with his lovers this moment, not conversing with this mean bit. Mariotte would not be trapped in the garden house in dousing rain with hardly any supper, chilled and soaking wet, while the hag queened it in Mariotte's place at table. Zounds, what'd George Redworth and Troyes ever seen in the baggage? The rain fell in buckets all at once without a heralding clap of thunder or hint of drizzle, Mariotte's fuchsia party had surely been surprised by it.

And what sort of man cared about different colors of fuchsias? *Aaaarggggghhhh!*

"Run!" Chione's vociferous shout carried through the downpour. Some ladies exchanged pained glances.

"There!" Julia Dearbourne perked up as two young footmen, their arms draped in towels, approached the main double doors. "They're returning now. Goodness, they'll be awfully damp."

"I'm afraid you're right." Alannah grinned at the streaming French doors. "Lud! Cedric! What sort of dogs are you keeping? They look exceedingly large."

Had Veikko transformed to protect himself from the wicked weather? "I've been puttering with some Highland species."

"Dash it, I say! Seti, that's no shepherd. It's the biggest wild boar I've ever seen!"

"Oh, Papa!" Julia wrinkled her sweet nose. "You didn't bring your spectacles."

"Come on, Seti. Lend me a gun and we'll go shoot him before he tramples somebody to death." Mr. Dearbourne's rising at the table prompted Cedric's sprint across the dining room. Dane excused himself to follow.

"A boar hunt in the garden? Extraordinary. I'm outdone, Seti.

There'll be no parties worth attendance in all Bath a whole month at least." Mrs. Redworth folded her hands in her lap.

"Papa! Really!" Julia covered her pouting mouth with her napkin.

Seti watched the window panes. Outside the faerie lights dwindled to bare infrequent sparks and cloudy moonlight offered little to no illumination. Chione's shouting expanded to the dreaded Amazon war cry. Seti tracked the racket and craned his neck toward the maze. Both her short swords drawn, Chione advanced menacingly toward a giant, bristly, round-backed beast shuffling with surprising speed given its bulk. It reared slightly, lean, powerful *human* arms raising and shaking an object in its human hands.

Gripping and throttling a woman.

Troyes breathed deep.

"Julia, come to me. Right now." Mrs. Dearbourne stood and held out imperious arms for her daughter.

"I apologize." Cedric's voice rang through the large room. "This is most unusual, of course, but given the alarming circumstances I must beg you all excuse me and depart the house immediately." He turned to the two men who shared his life. "Please let Dane and Troyes assist you through the front of the house."

What? Dane's mouth shook as he formed soundless inquiry. Troyes approached the female guest of honor and offered her his arm.

"I say! Seti, I'll go with you. You know I'm a good shot."

"Dearbourne, I know it. Please see your family safely from the house."

Mrs. Redworth's breath rushed in unfeigned alarm. "But you

can't expect we want to leave! Not with the-the thing outside, and it raining cats and dogs."

A body, long and lithe, struck the tall windows. Kaiva's lovely blonde head did not fully separate from her neck, but its bizarre new position, facing way too far back over her left shoulder so that her chin drooped upon her shoulder blade, left the horrified diners unable to doubt a corpse or near-corpse had been thrown at them.

Her mouth opened and shut, eyes blinking and widening repeatedly before rolling upward. Convulsive jerks in her limbs persisted as Kaiva slid down the glass to the ground.

Once the first screams commenced, a veritable chorus followed.

"Ladies! I beseech you stop!" Dane's sharp command hacked into the mounting hysteria. China, crystal, and silver rattled and clinked; the table trembled beneath his heavy fist. "I say be silent AT ONCE!"

Cedric had no time to hear Dane instruct the crowd once the din receded. Dane would offer some scholarly, diplomatic explanation that might somehow leave half the guests satisfied they were not being snubbed. Turning on his heel, Cedric headed to the massive weapons case in the hall, tearing his coat from his shoulders and ripping his snug cravat.

* * *

"Veikko! Get inside!"

Did the Amazon think they sprawled facedown in mud and soaked grass on purpose? Mariotte wondered if her impulse to laugh at Chione's order indicated hysteria. Just as well the fall she'd taken with Sir Veikko knocked too much breath out of her lungs for mirth.

"*Lykeios*." Sir Veikko's snarled prayer roused colonies of insects crawling, flying, and slithering through Mariotte's abdomen. The man never swore.

Before she scrabbled to her knees, Sir Veikko's open hand slammed wetly against her right flank.

"What!" A larger hand crashed into the earth less than a foot above her head. Muddy water spattered her face.

"Roll." He didn't wait to register her understanding. Whipping her atop him, the Lykeion knight tethered her body to his with one arm tight across her upper back, the other across her buttocks. He'd ripped his shirt open and Mariotte landed against a lean, hard chest. Mariotte struggled not to squirm as he rolled them across the lawn. A pair of hooves smashed the place where they'd lain, splashing her face and hair with new mud.

Hooves. Hands. The top of Mariotte's head felt too full of air, separate from her body as though she suffered a nasty cold. Sir Veikko let go his hold. Their combined weight sank Mariotte into a soggy hollow of lawn; shifting water crept, trapping itself in folds and pleats of her soaked clothing.

Spasms induced by the chill wracked her limbs, chest, even her jaw. Patches of gooseflesh, random as wildflowers, crept along her skin. Her nipples shriveled to aching tight buds as if longing for love. Mariotte's mind smiled at the irony; right now, her sex formed the driest part of her person.

She glanced up to the huge man sheltering her with his own body. English abandoned her. "*Bon Dieu*."

The wolf above her stood at an abnormal height, a closer match in size to a large pony. All other proportions matched the conformation of the canine predator; linear body, broad of chest, powerful shoulders and long, sinewy legs. Ticked banding in his dark fur spread over his head and trunk, fading to whiter fur with dark flecks on his chest and his hind legs kicking away his breeches.

Mariotte's lungs imprisoned breath when she met Sir Veikko's eyes. Deep-set, framed in sleek charcoal fur ringed with slim bands of silvery white, their pale gray-blue depths held the placid intelligence of the man she'd seen each day. She knew him, would have identified him had she not been close to witness his transformation. Perhaps that explained why awed admiration tightened her cold-prickled skin instead of honest fear.

"Sir Veikko." Heartbeat punched her breastbone and Mariotte sucked in fresh air.

His short *whuf* matched the timbre of his human voice, perhaps a shade deeper. Each large foot picked its way from Mariotte, uncaging her, and broke into loping, silent strides toward the snuffling animal thing feinting with Chione.

"Veikko!" Chione's bellow echoed outrage; rain magnified her fury. "Get to safety!"

Mariotte kicked away Sir Veikko's discarded garments, caught her skirts in one hand to climb to her feet.

"Mariotte! Quickly! Get inside!"

"Seti!" Stupid tears had no reason to burn her eyes. They blurred her view of Seti passing her at breakneck speed to join the fray. Wavering faerie light showed he still wore his silk breeches, but his shirt was torn and his cravat lost. A wide-bladed sword's basket hilt gleamed over his fist. Mariotte wheeled around, awkward movements encumbered by her wet clothes. The heels of her hands ached, tingling and painful in turns from their harsh meeting with the grounds. The faerie lights gained intensity in the slackening rain, bathing the grounds in misty glow. Mariotte watched the far west end of the garden court through half-shut eyes to filter away the spray.

She wiggled her toes in her mud-caked shoes to no avail. Encroaching numbness sweeping through her limbs and petrifying her ribcage birthed from other parents than sticky mire and frigid rain.

At first look, Mariotte identified the creature as a huge wild pig. Its enormous head boasted curved, ugly tusks at least a foot long. Its barrel body, compact in size compared to its head, sprouted bristly brown hair that stood away from the skin, jagged and thick.

Human hands and forearms merged into the boar's front legs. Odd shell-shaped lumps swelling beneath the tulip shape of animal ear flaps bore close resemblance to human whorls and lobes. The beast's hindquarters lacked the tapering definition typical of its species, the buttocks fuller, more round than square.

Peculiar. Without its human attributes it might appear a large, dangerous wild animal instead of a monster. Mariotte swallowed several times in an arid throat.

Why did Chione attack it with her bare hands? She'd meant business with those two swords she'd carried. The Amazon's body worked, a trained machine intent on combat. Golden patterns in her tunic gleamed whenever hints of murky light struck them. She dove, a graceful swimmer in mid-air, striking the boar-thing's snout with both fists and falling back to crouch facing away from it. One muscular leg swept out straight and Chione pivoted upon her supporting foot, landing a new facer on her luckless opponent. She jumped high, turning to land a crushing kick underneath its chin. Why didn't the pig go down? Or at least retreat? Sir Veikko attacked from behind, biting and pawing at the boar's hindquarters, leaping clear of enormous, bucking hooves. The Lykeion knight moved quickly, far more agile than his prey, but he whined whenever his jaws captured his enemy, twisting away and snarling.

Seti charged onto the open lawn, lifting his sword above his head in both hands. Air parted with a resentful hiss before the blade. Mariotte's heart rammed her breastbone. The sword crashed squarely against the creature's back.

"Don't!" Why did Chione intercede for the animal? What happened to Kaiva?

Instead of slicing through the tough pelt and sinking into the boar's spine, Seti's blade broke in at least three separate pieces.

* * *

Odin's testicles!

Cedric didn't throw off the remnant of his Scottish broadsword. His fist plunged against the stinking boar's flank, driving the blade's ragged edge in a downward blow. Icy shock lashed through his fingertips up his arm, burning the tiniest nerve endings from the contact. The monster's body yielded, pliant as bread dough, unaffected by Cedric's rebounding arm.

"It's shielded." Terse grunting punctuated Chione's high dropped kick landing under the boar's chin.

Little streams of smoke swirled from her boots. Cedric caught the faint whiff of cooking leather and Chione's blood as well as his own, dripping from dozens of fiery cuts slashed into his knuckles and the tender spaces between his fingers by the boar's dense, coarse bristles. Veikko seemed to be having better luck attacking from the rear, catching the beast's haunches and hocks, gnawing a moment, falling back whenever it bucked, but he moved awkwardly, like his forefeet seemed tender, and he made no effort to leap high upon the boar and bring it down.

"The shield spell has to be close!" Chione favored her right side to kick the snout with her left foot. "Nearby."

He grunted his assent. Treachery in his own house. Who? Newcomers made most credible suspects—Mariotte, or Serena but anyone with a gift for magic could do the deed. They would have to contain the beast long enough for all of them to get clear of it and conduct a search for whatever talisman or object conducted the shield magic.

Cedric leaped close against the boar's side. Teeth gritted, he rammed his fist straight down right behind the boar's head. His jaw loosened to release agonized hissing. The frigid burn struck high, into his armpit, tender nerves and nodes throbbing in wild protest.

The bellowing boar lurched, launching itself into Chione's next kick. Its stinking musky bristles scraped pieces of fabric loose from Cedric's breeches. He took one precise step back and turned to seize the monster.

Its human hands lashed out, gripping Chione above either elbow hard enough Cedric heard her pulses disrupt. Bone ground, strained, and snapped out of joint with a gelatinous pop. The warrioress shrieked a colorful oath, vowing she'd slay the boar barefooted if she had to.

Cedric threw himself across the boar's back, unflinching against the needles-and-blades texture of the hide and its burning cold shock. He caught one floppy ear in his mouth; the electrical protection shielding the boar sank through his teeth, past the pulp and the roots, down to his jaw muscles. He held on, casting shallow punches against the creature's bulky throat, clawing its snout, throwing his weight on one side of the beast to force the boar to turn or fall over.

It never faltered in its path or purpose, slamming its substantial upper body into the trapped Amazon's torso, crushed her against the high brick wall. Sir Veikko's howl vibrated on the rain in counterpoint to his frantic pawing and snapping at the boar's undefended rear.

Cedric jerked the boar's ears until the flaps folded completely backward. Shield magic deadened his hands and forearms; extreme heat flaring over live nerves reminded him it still must hurt. He could not turn or back the boar. Its tusks dug into Chione's middle, ripping through cloth and skin, piercing sheets of muscle to stab organs.

"Father and Mother." Chione's bloody-lipped groan escalated to a brief scream that cut off too suddenly. Rich color abandoned her face.

"Chione." Cedric growled at his helpless despair. Blanched features slackening, Chione's writhing grew jerky, less pronounced, a product of spasm and reflex instead of conscious movement. Odors of her body relieving itself blended with blood, rain, fat, and a dozen fluids and substances that smelled inoffensive inside a human's body.

"I'm all right." Her mouth dropped open as though to take in more air, and her glassy eyes held faint wonder before they faded to senseless blank.

Her shoulders, too heavy, landed powerless and solid against Cedric's cupped hands. No more time to gentle her fall; tossing its head, the beast snorted and panted until the gashes and holes ruining Chione's abdomen widened enough for her body to slip free of the tusks. The Amazon's arms flopped outward, limpness splashing dark, wet grass.

Cedric felt muscles beneath him tensing to rush, wheel to one side, and trample Chione's quivering legs. He roared warning and agony from the bristled hide puncturing his skin, searing it with frozen fire. Without releasing his grip on one leathery ear, Cedric jabbed four fingers joined to a stiff point into the boar's left eye and slammed his heel against its solid flank.

