

# Eternal Covenant

By : **Dreamerwaking**

Cassie is a strong willed young woman whose curiosity lands her on Ahriman's hit list, an evil Fallen Angel determined to make himself immortal. Cassie's only chance of survival is with Alaric, a sexy vampire who unwittingly finds himself in the role of Cassie's protector. Drawn to her like no other, she is a forbidden temptation he can't ignore but claiming his Mate could see him banished to the Underworld forever as the secrets he's held for centuries begin to unfold.



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# Eternal Covenant : Chapter 1

## Prologue / Chapter 1:

The day had started no differently from any other he'd experienced over the past fifteen years. His tunic chafed against his chest from the constant trickle of sweat, and dust collected between his calloused toes distracting him from a small area on the ball of his right foot, blistered from persistent aggravation of small stones through the hole in his sandal. The hot dry wind succeeded only in causing him to squint to stop a tassel of blonde hair protruding below his helmet, from blowing into his eyes.

How he missed the cold climate of his homeland.

However the day may have started, he knew there was a promise of something special to come.

For two hours he stood at his post. A crowd of people had gathered around him, lining the street and eagerly waiting. This was the Jewish holiday of Passover and their proclaimed Messiah, Jesus, was arriving for the celebration.

The crowd began jostling for a better position as cheers and clapping erupted behind the market place just around the bend in the road. Intermingled with the excited overture were the many jeers and insults from those devout to their own various religions. Jesus had many followers but the enemies he made were very powerful and forthright in their abhorrence of him and what he stood for.

Although he was on duty, and therefore not permitted to show any emotion, he was just as excited as the rest of the crowd. Unlike the other onlookers, he had no trouble seeing the entourage approaching. He stood almost a whole foot taller than the majority of the crowd. He was tall, even for the people in the village where he was born, standing an impressive stature of six feet, five inches tall.

His mind drifted back to the region of the Rhine where he grew up. His village had fought against the Romans for many years but eventually they signed a treaty with the Roman General, Germanicus, for peace.

As was the Roman way, young men of the village were offered an occupation in the Roman Army. In return for twenty years service they would each be given a plot of land of their own. If they survived that long. Not many did.

Being a Roman soldier demanded total commitment and fealty, and marriage was forbidden. At the age of fifteen he didn't have any worldly experience or understanding to know how difficult it would be to uphold that pledge.

Many of the people in his village feared him. They believed he had a demon inside him as he often foresaw the imminent death of others. He would sit with the dying through their last hours until their time of passing. Although his presence was obviously comforting for those dying, for the living it was unnatural and therefore he was shunned by his superstitious kin.

For this reason, and the fact that his hunting and combat skills were second to none, his father had encouraged him to enlist into the Roman Army. Although he missed his home and family and thought about them often, he knew he would never return.

He was lost in his memory. For a moment it was so real, he could almost smell the pine scented breeze rising off the Elbe River.

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The growing noise of the crowd filtered into his consciousness, bringing him back to reality and leaving him suddenly feeling melancholy.

A tugging at his elbow diverted his attention from the crowd. Before he even turned his head, he could smell her hair, the sweet hint of persimmons intoxicating his senses.

All thoughts of self pity were instantly replaced with joyous warmth in his heart, a tingle of excitement rippled throughout his body. As determined as he was to remain stoic, the corners of his mouth turned up with a smile to greet her.

He looked down into the angelic face of the Jewish water girl at his side smiling longingly back at him with her soulful brown eyes, silently proclaiming all the words they were not permitted to speak aloud.

She discretely took a step closer toward him.

"Please sir, would you care for some water. You must be parched out in this hot sun." Her soft and soothing voice was music to his ears.

The afternoon sun seemed to linger over her, highlighting the soft milky white skin of her face against the glossy sheen of her raven black hair. He had to restrain himself from stroking the lock which fell below the level of her veil which covered most of her head and shoulders. Just being this close to her gave him goose bumps.

"Thank you. You, you are most kind," was the best he could manage in reply, stammering over his words, frustrated at his inability to convey his true thoughts and feelings he graciously accepted the water skin.

Their hands touched for the longest moment. He wanted desperately to make it last longer but this was not the time or the place. Only five more years of service to go but he was doubtful he could keep his feelings hidden from the world for much longer. Becoming a deserter had crossed his mind and recently he had begun making plans to do just that.

Jessica had been his wife for nearly two years. A year ago their daughter was born. Between them, they were his reason for living and also his motivation for deserting the Roman Army. They had wed with the blessing of her family but things had become more complicated recently. Her brother, Jesus, had made enemies of the Jewish Religious Officials and also the Roman leaders because of his controversial views and his popularity with the people.

Her family kept their marriage a secret. He continued to live in the soldier's barracks and she lived with their daughter in a small house at the edge of town. He dared not think about the consequences if they were discovered.

Following her brother's visit here to Jerusalem for Passover, he was going to take his wife and daughter as far away from Rome's influence as possible and start a new life for his family.

"Jesus has asked that you attend the Passover meal." She whispered.

She looked around nervously at the people closest to them, all of whom were jostling with one another for a better view of the road. She hoped that the excitement of the crowd would drown out their conversation.

Although he was accustomed to eating with Jessica's family, this was the first time he had been asked to attend in the company of others. Jesus' disciples would be attending, along with who knows who else. His

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instinct was to decline, fearing their secret would be exposed. But, Jesus himself had asked him to attend.

He knew who Jesus really was and Jesus knew his own well kept secret. They shared knowledge of something much greater in importance than his clandestine marriage.

As much as he wanted to, he couldn't refuse Jesus' request.

With a pursed smile and an almost imperceptible nod, he accepted the invitation.

A hollow sick feeling began to settle in the pit of his stomach which left him in a cold sweat, despite the afternoon heat.

His time had run out, he could feel it in his bones.

Passover supper was a joyful celebration. Jesus and his disciples attended along with all Jessica's family. Good food, good company and good humour were in abundance. During supper, Jesus blessed the bread as his body and broke it for everyone to eat. He then blessed the wine.

Jesus looked directly at his brother-in-law when he spoke: "This is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice for many".

There was a subtle ripple in the air in the room which only he and Jesus were aware of. The words Jesus spoke during his blessing had more power in them than a simple sermon to his followers.

With the knowledge that there was one amongst them who was to betray him, Jesus informed his followers that his time with them was ending. The festive mood of the meal was broken, as were the hearts of all those in attendance. One by one he spoke to each person to say good-bye.

Lastly, Jesus approached his brother-in-law and with sadness in his eyes, embraced him.

"I must speak with you Sammael."

Sammael's breath hitched involuntary. He had never heard his true name spoken out loud. It was the name he only heard whispered by the spirits in the forest when he was a child, but never by another man. Instantly he knew Jesus was about to call him into service whether he liked it or not, and a heavy weight settled over his heart.

"Sammael. As an Angel of Death, it falls to you to help me fulfil my destiny here on earth. In so doing you will fulfil your own". He calmly announced.

"Take this cup and protect it. You will know what to do with it when the time comes. I'm sorry this responsibility has been placed on you but there is no other way".

Sammael sighed in resignation, his body tensed as he accepted the chalice from Jesus.

"Yes, well, we both chose our destinies before we came to earth for this life." Sammael replied solemnly. He was beginning to feel the weight of a commitment he made an eternity ago. A commitment he couldn't quite remember the details of.

Jesus placed his hand on Sammael's shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze to make sure he had his full attention.

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"We did indeed. You must know, you won't be forgotten for your own sacrifice and your future actions will be forgiven. It's all part of the greater plan. In time you will come to understand and embrace this."

Sammael lightly fingered the uneven texture of the rim and outside of the wooden cup created by years of use. In contrast, the inside was well polished and smooth and a couple of shades darker than the outside, stained from years of wine permeating the porous wood. Although his mind was distracted, he was aware of a vague tingling sensation in his fingers emanating from the cup.

"What is it I must do?"

Jesus leaned in closer, his voice low. "You must complete the sacrifice."

"What does that mean. Am I to be the one to kill you?"

"I cannot tell you any more. I'm sorry." Sammael noted the dark hollows beneath Jesus' eyes. "My duty here is nearly ended but yours is just beginning. This is not the last time our intervention will be needed. Along with others, you and I have made a promise to protect this world, but for now it's time for *us* to fulfil *our* purpose".

Although Jesus spoke with honour and pride regarding his eminent commitment, there was an air of trepidation in his voice. He was a very powerful upper level angel, from the order of Dominions, but in his human form he must still experience physical death in order to fulfil his purpose.

Contrary to belief, Jesus was not a religious man. Religion was a man made concept to enable people to interpret their place in the world according to their limited knowledge. No, he had spent his life teaching the world a new way to experience life, preparing them for a new phase of their evolution, or at least he tried to.

Likewise, Sammael followed no religion. There was no religion where they originated from. There was no God that existed as an individual being but instead a hierarchy of spiritual beings at varying levels of evolution fulfilling many roles, in multiple dimensions on a universal scale, each working together as one to create what was known by humans, as God. At the current point in time, this was a concept that the human race was incapable of comprehending, although they would come to understand this at a much later time.

However, human souls *had* evolved to a point where they were ready to open up to the higher dimensions but without the assistance of an Angel of Death at their time of passing to channel their souls, they were unable to attain this ascension on their own.

Jesus' purpose was to create a doorway to the higher dimensions of light for people to follow without assistance.

Part of the process to achieve this required his physical death as a human.

Sammael wrestled with his turbulent emotions to stay composed.

"I have accepted that in our endeavour to live this human life, we are susceptible to all human flaws and weaknesses. But, we have also retained our own capacity to love with great intensity, and I love your sister and my daughter more than my own life. Promise me I can protect them, regardless of what we must do." He desperately wanted a guarantee.

"There are some things that even I am not permitted knowledge of at this time." It was a hollow reassurance, but it was the best he could offer.

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However much Sammael wanted to turn his back on Jesus and flee with his family to escape his fate, he knew that this was one duty he could not desert from.

Jesus embraced Sammael, sharing a moment of inevitability that no amount of denial could erase.

In silence, Sammael walked his wife home. Their mood was sombre. He carried their daughter in his arms, sound asleep, blissfully unaware of the upheaval to her life that was about to unfold.

His mind raced through one scenario after another, trying to plan for unknown consequences to the as yet unknown actions he was bound to carry out. He would fulfil his duty and immediately after, he would finalise his plans to leave this town and escape with his family.

If he was still alive.

As they reached the house, Jessica took his hand and gently kissed it. Their daughter began to get restless cradled in his other arm. They were both in awe of the love and happiness that this small child brought them. It seemed inconceivable that he wouldn't always have his precious family.

He was an Angel of Death and death was coming, he could feel it. The chill in the pit of his stomach had intensified into a block of ice numbing his senses. Jesus would die tomorrow, that he knew for certain. But, there was something more. Something just out of reach of his grasp, teasing the periphery of his fragmented memories, taunting him.

It was a feeling, nothing more.

Yet, he was also a warrior who relied on those *feelings* to survive. He couldn't allow himself to be so distracted by the lion that he failed to see the cobra hiding in the grass.

He silently entered the house and placed his daughter into bed, barely opening an eye before turning over and resuming her sleep.

"In a few days we will leave here. We will need to travel quickly so only pack what is absolutely necessary." He stated in a solemn tone, whispering out of habit. He was looking forward to the day when he could live a normal life, without fear of retribution.

He was determined to create that life for his family.

The moonlight through the window outlined the silhouette of Jessica's figure, highlighting her full lips, beckoning him closer for a kiss. He willingly obliged.

He became aware of something pressing into his side. The chalice Jesus had given him.

He detached it from his belt and placed it on the table. He dared not take it with him back to the barracks, it would be much safer here with Jessica. He wasn't sure why the chalice was so important, no doubt its purpose would be revealed in good time. He had more important things to focus on at the moment.

He pulled her in closer once more for another, more passionate kiss, leaving her in no doubt of his love and desire for her. All the stress of the evening melted away as the heat of their bodies pressed firmly against one another, moulding into a perfect union.

It was past midnight when Sammael snuck back into the barracks.



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Early that morning he was roughly dragged from his bed. Two fellow soldiers and his commanding officer stood before him, his commander's expression could only be described as one of disappointment. Not anger, which he had earlier envisioned in the multitude of potential scenarios he'd considered during the night. It was time to fulfil his promise and even though he knew this was coming, he still felt unprepared.

They shackled his hands and feet and lead him from the barracks. The older of the two soldiers, Logius, an ill tempered man who seemed to take delight in inflicting pain on others, was holding Sammael's own spear and prodding him in the back to move faster.

The sun had not yet risen. The faintest red on the horizon splintered the night sky, inspiring the first of the birds to herald in the new day in a chorus of song.

He was marched through the streets to the Palace, the two soldiers flanking him on either side. Attendance at the Palace was never healthy for a soldier, no matter what their rank. Since he had been hauled so abruptly from his sleeping quarters, he had not been given an opportunity to put on his sandals. The cold marble floors under his bare feet gave him a feeling of being grounded which helped him to focus on resigning himself to the inevitable, whatever that was.

His stomach clenched.

Torches lit the hallways leading through the Palace. Pontius Pilate was the residing authority and although he had a reputation of being tough, he was still a reasonable man.

It was time to meet the cobra in the grass.

Sammael knew that Judas was to betray Jesus and he could only assume that he also disclosed his knowledge that Jesus' sister was married to a Roman soldier. He prayed with every fibre of his being to the higher powers, that Jessica and their daughter were being spared the repercussions and he alone was to be punished.

As the doors to the chamber opened, his first sight was of Pontius Pilate pacing across the room. One hand on his hip, the palm of the other pressed against his forehead. As he stopped and turned to face him, his cape flayed out behind him in a magnanimous and pompous display, both hands coming to rest on his hips.

His eyes showed his inner torment of choices he had been deliberating. The lines on his forehead were heavily creviced and his lips pursed so tightly together, draining them of colour.

"I'm assuming you know why you're here." Pilate spoke at last. His voice was light and carefree which was in stark contradiction to his tightly wound body.

Sammael kept his eyes directed down toward the floor, unwilling to aggravate the situation any more than necessary.

"It seems my city has been overrun by self proclaimed Gods and treasonous soldiers". The tone of his voice became sterner, malevolence dripping from the word "*treasonous*".

Pilate began slowly pacing again. The soft tapping of his sandals echoed in the otherwise silent room.

"I have recently learned that you have taken a wife. This, on its own, is worth fifty lashes for not obtaining prior approval".

Sammael could tell that this speech wasn't going to end in his favour.

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"In any case, this marriage would never have been approved!" The volume of his voice was beginning to rise as his pacing increased.

"I have been placed in a very awkward position you realise. I understand this woman you married is the sister of the one the Jews call their Messiah, Jesus. Is that correct?"

Sammael straightened himself a little more and looked Pilate directly in his eyes. "Yes, that is true."

Pilate ceased his pacing. After a moment of thought, he approached Sammael and stood at arms length from him. Any closer and Pilate would have gotten a stiff neck looking up at him. His expression relaxed a little, showing maybe even a hint of sadness. "How unfortunate for you."

"Jesus has been disrupting the peace and stirring up all manner of trouble for me for far too long. I cannot allow this to continue. Nor can I allow my soldiers to defy the law. I'm afraid an example must be made as deterrence to others."

With a clap of his hands and a curt nod to the guards, the doors behind Sammael swung open.

The guards dragged in the limp and bloodied form of a dark haired woman and dumped her at his feet. Sammael's heart began racing before it sunk into the pit of his stomach like stone. Jessica. His beautiful wife was barely recognisable. He collapsed to the floor beside her, cradling her head in his shackled hands and stroked her face gently with all the love he felt. His arms ached to hold her but his bonds wouldn't allow it.

Screams tore through his mind but his throat wouldn't release them, strangled closed by his anguish.

"This is not your wife." Pilate spat out. His voice laced with venom.

"Since you are not legally married according to Roman law, *she* is unmarried and as such has been judged an adulteress. Her punishment was stoning." Pilate indignantly explained.

She was still alive, but only barely. Her consciousness wavered as she looked up into his eyes one last time, pleading silently to be released from her broken body. Her eyes became vacant and her body went limp as she released her last breath. He felt her essence loosening from its physical bonds, drawn to him. He opened himself to her to pass through him, sending her soul into the spiritual realms. The gentle caress of her essence connected to his, sharing one last intimate moment together.

His final gift of love.

So many times before he had guided souls across the threshold of death and felt a sense of peace as they passed. Never before had he felt this âdespair. He wanted to die with her. A part of him *did* die, the part of him that was human.

Sammael was bigger and stronger than anyone in Pilate's chamber. He could have killed every one of them without breaking a sweat, but he was unable to retaliate. All he could do was hold her as he wept over her lifeless body.

Moments or minutes passed, he couldn't tell. He finally found his voice, grating past his clenched teeth.

"Why? *Why?* She didn't deserve this. I am the one who should be punished. I was the one who broke the law." His grief expanding to fill every crevice in his being, body and soul. His throat hurt with the effort to speak through his tears.

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"Well, you're right about one thing. You *have* broken the law and you *will* be punished." Pilate's demeanour changed, his face became stony, full of indignation.

"Jesus has also been condemned to death. He will be crucified this day. Since you are his brother-in-law, you shall have the honour of nailing him to the crucifix. You will watch over him until he dies and afterwards, you will also be put to death."

"You will serve as the example to all others who think to defy Roman Law."

Pilate turned on his heels and marched past Sammael, who was still clutching Jessica's empty body.

"Oh, and dispose of *that* before it starts to smell". Pilate said to the guards. He spoke with disgust but his eyes betrayed the regret lying behind them. This was not the outcome he would have chosen under normal circumstances. He had been backed into a corner. In order to maintain the loyalty of his army and keep the peace with influential religious leaders, drastic measures were required.

A couple of hours later, Sammael found himself at Golgotha. He, himself had been escorted to the mount by soldiers, taunting him with comments of how his wife suffered and how she screamed for mercy while she was being stoned.

His grief became intermingled with white hot anger simmering in the depths of his soul. The faces of these soldiers burned into Sammael's memory. Logius, whom he had once called his friend, being one of them.

Time had no meaning, a minute felt like an hour and an hour felt like a minute. People moved about him but their presence was insignificant to him. He was deaf to the growing noise of the gathering crowd.

He was totally consumed by the loss of his wife.

A procession of people slowly made their way to the top of the hill. Among those was Jesus carrying the heavy weight of the cross over his shoulders.

Breathless and exhausted, Jesus collapsed on the ground next to him. Only enough strength left to take Sammael's hand and squeeze it feebly. He mouthed the words "I'm so sorry," as a solitary tear escaped his eye, rolling over his bruised and bloodied cheek.

Logius indignantly pushed Sammael in the back with his foot. "Get to work, traitor." His actions obviously amusing the other soldiers standing nearby, who erupted into riotous, belly aching laughter.

Sammael exchanged mournful looks with Jesus. "Do what you must." Jesus said, breathing heavily for a moment before continuing. "You must fulfil your destiny or I can't fulfil mine. Your actions will be forgiven."

That was the second time Jesus had said that, but with Sammael's mind so foggy, he couldn't tell whether Jesus was telling him he would be forgiven for murdering the arsehole soldiers behind him or for carrying out his duty nailing him to the cross. It didn't matter. He was beyond the capacity of any rational thought.

He picked up the mallet and one of the large nails lying on the ground beside him. Jesus voluntarily laid his hands on the wooden beam. Sammael drove a nail into his left hand, and then the right. Vaguely, Jesus' cries of pain registered somewhere in his consciousness but not enough to break through the hazy wilderness of his mind.

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He didn't remember nailing his feet, or his crucifix being raised and planted into the ground, but there he was before him, hanging several feet away, overlooking the crowd which was now large enough to cover the mount.

The sky began to darken as an eerie atmosphere settled over Golgotha. For hours the darkness continued. The air itself felt electric to Sammael. He could feel the veil to the higher dimensions becoming thinner, pulling against the strain of energy being created between the two worlds.

The noise of the crowd had become more subdued as the hours passed. All except the soldiers behind him who obviously felt it was their duty to continue to taunt him.

"When *he's* dead," pointing at Jesus, "I'm going to take great pleasure in killing you with this." Logius yelled, still holding Sammael's own spear in his hands, brandishing it front of him. "How'd you feel about that, Traitor" spitting in Sammael's face. He was obviously getting his jollies from the attention and encouragement from the other soldiers.

"I'll kill you last. I'll make it slow and painful. That's what I think". He replied beneath his breath.

"What's that, you're going to kill *me*! From your grave? I don't think so." soliciting a new round of laughter from the soldiers.

These same spineless soldiers who now goaded him, until only yesterday had feared him for his size, strength and efficiency in battle. Believing they had the upper hand seemed to rally a burst of cowardice courage from them.

In his mind, Sammael heard Jesus' voice. "*It's time! Use the spear!*"

While the soldiers were still distracted by their own small minded amusement, Sammael snatched his spear back from Logius' grasp. He moved so quickly that Logius didn't notice it missing from his hand until it was too late. Before he could react, Sammael plunged the spear deep into Jesus' side, eliciting a gush of fresh blood pouring from the wound.

A crack of electricity exploded into the spear from Jesus' body simultaneously with a ripple in the atmosphere which only he and Jesus could feel.