That squeal held some note of discomfort. Cedric found greater gratification in it than he should have. He tugged the ear so hard he should have ripped it free of the broad head were the boar unprotected and shifted his weight in the same direction, and shouted aloud to drive it, encourage it to turn.

Veikko surged alongside and ahead of them. He'd reverted to his man's form so quickly he still ran on all fours and no human tongue translated from his growling. The Lykeion knight's fingers latched onto Chione's biceps; he dragged her clear of the boar's path. Cedric hung on grimly, aware of his own bleeding, cooking flesh, digging his fingers well into the pulp of the monster's eye socket and kicking.

Turn. Turn, damn you.

The boar beast seemed inclined to follow Cedric's vicious directions, leaning away from Chione and heading closer to the wall. Its damn bellowing and snorting grew higher and more drawn out. Good. Maybe if it could not be severely injured or killed, it could be exhausted.

The boar snuffled and squealed, jumped to flatten its man's hands against mossy brick, pulling itself to stand almost upright. Cedric clutched both its ears again, squeezing the beast's body with his thighs to hold his seat. The wicked shock of the shield permeating his flesh transmitted pain elsewhere now, places where the vampire's body made no contact with the creature.

It threw itself on its right side first. Cedric felt wet earth, spongy, cool refreshment beneath him, before the boar, a solid four hundred pounds of blood, bone, hide, and muscle, crashed into his thigh.

For a blessed moment, no sensation bothered Cedric beyond the disorientation of lying twisted on his back on the ground, the boar's stinking musk, and the gruesome bitterness of Chione's injuries. First bewilderment cleared, driven by excruciation. A piece of his thigh bone protruded through his flesh, muscles spasmed and cramped in his knee and his calf. Every toe on his foot curved back unnaturally, pulled out of joint by his fractured femur.

His wordless scream held universal appeal, and the monster flopped all the way over onto its back. On top of Cedric.

CHAPTER 27

"Gods and Guardians, hold fast the Protector."

Serena's elbows and forearms ached from the chronic motions of drawing her brush through the length of her loosened hair, but she continued the rhythmic strokes and her careful chanting.

"Blood, fire, flesh, take your fill...Gods and Guardians, hold fast the Protector, blood, fire, flesh, take your fill..."

She no longer saw objects clearly in the mirror before her. An occasional glance assured her the lit candle planted in the center of the worn bureau had plenty time left to burn. She'd taken care to dilute the dish of pork blood with a teaspoon of wine to discourage it from clotting; thus far, it remained fluid. Serena could not be certain if the level of the liquid in the dish truly stood more shallow than it had since she placed it beside the candle or if her eyes, entranced and weary from magic's monotony, no longer perceived its actual depth.

If nothing else, employment in a vampire household assured availability of blood at a moment's notice.

Exhaustion from kneeling dissipated some time ago; Serena felt molded into the position, now, could hold it all night.

"Gods and Guardians." *Swish, swish, swish* went the hairbrush. "Hold fast the Protector." *Swish, swish, swish.* "Blood, fire, flesh take your fill." *Swish, swish, swish.*

Giving herself to Dick this evening frightened her to the point she entertained reconsidering her task's completion. Dick's urges had gone more bestial than human by then, though his form did not finalize its change until their copulation ended.

To fulfill the spell's requirements, she'd initiated multiple rounds of sex with him, draining his first passion in her throat. The taste of Dick's seed, raw and somewhat wild, lingered on the back of her tongue. He'd creamed her cunny so often their combined juices clung to her body hair and slickened her inner thighs halfway to her knees.

Though he'd been plenty content, she'd knelt upon the bed and invited him to bugger her. Despite his earlier release he'd gone hard as iron at the prospect, hammering her anus with near-brutal thrusts carrying their own cruel brand of pleasure. He'd pushed so hard up inside her to come, Serena's orifices still felt flooded and filled, his semen too slow to leak free.

"...Blood, fire, flesh take your fill..." *Swish, swish, swish*. Naked, kneeling before her candle and blood offering, she'd filled all requirements to the letter.

"Gods and Guardians..." What if all their coupling got her with child? "...hold fast the Protector." She knew methods to discharge

unwanted pregnancy could be unreliable, deadly. "Blood, fire, flesh..."

Tapping on her door, so quiet. Dry despite the storm of water outside the house and the maelstrom incantation created within this room.

"...take your fill..." Swish, swish, swish.

"Serena?"

"Gods and Guardians, hold fast the Protector..." It shouldn't surprise her Tucker knew her room's location and would mount four flights of stairs to reach it. "Blood, fire, flesh take your fill. Gods and Guardians, hold fast the Protector..."

"Miss needs you."

"...take your fill. Gods and Guardians..." Such peculiar use of the term *need*. The Creole lightskirt never needed Serena in all the months Serena dressed and looked after her. Need, visceral and vital, compelled Serena. She would not be kneeling and chanting, her body pungent with the wrong male's sex, if she did not need. "Gods and Guardians, hold fast the Protector."

The doorknob rattled.

Swish, swish, swish.

"Blood, fire, flesh take your fill..." She could not rise from her place to don some covering and answer the door. Could not answer Tucker. The spell's duration broke the instant she ceased chanting. The storm empowering Dick ended if she hesitated with the brush.

"Serena..."

Mac, I need you so! "…hold fast the Protector." She did not turn away from the mirror. Tucker opened the door slowly. A little at first, as though to ascertain she slept, then all the way. Serena's consciousness lay beyond panicked modesty's reach, entrenched in ritual.

"Gods and Guardians hold fast the Protector. Blood, fire, flesh, take your fill." The ending approached. *Swish, swish, swish. Please Gods, oh please, let this not be all for nothing. Let it be done.* Did enough human intelligence remain in Dick to accomplish the object? She'd continue to purchase him time.

Swish, swish, swish. "Blood, fire, flesh..." Footsteps smooth on the bare floor. Not a trace of dust, dirt, or grit stirred under Tucker's shoes. She kept her room tidy. "Gods and Guardians, hold..."

Her eye fell on the dish of blood. Emptier than when she began. *Swish, swish, swish...*

"...flesh, take your fill."

Tucker's gnarled fingers descended into her line of sight, hovered over the flame, and pinched it to extinction. Serena locked her gaze with reflected darkness and continued to brush.

The old servant leaned closer and she lifted her bottom off her heels, knelt upright.

"What've you done?"

She smashed the brush's silver back into Tucker's jaw. Or perhaps the side of his neck, she could not see where the blow landed in the dark. She climbed her feet, groaning at stiff discomfort in her ankles and the backs of her thighs, and seized the candle. She hurled it toward the staggering old man like a glass of water, spattering him with hot, melted wax.

"Sweet Jesus, girl."

She would wonder later why her conscience smote her. Her involvements in darker, more serious violence occurred from too much distance. Doubtless Tucker's age and frailty moved her; his injuries would not cause undue harm, though, and she must deal with him long enough for her to clothe herself and flee Royal

Crescent.

* * *

"CEDRIC!"

Mariotte could not cease screaming his name; her thudding heart beat out each letter until her ears rang and her throat burned. The single vocal outcry drowned, dragged under internal terror more rampant than passion, uglier than the monster wriggling on its back to crush Cedric to obliteration.

Sir Veikko, an enormous dark gray wolf, rounded the writhing boar, darting near its head to snap at its snout and ears before dancing away. The boar's legs and arms flailed in time with its other movement; the creature looked for all the world like it suffered an itch and rolled upon the grass to relieve discomfort. One of Cedric's legs, strayed free of the gigantic beast pulverizing the rest of him, gave lie to the illusion of playful wild animals romping in the rain.

"Miss! Miss! For God's sake, come in the house, Miss!"

Mariotte's head turned on rusted joints. The footman's urgent rapping on the French doors he'd been brave enough to open to call and gesture landed distant on her ear. Miles away, so close. Kaiva's body arrested the Creole's motion. Dispassion insulated Mariotte's assessment; the guard's sodden, dirty form revealed no extreme injury until Mariotte met the back of Kaiva's ear where her face ought to have been.

Time spread out to accommodate Mariotte, cramming hours of thought into blurry, blank seconds. Swamp water roiled in her stomach; she urgently required a chamber pot.

One loud, mournful howl sliced through her stupefaction,

forcing her out of the quiet, empty closet in which her mind longed to hide.

She pivoted back toward the fighting beasts. She gauged the boar creature matched the height of an adult male bear. It rose to a clumsy stand upon its hooves. The beast's underbelly had more human characteristics than its back; Mariotte recognized the muscular definition of a man's stomach covered in dense hair. One arm captured Sir Veikko in a loveless embrace. The great wolf flailed, thick, hind claws raking the boar's abdomen and legs. The boar slammed its free fist into the Lykeion's midsection.

Mariotte scowled at the pale, metallic gleam trailing the creature's blows. Not some new display of demonic attack. The boar fought with a knife, he stabbed Sir Veikko's belly, hip, thigh, his lower back, over and over again. Sir Veikko's counterattack weakened, grew less frenzied, struggling to free himself more than to damage the boar.

The boar had the cunning to fight a Lykeion with a knife. A silver knife.

"Miss! Come ON!"

Other movement caught Mariotte's peripheral vision. Tears crowded her eyes as she recognized purpose in Seti's movements rather than random, nervous spasms sometimes occurring in recently slain creatures. Sweet Heaven, he must be an absolute wreck, but she saw beauty alone as he forced himself onto his belly, dragged his limp lower body on his elbows.

He's alive...

The boar plunged his knife into Sir Veikko, jabbing and jerking until the wolf went limp and still. His louder wails reduced themselves to low, brief whine.

"Miss!"

Mariotte stepped over the raised brick border on the flower bed where Kaiva slumbered. The short sword in the Amazon's belt was longer than Mariotte's good hunting knife, its blade narrower.

It would have to do.

So much for Serena's assertions one had no need of weapons during English fetes.

* * *

"Stop it! Please, sir! Oh please it HURTS!"

Serena panted against her sobs, but they broke free of her chest in constant, breathless waves. Her face grew cold and hot and cold again, the top of her head separated and floating just above the rest of her. A nasty cut splitting her lower lip leaked a fine, steady trickle of blood over the side of her chin.

"I know it. I'm sorry for it." Tucker dumped the blood offering into her chamber pot and replaced the pot's chipped cover. "Try to keep very still and relaxed, if you can."

As for her hand...she dared not move it. Could not turn her head to look, certain if she did the dull, persistent ache would magnify itself.

In the scuffle to force the valet into the armoire, she'd never entertained the probability the dignified old man would fight back with such ferocity, hadn't dreamed he armed himself under his Beau Brummell elegance. Like a true gentleman.

The slender stiletto he'd driven through her palm ruined her clean floor, several inches of the blade sinking deep into the wood until the wide guard lay across her open hand, anchoring it. Any movement or flexing ground the thin blade against bone and tissue. A million nerves shrieked until Serena screamed, too. She craned her neck, struggling to watch him rummage through the practical and less practical dresses hanging in her armoire. Fine fabrics brushed the closet's interior and Tucker's hands, reminding Serena of Miss's generosity. She shut her eyes tight against shame. It came easy for Miss to give away her nice gowns; his lordship bought her plenty.

She hoped Miss made out all right downstairs. It hadn't occurred to her to ask Tucker what Mariotte needed.

Tucker shut the armoire and squatted beside her, reaching for her free hand.

"No." Serena could not prevent her own instinct to resist. Rolling over, she clutched her uninjured hand to her chest and curled her body into a tight ball to protect it. Her voice cracked. "Please."

He didn't stir, and for a moment triumph gladdened her heart. He must be as sickened as Serena herself. They were human beings, after all, not a real part of this vile Extranatural world. Humans did not do these kinds of things in ordinary human lives.

"Do you prefer I push the blade down harder until you cooperate?" The question held Tucker's normal inflection, soft, reserved, subservient. It would haunt her nightmares for however long she had to live after tonight. Her body lost control, passed its water, acrid heat between her legs on the floor.

The bastard took her free hand without waiting for her to relinquish it. A silk satin sash, cool and soft, lightweight and so strong, flowed over her wrist, surrounding it in luxurious bondage. Tucker drew her arm over her head; Serena felt the sash's tension adjust as he fashioned the free end into a complex knot requiring various looping and tugging around the armoire's thick leg.

"It's best you not fight the knot. You'll tighten it until it bites

into you, and it might be some time before I return." Tucker collected a pillow from her bed and slipped it beneath Serena's head and shoulders before gathering the chamber pot.

"Wait! Please!" Thousand of approaches and protestations worried edges of her brain, nothing staying fixed long enough for Serena to grasp and make use of it. "It's not...right...to leave me like this..."

The bedroom door opened. "I've been his lordship's man a long time."

New tears, burning wet, crowded the corners of her eyes, spilling over the sides of her face into her hair.

The door closed.

"Mac." Her whispered sob appealed to the dark empty room and dark emptiness replied.

* * *

At least the rain tapered off. As the faerie lamps flickered back to normal function, Mariotte evaluated Sir Veikko's twitching convulsive writhing on the ground. Pale foam coated his panting jaws and the sheer number of wounds littering his body demanded immediate help. She forced herself to stop looking. She must kill the beast quickly, or force its retreat, so the Lykeion might be helped.

The boar's head hung low, mouth open, tired, Mariotte decided, surprised at her empathy. Her tongue swept over her lips. Its head and hind parts appeared the most vulnerable, but she needed to strike a killing blow.

Soon.

Sir Veikko's back bowed; his next howl held liquid undertones.

Mariotte forced herself not to look, tightened her grip upon her sword.

The boar's hindquarters twisted and gave out abruptly. At least it seemed so before Seti's upper body reared high enough for Mariotte to see he'd tugged the boar down by its rear legs.

"Go." He wrapped his arms over the squealing creature's midsection to hold it fast. "I'll hold him as long as I can."

And then what? Mariotte kept her counsel; right now the lower half of Seti's wonderful body fell in death-like bonelessness. His hands and his face were a battered mess of oozing cuts and burns.

"Patience." She murmured to herself as much as to Seti. "We'll be all right."

She traveled in a wary half-circle around them.

"Mariotte!" Seti's tone waxed urgent. The boar strained to regain its feet. "Go. Dane and Troyes will come. They're moving the guests out of the house."

Mariotte nodded. "They'll be here soon."

She sprang from slightly behind the boar, her wet skirts slapping its bristly flank without ill effect while she hurled her weight down upon his withers. Her grip on the sword suffered and its point dragged on the lawn. She struggled to lift it as she normally would her hunting blade. Snuffling indignation, the boar tossed its head away from the sword as Mariotte's other hand snaked down its thick neck.

Skin covering Mariotte's forearm yielded like old parchment.

"Mariotte!"

"Bon Dieu!" The first explosion of pain proved a mere pinprick, forgotten the instant the tusk sank deeper into the meat of her arm. The scream could not be stopped, then, but she shut her lips tight anyway. Nerve endings throbbed around the tusk. Ripped muscles cramped and contracted, shifting in attempt to dislodge it.

The broad, ungainly head tossed, shoving upward. Mariotte smelled its fetid breath. Her own blood spurted, spraying the beastly drool leaking over her hand.

Behind her, her loved one hissed, "Mariotte. Try to remain calm."

"Yes." Every heartbeat pushed more of her blood through the wound in fiery splashes. Her fingers convulsed around the hilt as her wrist's erratic flapping forced her grip to tighten. The weapon's weight drew the sword to an awkward angle. *Even if I lift it, what if it breaks up like Seti's sword?* Mariotte shook her head. There had to be a way to kill the thing.

"I'm coming."

"No!" She breathed hasty negation. "Hold him, Seti, please. I can't weigh him down on my own. If you don't hold him he'll shake me lose or—or roll on me."

Appalled silence ricocheted between the two of them over the boar's back.

"What then?"

Unable to look back at him, she glanced down where the boar snuffled and blew against flecks of her blood splattering its snout. Wouldn't a normal animal consume blood or lick it away? Broken ice sank into the back of her brain. Dear Heaven, whatever creature it happened to be now, it'd been human. Once.

"Calm, Mariotte. Breathe normally. You're bleeding faster." Did Seti speak so gently to soothe her, the boar, or himself?

She bit back reproach, swallowed its tangy emptiness and drew deep breath to lift her heavy head. Faerie light gleamed upon dark panes and her own face peered back at her through them, whiter than she should be, wraithlike, bloodstained. Her wound sucked and squeezed, spattering her with fresh crimson heat, cooling her insides.

Dark glass in the windows revealed horror alone; the angelic presence surrounding all things could not show itself. Right now she felt so separate from it she wondered if she'd really seen or felt the entities in the first place. The day Dane showed them to her felt years gone.

"Help me..."

"I'm trying, dear. Please be patient." Seti could afford patience. He'd lived centuries.

She pushed herself closer upon the boar's shoulders, forcing her weight on it. She stretched her impaled arm farther to seize the creature's jaw, and screamed behind bitten lips. A new round of cramps and spasms wracked her flesh, hammering her elbow, shattering her shoulder and shooting up her neck. Vessels squeezed against the tusk before spewing up more of her life, heartbeat after heartbeat.

"Mariotte..." Seti worried for her; his deepening voice trembled too much for such a powerful man.

"I love you, Seti." Though she couldn't see him or much of anything else, anymore. If Dane were near she could tell him she loved him, too.

When the sword's tip began its gentle glide upward, Mariotte tried to believe some burst of concealed strength announced itself, countering the awkwardness of the blade's length to her position and task. As it rose parallel to the ground, then slightly upward, she knew she could not be manipulating it. Fatigue and darkness crowded her sight, blunting her reasoning. It had to be...could it be...did it matter?

"Thank you," she whispered.

The blade whipped beneath her arm, a new blood price to pay. Mariotte's grunt ran in symphony with the boar's squawking snuffles as she dug the blade in, shoved deep past hide, skin, and meaty neck. She dragged the sword, too tired to grit her teeth or wince, pushed against resistant muscle and tougher sinew, kept dragging and pushing until her bent arm reached far back behind her and the boar's head sank upon its failing forearms.

I am so sorry. Never before had she killed an animal without purpose. Food, hides, fat or tallow for her own family or for market. *Forgive me*.

Her arm smarted less, and the bristled boar's hair made a more comfortable pillow than she'd imagined.

CHAPTER 28

"I'm unwell. I feel so tired."

"I know."

Fresh bedding, clean and lush, welcomed Mariotte's limbs. Heated bricks wrapped in fluffy wool tucked at the foot of the bed restored warmth she'd lost. "Thank you."

"M'riotte, I want you to drink. Only a little. From me."

She sighed several times, not understanding why her breathlessness persisted. "Where are you, Dane?"

A large hand slid over her knuckles, fingers parting hers to lace them together. Mariotte stroked the digits; she found gentlemanly smoothness, and one rough, callused knot on the second finger, near the top joint. Smiling recognition brightened her dark world. Dane's writing hand. "Seti?"

"He's close, sweetheart. His injuries want treatment. He'll be fine." He leaned closer. "You're badly hurt, M'riotte, do you understand me?"

She gave him an infinitesimal shake of her head. "It's not so bad. I think I feel better now I'm out of the rain."

"You're more comfortable since I've wrapped your arm in a tourniquet. You've bled so much you've grown insensible to pain. It is necessary you feed on me. Please."

"I don't know if I can. I've tasted Seti. Just a little while ago." She heard him shedding clothing and wished more than anything she could see.

"I won't give you much. Whatever may happen, you'll survive." Lips brushing hers tasted of red wine, dark and sweet. "Let me help you now."

Her tongue lashed over her dewy mouth to savor the dregs. "It's good."

"It is, yes." A crystal goblet's edge bumped her lips. "More? Then you'll rest, and feel improvement."

She lolled in the corner of Dane's naked chest and his outstretched arm. Drank her fill.

* * *

"This is a complicated case." Cedric hardened his face into a stony mask, camouflage for leonine pain raking claws through his left hip and thigh past his ankle into the arch of his foot. He'd consumed quarts of blood in the past four days and suspected he'd kill live humans and animals to boost his healing factors if the slaughterhouses didn't provide sufficient supply. "We reserve death as a penalty for the gravest offenses. As a rule, the Supreme Justice Council rules conservatively in matters involving non-Extranatural defendants. Court Rules state issues concerning human defendants must be pursued through litigation within human courts whenever possible. The charges against Serena Parry are ineligible for resolution within the English court system due to their Extranatural nature."

Cedric glanced at the stacks of documents, notes, and multiple petitions spread out over the width of his desk before circling the room with his eyes. Seven Amazons made up the delegation come to escort Chione and Kaiva home and to place their complaints. The dozen Lykeions alleviated some of the crowding by taking their wolf form and sitting or lounging on the floor. Three retained man form to address the court.

Odin give me patience to do my duty properly this day. Let these people not be so obstinate as their kinsman. Not that I wished Veikko's fate upon him.

"You've spent the better part of two days in mediation with each other under Dane's counsel." Cedric studied the Amazon captain first. "Has any decision been reached concerning the conflicting charges and questions of jurisdiction?"

"We've reached several decisions, Justice." The statuesque captain's straight red hair fell backward from her shoulders. "We've concluded the Lykeion bear greater claim against the defendant than do we. They lost one brave warrior and will lose another shortly. Worse still, their loss may yet incur a nubile bitch." Her mouth, small and well-defined, pursed around the word. "Our sisters suffered injury and no small inconvenience during the incidents in question, but they will achieve full recovery in time." She cleared her throat. "We opt to defer to the Lykeion claim in the interest of true justice."

Cedric spared a glance for the two snow crystal sarcophagi preserving the discharged guards who'd served his house so faithfully. Amazon custom required the grieved parties' presence, with or without capacity to testify. Chione lay upon a bed of magnet, her hideous wounds concealed beneath chrysasilk dressings, her sleep restful as she healed. Kaiva's unconscious face bore deathly horror; the young warrioress regained brief consciousness while a nurse realigned and reset her broken neck. Heavy doses of laudanum quieted her terrible screams piercing the night. Three maghunds, enormous black dogs Ares bred to serve and defend his earthly progeny, guarded the coffins, their coppereyed gazes wary of foreign species.

"Well. Do the Lykeions accept the deference of their coplaintiffs?"

"We accept, Justice."

"Have you elected sentence?"

"We have."

"Well." Cedric turned to the woman seated in the chair next to his desk. Thus far, Serena's calm commanded some bit of Cedric's grudging admiration. Excepting the night Tucker immobilized her and the time the Lykeions stripped and branded her body to mark her as a criminal to their people she'd not cried out, wept, or shown any excessive emotions. Today she sat straight, unflinching, and did not lower her gaze or look away from the Lykeion feral scrutiny. A fichu tucked into the neckline of her plain gray dress covered the brand's angry scarlet marring the top of her breast, and her entire attitude conveyed resignation to fate. "Serena Parry."

"Yes, sir." Polite, as civil and professional as ever.

"You've not denied the charges levied against you."

"No, sir." Dry eyes; she'd fretted more about having Mariotte's hair done in time for that disastrous supper ball.

"You were apprehended in the act of performing animal transmutation, utilizing illegal spell components. Your actions affected Mr. Richard Filmore, transforming him into a unique bestial demon. The use of Minotaur components should have hybridized Mr. Filmore into a humanoid creature with either Minotaur or bovine characteristics.

"Mr. Filmore's natural heritage includes matrilineal descent from the MacSwains of Clan MacQueen. The line is known to the Extranatural community for its distant relationship to swine demon. Trafficking in illegal magics hybridized him into a monster possessing characteristics of all three species. Your utilization of shielding magic to defend Mr. Filmore is not in itself illegal, but its intended use to facilitate Sir Veikko Carstensen's assassination is a criminal action.

"Investigation of Rowan House's guest book indicates Dick McSwain and one human concubine visited Rowan House the night of Sir Aksel Raymond's murder." Cedric shook his head at Alannah's oversight; paying thousands of pounds for defensive guardian spells against Extranatural attack made no sense unless spells binding human attack were utilized as well. "Records indicate the couple took a room, remained in that room, and no one seems to recall much about them." Cedric shifted his weight; the plump cushion covered in sheepskin Tucker placed in his chair offered some comfort, but the angry throbbing in his hip refused to quiet completely. "Further investigation of Sir Aksel's murder scene and the room occupied by the McSwain party contains evidence linking Mr. Filmore in his bestial condition to both areas, mainly hair samples and olfactory evidence. Your own hair was discovered in the linens of the McSwain room.

"In addition to Sir Aksel's murder, Sir Veikko Carstensen suffered mortal wounds in combat with Mr. Filmore. Mr. Filmore utilized a silver bladed knife to dispatch Sir Veikko. While Sir Veikko's wounds were insufficient for an instant kill, argent infection has set into the injuries and is taking over his system. He will eventually succumb to this condition."

Serena swallowed, and her eyes grew shiny, dropping to her hands folded in her lap until she suppressed watery regrets.

"Other persons harmed in Mr. Filmore's assassination of Sir Veikko include the two Amazon guards employed in my household. The extreme injuries sustained by Kaiva Viatanja will require lengthy comatose regeneration, and after she attains full recovery she may not return to her position due to her death-like appearance of her attack in plain view of multiple witnesses. I also suffered damage attempting to subdue Mr. Filmore and defend Sir Veikko. Finally, my human ward, Miss Sabrier, sustained mauling injuries to her left arm and excessive blood loss requiring extreme measures to preserve her life." And for that, I want to rip your head from your body and throw it on the fire.

Cedric paused. His mention of Mariotte's condition reduced his words to graveled growls. He poured himself a full tumbler of blood diluted with enough wine to keep the mixture fluid, drained it in three swallows, and poured another. The physical risk of harm to Mariotte, once he knew she would not perish, did not anger him so much as the horror the experience must have inflicted upon her psyche. He'd yet to dare address it with her, had barely seen her apart from short visits of careful courtesy.

She must want to leave them now, and if she did, he must let her go. The idea magnified agony in his crushed hip and leg, spreading it through all his limbs, slithering through his vertebrae to pinch, heartless and cruel, behind Cedric's eyes.

He drank more bloodied wine. She would have to wait. He needed to be stronger, in full recovery, to handle the disruption her departure would bring him. Bring all of them. Odin help him, if she insisted on leaving at once he might abuse his own authority and confine her.