"Protect them always." Jesus whispered, his eyes resting on the spear.

Jesus' mother, Mary, pushed past Sammael screaming at the sight of his plight. So much blood flowed from his wound, pooling on the ground beneath his feet.

Mary took the veil from her head and held it against his legs, unable to reach the wound, desperately trying to collect all his blood as it was spilled, hoping that by sheer will, she could somehow stem the bleeding and prolong his life. Not willing to let her son leave this world without a fight, she clung to him.

The time had come. This was his destiny. What *was* his destiny? What was next? He felt so confused. His mind couldn't make sense of anything. Jessica was dead. He wanted to be near her, smell her scent on her clothes, touch her face and see her smile.

He was shaken back to reality from the clouded recesses of his mind by a shudder which tore through the atmosphere so violently that it shook the very foundations of the earth. Jesus was dead.

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Numb, both in body and soul, he stood for a moment watching the stunned onlookers searching for their own sense of reality in the events unfolding. The sky was still darkened and the ground rumbled and shook beneath them. Storm clouds began rolling in, threatening further ferocious retribution.

The repercussion of his sacrifice was being felt throughout all the dimensions, splintering the veil between them a little more.

Mary clutched her son's feet, wailing at God for taking him from her. The blood soaked cloth slipped from her fingers and was caught by the wind, landing at Sammael's feet. More from instinct than thought, he picked it up. All that blood on the woman's veil reminded him of Jessica's own blood soaked clothes. He wanted to be near her. Subconsciously he placed the cloth in his belt.

There was so much commotion on the mount, it was easy to lose track of people in the semi darkness. The soldiers were too busy trying to regain some semblance of crowd control to notice that Sammael had disappeared.

He wandered aimlessly for hours until he finally found himself back at his family's home clutching his wife's shawl, breathing in the sweet perfume of her scent, lost in memory of all the wonderful moments they'd shared together. Although he didn't remember leaving the mount or entering the house.

Once again time stood still as his despair blanketed his awareness. He wasn't sure if the darkness still enveloped the land or if it had become night. He didn't even know if one day or maybe even two had passed since his wife was *murdered*. His thoughts were lost in the swirling vortex of his mind, staring into the abyss of madness.

The memory of Jessica's beaten and broken body was a raw wound too deep to heal, its talons grasping and venomous, destroying any and all warmth in his soul.

Early Sunday morning, Sammael woke at the table, still sitting in the same spot he had for the past two days.

The first rays of sunlight began to filter through the window reflecting off something shiny on the mantel above the fireplace, catching his attention.

Sammael looked around him. It was the first time he had taken in his surroundings since he arrived at his family's home.

It was only now that he noticed the evidence of a struggle in the house. A couple of chairs had been knocked over, a vase lay shattered on the floor and the bolt on the back of the door was broken. The door lay partly open, creaking on his hinges as the outside breeze pushed against it. Sammael's spear stood upright against the wall by the door, although he didn't recall leaving Golgotha with it. He walked through the house to inspect all the evidence of his wife's capture. In the bedroom, both Jessica and his daughter's beds were in disarray.

*His daughter!*

He'd been so consumed with grief at the loss of his wife, he hadn't stopped to consider what had happened to his daughter. In his mind, he played back as many of the taunts from the soldiers that he had could remember. Not one of them had included his daughter.

He could only surmise at this point, that his daughter was safe, somewhere. If his daughter was alive, he had a reason to live.

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He straightened the chairs back into their rightful place at the table, committing to memory the familiarity of their texture. This was another home that after today he would no longer be able to return to. He was a condemned outlaw.

His only priority now was to find his daughter and leave Jerusalem as soon as possible.

As the sun rose a little higher, it not only illuminated everything around him, but it also began breaking down the cobwebs in his mind. Slowly his clarity of thinking was returning. He smelled the persimmons in the bowl on the bench which were beginning to over ripen, and he heard the first stirrings of the neighbours going about their daily chores.

As he continued to look about the room, he realised his hands were covered in dried blood. Whose blood, he wasn't sure. It could have been Jesus' blood or Jessica's. Maybe both.

Although reluctant to shed this last physical contact he had with his wife, he knew he had to clean himself up for his daughter's sake. She needed him now more than ever before.

He retrieved the washing basin which his wife kept on a shelf under the window. The jug on the bench below was still half full. He carried them to the table and poured the water, retrieving every last drop.

When his hands were clean, he looked himself over more thoroughly. It was then that he noticed the cloth, Mary's veil filled with Jesus' dried blood attached to his belt. The hand woven cloth had soaked up so much blood it was almost brittle. He placed the cloth on the table beside the basin, perplexed that his state of mind had been so greatly affected that he retained so little memory of the past couple of days.

The reflected glint of metal pierced the corner of his eye, once again distracting him from his thoughts.

On the Mantel were Jessica's few meagre prized possessions. A wood carving given to her by her brother and a couple of other knick knacks she had collected over the years. His eyes skimmed the shelf for the culprit which had caught his eye.

It was a small metal pendant he had given her for their wedding.

As he picked it up, a very distinct pull of energy emanated from the cup that had been placed next to it. It was the cup Jesus had given him at their last supper together. This was the chalice he had been asked to protect... and use.

He placed the pendant around his neck and picked up the cup.

The tingling in his fingers radiated up his arm, the energy warming him as it flowed through his body. This energy was so familiar to him, it felt like home. The home that until now seemed so inaccessible. His angelic home.

Intuitively, he collected the cloth on the table and placed it in the bowl of water. Swirls of deep red began to infuse in the water as the blood dissolved and the water became as dark as the cloth itself. Jesus' words: *"This is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice for many"* and *"You must fulfil your destiny or I can't fulfil mine. Your actions will be forgiven."* played over in his mind.

Instinctively he placed the cup in the water. A deeply seeded compulsion overtook his rationality compelling him to drink the cups contents in its entirety, and then another and another until he had consumed almost the

## Eternal Covenant

whole basin.

The warming energy which had flowed through him only minutes earlier quickly faded. In its place, a hollow, sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach as a chill filtered through every cell of his body, integrating darkness in the depths of his soul which he'd never experienced before.

He was changing, into what, he didn't know.

He seated himself back at the table, trying to fathom the depth of his new disposition. He placed his head in his hands as waves of nausea passed over him.

Was he dying? He could feel his soul loosening from his body, altering.

The sunlight began to irritate his eyes and the sun's warmth took on a burning tinge against his skin. It no longer held any comfort for him.

Soon afterwards he could hear the neighbours in the street. *"Jesus' body is gone. He has risen from the dead."*

Morning passed through to afternoon while he remained in the shadows seated at the table. His body ached from head to toe.

A shadow blocked the sliver of light from the doorway. Sammael lifted his head in time to see three soldiers enter the house, although he smelt them long before he saw them. Logius, and two other soldiers who had taunted him at Golgotha had come to complete their duty.

To the soldiers, Sammael's appearance was sickly and weak. His skin was pale, his cheeks were hollow and drawn. His eyes had lost their clarity, appearing more grey than blue with dark circles beneath them. He certainly didn't look like the hulking menace they knew his reputation to be.

Sammael's heart beat faster. Not from the anticipation of his imminent death, but from an unbearable hunger that was awakening inside him. He could hear the blood pumping in their veins. Their breath exhaled the aroma of air brushed with blood.

It was intoxicating.

He wanted to taste.

No. He needed to taste their blood.

He desperately wanted to fill himself with every life giving drop their bodies could offer. Like an addictive drug, it called to him.

Slowly he raised himself from his seat, his eyes never leaving the faces of the soldiers before him. They appeared mesmerised by his stare, like small animals stunned by an unexpected predator.

Sammael grinned, not from happiness but an automatic response to the exhilarating craving enveloping his senses. As his hunger intensified, he could feel his incisor teeth growing longer.

Fear became evident on the soldiers faces as realisation set in that there was something unnatural about him, something dark and inhuman.

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Sammael was not fully transformed but he was no longer human either. He was still mortally fragile.

The soldier's instinct for battle kicked in. Logius, being closest to the door reached for Sammael's spear resting by the frame, choosing this weapon over his own shorter sword, wanting to keep as much distance between himself and Sammael as possible.

Sammael's attention was diverted to the spear. It also seemed to exude an energy, similar to that of the cup.

Sammael stood still, arms by his sides, palms tilted out, not giving any resistance as Logius charged at him with the spear, thrusting it deep into his chest.

He crumpled to the floor, the spear still protruding from his body as his mortal life left him.

Logius found it humorous that he'd killed Sammael with his own spear, just as he'd promised at Golgotha. "Kill me will you. You're *pathetic!*" His shaky voice trailed off to a uneasy manic giggle.

The sight of Sammael's emerging fangs and his predatory stare, lingered in Logius' mind. He was unsure how to interpret what he'd seen and justify it in comparison to what he understood to be *normal*. It left him with a sense of foreboding.

The soldiers checked for a pulse and believing him dead, left. They couldn't get out of there fast enough.

The sun was just reaching the horizon, slowly sinking into history for yet another day.

On the floor by the table, Sammael's body began to twitch as he inhaled a gulp of air, filling his lungs with the first breath of his new life. His eyes opened with newborn sight, everything was crisp and clear. All his senses were heightened. He could taste every scent that drifted on the breeze, spices, earth. Even water had a scent. As he picked up the scent of humans, his throat began to ache with thirst. He heard people talking a hundred metres away and could hear a beetle scuttling along the floor in the next room. His vision had magnified to telescopic proportions, colours intensified and the dark was no longer a hindrance. He could see just as well at night as he could during the daytime. To add to that, he felt strong, really strong. His already muscular body was now much paler than he had been previously and appeared as flawless as chiselled marble, his bright blue/green eyes now had luminescent flecks within them.

He exuded a mesmerising dangerous beauty.

As he sat up, the spear fell from his chest, leaving a gaping gash which immediately began healing. In less than a minute, there was no trace of any injury to his body.

In that moment, all those memories which had been blocked from him came flooding back with crystal clear clarity. Once again he remembered his angelic life and felt the full gravity of the covenant he had made before being born into this world as human.

Everything in the universe, in every dimension needs to be balanced. To keep that balance every action has a reaction. For anything to exist, its equal in the opposite also has to exist, e.g. black/white, night/day, good and bad.

This was his destiny. In order for Jesus to create the path of light for human souls to ascend to the higher dimensions, the opposite also had to exist. HIM! His soul was now destined to spend eternity trapped in his physical form, in darkness, here on earth. He was the new balance in the universe.



## Eternal Covenant

He was the first Vampire.

With his newly discovered insatiable hunger for blood, his first necessity was to quench his thirst. This, he achieved by satisfying his need for retribution for his wife's death in the same gratifying act. As promised, he saved Logius for last, enjoying the irony of killing him from *beyond* the grave!

His daughter was safe as he suspected, being cared for by Jessica's brother Peter. Peter and his wife had no children and found joy in raising his daughter as their own.

Sammael made no effort to contact her throughout her life but he watched over her and her descendants, over the many centuries that followed.

A true darkness settled over his soul and dominated him for centuries.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2

"Order up, table two," bellowed the gruff voice of the owner and chef of Meg's Caf  , in his thick Ukrainian accent.

"I said, Order up. Are you deaf or mentally retarded!" He yelled at the waitress who was scurrying between tables, balancing plates of half eaten food and cups of barely touched cold coffee.

Orlof may have been the owner of Meg's but he was certainly no chef. So long as customers paid their bill, he didn't care that the food he served was inedible. The caf   survived on the night trade, mostly night clubbers who, in their more than slightly inebriated state, didn't notice how bad the food was. Most never returned a second time to tempt their luck at a decent meal, but there were always more than enough first timers to keep the caf   alive.

"This isn't what the customer ordered. He ordered the focaccia, not a roll," Cassie stated curtly, poking repeatedly at the word *focaccia* clearly written on the docket.

Orlof's eyes began to bulge and the colour in his face darkened as his blood pressure rose. If there was one thing he hated more than incompetent waitresses, it was losing money because of wrong orders. Ordinarily, he would find an excuse to blame mistakes on a waitress and deduct the cost of the meal from her wage. In this case however, it was clearly his error and *he* had to wear the cost.

He stormed back into the kitchen carrying the roll, muttering curses under his breath as he went, his short and heavyset frame barely squeezing through the doorway. It was obvious that he enjoyed the food he served, even if no one else did.

The bell on the door rang, announcing the arrival of more unsuspecting victims of Orlof's cooking.

As the door was closing, Cassie noticed a homeless woman nervously hovering around the front of the caf  . She'd seen her there before and couldn't help wondering what had happened in her life to bring her to such desperate circumstances.

Her eyes betrayed her shame and desperation. This was not a lifestyle she enjoyed but obviously one she felt unable to change.

Cassie felt a knot in her stomach. She was a sucker for a sad face, whether it was another human or a stray puppy.

It was hard to guess her age. Maybe she was in her early forties, maybe younger. Beneath her heavy, well worn and tattered brown woollen coat, at least two sizes too large for her, she was wearing several layers of equally tattered and dirty clothing. Her hair was most likely blonde but it was too hard to know for sure, possibly shoulder length by the wisps of hair falling from under a multi coloured crocheted beanie, matting together to form dread locked clumps below her ears. Her face had soft skin, grubby but still smooth. Cassie assumed she hadn't spent a lot of time in the sun over the years. Her cheeks were slightly hollow and her eyes had a sunken-in appearance with dark rings beneath them which only seemed to highlight her fine boned facial structure all the more. Under better circumstances, she may have been quite attractive.

## Eternal Covenant

Ten minutes until her break. Cassie wanted to offer the homeless woman some help, although she couldn't afford to give her any money, she was a struggling Uni student who barely made enough to get by herself. The roll Orlof had taken back to the kitchen sprung to mind. It was destined for the bin anyway. Who would appreciate it more than a homeless woman?

Over the next few minutes she mulled over the pros and cons of giving the roll to the woman. On one hand the woman was obviously hungry. On the other, Orlof was likely to have kittens if she took it. But then again, if *she* didn't help this woman, was anyone else going to? Probably not. That settled it, she would give the woman the roll.

Outside the night air was crisp, with just a whisper of drizzle leaving a light film of moisture over everything it touched. The black asphalt of the road glistened under the street lamps and reflected off the shop windows on the opposite side of the street.

It was just past 9pm on Friday night so the café was still fairly quiet. The nightclub scene wouldn't kick off properly for a couple of hours yet.

A new nightclub, Phoenix, had opened recently only a block from Meg's and was proving to be extremely popular. Already there was a cue of hopeful patrons lined up, extending along the footpath. The club was very selective about who was granted entry and more than half the crowd of hopefuls were destined to be turned away, rejected.

Since their opening, business at the café was booming. The propitious night clubbers from Phoenix all came in looking totally wasted, eating and drinking anything on the menu. They probably had enough alcohol in their system to counter the salmonella Orlof was cultivating in the kitchen. In fact, the deadly bacteria was probably more palatable than the food.

The increase in business fuelled Orlof's ego. He honestly believed it was *his* cooking they were coming in for. If he hadn't been a big enough arsehole already, his newly inflated ego made him twice as obnoxious.

Cassie suspected it was something else. It crossed her mind that there may be a new drug on the streets that was being pedalled at the nightclub. It didn't seem natural that so many people coming from *that* nightclub all appeared so high, almost euphoric and at the same time physically drained. They were ravenously hungry and had all the signs of dehydration.

And then came *that* voice again, interrupting her thoughts of intrigue and conspiracies. "Order up, table two."

Cassie sighed and hustled back to the kitchen to collect the correct order - hopefully, this time, she didn't want to tell the customer that the chef got his order wrong, again - although it wouldn't be the first time. Secretly she hoped the customer would get tired of waiting and go somewhere else that served real food.

Cassie had one eye on the clock and the other on the homeless woman outside. Five minutes to go until her break. Just enough time to deliver the focaccia to table two and take an order from the newcomers.

Orlof glared at Cassie with disdain as she collected the plate and examined it carefully to make sure the *focaccia* had all the correct ingredients. She knew it would rile him further, but she couldn't help herself. Maybe it was PMS.

The temptation to antagonise him just got the better of her.

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She barely contained the smirk on her face as she pushed open the kitchen door back into the dining area.

After handing Orlof the docket for his next order, Cassie put on her jacket and picked up the roll.

"I'm taking my break," she announced. "Try not to miss me" the sarcasm dripped from her tongue contemptuously.

Orlof looked up from his grill. "You be back in ten minutes. I'm watching you." He said in an insidious tone, shaking his spatula at her. The last part trailed off under his breath as he noticed her carrying the contraband out the door. A menacing smile crept across his face as he realised he just spied the way to recoup the cost of his earlier stuff-up.

Tegan, the only other waitress rostered on, and yet another student, caught Cassie by the elbow as she passed her on the way towards the door. "Ooh, you're really pushing your luck tonight," she whispered anxiously.

Orlof only hired the young, inexperienced and broke Uni students, as they were easy to manipulate and coerce, working long hours for minimal pay and of course, no paid over-time.

"I don't care. I've had enough of the way he treats people. I'm not going to just *roll-over* and take it anymore." She replied, glancing quickly at the contents of her hand, no longer containing her smirk, she closed the door behind her.

Tegan shook her head and sighed, and went back to clearing her table.

Outside the cool night air whipped at her face and neck sending shivers down her spine. The breeze pulled a slip of hair free from her neatly tied ponytail falling into her eyes and threatening to obscure her view of the path ahead. The drizzle tickled her nose and cheeks as it settled on her warm skin, the accumulating droplets dripping from the end of her nose.

Suddenly she felt nervous. Maybe it was because she was doing something out of character by offering the homeless woman the food, or maybe because she knew she was really pushing her luck with Orlof. But, what the hell, he's an arsehole, a fact that wasn't going to change unless someone has the guts to stand up to him. She was sick of tip-toeing around him, even if he was intimidating.

Maybe antagonising him wasn't the best way to achieve her goal, but it felt so good.

The homeless woman stood down by the corner, leaning up against the wall of the second hand book store. Under the shade of the eaves she was barely noticeable.

Cassie sucked in her breath and wiped away the light film of moisture settling on her face as she forced her first foot forward, determined not to be disparaged by her insecurities.

Each step became easier to take as her resolve in helping this woman became more tangible.

The woman stood very still with her arms crossed and her head tilted downward. Cassie could see by her faint outline, her face was turned, watching her approach.

Too late to turn back now.

Cassie could feel the woman's curiosity regarding her intentions burning into her.

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She was usually very good at reading people's personalities and moods. She had no trouble understanding what made other people tick, but no one seemed to really understand her, except her cousin, Alex, who was also her best friend. The two of them had always been outsiders, never quite fitted into the mainstream.

As Cassie approached, she discerned a cocktail of emotions from her posture, broadcasting a mixture of sadness and confusion on the woman's face, with a hint of fear and distrust in her closed body language.

How curious she thought, had this woman been a homeless dog, there would be no lack of people willing to take her in and care of her. Sadly, the same didn't apply to homeless people, in fact it was the opposite.

Cassie stopped a few feet away from the woman. "I'm sorry to bother you," she began hesitantly "I noticed you outside the café."

The woman didn't move. Her eyes dropped to the ground, awkwardly fidgeting her hands in front of her. She was embarrassed by Cassie's attention and suspicious of her motives.

"I'm Cassie. I work at Meg's. We, um, well we often have food left over and I thought you um, m-might like something to eat." she stammered slightly, abruptly extending her hand and offering her the roll in the hope of negating the need for further awkward speech. It was a good thing it was dark, her cheeks burned with embarrassment and her palms were beginning to sweat despite the chilled air. Again, she wasn't so sure that this was such a good idea.

"I'm very pleased to meet you. Cassie. I'm Abigail." She spoke with more eloquence than Cassie expected. That was a shock.

Cassie's anxiety toned down a notch.

Abigail looked up and smiled shyly, but her eyes betrayed her voracious hunger, looking quickly back to the roll. She needed no encouragement, gratefully accepting it and taking a huge bite, promptly followed by a second before she'd swallowed the first. Her mouth was so full that Cassie thought her cheeks might burst at any moment. In no more than a minute she'd managed to eat half the roll.

Both women relaxed slightly, feeling more at ease with each other.

"Thank you for your kindness. Most people do their best not to notice me at all, let alone offer any sort of generosity," she muttered, almost inaudible as she gulped down another mouthful of food. Funny, hadn't she just been thinking the same thing, Cassie thought.

Cassie half expected to see the woman's eyeballs roll up into her head she was eating with such a ferocious feeding frenzy.

"Thank you so much. I was famished," swallowing the last of the roll as she spoke.

Cassie didn't want to seem intrusive by asking Abigail how she ended up living on the streets, but the question was foremost in her mind, prickling her curiosity. It was quite obvious that Abigail was highly intelligent, which only heightened Cassie's interest to know about her decline to the lower end of the social scale.

Fearing that any question she voiced regarding her personal life would be construed as insensitive and most likely insulting, she managed to hold her tongue. A great accomplishment considering how freely Cassie normally shared her thoughts. It was none of her business after all, she reminded herself over and over again.

## Eternal Covenant

Following a couple of benign comments about the weather, their conversation lapsed into an awkward silence. Abigail looked down again, her cheeks becoming flushed as her discomfort returned.