Everyone in the room watched him and he curbed desire to rage of his exhausted discomfort, that despite the impressive haste of vampiric regeneration his buttock and leg were killing him. Cedric wiped his mouth with the linen napkin Tucker provided before continuing.

"There is no doubt of your complicity in these assassinations and illegal magical trafficking. The letters collected from your room and a notebook of private notes and entries concerning your participation indicate you did not act alone in these offenses, nor were you the instigator." Deafening silence didn't trouble Cedric; he let it continue for some time until the Amazons fidgeted a bit. "Miss Parry, have you anything to say in your defense, or anything to contribute to our investigation?"

She looked up from her hands at once. "No, sir."

"Serena, your refusal to identify Macksim Daivorak's participation and conspiracy with you to kill Sir Aksel and then Sir Veikko does not alleviate him. His letters speak for themselves."

"I don't have anything to say about it, sir. I acted by myself, of my own free will. Mr. Filmore did not know exactly what he did."

"You acted of your own free will to murder two people unknown to you, at some trouble and no gain to yourself, but the man you loved who would gain handsomely from these two deaths is guiltless? "I acted by myself, for my own reasons. Macksim Daivorak is guilty of nothing, beyond his association with me and writing me letters."

"You aren't protecting him. A search party is en route to the Americas to locate him, ascertain his wife still lives, and determine his liability in this matter."

"That's as it may be, sir, I can't incriminate an innocent person." Serena clutched her handkerchief in a brutal grip.

"Have you anything else to say before sentencing?"

"No, sir." Her milky face paled.

"Then rise." Molten anger oozing through his inner ears, Cedric nodded for the Lykeion to proceed.

Sigmond stood as well. "Lykeion law commonly relies upon death sentence in murder cases, or in any crime affecting our numbers or our future numbers. We spent some time evaluating the evidence and circumstances of this case, and I spent ninety minutes in conference with Sir Veikko, an intense discussion regarding his personal feelings on this matter. We have agreed to impose Sentence of Life upon Miss Parry."

Cedric thought nothing remained to surprise him. "Well. Serena Parry shall accept Sentence of Life in accordance with Lykeion law. *Res judicata*." His fist struck the edge of his desk.

Sigmond bowed his head in acknowledgment of the judgment and led his people out of the room. No doubt they'd be in and out of the place until Sir Veikko passed on. Perhaps the old boy would get it in his head to leave and go die somewhere else.

The titian captain stood, every movement utilitarian and clean. "We shall be in close contact as soon as possible concerning permanent replacement security for your home, Justice."

"I look forward to it."

She nodded, kept leaving, her Amazons in tow. "The Wolfpeople made the correct decision."

"I thought so." He waited until the last woman exited and shut the door behind her. "Well, Miss Parry?"

She stirred, sat up on the chair's edge. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Your continued employment here is impossible given the circumstances. Mr. Melbourne composed a letter referencing your suitability as a lady's maid and your character. It makes no mention of your crimes since there is no reasonable way we can prove them, but I caution you against seeking new employment among other Extranaturals. If they don't know us or know somebody who knows us, they may have means of discovering. Some read minds, body language. Angelic auras. Dreams." Cedric slid his hand underneath the desk to retrieve two envelopes. "Your wages are paid through this year in accordance with the original hiring practices of my household. You're free to leave at once. I prefer you do so."

She stood up slowly, stiff as an arthritic old lady, wide-eyed with incredulity. "You'd assist me in escaping?"

"No, Miss Parry, I'm concluding our business association." He saw no reason to laugh at her.

"But won't the werewolves wonder at my leaving?"

"Why should they? You're already sentenced, and justice is served."

"I'm free to leave right now?"

"You can leave now, but you aren't free. For the remainder of your lifetime, you are beholden to the Lykeions, and they know it." He pointed toward her chest. "They've branded you to indicate you've betrayed them once and your life belongs to them. If a Lykeion wants your service, you're indebted to perform for him. Whatever it is. And it could be anything. Perhaps you'll never see or hear from them the remainder of your life. Or one day they may show up in need of a proper lady's maid. Or a dairy maid. Or they might research your pedigree and decide you make good breeding stock for them—sometimes they've taken to mating with other races to help increase their numbers. Whatever they do, anything you undertake from now on must be with the realization your life is never really your own."

Neutrality warred with fear, lost the battle in her eyes. Her unbandaged hand crammed the envelopes into her reticule. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, Parry. Good afternoon."

* * *

"So she's gone?"

"She is. Not a bit of fuss. She refused to name Macksim as a conspirator, though." Cedric relied on his stout oak cane as he rounded a card table and helped himself to a chair. He approved Sir Veikko's clean dinner tray. "Glad you like the mutton."

"Scrumptious good, thank you. Maybe she's telling the truth." Sir Veikko studied the florid patterns in his damask coverlet. "I like to think the man who won Gretchen's love deserved to do so. Perhaps he loves her truly, and the maidservant acted out of some misguided idea that if she enriched him he might return to her."

"The Order of Lykeios will continue the investigation. A formality to assure the couple's safety." Cedric saw no merit in arguing the evidence with the dying knight. Whether Macksim wrote the letters encouraging Serena to murder his father-in-law and his father-in-law's heir so that he and his new wife might enjoy a substantial legacy, or if he intended to murder Gretchen and return to Serena, his letters proved he advised and instructed Serena on her crimes. "The matter's beyond my jurisdiction now, sir."

Sir Veikko raised his handkerchief to cover his mouth. The coughing fit combined with violent, repeated sneezing continued for several minutes. He sucked up air in deep, quick gasps during an infrequent lull, wiping his mouth when the episode subsided.

Cedric handed him a glass of water. The extreme coughing smelled bloody and sour. Already small veins in the Lykeion's complexion altered in color, silvery gray streaking through the blue.

"Demme, I like that not." Sir Veikko glared through bloodshot eyes. "Feels like I'll hack out everything in my body or my lungs'll turn inside out."

"Why did you encourage the knighthood to elect Sentence of Life?" Death seemed more than proper. Sir Veikko presently endured the earliest stage of argent infection. As the condition progressed it would suffocate him, his lungs filled with silver compounds his blood strove to reject.

"It's unorthodox, I know." The Lykeion knight sprinkled a napkin with warm water from a dilapidated earthenware pot and used it to bathe his face. Cedric handed him a clean napkin to blot the moisture away. "Thank you." He sank back against his pillows, inflamed eyes half-shut, nostrils swollen with irritation, saturnine mouth dark red and cracked with dry skin.

Cedric did not press him; if the Lykeion felt too tired and ill to answer, he'd more than sufficient reason to keep his thoughts his.

"I consider it wasteful." Sir Veikko expelled one shallow

breath, drank down another. "The woman's young, with some small affinity for magic. She may be more useful to my people alive. With the stink of that hybrid upon her, she might be pregnant, and I'd not have the unborn's life upon my conscience." He moved his left hand, a gesture meant to ward away blasphemy. "Who knows but that sparing her life might result in some benefit outweighing vengeance for the Lykeion?"

"I think you're one of the strongest people I ever met."

"Probably. I passed the trials for knighthood, Justice. Weak I'm not." Sir Veikko's complacency would have smacked of egomania in another man. "How's your ward? Did she sustain the blood or is she changing?"

"She sustained it." One less worry on his mind. "Her injured arm requires exercise and tending to fully mend."

"That's wonderful news." Sir Veikko's swollen eyes opened a bit. "I don't doubt she'd make a fine vampiress, but decisions of such magnitude are best handled without desperation."

Cedric nodded. "Your instructions she isn't to see you distress her."

"I'm not going to watch pity in your woman's eyes, Justice." Whuffling sounded odd on human lips. "Not pity for me, anyway. I'll trouble you to accept a token on her behalf, though."

"A handsome present." He knew what the folded handkerchief contained before he opened it. Cedric admired the precise perfection of the medallion's engraving. How the Lykeions loved art and excelled in its production. The sun disk took up a good two thirds of the heavy round pendant, but the smaller likeness of a man standing upright and facing a rampant wolf boasted such care in detail Cedric recognized the emotional depth in their posture and expressions. The two creatures and the sun itself stood in collaboration, separate parts of a supreme whole.

"My personal emblem of Wolfish Apollo, awarded me after I succeeded at my trials."

"Perhaps it's a greater honor than a human ought to expect. I mean in the eyes of the knighthood."

"Most humans wouldn't fight to the death to save a Lykeion." He covered his mouth to yawn and a new fit of coughing wracked him. His body twisted and he huffed and growled at the unassailable predator's insidious attack. After a time he wiped his mouth, gulped more water, and shut his bloodshot eyes.

CHAPTER 29

"I suppose I should have expected this some time ago." Louisa Redworth fixed Troyes with disinterested reproach. "Miss Sabrier is generous to spare you long enough to return these poor old tokens of when we were friends."

"Miss Sabrier has nothing to do with my calling tonight. Had you been at home to me sooner, I would have come long ago."

Lud! The whole problem with Troyes Pellerin could be summed up in one tidy term: sincerity. Years before his exquisite French beauty excited her too much to bear thought of his attentions turning anywhere beyond herself, she'd devoted considerable effort to securing his attachment.

As they'd grown closer and he revealed his true nature to her, Mrs. Redworth burned and thrilled in triumph of a superlative coup. The knowledge that no one less attractive and remarkable than Troyes Pellerin pined to have her on his arm and in his bed went straight to her brain like the best champagne. Even the very best champagne couldn't command her appetite at all times, however; the more of it she had, the less she desired.

The sole experience superior to captivating one of the richest, most fashionable, and fascinating men in Europe was the length of time he danced to her tune like a patient jumping-jack. A human man could not have managed it; Troyes had all the time in the world.

Tonight, she sensed, their quadrille of an affair reached its finale. The realization smarted more than she'd expected since she'd considered her infatuation with him finished.

She gave the stack of old letters a quick nod without bothering to touch them. "I'd hand over your correspondences to me if I had them. I couldn't trouble to retain them." She held out her empty hands, palms up, gave him the same smile and courteous tones she gave all strangers who were once her lovers.

"I understand. It would have inconvenienced you." He exhibited no affront.

"And, of course, I never requested any picture of you." The miniature portrait in a plain oval frame didn't smile, unless one counted the slightest curling at the corners of her mouth. Mrs. Redworth did not look at it too carefully. Regardless of her jet necklace and twin bracelets endowed with cosmetic magic, her looks now could not hope to compete with her likeness over three decades past.

"You didn't need one." Troyes's agreement held a faint note of cheer. Dared he mock her inability to retain youth?

"I did not. Your looks are much the same as they've ever

been." She pointed it out as though his condition counted as a defect. Fair enough; years changed natural people.

"You're right, of course."

"I guess that will be all?" She looked past his fine shoulders to Lily's portrait hanging above the parlor fireplace. The scandalous beauty relaxed, a true Paphian, sensual in all her flaxen-haired, blue-eyed loveliness, her naked breasts rising, swollen and proud, from her old-fashioned chemise drawn so open the neckline's fine lace trimming draped over her slender waist.

No wonder Papa left Maman and me all alone in their great house so he could live with his mistress instead.

"One thing more. I wished to know if you've need of anything."

"I want nothing from you. I never have." She drew herself up, cold and regal. How dare the cad talk to her as though she were some doxy he dismissed? "You relieve me more than you imagine. I've not forgotten your earlier pursuit of me, how it impacted my marriage and the unhappiness it brought poor Mr. Redworth."

Triumph at last, the trouble misting Troyes's turquoise eyes. Lily's painted gaze offered Mrs. Redworth courage.

"George Redworth was my lover, too. We were all lovers together."

"He hated it. He told me often how much he loathed sharing me with another man. You so bespelled me I could not find it in me to put an end to it. You took an unfair advantage of us, sir. His yearning for you disgusted him, and he regretted his inability to conquer it." She widened her smile, self-depreciative, when the vampire flinched.

"I'm sorry if it's true." "If?" "Louisa, George did not object to our arrangements." Troyes folded his arms across his chest and unfolded them. "It made sense the two of you married—your children were more likely to be his than mine." He swallowed. "Those days aren't so long ago you can't remember them. We were happy together. George's unhappiness stemmed from the discovery of your other interests extending outside the three of us."

"You're mistaken, sir." That was another problem with Troyes, and had been a problem with poor George, too. Neither man seemed capable of understanding her frequent adventures were part of her private world that didn't include them. Neither of them knew how to leave well enough alone and be happy.

Her parents' bitter quarrels and her *Maman's* demands all led to the same destination; Papa packing up and living away from them for lengthier periods of time. After *Maman* died and could reproach him no longer he still hadn't stayed. Louisa had been a delicate schoolroom miss when she seduced her first footman, finally understood and forgiven her Papa's neglect. Nothing compared to commanding another person's most intimate attentions, using their bodies and affections for short-lived gratification.

Dismissing them once their embraces felt too much like love dwarfed the earlier part of the game, however, and proved far more intoxicating with female acquaintance. Women didn't expect such ill-usage from their own sex. She'd never felt greater empowerment than the day she left a blonde enchantress weeping over Louisa's withdrawn affection.

It did her no good to want Troyes. Everybody in the world wanted Troyes. George, a loving, affable man, had been the flower of his family. Spoiled men and women like Lily had all the love in the world, uncomprehending what it meant to be young, alone, too unattractive and unaccomplished, unworthy of adoration.

"How is Miss Sabrier?" Adroit change of subject allowed her to fold up the unpleasantness, lock it away in a corner.

"She's well, thank you."

"I'd think the poor thing must be devastated after that disastrous fete at Royal Crescent! People talking murder and Idon't-know-what-all! Not to mention Miss Sabrier's imprudence with your other guest."

Troyes brushed her syrupy concern like an insect. "Seti's settled the young lady with three hundred thousand quid. The *ton'll* forgive her imprudence. Once she's recovered and Seti's better we're for London."

"Let us hope London is for you." She still wanted to laugh; the word *quid* pronounced in his French accent tickled her. "You love her enough for three hundred thousand quid?"

"I do not." His mouth relaxed; fine brows shot upward. His weight shifting to one hip indicated surprise at his discovery. "What she brought me isn't love, but it's honest about what it is."

"Whatever it is, it's plainly turned your friendship from me."

"Not the way you suppose. You want nothing further of me, then?"

"Not a thing." Why did her heart scream out secrets she had to tamp down into silence? How could she still want him when she'd had him for years? His clear, sharp gaze enraged her. He stripped her down, saw right through her. How dare he still have such control over her senses, no matter what she did to mitigate it?

If George still lived would they be happy together? If she'd taken Troyes's offer for the change, years ago while she still had her best looks she might be surer of keeping him. But Troyes, for all his gusto, had the soul of a pure romantic and he'd taken greater umbrage than George had to her meaningless pleasures outside their lives.

She couldn't live with another man who truly loved and wanted her for herself, anymore than she tolerated it in casual lovers.

She was too accustomed to not being loved at all.

"Good evening, Mr. Pellerin."

* * *

"Didn't take long." Through the barouche window, Cedric watched Troyes pause at Mrs. Redworth's door, exchange pleasantries with the manservant before striding out. "He looks glad."

"Not surprising. Anything's better than what kept happening between them."

"Cynic." Cedric smoothed a strand of Dane's dark hair away from his face and under his hat. "Of we three, you're the only one clever enough to have never liked her."

"I imagine it has to do with how you look at it. If I had it to do again, I wouldn't have chased my wife across the continent. How's it, Troyes?"

The elegant Frenchman mounted the step and settled into his customary seat across from Cedric. "It's well, gentlemen. Over. As it needed to be. The lady excused me graciously."

Cedric tapped the ceiling to indicate the driver should take them home. "London'll do us all good. If Mariotte chooses to come she'll enjoy it very much."

"Is there reason Mariotte won't choose to come with us to London?"

"One never knows, Dane. The swine demon could have killed Mariotte."

"That isn't your fault."

"I know it." So how could guilt gnaw at his insides, ruthless as his crippled leg. "Her safety isn't less my obligation for that. I offered her protection, she accepted, and I failed to defend her properly in my own gardens. If she decides she'd be more comfortable out of our household, I cannot demand she remain."

"You should." Troyes huffed, unrepentant, and bent toward the Viking beauty to kiss him. Lips smacked in casual possession. "I've been a fool for a solid decade or so, lover. But I'm not going to kick my own arse over my foolishness, because I recognize superior foolish when I see and hear it." Humor fled his look. "Wearing willow over love past its flower's foolish, but spurning genuine, returned attachment due to a dead swine demon who won't bother anybody anymore trumps me."

"If she decides she's unsuited to life with us, though..."

Another impatient hrummph fluttered from Troyes. "She's always been unsuited to this kind of life with us. Out with it, man. Since you love our *choux d'amour*, make it good! Tell her your mind and offer for her yourself. Makes as much sense as setting her up in style to attract some genteel, respectable buck to wed her for your money."

"I always value your counsel. I want what's best for Mariotte."

Troyes sat very straight for the remainder of the trip home. Cedric and Dane joined his silence, each devoted to quiet mulling over recent events and unusual consequences.

Dane extended one slow arm to Troyes, waited for his beloved blood-kind to accept his hand.

"I loved her. It was love. Once. The real thing."

Dane said nothing. He drew Troyes close, pulling him across to the opposite seat, snuggling the glorious male half on Dane's own lap, half on Cedric's. Troyes's moan held a low world of hurt and he relaxed against the arms cocooning him into a hold tender as a family sheltering a child in need of reassurance after enduring a distressing nightmare.

The vampire choked on a hiccough that could have been a sob.

"The real thing. For me, anyway."

CHAPTER 30

"You needn't carry me, Ardeth. Surely you find this a trifle unorthodox?" Mariotte's good arm curled over the back of the taller woman's neck for balance, but she held her body as far away from the Amazon's brawny form as she could.

"Stop trying to lift up your own weight, Miss. You're not heavy. There." At the foot of the stairs Ardeth deposited Mariotte on her feet. "You're free to walk and run 'round as you like on level ground, but until those giddy spells go away for good you need help on the stairs." Huge hands smoothed Mariotte's loose curls behind her shoulders, petted them into place. "I'm sorry about your hair. Seti says we'll call in a real hairdresser for a few weeks so I can learn to put it up proper."

"Thank you, Ardeth." No good came of chastising her new

maid; the Amazon made a remarkable attendant. "I'm comfortable without all the pins and pomade. Hardly anybody calls these days, anyway.

Ardeth sniffed. "They'll be back. Weak spells are a good sign, Miss. You're not contaminated from Melbourne's blood. Your body's exerting extra energy to heal itself."

"Good." Mariotte permitted her lips a fleeting smile. "I mean to practice a little, perhaps take air in the garden."

"Take this with you." Ardeth retrieved Mariotte's broad-bladed hunting knife from her belt and handed it to her. "Never know when you might need it. I couldn't help admiring it when I put away your linen. Fine weapon, Miss. You've taken good care of it."

Mariotte stared at the embossed leather sheath a moment before accepting it. "I believe we suit each other, Ardeth. You're welcome to the hour off if you like."

"I could do with a dish of tea. I'll be close if you need me, Miss." The statuesque woman nodded on her way to the kitchen.

Extranatural society surprised Mariotte the longer she lived in it. She'd thought all Amazons would be mighty warrioresses; the concept of Amazon women performing excellent needlework, taking exceptional care of a lady's wardrobe, and supervising that wardrobe's owner would have struck Mariotte as surreal prior to her meeting Ardeth. Now it made sense. Soldiers couldn't build strong societies all by themselves.

At some point Seti would explain to Ardeth assistance on the stairs meant an arm for balance, not carrying her charge like an invalid child. If Mariotte could get a quarter-hour's conversation with Seti it'd already be settled.

He won't see me.

Mariotte's heart fisted against her breastbone and she forced her mouth to bend into a smile; the action deceived briny drops ready to flood her eyes and streak her face. Seti continued to address her with his customary courtesy and showed gentle solicitude for all her needs to be met. Apart from their meals and infrequent meetings in the house, however, he declined to engage her at all.

She'd done her best to make herself available to him, drop hints she welcomed an invitation to play for him during his bath or enjoy a garden stroll. His kind refusals, worded not to hurt her, knifed her under the ribs.

The day she received the most obsequiously worded letter in the world from a Bank of England representative confirming receipt of three hundred thousand pounds in her personal account, Mariotte retired early to cry herself to sleep.

It's over. So quickly.

She glanced at her left arm. Thanks to Dane's contribution of blood the night of the party, most scarring already faded and the worst injuries healed with impressive speed.

She'd admitted to loving Seti that night because she had to. If it cost her Seti's goodwill it couldn't be helped, but—oh God—how could a man's rejection still hurt so damn much? She'd known this day would come, after all, and that it might come without warning. Seti never promised her love, and if he had reservations in continuing their liaison since she admitted to deeper than proper feelings, Mariotte had no reason to blame anyone besides herself.

Perhaps suggesting she occupy separate quarters from the family might regain some of their former camaraderie. Caution pinched her temples. If she bought or rented her own house, or moved to another of Seti's residences, the *ton* would talk, and

Seti's household made the juiciest *on dit* in Bath since that wretched party. She had no choice but to accustom herself to this new distance between them until Seti clarified his desire to end things.

Mariotte's cramping fingers tightened their grip on the news journal she received this morning before she lifted the rolled printed paper to rap against the sickroom door.

It didn't open. Of course. "Sir Veikko's orders are unchanged, Miss. You're not to enter."

Bloody, stubborn... Mariotte drew in a lengthy draft of air and widened her smile so its effect might be heard in her voice. "I wish to speak to you for a moment, please."

"I'm sorry, Miss."

Zut alors! Mariotte nibbled the inside of her lower lip. Her cheeks burned. If every time a demon infiltrated the property and attacked the household none of the men would wish to speak with her, perhaps she'd be best off in her own accommodations, Season or no Season.

She rapped again, fisting her hand behind the paper. "I won't take much of your time, sir, but I won't leave until you speak with me. Please."

No one replied. Mariotte waited for several minutes. Something decidedly immoral existed in being ignored when one attempted to help another person.

"I've said I'm not leaving and I'm not. Sir Veikko? I don't know if you're able to understand me. I'm very, very sorry about your ill health, and I wish I'd been able to do more to aid you. I hope, perhaps, someone still can. I've read news today about a remarkable medical experiment. I've brought the journal with me for you to look at. A London physician, Dr. James Blundell, has been experimenting some time with transfusing blood between dogs. A short time ago, he performed a transfusion upon a human patient. His effort succeeded."

She seized the molding upon the door frame when the door opened enough to accommodate the width of the brawny Lykeion's face.

"Sir Sigmond, is it?"

"Prince Thormond. Prince Sigmond's my brother."

"Forgive me."

His head tilted to indicate he took no offense. "We're not easily told apart." Dense chestnut brows knit until a small crease appeared between them. "Why do you stand outside a fallen Lykeion's sickroom, babbling about human physicians? Are you familiar with many human physicians? Half learn their trades in butcher shops."

"Dr. Blunden has an excellent reputation. He was educated in Edinburgh. His lectures on midwifery are well-received." She raised the newsprint. "Isn't it true that argent infection progresses through blood until the patient's system is too polluted to function?" She swallowed before voicing the idea clutching hope in a stranglehold. "If Sir Veikko's blood might be transfused with healthy blood, would that dilute the infection? Possibly...eradicate it?"

Golden-brown eyes took her measure in silence before Thormond began to laugh at her. Gusty, bellowing laughter. Obnoxious.

"What is wrong with you?" Good temper swept free of her tenacious grasp. "How can you find this situation funny?"

"I find you funny. Well-intentioned, to be sure, but comical nevertheless." Amusement lent color to his face; sandy freckles dusting his snubby nose darkened. "What an idea! You suggest a brother of the Lykeion knighthood submit himself as a patient to a human midwife for an experimental blood transfusion? You've no idea what might happen!" Another guffaw ensued, boisterous and healthy.

Mariotte slammed her open hand so hard into the door the wood should have cracked from it. "No, sir, I do not know what might happen! I do know what shall happen without any course of treatment, though! I know, you know, everybody knows!" She flexed her shocked hand to relieve surface discomfort. If nothing else, her violent gesture silenced the Lykeion's mirth. Heedless of his species and rank, she thrust the journal against his chest and took no small satisfaction in his responsive grunt. "See if you've at least the courage to read on the matter and let Sir Veikko decide if he's not too high in the instep for consultation with a human doctor!"

She sucked her lower lip until it tucked itself beneath her teeth, glaring into the man's brandied gaze until he grasped the journal.

"Thank you, Miss Sabrier."

She'd nothing left with which to construct civilities, deserted the door without answering him. The garden held no appeal to her, now, though Dane ordered the hedgemaze trimmed down until the tops of the yews stood no higher than a man's waist. She could take a nice, long walk without fear of monsters lurking beyond her line of sight, if she wished.

Mariotte gave her back to the wide French doors, returning to the main hall, passing Seti's office doors closed to all interruption as certain as he'd closed himself to her.

How dare he change to her? He'd called her love, held her close in his arms, tasted her in all the most intimate ways a vampire lover could.

She'd invited him; perhaps he'd never wanted her in that way. Accepted out of politeness or practicality.

Then the bastard should have declined!

He'd carved her a beautiful busk for her stays. Like a true sweetheart.

It's what he paid me for, to act as his lover...

The broken, hitching noise propelled through her lungs and throat warned Mariotte to scrub her eyes with her handkerchief.

In the drawing room, her Dragonova gleamed, its gilded symbols winking at Mariotte. Grimacing at the twinging pain from flexing her third and fourth fingers, she sat at the comfortable padded bench, anyhow. Shunning warm-ups, she lasped into Beethoven's twenty-third sonata.

She understood, now, how angry the composer must have been, frustrated by hearing loss and doomed love affairs. Everything flowed through music's eerie, disjointed connection. Part storm, part earthquake. Omnipresent. Sore muscles complained before she played half the first movement. Mariotte bit her lip and continued.

Reptilian anguish slithered over her left arm, coiled around it, her third and fourth fingers reduced to crampy spasms, skipping keys. The second movement's absurd simplicity faced obliteration, off-beats escaping her quivering digits.

Frustrated tears rimmed her eyes with acid. He'd always loved her music. Since she could not play so well these days, was that why...