Cassie was sure her questions, although unasked verbally, must have shown on her face causing Abigail's embarrassment. The last thing she wanted was for Abigail to think she pitied her. Her self esteem had clearly already taken a battering, what she needed was to feel ârespected.

Abigail stood up taller, straightening her spine with the grace of someone who had attended Finishing School. This combined with her perfect elocution, left Cassie convinced that it must have been circumstances in her life that had led to this destitute situation she now found herself in, not poor choices, as was the case for many of the homeless in this area.

"I know it wasn't much, only a roll, but I wanted to offer you what I could." Abigail's agitation overflowed onto Cassie, her hands fidgeted nervously in front of her. "I'm sorry if I've made you feel uncomfortable, it wasn't my intention. I just couldn't live with myself if I didn't offer you something. You looked so hungry." blurting out her sincerest apology. Her clumsy attempt at being a good Samaritan appeared to have back fired.

"You haven't offended me. It's *him*," pointing to her right, toward the cafÃ©. Her voice suddenly hard, obviously repulsed by the object in her sight.

Cassie followed the direction of her finger, inconveniently pointing at Orlof standing in the doorway, hands on hips, wearing his customary smarmy grin, more typical of a cat cornering a mouse.

They had something in common. They both loathed Orlof, bringing another question to her mind. What had he done to this woman to make her feel such revulsion for him. Most likely he had just been his usual personable self.

"Oh, bollocks," checking her watch she groaned. "This isn't going to be pretty."

"I hope I haven't gotten you in any trouble, have I?" Abigail touched her on the arm lightly, unintentionally, troubled that her own misfortune was about to have a detrimental affect on this kind young woman.

That small incidental touch warmed Cassie's heart and steeled her resolve to deal with Orlof. She knew that in her own small way, she had made a difference to Abigail's life, even if it was for only one day, and that was worth standing up for.

Abigail held out her hand to Cassie who chose to disregard it and hugged the woman instead. "I hope we'll meet again. Take care." She genuinely hoped she'd see this well spoken woman again. There was something different about her that tugged at Cassie's curiosity and it wasn't just that she seemed so out of place living on the streets.

She wrapped her coat around her a little tighter, feeling the etheric cold draft coming from Orlof's direction, and plodded her way back to the cafÃ© to an inevitable confrontation.

"You're late! Two minutes late," he began, still with that irritating smug grin plastered on his face. He was enjoying this. "I'll be deducting that from your wage, and the cost of that roll."

He really got off on belittling people, particularly in public.

"You were going to throw that roll in the bin and you know it," she stated flatly, trying to contain her annoyance which was beginning to create a knot in her stomach.

## Eternal Covenant

"Not the point. You took the roll for that, that street vermin, so you can pay for it," his face contorting in contempt.

"You're comparing a human being with a disease carrying rodent?" Cassie could feel her own blood pressure rise now. She wasn't upset that he wanted her to pay for the roll, she'd expected that. But his indignant and pompous attitude really got under her skin.

"Where's your sense of compassion for the more unfortunate members of your own community. They deserve some respect and some help to get their lives back on track, not derision and ridicule."

Without drawing breath, she continued "Are you really such a cold heartless bastard, or do you actually have a shred of humanity locked away in some dark corner of your soul." She already knew the answer to that question and instantly cringed waiting for his response.

"You're fired." He shrieked. His eyes bulging in their sockets in an unblinking mad glare, his face twisted into a feral snarl and spittle flew from his lips on exclaiming the word *fired*.

"Get out, get out now!" He yelled. Loud enough to be heard a block away and stunning the café patrons into silence, who until now had only pretended to carry on their own conversations while listening into their *'discussion'*.

A calmness came over her as if a weight were being lifted from her shoulders.

"Thank you." She stated matter-of-factly. "Now I can tell you what I *really* think of you,

"You're an anal retentive, egotistical, asshole with small man syndrome." It all started tumbling out of her mouth more easily than she'd ever imagined possible. She'd waited eight long months to tell him what she really thought.

"You're a shallow, insignificant man. Your life is empty of any value or meaning. The only time you're happy is when you're belittling others and making them as miserable as you are," She was on a roll, determined to get everything off her chest.

"I pity you and your wretched existence, your small minded attitude," the adrenaline surged through her veins, purging all her pent up frustration in a venomous torrent.

"I've tried to see things from your point of view but I couldn't get my head that far up my arse!" she blurted.

"You know what they say, *'what goes around, comes around'*. And, I'd love to be around to see you get your comeuppance," she added as an after thought.

Wow, that felt good. No, that felt great, fantastic, amazing, liberating.

Time to go.

Before Orlof could pick his jaw up off the floor, Cassie grabbed her bag and disappeared out the door, almost running the first fifty meters down the road.

Now what?

## Eternal Covenant

Reality started to set in. She'd just lost her job. She can't survive on thin air, her trust fund only covered her education, not general living expenses.

Thoughts of Abigail pushed their way into her mind. Such a well spoken and obviously sophisticated woman living on the streets.

No. She wasn't going to end up like her. First thing tomorrow morning she'd start looking for another job.

Tonight however, was another matter. It was only 9:30pm Friday night, too early to go home and brood in front of the TV. It had been ages since she had been out on Friday night, or Saturday night for that matter.

Stopping under a street light, she opened her bag and retrieved her phone. Out the corner of her eye she noticed something pass under a light, into the shadows of the car park across the road.

Not something, someone.

Obviously a male by his build, and tall, over 6 feet from what she could tell. He'd moved too fast to get anything but a brief glance, not enough to make out his identity. Nevertheless, she could still see a vague outline of his large form, hovering in the shadows at the back of the car park, which at this time of night was sparsely occupied. Although, not for much longer.

The city's night life was about to awaken, enticing out all its most colourful inhabitants. The city by day and the city by night were so divergent. It would be easy to imagine it as two totally different towns occupying the same space. By day it was inhabited by people focused on habitual routine, wearing tailored suits and pin pleat skirts, buttoned blouses in dull office friendly colours, all rushing about their business. By night, the city became as dark as the sky that enveloped it. Emo's, goth's and night club and pub devotees saturated the streets, hell bent on killing as many brain cells as possible with alcohol and in some cases, drugs, wearing their stereotypical styled clothes, heavy make-up and dramatically styled hair.

A vague momentary thought flitted through her mind that his presence should concern her since she was alone on a city street at night, but it didn't. Her mind was more agreeably preoccupied with her spirited exodus from Meg's. She was still on a high, buzzing with adrenaline.

She looked down for just a moment to switch on her phone. In the second that she looked away, the man disappeared.

How could he vanish like that, she thought, amazed he could seemingly evaporate into thin air. Building walls occupied three sides of the car park leaving the only way out, in front of her. She couldn't have missed seeing him.

Yet another intrigue to ponder over. Speaking of intrigues, she now had the night off to explore an earlier one that had been bugging her. The Phoenix night club.

She hit speed dial and put the phone to her ear.

"Yeah kid," Alex's voice cheerfully answered.

"Don't call me kid, you know I hate it."

"Whatever, what's up? To what do I owe this pleasure?" toning down his enthusiasm.



## Eternal Covenant

"I have some good news and some bad news." She stated, trying to keep her voice even to hide her delight at the evening's turn of events.

"Well, out with it. Give me the good news first."

"I've got the night off work," matching Alex's earlier cheer.

"And, what's the bad news," uncertain whether he really wanted to hear what she had to say.

"I was fired!"

"You were what? Say again."

"I was fired!"

"That's what I thought you said. That's great! What happened?"

She knew Alex didn't like Orlof, no one did. But still, that wasn't the response she'd expected. Although, being honest, she didn't really know how he'd react, maybe annoyed or disappointed that she's left herself without any income. Then again, this *was* Alex, who was notable for his unpredictability at times.

"I gave Orlof a piece of my mind," giggling, pleased with her own tenacity.

Alex laughed heartily along with her, "About bloody time too. You should've quit ages ago. That asshole doesn't deserve someone like you working for him." His jubilation giving the impression that he himself had achieved some sort of victory.

"That's sounds like a good reason to celebrate. What do you say? Why don't we get our party shoes on and hit the town." He suggested, although he knew that's really why she rang him. As unpredictable as he was, Cassie was the opposite, predictable to a fault.

"Actually, I already have a place in mind." She answered. "You know that new nightclub near Meg's, the one that I told you about. I want to check it out. You know, see what's really going on in there. You in?"

"Only if it's dangerous." He laughed, glad for a change to his own boring routine of researching his thesis and listening to his roommates bantering about their latest exploits. And, if there really was any trouble to be found at the Phoenix nightclub, chances are, he would be in the middle of it. He just seemed to have a knack for finding strife, or maybe it just managed to find him. Either way the end result was the same.

"Great. Pick me up in an hour. I want to go home and change first." She said.

"Oh, and you'll need to dress neat with just a little grunge."

"What in Hell is grunge?"

"The mildly rebellious rich kid look." Which was pretty much how Alex dressed anyway, minus the money.

She'd paid enough attention to the customer's at Meg's who were recent patrons at that nightclub to know what kind of people they let in. She hoped.

## Chapter 3

### Chapter 3

An hour and a half later, Alex and Cassie were lined up outside the Phoenix nightclub along with a crowd of other people. Fortunately the earlier drizzle had cleared and the ground had dried out slightly, leaving only small puddles in the deeper depressions of the footpath, making their potential wait in line more tolerable than it might have been.

At the door were three security men, one of whom walked the line up and down, selecting the lucky patrons for admission. His polished black shoes never made a sound as he slowly made his way alongside the crowd. To the majority of people it appeared that he was randomly selecting the favoured few.

With any luck, Cassie's assessment of the criteria for entry was accurate. Her white shirt hugged her figure to her hips, overlapping black leggings with black knee high boots. She left the top few buttons of her top open to accentuate her cleavage. A cropped black jacket finished off her outfit. Her long golden brown hair normally kept neatly in a ponytail, fell loosely about her face. The damp night air teased her natural waves into tighter curls, drawing attention to her fine facial features and highlighting her hazel eyes and full red glossy lips.

Alex's long sleeve black T shirt also clung to his body. It was ripped just below the neck with three long tears extending down across his chest, giving the appearance of having been torn by animal claws. A leather belt with a skull buckle held up his finely pinstriped black pants, both borrowed from his roommate, while his old pair of black boots tapped impatiently in every puddle within his reach. The look suited him but she didn't know if it would be enough to get them in. They'd soon find out.

Either way, by the appearance of the security men, no one was going to argue with them if they weren't selected.

Each of the three men was different in size, shape and complexion, but they shared two common similarities. They each wore plain black trousers and white t-shirts with the Phoenix Nightclub logo embossed on them, as you would expect for bouncers in uniform. But, their most impressive features however, weren't their extremely well muscled bodies, which were very impressive, it was their eyes. Their eye colours differed but each held the same cold and hard stare, devoid of emotion. Tiny iridescent flecks in their eyes glinted when caught in the light, mesmerizing, but at the same time very unnerving. Cassie had always sided with the philosophy that the eyes are the window to the soul. Looking at these guys though, she wasn't sure if any of them had a soul.

Both Alex and Cassie shivered when the larger of the three, with a military number two clipped hair cut, passed by them, their reaction that had nothing to do with the cool breeze which was beginning to whip-up again.

"You and you." The security man nearest, waved two blonde haired girls out of the line only a couple of feet in front of them. Their excited squeals triggered a murmur of anticipation which echoed through the remaining people in the cue of hopefuls. Definitely natural blondes judging by their ditsy behaviour, Cassie thought.

Almost as an after thought, his gaze fell on Cassie, his eyes moving so fast, she wasn't sure if they did actually move to her, or whether he'd always been staring at her and she just hadn't noticed.

## Eternal Covenant

"You two," pointing to the cousins, "You can go in."

Suddenly neither of them was sure if they still wanted to. A strange prickling sensation at the base of Cassie's neck radiated throughout her body. They looked at each other, sharing the same sensation. For a second time that night, Cassie found it hard to put one foot in front of the other.

But of course, their curiosity about this nightclub was much stronger than any extra sensory warning bell, so they chose to ignore their intuition and entered.

A friendly red headed woman waited patiently, smiling as they approached.

The main doors resembled the fiction movies stereotypical depiction of a medieval dungeon. The thick timber hung heavily, framed by the blue stone outer walls of the building. Each panel held together with large metal studs, old and weather beaten. The large iron ring handle sat idly, suspended in the mouth of a lions head. A small head height barred window and steel bolt lock finished the impression. For all she knew, they could have actually come from an old castle, after all this was England.

The entrance floor was tiled in a black and red checker fashion, the walls and ceiling painted in a glossy black. So far nothing out of the ordinary Cassie thought, for a nightclub.

"That will be £15 each please," stamping the back of their hands on receiving their money.

"Enjoy your evening." She called after them sweetly as Cassie and Alex left her counter, examining the club's branding on the back of their hands. The letters

PNC intertwined in red ink.

Heavy dark red velvet curtains were decadently draped, framing the entrance to the main nightclub area, pinned open at the sides by thick silk tasselled cord, the colour matching the curtains.

Passing through the doorway, Cassie gasped in awe of the room.

"Wow," Alex was taken aback by the scene himself. "Can you believe this place? No wonder it cost so much to get in."

Leaving the tiled floor behind, stepping onto carpet which in the dim light appeared to be a deep burgundy colour. Immediately to their left was the dance floor, decorated in the standard sleazy nightclub fashion: disco ball, strobe lights and lasers cutting through blasts of haze from the smoke machine across the dance floor. The music blared out of oversized speakers in the corners of the room at a volume that reverberated through everything within ear shot. That, however, was where the similarity to the average night club ended.

The rest of the room was magnificent in its finery, reminiscent of another era, not decorated with the genus of the typical drunk, party-hard young night clubbers in mind.

To their right, the carpet continued, leading to a lounge area. Opulence oozed from the plush sofas, their frames ornately carved from dark wood and arranged into private nooks. Each area exquisitely decorated with large gold framed paintings, featuring demonic and angelic creatures torturing and seducing humans, some erotic and some horrifying. Each painting, a vision out of heaven or hell. Either. Both. But all perversely intriguing.

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On the far side of the dance floor to their left was the bar which ran the length of the wall. It was elaborately carved in dark timber with scenes similar in fashion to the paintings. It too was beautiful and disturbing.

The effect of the room was very dramatic, almost theatrical, highlighted by the fact that the dance floor was a sunken pit about a meter below the rest of the room, offering a perfect view from above of all its occupants, with only one set of stairs leading in and out. Intricately detailed wrought iron banisters of woven vines extended up the stairs to interlace its way through the railing above, encasing the whole pit. Again, emphasising the unusual splendour of the décor.

The club was nowhere near full, with no more than a dozen or so people at the bar. In the average nightclub the cue at the bar would be three or four people deep even at this relatively early hour, all pushing and shoving each other to be the next served.

Alex nudged Cassie's elbow to get her attention. "Hey. Cassie, do you suppose they have some sort of VIP elitist policy going on here? I mean, they could fit twice as many people in this place and it still wouldn't be crowded." He said.

"I don't know, but I was thinking something similar myself," yelling her answer back at him. She never did like night clubs, too much damned noise. Oh well. She was here now, might as well make the most of it. After all, she reminded herself, she had come to do some snooping around, not partying.

"C'mon, let's get a drink," grabbing Cassie by the hand, Alex dragged her along behind him, making a B-line directly for the bar.

"Wait." Cassie pulled back on his arm, determined to get his attention, which was not an easy task when he was in the same vicinity as alcohol and girls.

"There's definitely something *off* about this place. I think we should stick to water. At least until we've had a chance to suss things out a bit more." The look she gave him inferred an order, not a suggestion. This place made her uneasy, she felt unsafe.

"Has anyone ever told you you've got an over active imagination," he retorted, removing her hand from his arm. "I'm sure your suspicions are completely unfounded." but the look in her eyes was enough to convince him to follow her suggestion, at least for now.

He'd learnt from past experience not to second guess Cassie's *feelings*. When he did, trouble often resulted.

Moving toward the bar they passed the two girls who had entered just before them. A really hot looking dark haired guy had obviously taken a shine to them, one arm wrapped about each girl's waist while both shamelessly flirted with him to gain his favour. The noise in the club was conveniently loud enough to necessitate him leaning in very close to be heard. Much to their delight.

Ha, Cassie thought. They've been here all of five minutes and they've already hooked up with a hunk who's charming the pants off them. Literally.

Cassie was trying to take in as much of her surroundings as she could. It didn't skip her notice that they themselves had attracted the attention of a number of people around the room, which did nothing to ease her discomfort.

"Alex," she tugged on his arm again.

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He reluctantly turned to face her. He'd already gone into predator mode, checking out the female 'talent' on the dance floor.

"Alex. Have you noticed there's no security inside the club?"

After a quick glance back at the brunette on the dance floor, he scanned the room. She was right. That was unusual. There would normally be a multitude of security hovering around, like bees around a honey pot, waiting in anticipation of the inevitable alcohol fuelled disagreements that went hand-in-hand with a nightclub. Heaven knows, he'd been thrown out enough times to vouch for that. In his own defence, the girls involved had all misunderstood his intentions, or at least their boyfriends had.

But there were none. Not a single bouncer.

A sly, lop sided grin appeared on his face, lighting his eyes with mischief. He was starting to like this place.

Cassie could see she'd lost his attention, again. His eyes wandered back to the dance floor below, to a sea of potential victims for a one night stand. This could be one of those times she catches a cab home by herself she thought, letting out yet another sigh of resignation.

He was two months shy of his twenty fourth birthday, six foot tall, with wavy black hair neatly styled around his face, just long enough to give it some body. Above his left brow a cowlick lifted his wavy fringe, draping it over his forehead in such a way that focused attention on his large chocolate brown eyes, framed by his blue/black eyelashes, long enough to make any girl envious. His olive complexion, inherited from his Spanish mother, combined with his lean physique, meant Alex rarely had trouble picking-up.

"Wait here," she yelled in his ear. "I'll get the drinks. Don't move," not at all confident he'd heard a word she said or if he did, he'd probably ignore her anyway.

"Why doesn't he ever listen to me?" she grumbled to herself, spying him making his way towards the dance floor only a second after she left his side. "One day he'll grow-up and behave like an adult, I hope." She always hoped, but the combination of testosterone and a fearless nature were a dangerous combination, and he had both in spades. It didn't seem to leave much room for rational behaviour.

She moved through the crowd squeezing past one person and side stepping another, her eyes cast downward, concentrating on her footing in the semi darkness. The puffs of smoke escaping from the pit below her, snaked a path across the main floor reducing her vision even further.

Without slowing her pace, Cassie looked up to get her bearings towards the bar when her foot caught on the heel of an extended boot invisible in the murky light, sending her tumbling forward. Quick as a flash, a man's hand extended and caught her elbow, steadying her before she could ungracefully collide face first with the floor.

Her cheeks flared with heat and for the first time tonight she was grateful for the obscurity of the poor light. Scanning the faces around her, it didn't appear anyone else had noticed. Thank God.

"Thank you," she shouted to the man over the noise, whose answer was a crooked furtive smile and a slight bow, which only made her more self conscious and embarrassed. She wasn't sure if he was mocking her. Cassie straightened her shirt, smoothing the creases as if somehow the act also removed the dent in her dignity. Regaining her poise, she gave him a feeble smile and quickly moved back into the crowd hoping that was the last she'd see of him.

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Only a few more meters to the bar. Surely she could make it without any more clumsy mishaps, just one foot in front of the other, carefully.

Her senses prickled at a nearby presence. Maybe she was just wound up and on edge, she reprimanded herself, but the sensation intensified stopping her dead in her tracks. An air of nervous anticipation and yearning enveloped her.

Her head snapped up, instinctively scanning the room to her left. *He* looked directly into her eyes as he approached. Desire flared to life and rushed to fill every cell of her body, vibrating every nerve. Her heart pounded in her chest and her head felt giddy. For a fleeting moment she could have sworn his face mirrored her own desire.

His clothing was simple, clean and crisp with an old fashioned white silk shirt, full at the shoulders, loose fitting with the top buttons left open exposing a sliver of his hairless broad muscled chest. The style emulated the aristocratic eighteenth century landed gentry, right down to his black boots. He could have been mistaken for having stepped right off the pages of a Jane Austen novel, he being the incredibly attractive Mr Darcy.

For an instant their eyes locked and his hand brushed against hers as he passed. Cool to the touch but electrifying her senses, she grabbed hold of the dance floor railing to keep her knees from buckling beneath her.

An instant later he was gone.

His tall frame disappeared into the crowd but the vision of him was indelibly burned into her memory. His straight blonde hair parted to the right, neatly combed back behind his perfectly formed ears and sat an inch or so above his shoulders hugging the nape of his strong neck. His skin was pale and smooth, ageless. His cheek bones were finely chiselled, accented by short old fashioned sideburns and a small dimple in his chin. Long lashes framed his piercing blue green eyes.

She looked down to examine her hand which had taken on a surreal appearance as she ran her fingers over the area where he'd touched her. Her heart raced, beating so hard she was sure it would burst right out of her chest.

"Oh my God, I'm losing it. That didn't just happen, did it?" struggling to make sense of her intense reaction to the stranger, her mind searched for a logical explanation. A pointless effort, she would have had more hope describing Beethoven's ninth symphony to tone deaf chimpanzee.