"M'riotte? I want you in the library, please."

"I'm coming, Dane." Phantom pain pulsed through her wrist after she'd walked halfway out of the drawing room's entrance.

She passed the stairs, coursing down the familiar route that

grew too strange to her in the past fortnight. Through the library's open door, male voices in quiet conversation touched her inner ear. Her heart barely quivered in hope before her ear registered Dane spoke with another man she did not know. Not Seti. One of his firm's associates from the sound of it. A youngish man who lingered long enough to trade bows before quitting the room with Tucker.

"M'riotte." Dane's smiling eyes, magnified due to a recent too short haircut, fell over her figure, glorious mid-day sunshine. "I heard you playing."

"I tried at any rate."

"I'm glad you feel well enough to attempt it. I've news." A courtly gesture urged her to sit. "Things I hope you'll be glad to hear."

In for a penny, in for a pound. "I've something I must tell you as well, Dane." Mariotte sank onto one of the library's long settees. Kneeling before her, Dane curtailed her left hand's effort to smooth her dress without setting her thumb and wrist into painful spasms.

"Sweetheart." His endearment, half-whispered half-kissed onto her knuckles spurred her tears. "Don't fret. You're getting better, M'riotte. Your injury would be much worse had you not fed." He sandwiched her fingers in both hands. "In good time, you'll play like you always have and forget this unpleasantness."

"You always know what to say to me." Happiness pulled her lips apart.

"Course I do. I'm a barrister." He flashed her a fine white smile. Lovely dimples, strong nose, warmest coffee eyes. His hair, cut too short, no longer formed wayward curls; they'd return in a fortnight. "I like your real voice very much." "You said you liked my voice before."

"I did. I like you now as well." Affection twinkled, mellow in his eyes. "Partiality for one mayn't necessarily rule out fondness to the other."

Pink heat suffused her skin. "Sometimes, I speak and confusion overtakes me. I'm convinced somebody else replaces my speech despite me recognizing my words." She nibbled her lower lip. "Do you suppose it's permanent?"

"I believe so. Remnant damage from your prior illness has been...reversed. Like the worst, deep damage in your arm and hand." His fingertip traced the bow of her upper lip. "I never imagined it'd happen, of course. I own I didn't think of it when I dosed you, but I've read of comparable restoration on others."

"I love you, Dane." Mariotte hadn't accustomed herself to the restored clarity and lightness in her tones to stop whispering.

His smile softened and he took her other hand. "You honor me profoundly, dearest, since you must know I've loved you for some time, now."

"I do know. I chose not address it from cowardice."

"A lady who clobbers magically shielded swine demons suffers cowardice?" His smile grew no less lovely below climbing brows.

"Please try to understand me." She pulled herself to the settee's edge and wove her fingers into his. "I didn't accept Seti's *carte blanche* with intent beyond building a new life for myself, but I was also desperate for something besides what my life circumstances'd allotted me." Mariotte shut her eyes. "I craved experiences I believed were passing me by and would leave me behind."

"No one could blame you for that." Dane shaped one longer tendril in his finger. "I know, when I stilled lived as human, I hungered for sensations and opportunities unsanctioned by society. I lacked courage to reach for many of them before my change." One brow quirked. "It takes bravery to recognize what you want, understand the costs, and to pursue it."

Laughter, silly, aimless, articulated her lifted shoulders. She met his eyes squarely. "I wanted a lover, and Seti offered me everything I thought I wanted." She expelled languorous breath. "Never minding the particulars, I believed it would be easy enough to fulfill my obligations to all of you and we'd all benefit." If she touched her cheeks, skin would flake off from shamed heat. "I don't know how to make myself a better mistress. I haven't been able to think of our arrangements as simple arrangements in a long while. I've tried to, but the best I've managed is to keep silent of it. I love you. I love Seti, too. It frightens me, I don't always understand it, but it's true. I can't seem to change it." Two tears slid from one eye, one from the other.

Dane handed over his handkerchief. "What of poor Troyes?"

"Troyes is dear to me." She sniffled into fine linen. "I enjoy his company. I desire his happiness, but I've never felt the denser sensibility toward him I have for you. I wanted to believe my sentiments for Seti were misdirected gratitude for what he's done for me, but the longer I've been with him I know it's not so. I wouldn't hurt Troyes for anything in the world. I think—perhaps if Troyes alone had become my lover, I'd not be in this quandary now. He's a charming, elegant man. I..." She couldn't blush deeper. "Our coupling excites me. It isn't the same, however. It lacks a depth I feel with you. With Seti, too. I'm incomplete without you. And him. I did not intend to say this much about it."

"Pray say more about it, dearling." Cedric's powerful form

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

filled the library's doorway. "I've longed to hear you."

CHAPTER 31

Wretched tears wouldn't stop, natural as her body's flow into Dane's arms when he sat beside Mariotte and cuddled her close. Cedric half-reclined at her opposite side, drawing slow circles on the backs of her arms and shoulders, his knees bent so he curved against her body.

"Seti, I love you." She refused to lift her face from hiding in Dane's arm curtained by her loose hair.

"I love you, Mariotte, love." Hard kisses buried in her hair. Mariotte tugged his arm over her.

Her heart tumbled over her reeling mind. Mariotte scrabbled for good sense. It'd never abandoned her before. "

Mariotte sucked watery breath. "I love you, too, Dane. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. I don't know how to stop it!"

"You don't have to. I don't want you to. I think the first niggling pangs of sincere admiration for you set hooks in me the day I offered to drive you out to Sydney Gardens." Dane squeezed her tightly.

"M'dear, I beg you don't cry." Cedric kissed the top of her head.

She controlled the sobs convulsing her throat after a time, and Dane spoke again.

"I remember when I first understood it was possible for some people—not everyone—to love more than one person. It disturbed and frightened me because the concept undermined my belief in the married state's true happiness." Wry smiling crept into his words. "Seti and I were quite at odds, then. In time, I came to see love could be honestly given—and returned—among more than two people, if the people involved shared genuine care and respect for each other, and if the situation didn't offend their moral standards."

Cedric nuzzled beneath Mariotte's curls to kiss her ear, lick the whorls and blow softly on her lobe. "Romantic poets call it free love, though they've somewhat bastardized the practice. If you've room in your heart for us all, in whatever degree, cherish it." He kissed her moist cheek. "We're not all of us the same people; we can't expect you to love us all the same. M'dear, I've cared for you so long, now. I would've told you after the ball."

She lifted her face at last. "Why did you not?" She watched his beautiful throat work over a soft choking noise, closed her eyes when he touched her wet face.

"I loathe if I've made you cry, dearling. I'd promised you your Season and inherent freedom to choose a partner. If I admitted loving you, I'd exert pressure upon you to remain, perhaps in a situation not entirely to your liking."

"But we've all lived so happily together." Mariotte accepted Dane's proffered handkerchief.

Cedric's kiss, soft and light against her mouth, sank deep, a tidal wave smashing her senses. She met eyes devoid of their usual, solid confidence and ennui. His mouth opened, closed, and his upper teeth scraped his lower lip.

"I hoped you shared my own feelings, hoped it enough I thought we might talk. Renegotiate." He found her hand clasped in Dane's wrapped his fingers around both.

"Then what changed your mind?"

"Nothing's changed, love."

"You sent money." Humiliation scorched her face. "The money, what we agreed I'd be...paid."

"God." He surrounded her, arms pulling her with real force from Dane's lap. "Mariotte, I'm not a cad so much as a fool. I did authorize the bank to transfer the sum we agreed would finalize our bargain. I wanted it finalized, to clear the way for us. You've thought I was dismissing you? You did." His mouth pushed hers, brutal consolation. "If you had the funds and were clear of obligation to me, you'd be free to accept me. Free to decide if we belonged together. Or refuse without fear of threat to your maintenance."

"You know I don't need that money."

"I still promised it to you. That account's settled. We owe each other nothing. If you love me, Mariotte, stay with me now."

Mariotte tugged his face to hers, splaying her fingers over sweet curves in Seti's splendid red-gold hair, threading through the strands to stroke and massage the firmness of his jaw.

He whispered through rushed, heated breath. "Wait, m'dear."

"I can't wait anymore!" It burst out before she could stop it. Disgusting, she sounded almost deprived, ready to burst into tears for need.

"Mariotte, love."

She opened, let lazy flame build beneath his tongue playing with hers, sweeping lightly against her lips in love's delicate rhythm. He toyed with the buttons on her high bodice, easing them free of their loops.

"Dane..." Seti prompted.

Mariotte heard the door shut quietly a moment before Dane's body pressed against her back. His hands rose up the folds of her plain day dress, reached her breasts, and gently squeezed them together. He planted dozens of kisses in her hair, the back of her neck, between her shoulder blades.

"What is it, love?" Blue fire erupted in Seti's scowl; he collected a relieved tear from her cheek.

Mariotte shook her head as she unbuttoned Seti's shirt. Behind her, Dane's capable hands unfastened her clothes, let down layers of fabric, unlaced her stays, and drew her chemise over her head.

Seti lifted her chin with two careful fingers. "M'dear?"

She whispered, "I've missed you." Let his mouth crush hers and trace a line over her chin and down her neck in close, lingering kisses. Brushes of his lips, soft bumping of teeth, playful sweeps of his tongue.

"I feared you needed rest," he whispered, raising heat in the hollow above her collarbone. "And...I'm still mending, too." Reluctant shame dulled his visage. "It rubbed my vanity, the idea of you seeing me with need for this." He collected his cane, tossed and caught it.

She caught a breath. "Do I hurt you?" Her mind wrenched over

her own stupidity, cranking out the nightmare image of Seti crushed beneath that writhing boar, Seti dragging himself away on his elbows.

Seti's low chuckle blew soft against her hairline. "We'll take care. Come, Dane, let me help you."

Mariotte hastened her work on Seti's garments. The act of disrobing might be sensuous itself, but she wanted to be naked with her lovers, savor bare skin's sweet, informal kiss on other bare skin.

"My word." Dane's dry exclamation followed Mariotte collecting Seti's white-topped boots with the legs of his trousers still tucked within the shafts and tossing them to one side. "If anybody could be messier with your clothes than you, Cedric."

The oldest vampire's red-golden hair shivered from his laughter. "With respects, man, Mariotte's things may all be piled in the same place, but I'd not call them tidy."

Flanked by the two men, Mariotte followed Seti's lead to the far fireplace opposite his desk. Dane threw a blanket over the plush carpet; Mariotte sank into its velvety texture.

Almost at once, two sets of hard-muscled male arms surrounded her form. Mariotte reached to embrace them both, running her fingertips over rocky biceps, smooth shoulders, and sinewy backs. Her caresses brought soft moans, closed eyes, whispered endearments.

A mouth latched to each of her breasts. Mariotte keened at the direct contact she'd needed. Dane licked her, circled her nipple again and again until she budded, taut and firm as a ripe berry. Seti suckled, lashing her with the broad sides of his tongue, building slower, exquisite arousal, steady as river currents.

Her hands cupped Dane's close cropped hair and Seti's

streaming waves. Seti's head rose, covering her neglected nipple with plucking fingertips.

"You take us now because you want us. You want to stay with us."

"I love you." She lifted her head enough to kiss him. "I love you, Seti." She traced lazy, indeterminate paths through the wave pattern of Dane's hair. "Dane, my love..." So marvelous to speak it. "I'm with you because I love you."

The younger vampire groaned against her flesh. Seti's eyes gleamed above his grin. Several hands parted her thighs, opened her quim to play.

Seti traced her private lips, fondled the crisp, tight curls covering them. "I've missed you. You smell so sweet when you want me in you." He sat up, parting her tender folds, inspecting her. "Such a beauty, pink as a rose." Large fingers delved within to stroke her clitoris until its sensitivity knotted, pearl-hard to his touch. He bent low. Mariotte sighed, opened wider to his first kiss of his skin touching her privacy, then the real kiss, gentle, toying pressure of his lips, his tongue, fluttery and flexible and moist. "Superb."

Dane planted another kiss on Mariotte's breast before rising to his knees, wrapping his arms around Seti's trim waist, and latching onto Seti's mouth with his, drawing hard, their faces shifting and turning to push against one another while Dane battered Seti open to taste the blend of Seti and Mariotte.

"Delicious." Dane's growl called heat from Mariotte's belly; it pooled low, thickened to honey brimming over within her swelling sex.

Seti grinned. "Very. There's oil in the third desk drawer." He pulled Mariotte's hand so she'd sit in his lap, facing him with her

legs draped over his thighs. He tightened his arms around her and sighed. "I almost can't believe you still want me."

It took Mariotte a moment to absorb his words. "I can't imagine how I've miscommunicated myself so you'd think it." She loosened her embrace and permitted her open hands to drift over his body, random in direction, petting his shoulders, arms, and flanks. His rigid sex rubbed her belly when Mariotte leaned upon his chest to nuzzle and kiss him, lick the line of his sternum over his heart.

"After the house was attacked, I couldn't be sure your feelings wouldn't change. If you no longer felt safe, if witnessing the events you saw might change your acceptance of me. My sons. All of us."

She pressed her cheek into his pectoral, caught the tip of his cock and played with it, swirling her fingertips over the glans. His mouth formed a sweet *o* and tension slanted his brow.

"Good?"

"Dearling, it's beyond good." He kissed her, a leisurely trek from one corner of her upper lip to the other.

"My feelings about you haven't changed, Seti." Her tongue darted out to meet his kisses. "Except I learned to be afraid, because I understood something in this world could move against you, try and do you harm."

He kissed the top of her head and began lying back. "Is that bad?" Cupping her breasts in both hands, he rubbed their tips with his thumbs until she sat astride him, pink-cheeked and hard-nippled.

"No. And yes. It made you more normal. And less so at the same time." Mariotte cupped her hand around the swelling sac at the base of his cock, exerted subtle pressure.

"But you must have doubted your safety and my ability to protect you." Seti's eyes darkened with passion until Mariotte's ministration.

"I love how smooth you feel in my hand. I'd have worried less if I'd had my knife. I grew up on a plantation, Seti. I've hunted deer before. Shot panther when they got on the place and killed cattle. Trapped bear for profit. I've done more than a little bit of killing. Oh!" Seti entered her sex with two fingers, Mariotte rode against that sweet thrust. "Seti, that's so nice."

"Lie forward with me. Let Dane prepare you so we can love you together."

Mariotte complied, closing her eyes and moaning when Dane's slick fingers stroked her anus, coaxing her to relax and open to him. "I hope it's as good as I imagined it could be."

"You imagined the two of us taking you this way?"

Mariotte heard Seti's smile, could not see it with her head pillowed on his delightful pectoral. "Yes, but it's Dane's fault since his suggestion put the idea in my head."

"I must reward my godson properly." Another kiss. "Very soon."

Fingers probed her body. Mariotte swiveled her hips, murmuring her pleasure.

"Mariotte, play with your nipples. Squeeze and pinch them so they stay lovely and hard."

Eyes locked with Seti's, she fulfilled his entreaty, feathering her spread fingers across her breasts, bumping against them with her palms, capturing her nipples in twisting pinches.

"Take me inside you and come down so I might hold you."

Mariotte rose to her knees and positioned herself over Seti. "Watch." She opened her quim and sank slowly, kissing Seti's

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

cock with her shyer, wetter inner lips before engulfing him in moist, welcoming heat. Dane patted her approvingly as she bent to lie on top of Seti, lifting her bottom for Dane. She kissed Seti's mouth and whispered upon his cheek. "Tell me what you need. Tell me if I need to move or if you can't take us on top of you." She licked the whorls in his ear. "We'll do whatever you want."

Seti swept one hand over her dense, curly hair. "Relax and let us into you. When we're inside, let Dane's movement control you. If you can, contract yourself and squeeze against us, resistance increases friction and make the experience more enjoyable." He caught her chin. "If you feel uncomfortable, or frightened. If you wish to stop, tell us so."

Dane's kiss met her hairline. "I love that you trust us enough to allow us all this pleasure."

"I love that you want this of me." Exhaling, Mariotte willed herself to yield to Dane's swollen tip. He entered slowly, invading her tight channel, his cock a slick column of scorching want. She groaned at his slow progress. "You're too big for me."

"I'm perfect for you." Dane lodged deeper, pushed a little harder, then growled as Mariotte's muscles tugged him into place. "See?" He swept cupped hands over her quivering hips and thighs.

"Yes." Her anus felt so snug around him, her body incredibly full. The man she loved lay beneath her, impaling her body with his flesh, and the man she loved knelt over her, filling her from behind. Wherever she shifted or looked, her lovers surrounded and possessed her, trapped her in the moment. Excitement ran roughshod through her veins in precious sparks.

Dane initiated slow, shallow strokes, rubbing sensitive flesh to precious heat.

"Mmm. Dane." Mariotte allowed his thrust to push her hips

against Seti, impaling her deeper upon his cock which in turn nudged Dane deeper within her body.

They worked and moved together, a luxurious swim through open air, bodies ever touching, cradling one another.

"I love you." Dane nibbled against the top of her ear. "Both of you. Want to do this to you forever."

Mariotte groaned. "That's not long enough."

Seti cradled her face in both hands, devoured her in kisses.

Mariotte clenched, contracting against her lovers. Their exultant cries brought a grin to her face and she worked with them, welcoming them into her depths, squeezing and cradling them before letting go.

"You're ready to come." Seti's fingers found her clitoris and began petting, almost ruthless. She wanted to fight, throw off the touch drawing their lovemaking to its inevitable completion. At the same time, she couldn't bear it if he stopped.

"I love you. Seti...Dane...I love you so much...Both of you..."

The declaration rose to a plaintive cry as spasms wracked her and her orifices tightened until she feared she'd crush the men.

"Yes, dearling, love us. Love us inside you." Seti gasped in low contentment when her body milked him. "So good, being inside you. I love you so, Mariotte."

Dane continued riding her and Mariotte pushed back, demanding passion's tribute. His breath coarsened, and he gave up the struggle to rouse her to a second climax, spurts of hot seed filling her depths.

Dane waited until he and Mariotte relaxed enough for them to part naturally. Mariotte shifted, lying beside Seti, covering him with kisses.

"How are you feeling"

"Don't fret. In truth, I can't fathom greater ways to enjoy loving with a game leg, my Mariotte." Velvet laughter accompanied his soft kiss to the bridge of her nose.

"Perhaps we'll rest and try it again?" Mariotte's proposal rekindled firelight in Seti's eyes.

"We didn't try the first time, m'dear. Let's succeed again, instead."

"What am I going to do with you?"

"Everything we wish." Fun danced in his eyes for the first time in weeks.

Mariotte rested her head on Dane's chest and subtly backed her body onto his limbs spooning round her. She turned, bumping her cheek against a hard bicep, puckered her mouth against it, sighed. "Dane."

"M'riotte."

Incalculable bliss swelled in her heart and spilled over, seeping throughout her every sensitivity. "We can all be happy. Together."

"We've only to want it." Dane cradled her in one arm and rose enough to plant hard, sure kisses on her mouth. She ruffled his soft, short hair; her fingertips reached again to brush silky blunt edges. He released her, eased away enough for her to meet his bright-eyed smiling gaze. "And we do."

He knelt over her to kiss Cedric; the soft, affectionate loving endeared itself to Mariotte as much as more passionate embraces she'd witnessed. Her world fragmented into sunshine-drenched rainbows, failed to assuage dreamy contentment's command of her heart or reduce the indecorous width of her unstoppable grin.

"I feel things are how they should be."

"They are." Dane's happiness melted against her skin through his cupped hand patting her cheek, fresh harvested honey's sweetness. He glided from his knees to his heels to his feet. "Excuse me."

"Where're you going?" Mariotte's yawn blurred her inquiry; she covered her mouth with one hand.

"I told you I've news to share with you." Visual paradise, the liquid flow of muscles in his thighs, the chiseled hardness of his buttocks flexing with each step. Such a beautiful back... "Your news trumps mine, certainly." She adored his playful grin, bestowed over one shoulder. "But mine ought to please you just the same."

Mariotte caught the closest piece of clothing within arm's reach, pulled the muslin shirt over her head and smoothed its fullness down her hips. Burying her nose in the neckline, a soft coo of recognition formed upon her lips.

She raised her eyes to Cedric and breathed, "I smell you."

"M'dear, you wear it better than I." He traced her nipple until it puckered against the delicate white cotton. Pleasure quickened her pulse and cartwheeled in her belly; Cedric's admiration of Dane's nudity as Dane rummaged through the desk mirrored Mariotte's sentiments. Something precious existed in sharing these experiences and feelings. Comprehension leaped into Cedric's smile and he hugged Mariotte against him."Come, love, tell us what you've found."

"You knew I sent an associate, one Mr. Lambton, to New Orleans with Mr. Moulon when he returned." Dane collected a leather folio and untied its thick cord. "Is that amusing?"

Mariotte quelled her giggles. "Truly? No, but it's fun to see you still a barrister without your clothes on."

"Now, now, Miss!" He shook a warning finger and sat on the blanket to face them. "Don't give me cause to swat your delectable bottom when I've found such recent welcome there."

"I apologize. Did Mr. Lambton enjoy his trip?" Mariotte wrinkled her nose. "And my brother's company?"

"Mr. Lambton enjoyed the availability of extensive records aiding his research. Louisiana has fostered a remarkable bureaucracy. Every civil transaction and record imaginable is filed in multiple copies, both in the transaction's local parish and in the capital. Multiple languages as well. Lambton's quite impressed. More wine, Seti?"

Mariotte kissed Seti's naked chest. Her silent lover offered them both a drowsy-eyed smile. The extra quantities of bloodied wine he consumed to accelerate healing wearied him quickly.

"I'll rest in a little while, love. Once we've bathed."

Dane flipped open his folio and sorted through various sheets and envelopes. His warm, dark eyes waxed serious. "Mariotte, I trusted Lambton's discretion in discovering information concerning your personal heritage. I mean about..." He searched for a word until he found something less distasteful to him. "Color assignment."

"Ah." Mariotte bent her right leg and hugged her knee. "What did you find?"

"The account of your late mother's employment in the New Orleans Opera House is exaggerated. Evidence substantiates she was indeed employed by the opera. As a musician. A pianist, to be precise." Gentle dark eyes twinkled at the irony.

"How on earth would you know that?"

"Lambton confirmed it through the opera's payroll records. Her name appears on the programme as *La Demoiselle*, doubtless to protect her identity, but the payroll ledger indicates her actual name, Marie-Charlotte Keller." "Oh."

"Miss Keller's debut proved to be her sole professional appearance. Mr. Sabrier, your father, relieved her of her duties and removed her from the opera house in something of a scandal. The matter's recorded in a management log, but, according to Lambton's report, the entry's dry wording and a missing page ripped out of the log indicate more to the situation the manager chose to conceal."

"Impossible! Papa was the gentlest soul in the world, and he adored *Maman*."

"Sounds like it." Cedric cuddled Mariotte closer as he burst into laughter.

"Given solemnization of the couple's marriage fifteen days following the incident, I daresay Mr. Sabrier thought he had his reasons for acting. Marie-Charlotte's baptismal record indicates she was born in the German Coast, of a respectable farmer couple, German immigrants who worked as hired labor before they settled in St. Charles Parish. Not huge landowners in your father's sphere but prosperous enough."

Mariotte's chin bumped the top of her knee. "It's true. After her parents' passing, *Maman* leased their place as a dairy farm."

"Are you familiar with Jeanne-Arthemise Sabrier, Mariotte?"

Mariotte nodded. "Arthemise and Pierce Sabrier are my greatgrandparents who built Beaulieu Place. Their initials are carved into all the columns surrounding the house." She dredged through memories of her father's accounts. "Pierce built their house, but Arthemise owned the land."

Dane moistened his fingertips and separated several certified documents. "This bill of sale records Pierce's purchase of an Indian tribeswoman, almost certainly Arthemise." Mariotte lifted the paper to read it herself, frowning. "It doesn't identify her specific tribe." She read further.

"The woman's sole identity to race is listed as *sauvagesse*, instead of *negresse*, which would have been used for a black slave. Nor does the bill of sale list the slave's nation of origin, bills of sale for African slaves born outside the country often do."

Mariotte scowled. 'Sauvagesse is used to describe the Indian people, but a tribe should specify where the Indian came from." She fingered the copy, recalled the various names. "Canneci, Choctaw, Natchez, Attakapas, Houmas, Chickasaw."

Dane shook his head. "Lambton made thorough investigation before he got to the bottom of it. In the earlier days of the colony, with fewer women present, French colonials allying with Indian women wasn't uncommon. Some traditional relationships, courtship resulting in marriage, other more illicit alliances resultant from slavery. It wasn't good business to enslave Indians from the tribes local to the region. Familiarity with the land facilitated escape. So, Frenchmen in the Acadian regions shipped captive Indians south to New Orleans. Extreme distance complicated escape, even if they knew the way home."

Mariotte understood that. "Hostile Indians do the same to white and black captives. Rescued captives are almost always retrieved lengthy distances from where they were taken and they're usually not in the hands of their original abductors. The government attempts to negotiate release of captives on both sides through treaties. Eventually, the French government outlawed selling Indian slaves in its colonies at all."

Dane nodded. "Indians slipped through the cracks in codes separating white people from blacks. There are records of Indians marrying blacks and living their lives designated as black themselves. If they married whites, they and their children were designated white." Dane smoothed out the other documents. "Here's the woman's baptismal certificate, dated about sixteen months after the sale. Marriage certificate to your greatgrandfather, the ceremony officiated the same day."

"I'm surprised the priest would agree to do that." Cedric rubbed Mariotte's left hand, bent her fingers to a natural curve, and fondled the hollows separating her knuckles.

"I'm not." Mariotte shook her head. "It's not unheard of even now. Especially in regions where clergy aren't in regular residence. If people need baptisms, weddings, funerals, or any other spiritual rites, they have to either travel to a town with resident clergy or wait until priests designated for the duty make regular visits to them."

Dane tapped another page. "Here's the document notarized by local authority, indicating Pierce Sabrier's receipt of fifty pounds of tobacco and thirteen good buckskins, compensation by Jeanne-Arthemise Sabrier, *sauvagesse*, in acknowledgment of her freedom, eight months prior to the marriage. Where'd she get the fifty pounds tobacco?"