Her heart beat continued to race, spurred on by an irrational need to find him again.

She stood on tip-toes searching the crowd. He couldn't just disappear. His height should make him easy to spot. He was well over six feet tall.

But he was nowhere in sight. Maybe he left.

"I couldn't have just imagined him, could I?"

Momentarily she found it hard to breath, giddy and confused.

When he touched her, she had a feeling of déjà vu. Something about him was familiar.

"Get a grip on yourself." she growled. Alex was right, she did have an overactive imagination.

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After a few deep breaths, she managed to refocus herself enough to resume her immediate task - drinks - and then possibly rescue Alex from the grasp of some guy whose girlfriend he's trying to chat up.

Alex may have been a genius in the academic world, currently doing his second Doctorate in Theoretical Physics on String Theory at Oxford. His first had been on Applied Physics. But, when it came to women, he was completely superficial and void of intelligence, totally caught up in his own self importance and good looks.

She sighed, finally reaching the bar, still shaken from her encounter. The memory of his touch lingered on her hand like a tantalising phantom's grip.

"Two bottles of water thanks," placing a £10 note on the bar.

Cassie turned her back to the bar, searching the room again for the gorgeous blonde who was destined to fill her dreams every night for the foreseeable future. Nothing. He was nowhere in sight.

"Here you go love," shouted the barman, handing over the water and her change.

She may not have been able to spot the man of her dreams, but from this vantage point at the bar overlooking the dance floor, she could easily see Alex. He'd set his sights on one of the two girls they'd seen a few minutes earlier. Obviously this one was rejected by the hunky guy and abandoned to the dance floor alone. Not that she appeared too unhappy about it though. By the way she was dancing, she didn't seem a bit annoyed about being ditched by her friend either.

In fact, on closer observation, Cassie noticed that not one person on the dance floor appeared to be dancing with anyone else. There were no cliquey groups of girls dancing in a circle around their hand bags and shoes, or guys pretending to dance nearby, discussing between themselves who was going to be the first to break into the girl's group to chat them up.

Everyone on the dance floor appeared to be possessed by the beat of the music, completely self involved.

Cassie moved closer to the railing above the pit, watching Alex dancing around the girl attempting to get her attention. This was normally a winning point for him. He was a great dancer and the girls always loved a guy who could move.

No luck. She was totally ignorant of his presence. Cassie couldn't help but feel amused at his frustration.

That's when she noticed the other doorway. The hunky guy was escorting the girl's friend into what was obviously a VIP room at the end of the lounge area, discretely hidden behind a partition. This doorway also had heavy curtains, similar to the main entrance. Standing outside this room was the one and only bouncer inside the club.

As she watched, another couple exited the room. The woman looking quite pleased with herself, walking her male friend back towards the dance floor. He looked exactly like so many of the customers at Meg's did after they'd left here, euphorically happy and physically drained.

Whatever was happening to people in here, was taking place in that room.

They approached two others on the dance floor, undoubtedly his friends. The woman spoke to each one in turn and without a word to each other, all three left.

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Cassie was sure their next stop would be Meg's. Poor fools.

Her interest was absorbed in the direction of the exit door when she spied from the corner of her eye someone standing beside her. Someone who was way too close for her liking.

She turned to find a man no taller than herself, waiting patiently for her to respond to his attentions. His dark trousers and shirt clung to his body, both at least one size too small. The shirt buttons strained against the tension, the material gaping between them revealed a mat of dark hair beneath. His cheeks were hollow and dark circles bordered his dark eyes. It was the man who had caught her from falling.

The intensity of his stare sent shivers down her spine as the warning bells bellowed in her mind. He closed the gap between them without appearing to have moved at all. His gaze was fixed, unblinking, holding her captive in his stare.

He had those same eyes. Cold and hard.

"Hello Cassie, my name is Jarvis."

"Hi Jarvis, nice to meet you," she answered politely, "I'm sorry I'm here with someone. Excuse me". She smiled sweetly, trying to look more confident than she felt as she took a sideways step from him.

Jarvis stepped in unison with Cassie, never losing eye contact with her. He was close enough that she could feel his breath on her face.

The warning bells multiplied in her brain to a crescendo of sirens as it dawned on her. Oh my God, he knows my name. How? Panic bubbled just beneath the surface as she strained to keep her composure.

"You don't want to be with your friend, you want to come with me." It wasn't a suggestion, it was a command. His voice was melodious, sweetly seductive. She heard his words clearly reverberating through her head as his eyes continued boring into her, searching for the weak spot in her mind. She could feel a distinct tugging at her mind to relax and acquiesce to his command.

To her astonishment she could no longer hear the music playing but she could still feel the vibration of it through the floor pounding out its beat, doof doof doof.

His voice filled her mind with a pressure bordering on pain as she fought against it.

Cassie shook her head a fraction to clear her thoughts, the small movement almost indiscernible.

"Ah, no. Actually I don't want to go anywhere with you," she replied as forcefully as she could muster, trying to keep her wits about her, simultaneously attempting another step away from him.

His eyes widened in shock and his lips parted slightly in disbelief.

The prickling at the base of her neck sent her senses into overdrive. Instinctively she knew this man was dangerous but why, she didn't want to find out.

His eyes betrayed the malevolence of his true intentions, breaking through his friendly facade. He wasn't used to be refused and wasn't going to accept no for an answer.

She had to get out of there, fast.



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Before she'd even had a chance to finish her thought, she felt the touch of a cool hand about her waist.

She closed her eyes and held her breath, afraid if she looked down she'd see herself already within his grasp, unable to escape.

Her body tensed as she prepared to scream and lash out at her attacker when she realised to her astonishment, the hand about her waist had pulled her backward, away from the man who had her cringing in fear.

If Charles Manson's creepy cousin didn't have hold of her, then who did?

Everything seemed to go into slow motion. The music began blaring in her ears again, as the man behind her, placed himself between her and the psychopath.

With his arm behind him, he anchored her to him protectively as if she belonged there. His grasp on her, even from behind him, was absolute. Nothing and no one was taking her from him.

As she held the sides of his shirt, soft under her touch, she could feel his hard body beneath it. Each breath she took intoxicated her senses. He wore Jean Claude Gaultier, her favourite men's fragrance. She knew it well, she'd brought the same cologne for Alex last Christmas.

Only an instant had passed. The psychopath was gone and her rescuer turned around to face her, keeping her body still firmly against his.

Her body was soft and delicate in his arms and he couldn't help the unfamiliar surge of emotions that welled within him. He held onto her, his hands moving to her back as he drew her closer into his arms, needing to hold her, to know she was safe, secure.

She was torn between bewilderment, gratitude and elation as a rush of hormones surged through her once again, blood throbbed in her core, leaving her body humming with a desperate need to know more about this man, intimately. She felt his body shudder against hers as he drew in a sharp breath in response to the emergence of her carnal desire for him. His eyes locked with hers for one desperate moment.

Hunger and heat, emotion and need. It all began to clash and coalesce inside her.

"Cassie. Listen to me very carefully," his eyes showed his concern. He wasn't afraid for himself, he was afraid for her.

"You need to get out of here now, right now." The intensity of his plea demanded compliance. "Do you understand?"

"Y, yes." Her reply was weak. She was still trying to compose herself from what she believed to be a momentary lapse from reality. The realisation was sinking in that she probably wasn't out of danger yet. Why this would be the case, she didn't know but right now it didn't matter. The thought of that creep touching her made her stomach churn.

She swallowed hard to stop her panic from consuming her and rendering her immobile.

Was she willing to put her trust in this stranger? Yes. For some unknown reason she would trust him with her life. Maybe she already had.

He took her hand in his and began leading her towards the door at a hurried pace.

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"Wait. I have to get Alex." Who was now doing his best to get the attention of *any* girl on the dance floor, unsuccessfully.

A flash of annoyance crossed his face.

He slipped his arm about her waist again and lifted her as if her weight were no more significant to him than that of a small child. For all intents and purposes, she would've appeared to be walking but her toes barely touched the ground.

They crossed the dance floor in a matter of seconds.

He picked up Alex in the same manner under his other arm and made his way towards the main entrance.

"Put me down. I haven't done anything wrong. Why are you throwing me out? I want your badge number," bellowed Alex, kicking and punching the man holding him, believing him to be a bouncer.

He tightened his grip around Alex's waist, quenching his verbal abuse when his ability to breathe was curbed.

Once outside and a considerable distance from the club, he placed them both back on the ground.

Cassie was relieved to be out of there. To her delight, her hero was her dream man.

Alex on the other hand was working himself up with a number of superlative insults unrivalled by even the most seasoned bikie.

"Where's your car." He said, looking directly at Alex, who continued his verbal deluge.

"Shut-up and listen, you annoying little prat." His patience was being surely tested. "You're entitled to be stupid but you're abusing the privilege. Shut-up!" Clipping him across the ear for good measure.

"That wasn't necessary." Alex retorted, a little more subdued. Shaking his head to stop the ringing in his ear.

"Where's your car," he asked again, his patience now hanging by a very tentative thread.

"A few blocks down, up the lane," pointing down the road, towards the poorly lit end of the street.

"In that case, I'll escort you."

Behind them, the security from the Phoenix nightclub watched intently as the three retreated expeditiously down the road.

Cassie realised she still had a tight grip of this man's hand. Feeling a little self conscious of the fact, she reluctantly let go. Adrenaline still raced through her veins making her thoughts jumbled but she had to ask him the most pertinent question on her mind.

"How did you know I was in trouble?" watching his face intently to evaluate the validity of his answer.

"I just knew." He replied flatly. Hardly a satisfying answer, but it would do for now.

"What do you mean, you were in danger?" Alex directed his question at Cassie, annoyed that he'd missed something.

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Cassie however, was focussed intently on her knight in shining armour. Consequently his query was completely ignored by both of them.

"What was he trying to do to me?" she asked, unsure whether she was ready for the answer. She knew there was a lot more going on in that club than was *normal*, and it had nothing to do with drugs. At present she wasn't able to make head nor tail of anything she'd witnessed. Nothing made sense.

Regardless of her curiosity, she wasn't keen on going back for another look.

"He was using a very powerful form of hypnotherapy called glamouring. It's used to compel people to do *things*." This caught Alex's attention and he leaned in a little closer to hear his explanation.

"It didn't work on you, which is extremely rare."

"When you say rare, how rare are we talking?" Alex asked.

"A snowball in Hell, rare. And now he's interested in you all the more," he clarified. "He won't be satisfied until he finds you. Unfortunately, if he gets his hands on you again, I doubt he'd be quite so *à la nice*." His look of concern crept back into his eyes.

"Which is why you need to go, now!" his plea becoming more authoritative, motioning them to hurry. "I'll take care of him, but do me a favour, don't go out after dark *at all*," emphasising his words clearly, "for at least the next week, just in case." He urged.

Just in case of what? Cassie thought.

"How are you going to *'take care of it'*?" Alex asked, suspicious. He wondered if this guy was a cop or in the military, maybe one of the elite forces. He was certainly strong enough and possessed the necessary egotistical streak.

"I can be very persuasive, when I need to be," he emphasized, his eyes darkening with determination. They were both glad this guy was on their side. He would make a formidable opponent.

Alex unlocked the car. He had one last question to ask. "What about me? Does this guy want to get me too?"

"Nobody approached you. You're of no consequence. Besides, what would someone want with you? They have no reason to hurt you, at least not beyond the desire to cure you of your lack of personal charm and manners."

It was like baiting a cobra. Alex's posture stiffened. Cassie could almost see the cogs of his mind searching for another flood of insults to throw his way. Alex had a very fragile ego at times.

Climbing into the car, Cassie had a multitude of question but one was vital to ask before she would allow herself to be whisked away.

"Who are you? Ah, I mean, what's your name - I have to know who to thank for saving me tonight," she asked anxiously.

"Alaric." He said, bowing graciously and sending another flutter of hormones rushing through her.

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"How can I contact you again, if I run into any more, ah, problems?" she quickly added, hoping she could find an excuse, any excuse to see him again.

"I've seen you around, you attend Oxford University I believe. I'll find you." His tone was a careful balance of detached and sincerely apologetic for his vagueness. His eyes smiled at her much more conspicuously than the slight curve at the corner of his mouth, leaving her feeling as giddy as a school girl.

Ah ha, she thought. She did recognise him, although it was strange that she couldn't recall seeing a gorgeous blonde giant like him floating around the Uni. He'd obviously seen her though, he also knew her name. Her chances of getting a date with him just increased she thought to herself cheerfully.

Alaric gave one last instruction to Alex.

"Take the back lane to the main road. Under no circumstances go anywhere near that club again, *ever*. Go directly home and don't leave until morning. Do you understand?"

Alex only nodded as he put the car into first gear and released the hand brake. Putting some distance between himself and Alaric.

He was mildly bemused how the tables had turned. For the first time it was Cassie in trouble, not him.

"Well, this turned out to be an interesting night. Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I don't know how to answer that question. Yes and no."

Cassie looked at her watch. It was only 12:30am. In the space of three and a half hours her life had been turned upside down. She'd fed a homeless woman, lost her job, been hit-on by a psychopath and been rescued by the man of her dreams.

She suddenly felt mentally and emotionally exhausted.

Tomorrow was Saturday. She had only one thing on her agenda and that was to spend the entire day daydreaming about him, Alaric.

## Chapter 4

### Chapter 4

"Come in," called the Professor, as a second round of tapping on his door began.

"Ah, Miss McLennan, please come in. Have a seat." His chair squeaked as he shifted his weight in it to face her. His smile broadened, a little more laboriously than usual, yet still managed to reveal a good view of his perfect white teeth.

He gestured for her to pull the 'student's chair' over to his desk. Its metal legs were rusted, one of which was slightly bent making it a little wobbly. The red vinyl covering had faded and cracked and the padding had long since deteriorated, allowing the tip of a single nail to poke through. It wasn't his deliberate intention to make the student's visits to his office uncomfortable, just brief. Unfortunately students had a tendency to linger in his company far longer than necessary, unless they had an incentive to hurry along.

Cassie pushed the door open further, mirroring his smile. Professor Elijah Cohen was her aging kindly Professor whom she adored. She'd often thought if she'd had a grandfather, she hoped he would have been just like him. Although, he could be tough with the students, she had never known him to raise his voice or use a harsh tone with anyone. It was as if he was from one of those old movies where everyone was always perfectly amiable, not a mean bone in his body.

"Ah. I see your cousin is with you again today. You may as well come in too," he sighed, shaking his head slightly and waving him in.

"I swear, you two are practically joined at the hip. Don't you have your own classes to attend here somewhere or have you finally decided to join our Faculty and study Anthropology like your cousin here," pointing to Cassie and giving Alex his best serious look above the rim of his glasses, balancing dutifully at the end of his nose. His hands fidgeted in his lap.

Alex raised his hand to his mouth to cover his smirk and cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you sir, but I'm afraid the Physics Department can't manage without me," he replied cheerfully. "Actually, I'm only here to escort Cassie to her classes today. You know, make sure she doesn't run into any trouble." He pursed his lips together and stood a little straighter as Cassie shot him a sideways glance that he recognised to mean, 'shut-up or else'.

The Professor's left eyebrow rose with mild curiosity as he glanced at each of them in turn. His interest however, was fleeting and was lost in almost the same moment. His right knee began jiggling restlessly as he glanced at the clock on the wall behind them ticking over to 10:05am. He could only spare them ten minutes of his time. He had a very important meeting shortly and he was feeling rather troubled about it.

His agitation didn't slip Cassie's notice. Even Alex, whose powers of observation were normally restricted to the opposite sex, noticed something off about the Professor's manner this morning too.

"Ok. Yes, yes. Well, what can I do for you this morning Cassandra?" He asked, shifting his weight a little more in his chair.

"I wanted to ask you about the last assignment you set. I was hoping I could get an extension of an extra week, until next Monday. Unfortunately I've had to work quite a few hours recently and I haven't had the time

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to research the paper," offering her best face of innocence in the hope that he'd take pity on her and give her what she was asking.

"You do realise the deadline is today, don't you Ms McLennan. You should have come to see me last week and we could have discussed this then," not willing to give into her easily. He knew the students saw him as a soft-touch, which he was, but he wasn't in the mood today for niceties.

"I know. I'm very sorry. Time just got away from me. If you give me an extension, I promise I'll get it finished," pleading for his mercy. She chewed on her bottom lip nervously, waiting for his answer in the empty seconds that lapsed.

"It's unfair to give you extra time when all the other students will have completed their assignment in the allotted time. But, since you are one of my better students, normally," he pursed his lips, the small lines above his brow furrowing further in thought, "I'll give you one extra day. But, you must have it here on my desk first thing tomorrow morning," repeatedly tapping his finger on his desk to emphasise his seriousness.

"Yes. I promise. Tomorrow morning you'll have it, I promise." She vowed earnestly, knowing she would most likely need to pull an all nighter to do it. After her classes, she would need to utilize the library's resources until fairly late tonight if she had any chance of finishing the assignment.

Alaric's words only a few days before replayed in her mind, not to go out after dark. Oh well, there was no other choice. Not that she really thought there was any danger, but she liked the idea that her knight in shining armour was concerned about her.

She'd spent most of her weekend fantasizing about Alaric, wondering if she would see him again. He knew she was a student here at Oxford and had said that he had seen her around, so there would have to be a good chance of running into him here, sometime. Or, they had a mutual friend she could bribe for his number. She hoped.

She was still musing over her daydream when a sharp rapping at the door jolted her back to the present. The door opened and the Professor's assistant, Lilith entered without waiting for an answer.

The professor's posture stiffened and he stood abruptly, his sudden movement startling Cassie, making her jump from her seat too.

"I'm very sorry to interrupt your meeting, but I thought you might like to know that *he's* here," she advised. "He's down the hallway."

In contrast to Lilith's excitement, the Professor's agitation seemed to increase.

This of course caught the interest of both Cassie and Alex. Lilith now had *their* full attention as well, concurrently piquing their enquiring minds. The two cousins looked at each other with mutual curiosity.

"Thank you Lilith. Please show him in." He responded, again glancing at the clock which now read 10:12am.

Placing a hand on Cassie's shoulder he gently guided her towards the door. "I trust that I'll have your assignment here tomorrow?"

Alex had already retreated and stood staring down the hallway, his interest drawn to the approaching visitor.

"I won't let you down," she affirmed, endorsing her promise once again with the thumbs-up sign.

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As Cassie stepped into the hallway, her eyes followed the direction of Alex's interest. Walking beside Lilith was a monk, Tibetan by his appearance. Although Professor Cohen was Professor of Anthropology, specialising in Religious Anthropology which encompassed many religions, the presence of a Tibetan monk was very peculiar.

As Lilith and the monk neared them, his eyes met Cassie's. A chill passed through her.

The monk carried a great burden and he was here to share its weight with the Professor. Her chest felt suddenly tight as though someone had gripped her lungs and squeezed the air out. His visit had grave implications. Cassie knew it in her bones.

The monk smiled warmly at the cousins as he entered the office, shaking the Professor's hand with enthusiasm.

"Anil, it's good to see you again old friend," the Professor affirmed, directing him into his office.

Lilith closed the door behind them.

Cassie and Alex both stood motionless. Cassie stood staring at the space where the monk had been only seconds before, while Alex had his eyes firmly fixed on Cassie.

"I wonder what that's all about?" although he was staring at her, it was an internal question spoken aloud.

"I don't know, but I do know that he's not here on any holiday." Her reply was barely louder than a whisper as she forced her lungs to draw in the air needed to answer him. Her body shuddered visibly, snapping her out of her flustered daze. Her ashen complexion and distant gaze gave Alex a feeling of *dÃ©jÃ vu*. A sensation of icy fingers stealing their way down his spine, sinking in the pit of his stomach left a residue of apprehension that settled over him like a dark cloud. Only once before had he seen Cassie look like this, thirteen years ago, the day her father died.

Cassie was nine years old when her father, Jonathan McLennan died tragically in a car accident, in circumstances very similar to Jonathan's own parent's death when he was only five. Following their death, Jonathan's godparents the Delgado's, adopted him and raised him with their own daughter Renata, two years his junior. In his early twenties Jonathan married Renata's childhood friend Anna. The three were very close and spent more time together than apart.

Renata had many relationships but none lasted longer than a few months. She was a strikingly beautiful woman with eyes the colour of velvety chocolate, framed by long black lashes and a shock of thick jet black hair, but despite her beauty and an abundance of admirers, she just never seemed to find Mr Right. When she became pregnant and the father was nowhere to be seen, Jonathan and Anna insisted she live with them. Fifteen months after the birth of her son, Alejandro Delgado, whom she named after her own father, Cassie was born. The two cousins grew up together like brother and sister.

For several years their amalgamated family lived together very happily, until the day Jonathan died. The events of that day were forever engraved into Alex's memory. Every intricate detail. The wintery morning sky was dark and cold with storm clouds threatening to break at any moment. The wind whistled through the eaves of the house, rattling windows as tree branches scraped against the tin roof. The smell of freshly brewed coffee and bacon and eggs cooking filled the house.

Both he and Cassie hurriedly dressed in front of the fire, each trying to shove the other farther away to hog the heat for themselves, Cassie gaining the upper hand when he got one foot twisted unsteadily in his trouser leg,

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toppling him onto the floor in a noisy heap, giggling all the while. It had become a daily ritual. Everything was a competition between them then, a game. Their mothers were busy organising breakfast and lunches for school and gossiping about the indignities of the local Minister's affair with Mrs Chatsworth next door, whose husband was frequently away.

Entering the lounge room, Jonathan laughed heartily as he watched Alex scrambling off the floor, yet again, and gave each of them a huge bear hug. Cassie stiffened and stared at her father, all colour drained from her face and she began to cry. Thinking he'd hugged her too tightly, he immediately began apologising.

"Don't go," was all she could say, over and over. Dismissing her fears he pried her arms from his waist and wiped her tears away, giving her one last hug before heading out into the dreary weather for work, leaving Cassie to stare dolefully at the door behind him, her bottom lip quivering.

The storm broke shortly after. It rained heavily for hours. School was cancelled as the deluge flooded a number of classrooms, flash flooding closed roads and the guttering of their house overflowed sending a backflow of rain water through the roof in the laundry, dripping into a precariously placed bucket on the edge of the trough.

Hours passed and the storm continued. Shortly after the power went out that afternoon, there came a knock at the door. Two police officers with grave faces came with news that Jonathan's car had been swept from the bridge when the flood surged through. He'd had no chance.

Alex had known then, that Cassie had some sort of premonition about his death. The question was, what was it about this monk that had her so spooked now. It fanned his curiosity to learn as much about him as he could.

Their voices could be heard faintly from the hallway. Alex leaned in closer, pressing his ear to the door, Cassie copying him only a second later, although the best they could make out were broken sentences and a few words here and there. They listened intently for any pertinent information.

They didn't learn a great deal but they did discover the monk's name was Anil Norgay, a Tibetan monk and personal advisor to the Dalai Lama. He was here to ask for the Professor's help to find a cup that had been stolen. The cup had been trusted to the Dalai Lama for safe keeping a very long time ago. They agreed that if the thief knew about the importance of the cup, they would be looking for the other artefact next.

Cassie was intrigued that the Dalai Lama's advisor would be sent here to Oxford to enlist the help of her Professor, an aging religious anthropologist, instead of getting Interpol or another crime agency involved in finding the stolen cup.

Alex on the other hand was still more interested in the monk himself.

As the voices moved closer towards the door, Cassie and Alex sprinted for the exit, reaching it just as the office door opened. Risking a look around the corner, Alex watched as Lilith led the monk away in the opposite direction, ogling the way her rear swaggered as she walked.

"Why do you think a monk of his importance would come here to see the Professor?" She mused. "And, what's so important about this cup they're talking about?" she asked, becoming more confused by questions that seemed to have no plausible answers.

"I know where to start looking for some answers. It's all about asking the right person the right questions," he answered, alluding to a few strings he could pull with a friend in Customs at the Heathrow airport.



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It was nearly 10:30am, Alex's stomach began growling loud enough to attract the attention of a pompous looking young man pushing past them in the doorway. Most likely a first year student Alex thought. He'll soon get the *pomp* kicked out his *ass*, when he realises he's no better than anyone else at Oxford.

"I'm out of here," he announced. "I need coffee and food, in that order," rubbing his stomach to emphasise that its importance outweighed any other requirement at the moment. His attention was fading fast.

"I'm going to be here until fairly late tonight to get that paper finished. I'll see you tomorrow." She called after him as he moved to make a B-line for the coffee shop.

"Don't go home by yourself. When you're ready to leave, give me a call and I'll come and get you," he yelled back.

"Don't tell me you believe that Alaric was right, that the creep from the nightclub might be out there somewhere looking for me, do you?" she chided. His reply was a dismissive wave, confirming once again, that he had the attention span of a gold fish. Turning on her heels, she headed back inside the building for her next class, dismissing the idea of any danger as being absurd.

Three classes later, Cassie found herself in the library surrounded by volumes of books piled high around her, wishing that the information she needed could miraculously appear on the pages in front of her instead of reading endless chapters to glean a snippet of information from one book and then another and another to write her overdue paper. The internet was of some help but most of the information she needed was abstract and obscurely mentioned in the words of authors long dead and not readily accessible on the net. Worse luck.

Several hours passed as she sat at the desk, watching the sun sink slowly towards the horizon, causing her to squint from its glare as it filtered through the windows, until the blood red hue of twilight descended into darkness.

Just before the library closed she finished her paper with a sigh of relief. Her eyes were beginning to glaze and blur from the long hours focussed on the books. The university was practically deserted at this hour, except for the die hard researchers and one or two Professors and Lecturers catching up on paperwork.

As she left the building, a familiar figure appeared fifty metres or so ahead of her. It was the monk. Whether he had had further discussions about this mysterious cup with the Professor or been utilising the Faculty's facilities for his own research, she didn't know. But, seeing him there at this hour of the night piqued her curiosity again.

Cassie followed at a distance, careful not to draw attention to herself.

Fortunately her sneakers made little noise as she maintained a discrete distance in the shadows of the abundant foliage. He crossed the road and walked alongside one of the residential colleges, rounding the corner onto the cobbled courtyard, heading towards the gardens on the other side with Cassie hot on his tail.

The night was quiet. There was barely a breath of wind to stir the autumn leaves that collected beneath the maple trees. Cassie slowed to choose her footing more carefully, wary of the noisy mine field of dry leaves that would alert him to her presence. The monk also slowed his pace, nervously scanning the darkness from left to right and behind him as if he knew he was being followed. Cassie hid in the shadows behind a bushy rhododendron well away from the street light.

Muffled voices approached from the opposite end of the courtyard.

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Goosebumps appeared on her arms as every hair on her body stood on end. She looked for the monk, now only a faint outline of him visible as he disappeared from her view in the darkness of the gardens further ahead. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, she thought as an uncontrollable tremor wracked her body and intangible fear clawed at her senses, her composure began to fray. What the hell was she thinking anyway, stalking a stranger in the middle of the night.

Turning to leave, the first of three figures came into view freezing her in her tracks.

Holding her breath in the darkness Cassie tried to remain as motionless as possible.

The lithe figure of a woman stepped into the mellifluous light of the courtyard illuminating her tall, shapely body. Bleached blonde short wispy hair contrasted strikingly against her deeply bronzed skin. Her dark clothing clung tightly to muscular limbs, her movement as graceful as a panther and her expression just as predatory as she scanned the area around her.

Close behind her followed a male who looked to be no more than eighteen or nineteen with spiked blonde tipped hair. Metal studs and earrings glinted portentously from every part of his face worth piercing. What wasn't pierced on his body was inked with tattoos or covered in leather.

Cassie stiffened and inhaled a sharp breath when the third figure appeared. She could barely contain her instinct to run, run as fast as she could.

It was Jarvis.

Even in the dim light and the distance between them, he was unmistakable.

Her blood ran cold in her veins.

While the Amazon woman and the punk were focused on following the same path as the monk, Jarvis stopped, his attention diverting in another direction. Tilting his head slightly, his nose lifted to sniff the night air, his head turned to follow a familiar scent further to his left, stopping when he was directly facing Cassie's location. She was well hidden from sight but she could have sworn that somehow he knew she was there.

She wasn't going to wait around to find out for sure though.

She hitched her bag on her back more securely and bolted from the bush, running as fast as her legs would take her back to the road and the safety of the bus shelter near the library only a couple of hundred metres away. There was always someone at that bus stop, no matter what time of the day or night. She didn't stop to look behind her until she reached the shelter, seating herself beside an elderly lady mindlessly plucking at the lint on her jacket.

She exhaled a deep breath and searched the darkness for any sight of Jarvis, her eyes darting from left to right anxiously. Unable to sit still, she stood again and began pacing back and forth, geared up ready to run again if necessary.

The thought of fighting him off if he came for her never entered her mind. There was something about his eyes, a barely leashed sadistic perversion leading her to believe that to find herself close enough to fall into his grasp was a very big mistake. That left running.

The bus rounded the corner and approached her stop. She had only been there a minute or two but it seemed to Cassie to be an eternity.

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As she made her way down the aisle, the bus jerked forward and she missed her footing, lurching her into a teenage boy with his Ipod headphones firmly attached to his ears, his head shaking to the beat of the music, giving him the appearance of someone with a Parkinson's tremor. She apologised profusely and took her seat, peering out through her reflexion in the window.

She swallowed hard as bile rose in her throat. Her heart raced, pounding so hard she could hear her own heartbeat. Her hands clutched the seat in front of her tightly, willing the bus to go faster. It was him. Standing at the bus stop, smiling a demented sneering smile, just watching her on the bus. She felt like his trapped prey with nowhere else to escape to.

"Oh God. Why didn't I ring Alex for a ride home? Oh God. Oh God." She mumbled to herself, rocking back and forth in her seat on the verge of losing it. "Get a grip of yourself, he's not following. He's gone." Her fear began to subside with every passing kilometre.

By the end of her ten minute bus ride home, she'd managed to rationalise her thoughts and fears as an over reaction. It would have been just a coincidence that Jarvis was there and besides he wouldn't have been looking for her anyway.

By the time she reached the front door of her apartment, she still felt jittery from the adrenaline rush but had calmed herself enough to return to thinking about why the monk was walking through the gardens at night.

Emptying her bag, she placed the Professor's paper on the coffee table, making a mental note to hand it in first thing in the morning, and dug deeper to the bottom of the bag for her phone. She'd had it on silent while she was in the library and sure enough, there were four messages from Alex.

He knew the library was closed and he'd head out looking for her if she didn't ring back soon.

She was exhausted. She felt mentally and emotionally drained. She put on her PJ's and brushed her teeth. She hadn't eaten since this morning but she was too tired to care right now.

She climbed into bed and dialled Alex's number.

One ring, two rings, and he picked up.

"Hi, sorry I didn't call you. Something came up," defending herself before he had a chance to say anything.

"I told you to call me. Where are you now?" She could hear the anger in his voice.

"I'm home. I caught the bus, I promise I won't ever do it again. Next time I'll call you," grovelling for forgiveness. He wouldn't stay mad at her, he never did.

"What happened? What is it you don't want to tell me," he quizzed. She never could hide anything from him. It was damned annoying.

She sank back into her pillows and began her story, giving him an account of the events after she left the library. Putting it plainly, he was madder than ever with her, vowing not to let her out his sight again. Under threat of coming over and sleeping on her couch, he made her take the phone to the front door to unlock and re-lock the deadlock so he could hear it, and knew she was definitely locked in and safe. When he was satisfied, she turned off all the lights and climbed back into bed, snuggling back under her doona.

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"Well," with his mood defused slightly, he proceeded to tell her his news. "I called my buddy at Customs. It turns out that Anil Norgay is a Tibetan Priest with diplomatic immunity," getting to the point finally, after explaining some conversation or other about an impending pub crawl. To Cassie it sounded like gibberish wafting through one ear and straight out the other.

"I mentioned to him that there is a cup, some sort of chalice that was stolen from the Dalai Lama and he has promised to call me if anything that fits the description, comes through Customs," he finished, deflated that Cassie didn't get excited by his investigative skills. It just wasn't going to happen tonight. Exhaustion was claiming her consciousness as she fought to keep her eyes open.

"Thanks for the info, but I'll talk to you about it more tomorrow, I'm stuffed," she mumbled sleepily. "And yes, I promise I'll call you if anyone comes knocking on my door in the middle of the night," adding this last statement, knowing that was going to be his parting request to her anyway.

Happy that they'd dealt with everything important, she placed her phone on the bedside table and switched off the lamp, sleep quickly claiming her.

## Chapter 5

### Chapter 5

It was barely light when she heard her phone beeping with a text message. It was too early to wake-up she thought. Surely nothing was more important than her sleep. She turned over and snuggled down deeper under the doona.

A few minutes later, another message came beeping through. This was starting to become annoying. She was so tired, she just wanted another half hour of sleep, even ten minutes would do, surely *everyone* knew that.

No sooner had the phone stopped beeping with the second message, than it started to ring. Now she was really ticked-off. Obviously there was no chance of sleeping in today. With her head still buried under the covers, she felt around on the nightstand for her phone. Her fingers finally located the cause of her early morning annoyance and dragged it under the doona with her, checking the caller ID. It was Alex.

"Alex, what's so important that you have toâ€¦!" She grumbled in a croaky voice, cut off mid sentence.

"Have you heard?" he blurted excitedly.

It was too early for her to be interested in gossip. "Heard about what?" she asked curtly.

"The monk. He's dead. They found him an hour or so ago, murdered on the University grounds." He spoke so fast it took her a moment to process the news in her sleep deprived brain.

There was dead silence on both ends of the phone for the longest seconds.

Suddenly she was fully awake as she realised she was probably the last person to have seen him alive. Her mind flashed back to the three people she saw in the court yard. Jarvis was one them and she knew he was dangerous enough, but could he be a murderer?

"Meet me at the Uni in thirty minutes," she implored, hanging up the phone before he had a chance to reply.

In a daze she dressed, her mind swam with the facts she knew and the possible scenarios surrounding them.

A little over thirty minutes later, she arrived at the scene of the crime. A cacophony of people hovered around behind the taped off police line, debating between themselves how his body was found. One said his throat was ripped out, another said he was decapitated. Then the rumours began about why he was murdered, each story more ludicrous than the last.

Despite the large crowd that gathered, the police almost outnumbered them, buzzing around the perimeter of their marked-out territory to ensure crowd control and encouraging people to move on. His body lay no more than fifty metres from where Cassie stood and no more than one hundred metres farther than where she'd seen him walking last night. He was covered with a khaki sheet, most likely donated from the Department of Medicine or Biology she suspected. Dark patches of blood pervaded the cloth in the region of his head and neck. It was a very sobering thought knowing that he most likely died only minutes after she saw him, going by where his body lay now.

Alex made his way up beside her in the crowd. His affect was sombre and his eyes darted about nervously. According to the cop shows, which he probably watched a little too much of, the murderer often returns to the

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scene of the crime to watch the drama unfold. It occurred to him that if Cassie had seen Jarvis here last night and he had recognised her, and if he was the murderer, then maybe he'd be after Cassie next. Until they can get to the bottom of this, he intended to stick close by her, day and night whether she liked it or not. She was fiercely independent but he was every bit as pig headed as she was and he wasn't taking no for an answer.

Her attention was so absorbed in watching the coroner putting the monk's body in the bag, she jumped when Alex tapped her on the shoulder, completely unaware of him beside her.

"Hey kid, how're you doing?" his concern barely masked in his voice.

"I keep telling you not to call me that," giving him a feeble back hand into his stomach as reprisal, but attempted to grin at him all the same. "I'm tired. Thanks for asking," yawning almost on command.

"I guess that would explain your clothes. Nice look by the way." He said, tugging at the sleeve of her top.

"What are you talking about?" Looking herself up and down, quickly noting matching socks and shoes, jeans and a top. She touched her hair which was up in a ponytail, no stray hairs flying about. There was nothing out of place that she could see.

"Your top is inside out. Didn't your mother teach you how to dress when you were a kid?" he jested. It was then that she noticed her miss managed effort in dressing, the seams of her top clearly exposed on the outside.

"Hmm," her brows knitting together in mild annoyance. She really couldn't care less at that moment in time how she looked, but since Alex's was likely to be the first of several comments regarding her attire, she figured she should save herself future aggravation in explaining herself and rearrange her top sooner rather than later.

She moved her way through the crowd with Alex hot on her heels.

"Where are you going," he enquired, having assumed the role of her minder.

"To the Ladies room to fix my top. Where are you going?" she asked, giving him a suspicious look.

"I'm going with you." His eyes sparkled and a cheeky grin emerged, spreading from ear to ear. The idea of going into the Ladies room was very appealing. He'd always been curious what it looked like. Since women seemed to spend so much time in there, it must be fairly impressive. To Alex at least, the possibility of seeing half naked women was impressive. Reality didn't enter into the equation, his imagination was far more *titillating*.

"That's what you think. I know you're worried about me but I think I'm pretty safe with a few hundred people around." She called back to him, already a few strides ahead as she reached the building's front entrance.

"Stay here. I don't need you to help dress me," admonishing him for his mischievous thoughts clearly painted on his face. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Standing outside the front door to the building, Alex dropped his bag on the ground in front of him and crossed his arms, leaning his back forcibly against the wall, raising his knee and resting his foot against the bricks, tapping it on the wall in defiance. "I'm coming in after you if you're not out in ten minutes, pointing at his watch to emphasise his resolve.

She gave a pained sigh and entered the building.

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The Ladies room was at the far end of the corridor. As she neared the Faculty Office half way along, the Professor's door opened and two police detectives exited. One of whom handed his card to the Professor on his way out. His charcoal black hair, although neatly cut, hung limp about his face. Even from a distance, Cassie could see the silky sheen to his hair.

Lilith appeared from the office offering to escort the Police Officers from the building, smiling sweetly at the raven haired officer.

"Thank you detective." The Professor said, shaking his hand.

"If you think of anything that could help us with the investigation please call me," he pointed to the card in the Professors hand.

"Yes, um, certainly, ah ,â Detective Renkin," he replied, reading his name from the card.

"Bill Renkin. I'm available on that number 24/7," the detective affirmed, turning abruptly to leave. His fellow detective, a shorter red headed fellow making a dash to catch up with him.

As the detectives approached Cassie could see the dark haired one was around Alex's height but more solidly built. His trench coat flared around him as he walked, forcing her to take a step to the side. As he passed, he looked her up and down, eying her off in the same manner you would a lab rat about to be dissected. His dark eyes were emotionless, hardened by years on the force, not that Lilith seemed to notice, flashing her brightest smile at him.

The Professor stood in his office doorway for a few moments staring at the card in his hand, fingering one of its corners, looking at it but oblivious to the details. His mind was elsewhere, deep in thought.

The monk had obviously been his friend by the way they greeted each other yesterday morning. Cassie recalled her feeling of distress when she first saw him, the memory washing through her, giving her goose bumps. She'd known he was here for something important. It was obviously something important enough to die for.

Even if she was reluctant to admit it aloud, she was rattled by his death and needed to share her thoughts with someone, and who better than the Professor. She called out to him.

The Professor looked up, his trademark smile automatically falling into place. "Ah, Miss McLennan, I trust you have something for me," he stated in his well rehearsed teachers manner.

"Well, actually no. I forgot the assignment, but believe it or not, I did finish it," grimacing slightly, anticipating his chastisement and lecture on fulfilling a commitment and responsibility, yada, yada, yada. She'd heard that one before, more than once. But, there was nothing, not even a frown.

"Professor, if you have a moment, I have something else I'd like to talk to you about. It's about the monk who was killed last night, Anil Norgay. I have some information that might be of interest." Instantly she had his full attention.

"Please come in and sit down," ushering her into his office, checking the corridor was clear in both directions before closing the door.

"Tell me what's on your mind Cassie," addressing her informally for a change. He watched her expectantly as she fidgeted nervously, searching for the right place to begin her recollection of events. She deliberated,

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inhaling a deep breath and slowly letting it out again. A Yoga technique she'd learnt to deal with stress.

"On Friday night, Alex and I went to the new nightclub, Phoenix. While we were there I was approached by this really creepy guy who had this whole Charles Manson theme going on. He told me his name was Jarvis. Anyway, a long story short, another man stepped in and got Alex and me out of the club before Jarvis could *do* anything to me," pausing to see if she had his attention, which she did. The Professor sat forward in his seat with his hands beneath his thighs on the chair.

"The guy who rescued me gave me strict instructions not to go out after dark for at least the next week," stopping again to take another deep breath, she fidgeted nervously, aware that the Professor was watching her intently.

"Yesterday morning when you had your meeting with the monk, Anil Norgay, Alex and I stayed outside and listened in. We overheard you discussing a cup that was entrusted to the Delhi Lama was stolen." Expecting him to be annoyed with her for eaves dropping, she paused again steeling herself for a reprimand which yet again didn't come. Instead he asked her to continue.

Feeling a little more confident that her information was obviously important, she spoke with more animation, eager to get it all out.

"After class yesterday, I went to the library so I could get my paper finished. I was there until it closed. When I was leaving I saw Anil Norgay leaving also. I followed him as far as the courtyard next to the gardens behind one of the Colleges, when I heard voices. I hid behind some bushes out of sight. I thought I was well hidden but when the three people came into view, one of them seemed to know I was there. It was the same man from the Phoenix nightclub, Jarvis." Her breathing quickened, as she relived the stress of seeing him again. "The other two followed Anil Norgay. His body was found only a one hundred metres from where I last saw him," she finished up in a rush of words.

"Are you sure it was the same man from the night club?" he asked, sitting even further forward in his chair, his hand placed over her clasped ones in her lap.

"Yes, I'm certain." She replied. "He followed me to the bus stop. I got a good look at him."

"Well, this is very important information indeed. If you wouldn't mind doing me a favour, I have someone who I'd like you to speak to about this. Unfortunately it would mean a trip out of town this evening, but I do believe it is very important to tell him everything you know." His concern left her with no doubt that she should agree to go.

"Okay, but I don't have a car." A minor detail that was bound to make a trip to the country more difficult.

"Don't worry about that, neither do I," he chuckled. "Fortunately I have a very good assistant who like myself, doesn't have a life outside of work. It will be a very pleasant trip for the three of us. Fortunately it's not too far, only an hour or so," patting her on the knee in a grandfatherly fashion.