"She probably grew it on land allotted her for the purpose." Mariotte fingered the careful English translation copied in a copperplate hand.

"This is a notarized land grant, witnessed by an attorney and a neighboring planter. Jeanne-Arthemise applied for and obtained six hundred acres from the Crown. The conditions are standard to grants issued at the time. The recipient agreed to settle on the property, clear it. farm it, and practice the Catholic faith. Evidently the witnesses vouched for her Catholicism until the priest finalized it later." "Six hundred acres." Cedric collected the document and read. "Adjacent to Pierce's...three hundred seventy-five acres?" He did figures in his head. "Pierce Sabrier purchased a woman who manumitted herself to his profit, obtained a land grant near double his own acreage, and married him within two years of his original acquisition? What an investment!"

"It was an interesting time and place to be alive." Dane drew Mariotte's foot on his lap and kneaded the arch. "I suspect this ancestor of yours passed down her practicality with her land. And hints of her own beauty." His eyes enfolded her in compelling darkness, begging her to see what he saw. "I'd guess your father's family permitted her heritage to fade into history since, after her marriage anyway, society accepted her as a white woman."

Cedric fingered the shape of Mariotte's pronounced cheekbones; soft assent escaped his chest in a low *hmm*. His hand slipped over hers and Mariotte absorbed his presence and that of Dane. Both so near, both touching her. Loving her.

"If nothing else, I hoped the information might lay your concerns to rest. You know, for certain, now, who you are." Dane smiled. "A fascinating story and hardly a history to shame you."

"Thank you, Dane." Repletion slowed her words. "You're right. You often are. I..." Language eluded her when his fingers found a perfect grip, superlative pressure. Mariotte moaned, relaxed deeper into Cedric's embrace. "It does matter to me. But you matter to me so much more. You and Seti. I want to be excited by this, but all I'm too happy. For all of us. Ooooh, Dane!" She gasped when he raised her ankle and pressed one hot kiss on her instep.

"Lambton's trip's well spent, M'riotte."

CHAPTER 32

18 November, 1818, London, England

"Pray stop playing, m'dear. The bath's ready."

Mariotte closed the lid on the pianoforte. "The Gibson lacks the Dragonova's resonance."

She surveyed her flexing hands. Very smooth performance; who would imagine a little over a month would restore coordination so well? She crossed the room and helped collect Cedric's garments to hand to Tucker.

"We could bathe in the drawing room, m'dear, but it might discomfit any visitors."

"Probably." Mariotte waited until Tucker and the page left the room before presenting her back to Cedric so he might help her disrobe, taking care to drift away from him after he finished unfastening her dress and petticoat so he couldn't remove and drop them on the floor.

She draped her garments over a chair and returned to find her majestic lover sinking into the water. Curls of steam drifted along his wonderful arms.

"Zounds, this deeper tub is quite the thing." Cedric nodded in satisfaction. Mariotte stepped into the middle of the tub, knelt, and slowly sat. "More than enough room and we won't splash half the water over the sides."

"Mmmm, piping hot water."

"My poor colonial. London winter doesn't suit you." He fondled the tendrils escaping her hair and clustering on her neck. "After your presentation to the Regent we'll consider touring the continent. Italy's warmer this time of year and might be more comfortable for you." Cedric cupped water in one hand and spilled it over gooseflesh speckling the tops of Mariotte's breasts. "I've never seen New Orleans. Perhaps we'll stop with Henri a fortnight." His white teeth gleamed.

"That might be interesting, but with all this outlay you've backed on my court robes and the other reception fuss it seems a waste of blunt."

"We'll have the reception soon as London's out of mourning. Her Majesty picked an inconvenient time to pass on to her heavenly reward. She might have held out for opportunity to receive you."

"Seti! I'm sure the poor lady couldn't help it." Mariotte wrinkled her nose at his irreverence. "And anyway, I've not the rank for the queen to notice me."

"She would've met you. For Troyes and old time's sake."

"Zut!"

Cedric's chuckle, warm breath on her scalp, stirred her hair. "All the same, it might be best we quit Town a spell until the *on dits* regarding your most recent scrape fade a bit."

"London's gossip mill astounds me. Tell me with a straight face how my intervening with Julia Dearbourne's attempted elopement with Viscount Finchley left me in a scrape?" Mariotte smacked the water with a splayed hand.

"M'dear, had Finchley been the butcher's son you'd be praised to the skies for your spirited efforts on behalf of Miss Dearbourne's honor. Finchley may be a profligate but he's still the son of one of England's finest families. Wouldn't do for the *ton* to approve of upstart American tabbies chasing a viscount's getaway vehicle and forcing him to relinquish his *amour* at gunpoint and in broad daylight." Cedric's arms cocooned her body in more steamy warmth.

"I had to use the gun. I'm not proficient with throwing knives."

"Alas, no good deed goes unpunished."

"Perhaps if I'd sent them a note it might have been more decorous." Sense of the absurd bent Mariotte's mouth into a ridiculous smile.

"Perhaps. I doubt Finchley's people will ever forgive you for making such a cake of him. You've proved too true to your adopted household, my dear. In their eyes you're an interfering devil right enough. And a colonial devil at that."

"You needn't sound so pleased." Mariotte grasped Cedric's hard thigh under the water. "I'm not a blue devil at least."

"Aye, and absence of that flaw may redeem you yet. No one ever forgives a bore." Cedric's lips brushed the crown of her head.

Tucker rapped on the door. Waves slapped Mariotte's torso as

Cedric's submerged hands broke the water's surface to conceal her breasts.

"Your ice cream, sir." Tucker carried in the silver tray with the generous dish filled with a creamy white confection, set the dish and two spoons on a folding table beside the enormous copper tub. He examined the blazing fire's lively crackling in the fireplace and stacked several more logs upon it before he departed, shutting the bedroom door swiftly against drafts.

"I don't know how you can eat this in freezing weather." Mariotte shifted to accommodate her lover as Cedric reached for the dish.

"It makes me feel warmer after I eat it for some reason. Zounds, can you smell it?" He dug a spoonful up and nearly coated her nostrils in it.

"Not really." Mariotte lifted her head to sample the softening treat. She tasted it a second time and hummed admiration. "Almond. Like wedding cake."

"Delicious though a trifle sweet for my preferences." Still he relished it enough to continue eating.

"Sweet's not always bad. The asparagus ice cream tasted dreadful."

He stiffened under her body and put the ice cream down. "Right you are. Lud, what possessed Cook to attempt it?"

"Your preferences to avoid sweets?" Mariotte soaked the large sea sponge and began lathering it with fresh mild soap.

"I thought one expected some sweetness."

Mariotte sighed as Cedric's wet hands swallowed her shoulders and commenced delightful rhythmic squeezing to relax them. "I believe the Edmintons served a salmon ice cream at their theater ball." "Gad!" Cedric's wretching noises were all the more comical due to their lack of affectation. "Perhaps Cook requires no exorcism after all. Food fashion's inherently evil."

Mariotte rose to her knees and turned around to face him and soap his chest.

Cedric retrieved another sponge and began to wash her as well. Rinsed clean of aromatic foam, Cedric toweled Mariotte at a brisk pace and laughed at her hurried donning of a woolen chemise and a woolen nightdress.

"No one dresses more hastily than you do just after bath time." He grinned, unaffected by her long dry look, wrapped himself in a vivid, multicolored wool dressing gown, and followed her to her own room.

A fresh fire roared merrily against the fireplace screen. The bed's counterpane turned down invitingly, its foot stuffed with hot bricks for extra warmth.

Mariotte climbed into the bed and sighed contentment. "Oh, it's perfect, Cedric."

"Lovely." His agreeable tone drew her eyes to his face as he joined her in the bed. "As I said before—" He turned on his side and let her snuggle into comfort against him. "After the reception we can leave England for a nice tour. In several months the Finchley scandal will be scotched or at least less palatable than whatever the newest scandal is and people will send us invitations again." He fingered the pleated frill on the front of her nightdress. "And perhaps it may be time to consider the nature of our own connection. I've thought for some time now we ought to marry."

Warm stiffness coated Mariotte's belly. "How long have you thought that?"

Cedric draped her bent leg over his thigh. "Not for very long,

but I'm convinced the idea's sound. Marriage to me gives you my status and rank; it's harder for Finchley's people to hold his bumblebroth against Lady Edgard. It evaporates Henri Mulon's guardianship over you and your estate. I can think of few happenings in this world I like better than your attorneys explaining to our dear brother Henri how your plantation is to be run. Whether you elect to take on contamination or not, love, I dislike the idea of you pitied and scorned for being on the shelf, and I loathe the idea of suitors presenting themselves whether they hope to win your three hundred thousand pounds or they admire you as ardently as I do. I therefore offer myself as just compensation for burdening you with that wretched fortune."

"Cedric!" High pitched laughter accompanied her restless movement to sit up and look at him. "The things you say!" Her twittering ceased when he captured both her hands in his and held them until they warmed. "Seti." Mariotte's clear eyes searched his darker ones in the firelight and her lip trembled.

"I'm accustomed to our arrangements, quite comfortable with 'em and, if I don't mistake myself, you own similar feelings."

"It's true. They are." Her heart hammered madly on her ribcage. "You know it. But life seems so complete now. For us all. If we married, it might pain Dane." She loved the uncontrollable shivers scattering over her vertebrae whenever Cedric kissed her forehead.

"Nothing in our lives together with our family need change. If you elect not to wed at all, humans assume you single and available." Thoughtful eyes regarded her. "Do you think you might feel more comfortable wed to Dane? I understand if you do; he was human, once."

"It's not that. Truly." She shook her head and held his upper

arms. "You know it's not." Gnawing her lip, she glanced down at the bed covers rumpled over their laps. "I'm happy, Seti, happier than I believed I could expect when I left Louisiana." She twisted a fistful of sheets. "I've been twice engaged, both times to men I cared for, or at least respected. Each time I looked forward to a married future, it didn't happen." She rotated her shoulders, looked up at him, gave him a small smile. "Maybe it's not supposed to occur."

"M'dear Miss Sabrier!" He lifted her chin. "We need never suffer drawn out agonies of betrothal. I'll procure a special license and we'll wed without all the preliminaries."

"Seti..."

"Or I'll toss you over my horse and flee with you to Scotland."

"You are just the Devil!"

"Yes, Miss. I won't fail you at the altar." His mouth brushed hers. "This is supposed to happen." She returned his kiss, openlipped, sighing. "You care for me." Velvet warmth, his tongue over her lower lip. "You respect me." Blunt teeth nibbled; her nipples budded taut. "You trust me. And you really, really..." He covered her, urging her back onto the pillows. "Really. Want. Me." He grinned when she nodded. "I reciprocate your sensibilities. So it's different."

"I love you." Mariotte licked her lips. Playful vanity notwithstanding, she yearned for the vampire holding her. She yearned for Dane, too. Their friendship deepened and blossomed beneath the potent sunlight of their admitted love while his erotic attractions added spice and imagination to the bedroom. Troyes's passion for her was uncomplicated, rooted in lust and wanting. Mariotte enjoyed the excitement of their infrequent interludes but it didn't trouble her his heart remained free. The woman who captured Troyes's heart had her hands full.

"Yes, dearling." Soft, suckling kisses tugged at her mouth. "I love you, too, my sweet." Ethereal joy lit up his face.

"Life feels so complete now for us all."

"It would seem that we are all of us pleased and the natural thing is to look at the next step. Our leg-shackling'd legitimize our relations and take your interests out of the control of that ridiculous Henri to whom I promise all filial devotion he deserves. I'm fond of plans that secure my happiness and resolve more practical matters." His kiss upon her cheek, one feather light touch of his lips, before he waxed serious. "I do promise solemnly your happiness and comfort will always be as important to me as it always has been."

Mariotte closed her eyes on threatening tears. Opened them again. Slowly.

"Woman, you drive me mad when you blink that way." Warning curled within his growl.

"Can I think about it?" Her smile spread wide. Cedric kissed her and took her back down into bed, tugging the blankets over them.

"Of course you must. Any respectable lady ought to consider a proposal of marriage most carefully. But I'd rather you don't take as many months as I have to think about proposing. You're human still, you know. You should think faster. I fancy spring weddings, don't you, Persephone?"

THREE DEVILS IN BATH

FINALE

"Dear Miss, He is saved."—Private message from Thormond, Prince Lykeiodorus of the Saxony Provinces to Mariotte Sabrier, Dated 24 February, 1819. Carried by Special Courier. Copies left in Lord Cedric Edgard's unoccupied residences in Bath, London, and York. Courier to continue delivery effort through Continental Europe until the original message is placed in the addressee's hand.

MIA CHERISH

Mia Cherish earned her first paycheck as a writer when she was eleven, a book store gift certificate awarded to her entry in a local poetry contest. A lifelong resident of New Orleans and a member of a large multicultural family, she grew up in an atmosphere where past magic, history, sensuality, and tradition mingled with the lively informality of the present day Deep South. She likes depicting that balance in her stories.

Since the 2005 hurricane season, Mia's made a new home in a suburban parish just outside of New Orleans, sharing her residence with a dignified elderly Birman and a chatty brown domestic tabby. She loves reading, dancing, swimming, corsets, kid gloves, candlelight, pearls, white roses, and, of course, romance.

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