"Trip. What trip?" announced Alex, flushed and flustered in the doorway. "I told you I'd come looking for you if you weren't back in ten minutes. What trip?" His facial expression was stern and his stance commanding, in military fashion, ready to give her a rendition of his disapproval if he didn't agree with her answer.

"Mr Delgado. It's probably a good thing you're here," the Professor said, waving him in.



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"I've just told Professor Cohen about the nightclub and what I saw last night and he's asked if I can talk to someone he knows about it later this afternoon." She explained.

"Why not tell the police what you know. They're running the investigation." Alex enquired, speaking to Cassie but looking directly at the Professor. His priority was Cassie's safety and a request like this made him suspicious of even the saintly Professor.

"Normally, I would advocate the police being informed," he replied. "However, in this case there are some very delicate matters to be considered which are far beyond the capabilities of the police." Placing his hand over his heart he continued. "If I could hand all the information over to the police I would, but it's just not that simple. There is a lot more at stake here than the death of one monk and I fear that the two of you," looking at both Cassie and Alex, his eyes saddened by the knowledge that was still unknown to them, "have inexplicably been drawn into something beyond your present understanding, either by chance or by design, I don't know." He pressed his forefinger against his pursed lips at the end of his speech, as if it were necessary to stop himself from telling them any more. It was clear to both Cassie and Alex that there was a lot more explaining to come and their list of questions was growing.

What was that expression? Oh yeh, curiosity killed the cat. Neither of them had a death wish but they were both eager enough to get some answers and if they had to use up some of those hypothetical nine lives to do it, then so be it.

Alex cleared his throat and moved behind Cassie's chair, placing his hands on her shoulders. "I don't know what's going on, but if Cassie is going anywhere, then I'm going with her." Shifting his gaze from the Professor to Cassie, giving her ponytail a light tug to get her attention, adding a clause. "But in all honesty, I can't be seen in public with you until you dress yourself properly." An expression of mirth, earning him another back hand to his stomach.

"See how she treats me. I'm her willing slave, her bodyguard, ready to protect her from all the low life's out there, and she beats me up for it. Sheesh," quickly placing his arm across his stomach expecting yet another back hand.

Cassie rolled her eyes and stood to face him, placing her hands on her hips. "You're just lucky I've put up with you all these years. How many situations have I rescued you from, Huh."

"We're not keeping score here." He argued.

"Now, now children. You can leave your squabbling for the playground." The Professor said, becoming a little exasperated. Normally their performance would've gone unnoticed but today he seemed to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders and he just didn't have the energy for any petty childish behaviour.

Cassie excused herself to go and fix her top, turning to flash Alex the evil eye in the doorway, nearly bowling over Lilith in the process, dutifully carrying in the Professor's morning coffee.

Lilith gave Cassie her own evil eye as she brushed the few drops of coffee from her skirt which had escaped the cup in their collision. Apologising profusely to Cassie, grabbed a couple of tissues from the box on the desk and helped wipe the coffee stains from her skirt.

The Professor quickly removed the coffee from Lilith's hands, gratefully taking a sip. His morning coffee not only settled the rumbles in his empty stomach but had the comforting affect of ritual and normality that served to reduce his stress level a fraction.

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Alex looked longingly at the coffee, realising the he hadn't appeased his own addiction for caffeine yet this morning and made a mental note to make his next stop the coffee shop.

Professor Cohen related to Lilith what had been discussed in her absence. He didn't hesitate to disclose to her any of the details. She had been his trusted right hand, so to speak, for the past ten years. There wasn't much she didn't know about him either personally or professionally. Sometimes he thought she knew him better than he knew himself. She also had an amazing insight into his work which he had come to rely on.

"No doubt you need to see Mr Neumann. I'll call and arrange a time to meet with him. Should I ask him to come here?" she asked, hopeful of seeing him again herself.

"Ah. No. I don't think it would be wise to ask him to come here with all the police around. We'll need to go and see him." he replied.

Lilith beamed an excited smile. Even better she thought.

Focusing his attention again on Cassie and Alex he gave them instructions that they meet back here in his office at 4.30pm after classes.

"In the meantime, *do not*", emphasising his words carefully, "speak a word of what you've seen or what we've discussed, to a single soul. Promise me." To which both replied emphatically in agreement and left his office to go through the pretence of a normal day, although their minds weren't focussed on anything considered remotely normal.

## Chapter 6

### Chapter 6

Late afternoon shadows stretched long and thin as a shower of sunlight fell through the avenue of oak trees lining the length of the driveway. Over the years their branches had woven together to form an arched canopy, although sadly they were half naked of their coppery autumn leaves which collected about the procession of azalea bushes beneath them. Of which only a few bushes still retained a scattering of soft pink flowers.

Cassie wondered what a beautiful sight it would be in springtime to drive down this corridor of flowering shrubs under its roof of new green leaves. However, it was without doubt, the longest driveway she had ever seen. The gravel road stretched five hundred metres as straight as a die, until the last fifty meters where it bent to the left in an 'S' bend fashion, opening into a sizeable circular clearing with a large three tiered fountain in its centre. Skirting the clearing were more azaleas framing the flagstone path surrounding a stately house, or more precisely an enormous mansion, separating it from the lawns and the perfectly manicured gardens.

An old red sandstone building stood timeless with its backdrop of the Savernake Forest bordering the property on all sides. Ivy vines wove their way up the textured walls, finding footing in the mortar between each stone rising three floors, almost the full height of the front façade, only a foot or two short of the moss covered tiled roof. Four chimneys were visible from the front aspect on its steep pitched roof, one of which emitted soft plumes of smoke. Circular turrets dominated the corners of the house, rising level with the peak of the roof with battlements extended the length of the walls between each turret. It was stunning against its picturesque backdrop and the setting sun.

Alex whistled in admiration. "This guy must be loaded," he remarked.

"What a wonderful place to live," Cassie muttered, marvelling over its charm and beauty, unable to take her eyes off the house.

"This," the Professor announced, "is Havenswood Manor. It would be very hard not to be impressed by it, wouldn't you agree?" turning his head to face them and flashing them both a broad grin. His mood had taken a sudden turn for the better, his cheery manner becoming infectious enticing easy smiles from his companions.

"Yes, indeed, I think it would be hard to find its equal anywhere," she agreed, in awe of the enormity of the house, its grounds and the forest abutting it. It was completely secluded from the outside world. No traffic noise, no street lights, no annoying neighbours. It was perfect.

Lilith brought the car to a stop in front of the house, alongside a small path leading to the front doors.

As they approached, the lamps lining the path came on, highlighting the faded red glow from the setting sun giving off its last blush. Cassie stopped to watch as the sky changed colour in the dying moments of dusk. In truth though, she just wanted a minute to gather her thoughts. She didn't know if her trivial amount of information was really worth all the trouble of travelling out here, and the thought of being interrogated about Jarvis made her nauseous. She didn't want to remember how vulnerable he'd made her feel but remembering was inevitable. That was the whole point of coming here after all, to talk about Jarvis and his companions.

The front door opened and a stoutly woman with ruddy cheeks greeted them, wiping her hands on her apron before ushering them in.

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"It's good to see you again Professor," she flirted, emphasising her sincerity with a wink, "and you too," she said, nodding curtly to Lilith, raising an embarrassed giggle from the Professor and a "Hmph" from Lilith.

"The master will be with you shortly," she announced to the Professor sweetly, guiding them through the entrance hall. "We don't get too many visitors here you know, it's a bit of a novelty." She called back to Alex excitedly, who was doing his best to camouflage his snickering, amused by her greetings and the responses they elicited. Her character was as large as her bust, bold and bubbly and not backward in coming forward.

"Mrs Philpot, I'd like you to meet Alex and, somewhere," looking behind him toward the front door, he searched the semi darkness outside for Cassie, "is his cousin who is here to see Mr Neumann."

"Very pleased to meet you." She said politely to Alex. "Please make yourselves comfortable in the study. I'll see to the young lady," cheerfully shuffling them through another doorway into a very spacious room. The length of one wall was lined with bookshelves from the floor to its lofty ceiling. Leather bound books filled every available space, some looked particularly old.

"And, don't go touching anything," she said, waving her finger at Lilith.

Alex got the distinct impression that if Mrs Philpot didn't like you, you'd soon know about it. Clearly she didn't think much of Lilith. But then again, she obviously had a thing for the Professor and Lilith was his attractive, younger assistant. He could understand she might be jealous. Neither the Professor nor Lilith seemed to take much notice of her manner so Alex thought it best to forget it as well.

Instead, he turned his attention to the oversized fireplace. The delicate engravings in the mantel extended almost three metres in length and stood nearly two metres from the floor. The fireplace was practically large enough to stand inside. It was supported in place on either side by two pairs of intricately carved columns to resemble tree trunks made from the same piece of black marble as the hearth, one pair at either end supporting the mantel and a larger pair framing the fireplace on either side. Between the pillars were beautifully carved forest scenes. Logs blazed in the grate and the fire's warmth filled the room. A spark shot from a log as the sap crackled in the heat. Alex ran his hands lightly over the intricate carvings. The stone was cool to the touch despite the heat from the fire below it.

The hardwood floor was stained a deep mahogany although the polish had now faded from time and wear. A Large Persian rug covered the floor in front of the hearth with an old green Chesterfield high backed wing chair, angled towards the fire. A matching two seater sofa was placed perpendicular on the other side of the fireplace soaking up the fires warmth. Alex couldn't resist the chair and sank deeply into it, shifting his weight in the well worn leather, softened over years of use. The seat was perfectly moulded to the shape for his rear and very comfortable. He clasped the arm rests lightly, fingering the rough texture of cracked leather along the edge, enjoying the nobility of the chair.

"Elijah, it's good to see you. Thank you for coming all the way out here." The man's voice came from behind Alex's chair.

"I'm just sorry it isn't under better circumstances," replied the Professor in a serious manner, taking the man's hand and shaking it vigorously. Alex couldn't see his face but the voice was familiar.

"You said you wanted me to talk to someone. He's here with you?" he asked.

Alex stood from the chair and turned to face the owner of the voice.

"You!" they both exclaimed simultaneously.

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"You know each other?" the Professor queried, perplexed by their animosity toward one another.

"So, you have information for me?" he asked, a little disgruntled. His posture straightened expecting a verbal rebuttal at any moment. He didn't try to disguise his displeasure at seeing him, but then, neither did Alex.

"Actually, that would be me you need to talk to." Cassie stood in the doorway behind him, Mrs Philpot by her side.

Alaric turned to face her. His mouth gaped open and his heart skipped a beat at the sight of her. "Cassie!" he exclaimed. "I, well, um," was all he managed, stumbling over his words as he strained to regain his ability to speak coherently.

Cassie's cheeks flushed bright red although the heat she felt coursing through her wasn't confined to her face. She felt excited and nervous all at once. To be standing so near to him again was intoxicating.

"You know each other?" asked the Professor, even more bemused. Neither of them answered as they stood staring at one another, lost in silent communication in each others eyes.

"Are you going to speak or are you trying to catch something in that fly trap you call a mouth," quipped Alex, breaking the spell between them was broken.

"Has anyone ever told you how annoying you are? You prattle like a nagging fish wife." Alaric chided.

"Yes. In fact I believe you did only a few days ago, just before you *hit* me!" Alex barked back.

"Why are you here anyway, if it's Cassie who wants to talk to me," equally irritated with Alex as he was with himself for letting him get under his skin.

"I don't think anything will be achieved if we can't all sit down together rationally and get to the bottom of what's going on," Lilith interjected, diverting the discussion back to the matter at hand, before it deteriorated to childish petty squabbling.

The Professor stood to one side scratching his head, puzzled as to how the three of them should already be acquainted.

"Yes, you're absolutely right Lilith," agreed Alaric, finally composing himself.

"Cassie, I apologise for my terrible manners. I can't tell you how pleased I am to see you again," giving her a slight bow with the dip of his head, his voice was as smooth and sweet as honey. "Please, come in. Welcome to my home." His gaze never left her face.

Her knees weakened and began to shake, threatening to give way before she'd taken a single step. An overwhelming sea of emotions washed over her. The person she believed herself to be, confident and always in control, seemed to have deserted her, replaced by a nervous and needy stranger now occupying her body.

Whether he sensed her distress, or her desperate need to be closer to him was blatantly obvious, she could only guess. Alaric quickly stepped forward and offered her his arm, which she eagerly accepted, escorting her to the sofa and taking his place beside her. All eyes in the room were on her but all she could see was Alaric. The heat in his blue green eyes permeated every corner of her soul. For the first time in days she felt as though she could breathe again. The constriction in her chest which she hadn't been aware of until now, released. Her whole body seemed to sigh in response and visibly relax.

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"This is your home?" she asked, looking around the room in admiration.

"Yes," he chuckled quietly. The iridescence in his eyes glittered when he laughed. "It's all mine. Do you approve?" petitioning for a favourable reply.

"Very much. I think you're very fortunate to have such a wonderful home." Of course Cassie was envisioning herself curled up in his arms in front of this same fire, his naked body entwined with hers.

Little did she know, Alaric was envisioning the same fantasy. Subconsciously they leaned a little closer toward one another, as though an invisible cord was pulling them together.

"Maybe later you'll allow me to show you around the rest of the house," eager that she be equally pleased with the rest of his home as she was with this one room.

Or was it her approval of *him* that he wanted.

No. Definitely not. Her approval of him was irrelevant.

"I think we should just get on with this meeting so we don't take up any more of your time than necessary." Alex protested indignantly through gritted teeth, still standing by the Chesterfield, his arms folded in front of him. His eyes squinted and his lips pursed tightly together giving a good impersonation of having bitten into a bitter lemon. He hated that Cassie was attracted to *him*.

"That's enough Alex." Cassie chastised, staring daggers at him until he turned away and mumbled profanities to himself. Preferring to be as far away as possible from Alaric, he moved to stand next to Lilith by the bookcase, which in his mind was a much better view. Long legs and a short skirt could always improve his mood. Lilith however, seemed not to notice his presence in the slightest, having adopted a closed posture and seething glare toward Cassie.

"Too many hot heads and jealous minds in this house tonight", the Professor mumbled to himself, sinking into the chair behind the desk and let out a long sigh. He felt tired to the bone but nonetheless, there was a job to do here and he'd listened to enough bickering.

Alex does have one thing right, he thought, it was time to get on with business.

"Alaric," he began. "Cassie came to me this morning with news about some people she saw last night, who I believe are most likely Anil Norgay's killers."

All eyes turned in unison to face the Professor. His white hair and stately presence behind the huge desk gave him the appearance of a presiding judge in court.

"Cassie, can you tell me what you saw?" Alaric asked, his knee coming to rest against hers as he turned to face her again. Her heart fluttered. She was finding it hard to focus on the topic of conversation, his presence was a constant distraction. Staring down at the floor, mindlessly examining the intricate pattern in the rug, she composed her thoughts and once again related her encounter with Jarvis and his two companions.

"Hmm. I don't like the sound of this." Careful not to let Cassie see the full extent of his concern, Alaric stood and began pacing back and forth in front of the fire, one hand on his hip, the other supported his chin, rubbing the dimple in its centre. Deep furrows etched into his forehead as he contemplated the implications of Cassie's news.

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He stopped pacing and faced the group.

"I have no doubt that Jarvis and his companions murdered Anil. I'm also sure that by tomorrow the police will have someone else in custody, some poor fool they've framed for it," looking to the Professor and then to Alex.

"What I'm concerned about is that Jarvis knows Cassie saw them and he also knows he can't glamour her into forgetting about it. Besides that, he has a personal interest in her." His gaze rested back on Cassie. "They're hired assassins who can't afford to leave any loose ends."

"And I'm a loose end. Is that what you're saying?" Cassie asked, reluctantly voicing the statement that everyone was thinking. A pungent taste of bile tinged the back of her throat as her stomach twisted in knots again.

"It appears that way, yes."

"Then what do we do about it?" Alex asked.

"Well, we can't let him get to her, but, we also have another problem. Jarvis and his colleagues most likely have information that we need," he answered, troubled by the only tenable solution to their problem.

"You mean to lure him into a trap and use Cassie as bait." Alex aired in an acid tone, articulating Alaric's inference.

Cassie's shoulders slumped. The prospect of another confrontation with Jarvis was terrifying. Risky at best and at worst, well, she didn't want to think about that.

Alaric didn't answer. He didn't need to. He looked at Cassie, his face expressing a thousand words.

"No. I won't allow it. Fuck you!" growled Alex furiously. "It's too dangerous. You said it yourself, he's an *assassin*," emphasising the word slowly, as though he thought Alaric was too daft to get the point. "How do you propose to protect Cassie against an assassin? Not to mention his friends. I suppose you can take on all three at once can you?" His face contorting in anger, his chest puffed out and hands on his hips in the pose of a defiant rooster.

"Yes, I can take on all three at once *and* protect Cassie." Alaric protested calmly, resigned to the fact that he would need to expose his secret to gain their trust.

"Please enlighten us then, just how do you plan on doing this?" Alex stood his ground as Alaric approached and stood toe to toe with him.

"I can, because I'm a stronger and faster assassin than any of them." He answered, giving him a humourless half grin.

Alex watched in shock as Alaric's incisor teeth doubled their length and sharpened to a point.

"What the â !.. Holy crap," he exclaimed jumping back a step in astonishment. "Are they real? You're a, a â !"

"Vampire." Alaric finished the statement for him.

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"That's impossible. Vampires don't exist. They're fairy tales told to frighten children and to give grown women wet dreams," although his eyes were fixated on Alaric's teeth, which were undeniably real.

"It is possible and they do exist. Are you afraid of me?" he asked devilishly. Enjoying that he'd caught Alex off guard.

"Well, that depends. Do you plan on killing me?" unperturbed by his challenge.

Alaric glared into Alex's eyes. The pregnant pause of silence sent a chill through the room, while the electricity between them sizzled and crackled with tension. "No. I haven't killed a living creature in centuries and I don't intend to start with you." he stated flatly, conceding he'd lost the upper hand.

"Then, no. I'm not afraid of you." To prove his point he stepped forward again, pressed his thumb onto the end of one of his fangs, twanging it like a guitar string, to test its authenticity.

Alaric huffed and stepped away. He wasn't sure if Alex's boldness was due to bravery or stupidity. Time would tell.

He looked up at Cassie who sat wide eyed staring at him. He took a couple of steps in her direction and then stopped, fearing his revelation would be too much for her to accept. She was the last person on earth he wanted to frighten.

To his surprise, she stood and approached him, taking his hand in both of hers and squeezed it in reassurance.

Cassie sensed his insecurity. She wasn't afraid of him. In fact, she felt even more attracted to him, if that was possible. All those vampire movies and books she'd read tantalized her imagination. He was her personal, living wet dream. Heat bored through to her core, throbbing and alive with need.

"You need bait. I'm bait. End of story," leaving them all in no doubt that the discussion was ended. Although, her heart pounded in her chest and her mind screamed at her to take back her words, she knew that unless she confronted Jarvis she would never be free of him. In her mind, he would always be waiting for her just around the next corner, stalking her endlessly. She would never feel safe. It was better to deal with him now and if she had to trust someone to protect her, she was glad it was Alaric. In her heart she knew he would never let anything happen to her, or at least she wanted to believe that. He'd already protected her once hadn't he?

He retracted his fangs and the tension in the room decreased a couple of notches. With a tentative smile, he squeezed her hand gently as thanks for her support and to reassure her that he wouldn't let her down, holding her hand a fraction longer than necessary. His eyes roiled with mixed emotions as he fought to keep them in check.

How long had it been since he last *felt* anything?

It was so long ago the memory was just an echo in his mind. He'd existed in a self imposed cocoon, numb, devoid of any human emotion, which was only natural, he thought. He wasn't human.

He'd been dead inside.

Until now! Now, he was overwhelmed with emotions that threatened to crack his stone heart and bring his world crashing down around him. Desire, hate, frustration and fear. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt *fear*.



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He was completely unprepared.

"I have a couple of questions," Cassie began. "I'd like to know what's going on. I want to know what we've become involved in?" reviewing in her mind everything she'd already learnt.

Her query jolted him out of his stupor.

The Professor, Lilith and Alaric looked at each other, their faces grim.

"That's fair," said Lilith. "If you're going to put your life on the line, you should know what the cause is you're aiding."

The Professor nodded in agreement.

"It may be more comfortable to have this conversation in the sitting room," Alaric stated. "This could be a lengthy discussion."

## Chapter 7

### Chapter 7

The sitting room was much lighter in its colour tones, earthy but more modern than the study. Large full length windows looked out over the rear gardens and Savernake forest, now only visible as a dense black shadow against the starlit sky. The heavy cream drapes were pulled back by fringed golden ties at either side of the windows. By their appearance, Cassie guessed they were rarely closed hanging only for decoration. The cloth beneath the ties was a slightly darker shade, not bleached by the sun like the rest of the curtain material.

A creamy marble, mottled with varying shades of brown, framed the arched fireplace. It was much smaller than the one in the study but equally as stunning. The brass screen was fixed to the outer rim of the fireplace, thin framed brass doors with fine brass mesh allowed full view inside the hearth. The rim was textured with divots into its beaten metal, giving it a rustic finish. The matching brass fire tools stood beside it, their highly polished metal gleaming on the hearth.

Mrs Philpot, having anticipated an extended visit, had prepared the wood and kindling in the hearth. Alaric opened the screen doors and crouched down. With the flick of a match it flared to life, igniting the dry kindling. Trails of smoke spiralled up the chimney as the bark on the wood beneath caught alight.

As Cassie looked around the room she noticed an antique Chinese sideboard, stained a chestnut colour and lacquered with a glossy finish standing along the rear wall facing toward the fireplace. Its top curled up at either end emulating a scroll. The handles on the draws and cupboard doors below had brass yin/yang symbols. A large gilded mirror on the wall above it reflected back the warmth and light from the fire, giving the room a very homely feel.

Cassie and Alex sank deeply into one of two large cream lounges. Alex groaned with pleasure as he spread himself out and rearranged the nest of cushions around him, squashing Cassie against the arm of the couch at the other end.

"This is more comfortable than my bed," he said, turning to Alaric, "I don't think this couch goes very well in this room though. I tell you what, I'll do you a favour. I'd be happy to take it off your hands," he crowed flippantly, offering his best lopsided grin.

Alaric raised himself from his crouched position by the fire, its flames now growing steadily higher.

"I tell you what," Alaric began, in a serious business-like tone. "I'll let you have the couch if Cassie stays here with me," turning his head away from Alex to wink at Cassie.

Alex's smile disintegrated into a scowl. There was no way on earth he was letting Cassie anywhere near this guy...vampire...arsehole...freak. They all watched as his face flushed and the veins in his neck began to bulge. He rose from his seat slowly as if the pressure building in his body expanded in volume forcing him upright, his finger raised pointing at Alaric with a venomous deluge of insults ready and waiting. "Not on your life, you blood sucking perverted low life. If you think ..."

Cassie's giggles distracted his train of thought, redirecting his anger in her direction.

"What the hell are you laughing about," he exploded. "This fucker thinks you're a possession that he can trade for *furniture*," his face turning from red to purple with rage.

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"He's kidding. He's just trying to get your goat, calm down," she said, trying her best to keep the smile off her face, pulling on the cuff of his sleeve unsuccessfully trying to make him sit down again.

Although from her perspective, she couldn't see any problem with Alaric's proposal. There was nothing she'd like more than to stay here, not that she was about to tell Alex that though. Not without starting World War III.

Alaric smiled. "Sorry, I was kidding. Couldn't help myself. You're just so easy to bait and there's not a lot of entertainment around here. Please, sit down," trying to defuse the situation he held out his hand to Alex to shake, hoping he would accept a truce.

Alex slowly reached out woodenly and shook his hand with one half hearted brief shake and seated himself again, giving Alaric a glare that was the ocular version of a fully extended middle finger. His scowl furrowed lines so deeply into his forehead they left indelible marks like waves in the sand while his anger simmered visibly just below the surface. If Alaric was anyone other than a vampire, he would've snotted him one. Then again, he still might just for the hell of it, bugger the consequences. For now however, he chose a safer option and took it out on the cushions, punching them into a comfortable position behind him.

What really annoyed him was that he *knew* it wouldn't take much to convince Cassie to stay at the Manor with the blood sucking leach. It was written all over her love struck face.

Cassie patted him on the knee and gave him *the* look. The one that he knew meant *get over it*. Not likely, he thought to himself. He had a memory like an elephant.

The Professor and Lilith occupied the two matching chairs. Alaric began slowly pacing in front of the fire.

"Would you look at that," admired the Professor, rubbing his hands together with delight. "Mrs Philpot thinks of everything." A large platter of sandwiches had been laid out on the coffee table before them along with plates, a jug of orange juice and glasses. "Cheese and cucumber sandwiches. Ooh, and ham and pickles too, my favourites." He exclaimed, reaching forward to help himself.

"Of course she's made your favourites," sniped Lilith. "If fried toad was your favourite food, she would've made that too!" sitting back heavily into her seat she debated whether she was hungry enough to eat Mrs Philpot's food. Contrarily, Alex was hoeing into the platter of sandwiches with as much enthusiasm as the Professor, handing Cassie a token sandwich or two when she made no effort to acquire any for herself. If she didn't know him so well, she'd think his foul mood of only a few moments earlier was seemingly forgotten.

"Well. When do we get to hear about this cup?" Alex asked, gulping down the last sandwich and deliberately brushing the crumbs onto the rug. A fruitless gesture since Alaric's eyes never left Cassie for a moment, which did nothing to placate his pensive mood.

Although the Professor and Lilith were well versed on the relevant history, Alaric couldn't recall a time in his long past when *he* had shared so much information with humans, any humans. His life had required anonymity and it felt strange and unnatural to suddenly be openly discussing knowledge he had guarded so vehemently for centuries, secrets he'd once killed to protect.

Cassie leaned forward a little, staring expectantly at Alaric who in turn looked to the Professor, nodding and taking his cue to start the discussion.

"Where to begin?" The Professor mulled over the important parts to his story. "You're familiar with the tale of the Holy Grail. The legend tells that if you drink from the cup you will gain eternal life," looking from

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Cassie to Alex who both nodded in agreement.

"Well, the Holy Grail is real. It does have the ability to give eternal life but not in the way that the stories tell." He stopped talking, shaking his head, his forefinger tapping his chin in thought.

"No. That's not where we need to start. I think we need to go back further," clapping his hands and rubbing them together, as he often did at the beginning of his lectures.

"About 2,500 years ago lived a man by the name of Siddhartha Gautama, more commonly known as the *Buddha*. During his life he achieved enlightenment, and at the time of his death his soul ascended to the higher dimensions, one of the lower angelic dimensions, in fact. His was the first soul to achieve this without the assistance of an Angel of Death." He paused when Alex looked confused.

"What does the Angel of Death have to do with this?" He asked, flashing a look at Cassie to see if she understood any better than he did. Religious anthropology was here gig, not his.

"Well," the Professor explained, "There were many Angels of Death on earth back then, born as humans they retained their angelic gifts. At that time, the majority of humans weren't very spiritually evolved, and I'm not talking about religion, that's something completely different," he quickly added to avoid further confusion. "Those whose souls were ready to experience the higher realms were assisted by an Angel of Death at the time of their death. They acted as a doorway for the soul to pass through." Cassie and Alex both nodded silently.

"When Siddhartha Gautama achieved ascension on his own, the Elders recognised this as a sign that the human race was nearly ready to take another leap in their evolution. They saw that soon, many more souls would be ready to transcend to the next spiritual dimension, too many for the Angels of Death to manage. Another, more permanent gateway needed to be created." The professor paused when Cassie raised her finger, something she would have done in one of the Professor's lectures. *Habits die hard*, she thought to herself.

"You're talking about the so-called 'pearly gates of heaven' that you're supposed to pass through at the time of death, aren't you?" Cassie asked.

"Yes. In a round-about sort of way," he confirmed, quickly continuing on. "When the time was right, about four hundred years later, the Elders implanted a new gene into the embryo of an unborn girl. This girl grew up to become the mother of Jesus, who in turn inherited this gene from his mother. He was unique in this world. He was an upper level angel who had been born as human to create this gateway," The Professor paused again, searching their faces for a sign they appreciated where he was heading. Seeing only puzzled expressions, he decided he needed to elaborate on the topic further.

"A lower level angel can incarnate as human without damaging the body it inhabits, but an upper level angel's soul vibrates at a much higher rate. If an upper level angel occupied a human body and retained all its powers, the vibration required to use these abilities would quite literally vibrate the human body apart. In a short period of time the body would become sick and die. Are you following so far?" he asked.

He could see the cogs churning inside Cassie's mind, processing the information.

Alex, who'd sat quietly brooding, became suddenly animated, scaring the daylights out of Cassie when he jumped from his seat.

"I understand," he exclaimed. "Or at least I think I do," he added, a little less enthusiastically. For a moment his posture mirrored Alaric's opposite him, confident and commanding.

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"You're describing physics, more specifically quantum physics" he said. "There is nothing that exists that isn't pure energy when broken down to its smallest particles, each particle vibrates at its own unique frequency and rhythm. These particles cluster together in specific ways to create tangible matter. I guess you could compare it to musical notes. If you arrange particular notes in sequence and frequency, you get a unique song. If you change the notes, you change the song. The same is true with physical matter," he said, arranging the plates and glasses on the table to resemble the composition of an atom, "Particles that make a piece of wood, vibrate at a different rate and frequency to that of water, which is different from plants and different again from animals. If you change the vibration inside a human body, increase the rate, it can't sustain its original form, it would break down," reiterating the Professor's explanation.

"Although," he continued "It's believed that matter can't actually be destroyed, it can only change form." When no one interjected his hypothesis, he expanded on his explanation. "The Greek philosopher, Aristotle concluded that there are five elements: fire, earth, air, water and ether. Ether is supposedly an unearthly, spiritual substance that fills the universe but exists outside the physical Earth, and as such does not undergo change in the same way that everything in our world does," pointing to the fireplace with its fire now blazing.

"Some quantum physicists believe that in the same way a burning log becomes ash and metal can become rust, the eroded matter from the wood and metal doesn't just disappear as the original article shrinks in size, but changes form. Research has shown that the smallest particles of matter, *strings*, have been observed to vanish from view, presumably into the ether and then reappear again somewhere else.

"As a physical object is influenced by an outside force, the minute strings pull apart. Its physical form breaks down and the strings realign in a new pattern to become another form, either a new physical object or possibly returning to the universe in the form of energy." he explained.

"It's also believed that the energy that creates dimensional barriers is also able to be distorted or changed in some way, like creating doorways.

"Interestingly enough, I am working on a thesis at the moment that involves an experiment that manipulates these *strings* using electromagnetic energy to test the forces required to change their form." He concluded.

Alex took his seat to a round of applause from the Professor, whose broad smile beamed, lighting the room and lifting their moods momentarily.

"Alex, I'm glad to see your education hasn't been wasted on you. I don't think you realise just how close you are to the truth." Alaric said, complimenting him. Well, it was the closest he could get to a true compliment anyway.

Alex eyed him suspiciously, searching his blank face for signs of mockery.

Cassie held her breath waiting for a snide remark from Alex to undermine the momentary reprieve of ill humour between them, which fortunately never came. For once he held his tongue. Miracles were possible after all.

"Shall we continue then?" asked the Professor, forcibly maintaining his smile now. Signs of strain and fatigue were beginning to show. Each line on his face more deeply etched than Cassie could ever remember seeing before.

"Yes." They both replied.

"Let me know if you want me to clarify anything else won't you." To which they both nodded silently.

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"Ok then. This gene that Jesus inherited allowed his body to cope with the vibration of his soul, and also enabled him to retain many of his angelic powers so he could perform all those *miracles*." The Professor added.

Alaric joined the conversation. "It's believed that at the last supper, when Jesus blessed the cup, he infused some of his power into it. He handed the cup to his sister's husband, a roman soldier and also an Angel of Death called Sammael. Unfortunately Judas not only betrayed Jesus that night, but also his sister. A Jew married to a roman soldier was a criminal offense. They stoned her to death. Sammael was ordered to watch Jesus die and then was to be put to death himself," Alaric took a deep breath before continuing, slowly pacing a track through the shag pile rug in front of the fireplace.

"While Jesus hung on the cross, he called to Sammael. At Jesus' order, Sammael plunged his spear deep into Jesus' side, releasing blood from his body. At that same moment, the Elders poured into Jesus the power to create the permanent gateway. Jesus channelled some of this power into the spear. When he died, it opened the gateway but it wasn't until he rose again on the Sunday that the gate to the next spiritual dimension was sealed open." Alaric stopped pacing, his arms were crossed in front of himself, his expression thoughtful. He poked a log in the fire, a shower of sparks zig zagging their way up the chimney.

"Sammael" he continued "was half mad with grief over his wife's death. A couple of days after Jesus died, he found himself in possession of the cup and a cloth soaked with Jesus' blood. He soaked the blood from the cloth and used the cup to drink the blood." Alaric stated.

"Why would he do that? Drink the blood." Cassie asked. Ew, just the thought made her stomach churn with disgust. It was a form of cannibalism.

"No one knows exactly, but we believe that Jesus or someone else instructed him to." answered Lilith. "The blood that he drank contained the new gene that Jesus carried. The power he had infused into the cup forced this gene to penetrate every cell in Sammael's body, changing his DNA."

"The soldiers were sent to find Sammael and complete his sentence. When they found him though, they discovered that he was no longer quite human although not fully transformed at that point. Using Sammael's own spear, the soldiers killed him, or at least they thought they had. However, the spear contained the Elders power and Sammael rose from the dead as the first vampire. Over time he created new vampires but only he was *truly* immortal, the only one who had drunk from the cup and received resurrection power from the spear." Lilith finished.

Alaric watched Cassie throughout the narration to assess her thoughts and then Alex, their faces a mirror image of each others, enthralled by the tale. As unbelievable as it was, they were taking it much better than he'd expected. Fortunately.

"After Sammael became a vampire, he hid the cup and the spear realising the power they contained and the power that could be unleashed on the world in the wrong hands," the Professor chipped in. Even then there were those in the Underworld and on Earth who would stop at nothing to get their hands on them.

"How did the cup end up with the Dalai Lama then?" Alex asked, slowly digesting the new information which spun a new twist on history and religion, and for that matter, reality in general.

"That's a very good question," the Professor answered, pouring himself a glass of juice. "Siddhartha Gautama ascended to the next spiritual realm. He hadn't yet achieved the level of an angel but he was very close. He was given a choice whether he wanted to continue reincarnating on earth or continue his evolutionary journey in the spiritual realms," the Professor's eyes sparkled as he spoke.

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Lilith interjected and the Professor took another long swallow of his juice. "Siddhartha chose to continue the path of reincarnation on the condition he could return each time as a spiritual teacher. The Elders agreed with one condition of their own. He must be the guardian for the Cup of Life, the Holy Grail." finishing the explanation for him, eliciting a grin of pride for her knowledge and waved his hand for her to continue the story.

She had never studied Religious Anthropology, the course which he taught, although in the ten years she had worked for him, she had dedicated herself to learning as much as she could. The Professor felt she had earned herself an honorary degree. At times he thought she knew more about the subject than he did.

"Sammael had hidden the cup and the spear for centuries but he discovered that if they remained in one place for too long, people became suspicious of them. Well before the time the first Dalai Lama was inducted in 1391, rumours and legends about the power of the cup had circled the world." Lilith concluded.

"So Sammael gave it to the Dalai Lama," Cassie queried.

"Yes," Alaric said. The Professor and Lilith nodded in agreement. "The cup was hidden in plain sight. At each new incarnation the Dalai Lama is required to choose a number of items from hundreds of objects that belonged to the previous incarnation of himself. One of these items was the Cup. It was portrayed to the world as being an ordinary object having belonged to an extraordinary man."

"But, then how was it discovered after so long. He must have had it for what, at least eight hundred years?" Alex queried.

"Good question," all eyes now back on Lilith. "Jesus isn't the only upper level being that's appeared on earth. Lucifer, one of the original fallen angels, has also made an appearance, along with a couple of other upper level fallen angels including one named Ahriman. Ahriman is obsessed with power and domination. He wants to consume your soul, unlike Lucifer who wishes to live through you by manipulation."

Alex's lips tightened in thought for a moment, concern becoming more evident in his posture. "So, what you're telling us, is that we're mixed up in something really big. You're not talking about someone trying to take over a large international corporation, you're talking about someone trying to take over the world, like Hitler." A rhetorical question based on observation.

"Actually, Hitler was Ahriman's first attempt at incarnation." Lilith chipped in. "We think that's how the Cup was discovered. We know that Hitler used all his resources collecting artwork and religious artefacts and he had a whole division of the SS dedicated to researching every occult document they could get their hands on. He collected a library of information and occult relics," she looked to the Professor who nodded for her to continue.

"We believe that following Hitler's death, his men remained loyal to him, continuing the search for the Cup. They recruited more followers, hundreds, maybe thousands of people around the world who have dedicated their lives to ensuring that Ahriman's next incarnation will see him become immortal. They call themselves the Guild of Ascension." Lilith stood and moved in front of the fire, a shiver rippling through her, leaving her with goose bumps from head to toe.

"At the time that the Dalai Lama was expelled from Tibet by the Chinese, we believe that the Guild discovered the Cup." added the Professor.

"We don't know for sure, but we think that Ahriman has incarnated again and now either he or the Guild has the Cup. If that's the case, we need to find him and get the cup back before he can use it." Lilith finished,

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crossing her arms and then uncrossing them again with nervous agitation.

"No doubt he's learnt a few things since his last appearance. He's not going to make it as easy to find him this time. He's one of the upper level fallen with a very bad attitude. As a mortal he is an evil pain in the tuchis but if he becomes immortal, he'll be unstoppable. He'll create hell on earth." added the Professor.

"He wants to rule the world and possess our souls. Is that it?" Alex asked, not sure how much more of all this he could take seriously. But, then again, he just discovered vampires are real, why not everything else.

"Yes and no," pausing to find the right words to explain without confusing them any more. "He wants to change the course of evolution."

"What exactly does that mean?" Alex asked.

"And, what about the spear." Cassie's own curiosity was on fire, a thousand and one questions filling her thoughts. "You said that Sammael hid both the spear and the cup. If the Guild has found the cup and the spear holds just as much power, wouldn't it make sense that they would be after the spear next? Or do they already have it?"

The Professor looked to Alaric briefly, the movement barely discernable. "No. The spear is safe but unfortunately that is a conversation for another day I'm afraid or we'll be here all night." He smiled but the attempt was grim and humourless.

It occurred to Cassie, they seemed to have skipped over a major piece of information. "Where is Sammael now? I'm assuming that *truly immortal* means he can't die, so where is he and why isn't he doing anything to help in all this? Especially since he seems to be the one who started it all."

The Professor cleared his throat, once again exchanging glances with Alaric. "No one knows where he is. We assume he's still around somewhere but no one has seen or heard from him in over a thousand years," he postulated.

"We're hoping that now that the cup has been stolen, it might induce him to make an appearance again," Lilith quipped with an acidic tinge to her words.

Alex had seen and heard enough for one night about creepy psychopathic megalomaniacal fallen angels with identity crises and an inter dimensional angelic hierarchy who created blood sucking demons to somehow *save* the world in some debauched way, and hastily changed the subject.

"Right then. Getting back to the immediate problem," Alex looked squarely at Alaric gaining his full attention. "You mentioned before that Jarvis can't glamour Cassie. I take it that *glamouring* is a vampire skill. In which case Jarvis and his friends are vampires, not *just* assassins."

"Yes. But I'm not going to let them get anywhere near her. She will be completely safe. I promise you that." Alaric's steely eyes bored into him reinforcing his first impression of him being an extremely formidable opponent, capable of unspeakable acts on his enemy.

Alex shuddered, not from fear, but in eager anticipation.

Alaric recognised the hungry glint in his eyes and although he could appreciate the incentive for his mindset, he wondered if Alex's fearless gung-ho nature would end up making him a liability or maybe his zealous behaviour might even get him killed. He wasn't too fond of Alex but for Cassie's sake he'd need to rein him



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in, tomorrow. His priority right now was to keep Cassie safe and to do that, he was prepared to break every vow he'd made.

Alex looked from Alaric to Cassie, his doubt that he could protect her swayed a little more towards Alaric's advantage.

Alex himself, felt inadequate to protect her, he was so far out of his league it wasn't funny. He certainly wasn't equipped to do battle with vampires, he knew nothing about them except what he'd learned in movies, and he couldn't rely on those for accurate information. He had no idea how to defeat a vampire, but he resolved to learn as much about them as he could. In the meantime, he had no other choice but to put his trust in Alaric. Next time however, he'll be ready for those evil blood suckers.

With any luck there wouldn't be a next time. They would deal with this Jarvis character and be done with it. Get back to their normal lives.

His hands knotted into tight balls by his sides, his frustration was as pungent to Cassie as the odour of his week old smelly socks. She slid closer to him and gave him a nudge with her shoulder, cupping his knee with her hand and squeezing it. He attempted to give her a reassuring smile but it came out as a constipated grimace.

"There were others like him at the Phoenix nightclub," Cassie stated flatly. She didn't want to think about Jarvis a minute before she had to but it was unavoidable, there was still information she needed to know. "What is that place exactly?" she asked.

"Put bluntly, it's a smorgasbord restaurant for vampires." Lilith answered.

That made sense. That made a lot of sense.

The Professor checked his watch. "11:30 pm. I think we should be heading back," he said, raising himself from the comfortable chair, slowly stretching out his stiff muscles. "Getting old is a bitch."

Cassie gasped, staring at the Professor. She'd never heard him even remotely swear before, it sounded so, so wrong, unlike Alex whose vocabulary would be halved if he removed all the profanities, which seemed to naturally form part of his speech.

As the group began to move towards the door, Cassie's heart rate began to climb as anxiety took hold. The Professor, Lilith and Alex made their way towards the front doors while she held back fluffing and rearranging the cushions. Procrastination, she knew, could only delay leaving for a few minutes. She waited for Alaric who closed the fire screen and turned off the lights in the sitting room, blinding her momentarily. Even when her eyes adjusted to the filtered light from the window and the fading amber glow from the dwindling fire, she failed to make out the vague shapes of furniture in the shadowy dimness.

Her sense of orientation was off, banging her knee painfully on the corner of the coffee table. "Ouch. Damn."

Nothing felt as foreign as a strange house in the dark, she thought. But, hopefully she'd live long enough to become better acquainted with the manor and its owner.

Silently Alaric approached her, his hand slipping around her waist to guide her through the room. His hard body pressed firmly against hers.

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"I've got you." His voice, sweet and seductive, sent another flush of heat rushing through her, pooling between her thighs.

She remembered being this close to him before, when he'd stepped between herself and Jarvis. Her hands began to tremble as she slid her arm around his waist. Like a child clinging to its mother, she clung to him tightly. His skin was cool, but only a few degrees below normal body temperature. His taut tense muscles beneath his shirt rippled as he walked. If nothing else, his touch certainly distracted her attention from Jarvis. His relaxed countenance and calm optimism bolstered her faltering composure.

"Cassie," he said, stopping at the front doors, turning to face her, his hand slid from her waist. She looked up into his eyes, sparkling in the lamplight outside. The strong lines of his jaw and cheek bones, and the perfection of his flawless skin betrayed him as a vampire, while the strand of hair falling over his left eye as he tilted his head down closer to hers, softened his face to that of an angel.

"Don't worry. I won't let anything happen to you. *I promise.* I'll be following you all the way home and I'll be just outside your apartment until morning," he said to reassure her, taking her hand in his in the same manner she had done for him earlier.

"You'll be driving right behind us?" she asked.

He gave her a cheeky lopsided smile and shook his head which in a strange way resembled Alex. "No, I can travel much faster without a car."

"Oh. Of course. It's the vampire thing, huh," feeling a bit foolish.

"Yes," he chuckled. "If you're interested, I can give you a demonstration some time. But, right now" motioning towards the car where Lilith and the Professor were fastening their seat belts, Alex stood leaning against the open door, staring indignantly at them both. "It's time to go."

Alaric placed Cassie's hand through the crease of his arm and led her to the car, waving for Alex to take his seat.

"When you get home, do everything as you would normally. If Jarvis *is* watching you, we don't want to tip him off, Ok?" he instructed.

"It'll be okay," he added. The look of trust in her eyes caused a knot in his stomach. He felt so protective toward her. He had to fight the urge to steal her away to somewhere safe, away from anything or anyone who might harm her. But that, he knew, was not an option. Cassie was special. It was his responsibility to protect her. It was her destiny to marry a human man, and have his children.

He would have to console himself with a few brief encounters throughout her life.

Taking her hand in his, bowing low, his soft lips brushed the back of her hand, a kiss so gentle it felt like the cool caress of a feather. A current of attraction rushed between them, echoing in their eyes with parallel hunger.

She didn't want to leave.

"I guess I'll see you again soon then will I?" she said, revealing a half hearted mischievous grin as an attempt to down play the magnetism that she felt pulling at her core.

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Reluctantly Alaric released her hand as she climbed into the car and watched as she clutched it to her, touching the area where he'd kissed it, wishing it was her lips he'd kissed instead.

As Alaric pushed the door closed, Alex leaned across Cassie holding it open, his expression determined and strained. "I'm holding you to your promise. You keep her safe or you'll have *me* to deal with."

They stared at each other for a moment before Alaric gave a slight nod to Alex and winked at Cassie.

"Trust me," he said as he closed the car door.

As the car moved off, Alaric could hear Alex muttering to himself in the back seat, "*Trust me*, he says. As if we have a choice. I don't like this one bit."

Alex's words echoed in his head. He could only hope that he could live up to his word and hadn't underestimated Jarvis and his crew.

He watched until they disappeared around the bend in the driveway.

It was up to him now.

Hell would freeze over before he would let her down.

## Chapter 8

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Alaric arrived outside Cassie's building a little more than ten minutes after seeing them off, only a fraction of the hour long trip by car.

He immediately began scouting the exterior of the building. The four storey red brick structure had two exposed sides, the front entrance faced the street and one side wall faced into a lane. The other two aspects were the supporting walls to adjacent buildings. The building on the far side was a squat single story house, while the rear building was a double storey office complex. From the roof top he had full view of the surrounding area for hundreds of meters in all directions. On the corner of the lane, opposite Cassie's building, the local pizza shop was just closing up, an interior light behind the counter illuminated a short distance of the narrow lane with dull half light. Directly below him, on the third floor, overlooking the lane, was Cassie's bedroom window.

The street light opposite flickered intermittently. An occasional car drove by on the otherwise deserted road, and a group of teenagers laughed and joked in the park across the road. They were no threat, so he ignored them, concentrating on the shadows of the adjacent buildings.

Every muscle was tense, his senses tuned to every noise and every movement. He made a couple of sweeps of the area, including spying inside the other apartments of Cassie's building for signs of any intrusion.

Satisfied it was safe, he called the Professor.

"Well, good news," the Professor said, turning in his seat to speak to Cassie and Alex. "There's no sign of any unwanted visitors in your neighbourhood, so it's safe to take you home," giving Cassie a reassuring wink.

"What, do you mean, he's already there? But, we only left twenty minutes ago." Alex commented, impressed by the speed he must have travelled.

"Actually, I believe he's been there for some time," chuckled the Professor.

He remembered when he was first introduced to vampires and the mixture of fear and admiration that he'd felt toward them. It's funny how when you become so accustomed to something, it loses all its wonder, he thought. Seeing things through new eyes brought it all back to him. For him, that first time was so very long ago.

He noted Cassie's anxious expression. "Don't worry lass, he'll be back with us again in a couple of minutes. Then, he'll follow us the rest of the way. He just wanted to make sure it was safe before you arrived." Dark circles filled the hollows beneath his weary eyes. His bones ached with the strain of his aging years and the burden of the stressful disturbing events over the past week.

"Oh. That makes sense, I guess," she answered a little dejectedly. Although she couldn't explain why, she felt like crying. She'd felt so much stronger when she thought he was following her, bolstered by his shadowy presence. Now, suddenly she felt exposed and vulnerable. She bit down on her bottom lip to stop it from quivering.

A minute later her phone beeped with a message.

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It was Alaric. "I'm back," was all it said. But it was enough.

She sighed in relief, letting out the breath she didn't realise she'd been holding.

The car windows had fogged up. Every few minutes she cleared a circle with her hand and peered out. As hard as she tried, she couldn't see him but hoped he was nearby.

Her phone beeped again.

"I'm still here." She quietly giggled to herself, satisfied that she had his attention, and wondered if his attention equated to his interest as well. She hoped so because the attraction she felt for him was completely out of proportion for the time she'd known him and she didn't want to be the only one inflicted with such an irrational need.

Three streets from her apartment, her phone beeped yet again.

"It's all clear." He wasn't one for long messages, short and sweet, straight to the point.

As the car pulled up outside her apartment building, they all started talking to her at once.

"Don't do anything out of the ordinary," said Lilith.

"Any problems you call Alaric. If he doesn't answer, call me or Alex," said the Professor.

"If I call Alaric and he doesn't answer, what does that mean?" feeling panic beginning to leech into her calm façade. Her hands began to tremble.

"If he doesn't answer, it's because I've come back to kill the son of a bitch for using you as bait." Alex said. Bold words he wished he could follow through on, but reality was rarely what you wished for. He gave her his best confident smile and slapped her on her knee.

"You'll be fine. Get a good night's sleep lass, and we'll speak to you tomorrow." The Professor's smile too, masked his worry. Unfortunately, neither of them could hide their eyes, loudly telegraphing their true concern.

An air of trepidation hung over all of them, except maybe Lilith.

It might have been her imagination, but Cassie got the impression that Lilith didn't particularly like her. Spilling coffee on her skirt this morning may have had something to do with it, she thought, but she suspected it went deeper than that.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the car door, stepping out into the crisp night air, closing it behind her quickly to cut off any chance of more well meant parting comments.

She watched as the others drove away, discretely looking around to locate Alaric.

There. On top of the building, above the pizza shop, one floor below her bedroom window, but nonetheless a reasonably good view of her apartment.

She would've preferred it if he was watching her from inside her bedroom though.

She quickly squashed that thought.

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Her neck ached with nervous tension, knotting her muscles in protesting strain.

Fumbling in her bag, she retrieved her keys and entered the building. Her heart pounded in staccato beats against the wall of her chest.

The glass door opened silently, the fluorescent light flickered to life in the entrance foyer as she headed for the stairs. As much as she wanted to *behave normally* and climb the stairs in a calm and sedate manner, she had way too much nervous energy buzzing through her system for that to happen. Instead she took them two at a time until she reached the landing on the third floor.

Breathless, she closed her door, locking it and almost collapsing against it.

Dumping her bag on the floor beside her couch, she headed for the kitchen.

Out of habit, she searched the cupboards for a snack. It was only now that she realised how hungry she was. Her tummy rumbled with a hollow growl. How many hours had it been since she ate, really ate? She thought about it for a minute. It must have been lunch yesterday. She couldn't remember eating last night after leaving the University, she was too traumatised by seeing Jarvis again. She didn't count the chocolate bar she ate in the library, and she'd only had the two corners of a sandwich at Alaric's.

She opened the refrigerator and grabbed the only thing in there that didn't look like it could escape of its own accord and heated it in the microwave on high for an extended period. Surely, no bacteria could survive a blast of nuking of that magnitude, she postulated.

The combination of lack of food and sleep, not to mention stress over the past few days left her head feeling light and giddy. It wasn't likely she'd get much sleep tonight either, she was wound up tighter than a spring. She was conscious of each shadow twisting and stretching around her and every noise made her jump. Even the dripping tap in the kitchen echoed loudly in her apartment and made her twitchy.

Alex had grudgingly given Alaric his key to her apartment and she knew he had been through already as evidenced by the single red rose he'd left on her pillow. A thoughtful gesture maybe, but it didn't make her feel any less tense.

She sank down into her couch amongst the collection of soft cushions. Relax, relax, relax, she silently chanted. Clutching the TV remote in one hand she flicked through channels, while the other hand mindlessly shovelled away the four day old lasagne which she'd grossly overheated in the microwave. She'd need a jack hammer to get through the edges she thought, pushing them to one side.

Her mind swam as she reflected on everything that she'd seen and learnt over the past few days.

Relax, relax, relax, she continued to chant, snuggling deeper into her nest of cushions and slowed her breathing, trying to imagine waterfalls or a peaceful meadow. Anything else but Jarvis, but all she managed to achieve was an imaginary grass rash and a sudden feeling that her bladder was about to burst.

The old clock on the mantel chimed. She shifted her eyes wearily to check the time. 1:00am. Alex had chided her about that clock but she refused to get rid of it, even though the glass on the face had broken years before, and she had to wind it up every couple of days to keep it going, there were no batteries when this clock was made, but she loved its deep resonate chime and its monotonous ticking. She found it comforting.

It was her grandmother's clock originally and although she'd never met her, it was a family heirloom and a bridge to her past. Unseen and unknown ancestry which spanned generations. A comforting thought, even if

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they were no longer living. The only family she had left now was Alex, although he wasn't related by blood. Not that you would ever know it as they were so much alike in many ways. Since there was no genetic link between them it gave rise to the notion that environmental influences were responsible for bringing about their similarities, having been raised together from birth. Maybe, she theorised, it was similar to groups of women who live together, all having their monthly cycles synchronised to the same time.

With a weary sigh she pushed herself out of her comfortable nest of pillows, turned off the TV and made her way to the bathroom. The mirror showed the dark circles beginning to engrave themselves beneath her glassy eyes. She looked as tired as she felt. Her hair was becoming limp and stringy, desperately in need of a wash.

She turned on the shower. Steam filled the room and fogged up the mirror improving her reflexion exponentially, she thought. Cassie's mind wandered as she stepped naked under the hot water and soaked up its heat, relaxing and unwinding her tense muscles.

Her thoughts drifted back to Alaric, outside right now, watching her building. Did he know she was in the shower? Would he sneak into her apartment and join her? What would it be like to see *him* naked? The picture it conjured in her mind inspired her to grab her razor and 'tidy-up' all relevant areas, just in case. Her mother always told her, "*If you wish hard enough, your wish might come true.*" But on the flip side, she also said "*Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it.*" Cassie pondered the likelihood of her fantasy coming true being slim to none, but opted for the side of optimism, running her fingers over her smooth legs checking for the prickly stubble of any missed spots.

Feeling much more relaxed, she lingered under the hot water for an extra couple of minutes, enjoying the sensation of it pounding rhythmically against her skin.

She pulled on her pyjamas, collecting them from the floor where she'd dropped them earlier that morning when she'd dressed so hastily. A pair of hipster pastel chequered pants and a tank top, cropped just below her rib cage exposing her perfectly flat stomach.

She made one last round of her apartment to check she'd turned off all the lights, locked the front door and checked the dead bolt was soundly fastened before climbing into bed and setting her mobile phone on the bed side table next to her. Alaric's number was on the screen, her finger itched to press the call button but she restrained herself grudgingly. If she called him now, he'd think it was an emergency and probably break down her door to rescue her. The vision spawned a new fantasy in her overactive imagination that sent arousal pulsing through her body.

She lay on her back and pulled her doona up around her, leaving her arms free to reach the phone in a hurry if need be.

The window, which opened inward, was left ajar a few inches allowing the soft breeze to caress her face. She hated the feeling of being closed in and so habitually left the window open for the fresh night air. Even the threat of Jarvis coming didn't tempt her to close it. Besides, she was three floors up and there was no fire escape anywhere near her window, not to mention Alaric outside on guard duty in full view of her window. She had nothing to worry about.

Though, tired as she was, she fought her desire for sleep. Not yet. Instead, she waited, lying silently in her bed listening to her grandmother's clock. Tick. Tick. Tick.

To no avail, the heaviness in her head blanketed her thoughts and sleep slowly stole her consciousness.

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It had been a couple of hours since Alaric had heard any sounds coming from Cassie's apartment. The night air had turned cold and a blustery breeze had blown in an hour or so earlier. The bottom of his black leather duster snapped about his crouched form in the gusty wind. Maybe the duster was a bit of a vampire cliché, as were the shit kicker boots and black leather pants, but he found them comfortable and highly practical.

His senses probed the surrounding neighbourhood. There was nothing out of the ordinary.

Nothing ventured into the vicinity except for the occasional car passing and a family of rats which scratched through rubbish in the lane below.

Only a couple of hours before first light and everything seemed...too quiet.

An increasing uneasiness tugged at him.

His phone vibrated in his pocket.

Retrieving it, noting the time, 4:30 am, he checked the caller ID. "Alex," he grumbled as he opened his message.

*"Any trouble? Is she ok?"* he wrote.

*"You'll be the first to know if there is!"* Alaric replied.

Alex could be on the other side of the world and he'd still find him annoying.

As he placed his phone back into his pocket, a flash of movement on the roof of Cassie's building caught his eye. Someone was up there.

In a single leap he cleared the lane, landing lithely on the opposite roof.

"Well, it looks like Jarvis was right," said a spiky haired boy with more tattoos and metal studded through his face than the average teenage boy had pimples. A human imitation of a painted pin cushion, Alaric thought.

He stepped casually to the side, drawing Alaric away from the edge of the building.

Alaric's lip curled, his fangs descended and his eyes flared with a lethal glow. The temperature on the roof plummeted as his power exploded from him.

A stiff cold breeze woke her. Goose bumps rose on her naked arms.

Blinking the sleep from her hazy mind, a shadow crossed in front of the window at the end of her bed.

"Alaric?" she whispered.

Silence.

Straining to see in the darkness, she asked again. "Alaric, is that you?"

"No poppet, Alaric is presently occupied. Did you miss me?" The shadow moved to the side of her bed, his profile outlined by the light from the window. He began to laugh, a vile, malicious laugh, filled with the promise of pain.



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"I think you did," he declared, as he picked up a photograph of Cassie and her mother from the dresser.

"Oh, God no. Jarvis!" she whispered, her throat suddenly dry.

"We didn't get a chance to get to know each other the other night." His southern American accent oozed a mixture of honey and acid, sending a chill down her spine. Her whole body went cold with fear.

"I'd like to stay and play with you now, but just in case your friend gets the upper hand on my colleague," pointing to the roof above, "We have to cut our time together short. Such a shame," he lamented with an exaggerated disappointed sigh.

His hand reached out to touch the end of her bed. Reflexively, she sat up and pulled her feet up, clutching her knees to her chest through the doona. Fear escalated to terror when she saw his face. His fangs were fully extended, as sharp as daggers, but it was his eyes that held her frozen, like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming truck, helpless to escape. His ice-cold stare burrowed into her soul, while an iridescent flicker in his eyes betrayed his excitement for the kill.

Her scream locked inside her constricted throat.

She didn't want him to get any nearer. Grabbing the only thing close enough to reach, she threw her phone at him, hitting him in the face.

Rage flared in his eyes.

Cassie knew she'd just taken her last breath and closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

An explosion of broken glass showered her room.

She opened her eyes to see Jarvis' hand only centimetres from her throat.

Alaric, behind him, grabbed his neck and pulled him back, flinging the smaller man like a rag doll into Cassie's dresser with such force, it not only demolished the cabinet, but pushed it and Jarvis through the wall.

Cassie scrunched herself up tightly on her bed. Feral growls erupted from both men as they pounded each other with ferocious intensity from one room to the next.

Jarvis was fast but his strength was no match for Alaric's.

"When I'm done with you, I'm going to take my time with *my* little poppet." Jarvis scoffed, licking his lips sadistically, taunting him.

Alaric's mind snapped. No one was going to touch *his* Cassie.

Many years ago, he'd made an oath never to take another life, human or other.

That oath had just been nullified.

Cassie watched wide eyed as Alaric came to a complete standstill, not a muscle moved except for his hands which fisted tightly at his side. An unearthly growl erupted from him as he took one slow step toward Jarvis. His next move was so fast it was a blur in Cassie's vision.

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Jarvis lay on the floor, Alaric's hand around his throat, pinning him down, his other hand raised behind him, fingers splayed like claws, ready to strike at his captive.

Jarvis may have been pinned down but his hands were free. He punched into Alaric's chest. Alaric released his grip on the smaller man and staggered backward, landing crouched on all fours on the floor.

Cassie strained to see. She heard the sound of breaking bones, Alaric's rib cage. No, no, no. This can't be happening.

Jarvis jumped to his feet, brandishing the spoils of victory in his hand. Alaric's heart.

"You're next my pretty poppet," he boasted. Then his smile began to falter.

The heart he held in his hand was dissolving before his eyes. Not turning to dust as it should, as Alaric should, but the heart was dissolving into nothing, vanishing.

Alaric rose from the floor, the hole in his chest closing over and healing.

"That's impossible. You should be dead," he stuttered, disbelieving.

"It's not my time to die, but it is yours!" Alaric pronounced, ripping off both Jarvis' arms in one move. Dropping his twitching limbs on the floor, he grabbed him by the throat and held him upright.

"I should have killed you the night you tried to touch Cassie at the nightclub. A mistake I won't make twice."

Jarvis' eyes went wide as Alaric sliced open his chest with his taloned finger and removed his beating heart from his chest. Jarvis stared at Alaric, making gurgling sounds in his throat as he tried to speak.

His body shimmered for a few seconds and then exploded into dust.

Alaric's attention turned to Cassie. Her shock and terror displayed on her face, her eyes staring at him incredulously, her brain desperately trying to translate what her eyes had just witnessed.

A strong gust of wind blew through the broken window, brushing aside a wisp of hair from her face. The curtain struck the battered remnants of the window frame, dislodging a shard of glass sending it crashing to the floor and shattering on impact. Cassie jumped.

Alaric stood riveted to the spot, watching her. He trembled with the adrenaline searing through him. He'd come so close to losing her.

He knew he'd frightened her almost as much as Jarvis had. Torn between keeping his distance and rushing to her side, he tentatively spoke softly. His voice little more than a hoarse whisper as he tried to regain control of the storm raging inside him.

"Cassie, are you alright?"

She blinked the fog of shock from her mind. "Um, yes. I think so," she replied. Her eyes began to moisten as she fought back tears threatening to overflow. Her hands were trembling so fiercely, she could barely clutch them around her own body. Vaguely she became aware of a sensation like bee stings all over her arms, neck and face, intensifying as she tried to move.

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She tried to look herself over but saw nothing in the dim light.

Until this moment, Alaric hadn't noticed the carnage in the apartment created by his dramatic entrance and his battle with Jarvis. He followed her gaze to her arms and his heart sank. With his preternatural sight he clearly saw the small trickles of blood slowly oozing from a multitude of wounds she'd suffered from the fallout of his enthusiasm to save her.

"Um, I don't think so," her voice quivered slightly, desperately trying to hold onto her self control. As she reached for the lamp beside her bed, the movement of her doona sent a tinkling of glass onto the floor. The forty watt globe, which normally seemed so dull to her, now made her wince. As her eyes adjusted, she became aware of Alaric staring at her from the other side of the room, silent and motionless like a statue. The demon he'd been only moments ago was gone, his fangs retracted and his eyes were no longer wild but showed his growing distress.

She couldn't look away as he slowly closed the distance between them, mesmerised by his stare and spellbound by his commanding presence. Unconsciously she held her breath until he was sitting beside her, inhaling sharply when her lungs began to burn from lack of air. As she exhaled a ragged breath, her bottom lip began to quiver.

"I'm so sorry." He said, his distress seemingly surpassing hers. The horror now a forgotten blur in her already hazy mind, was replaced by an overwhelming wrenching need to comfort *him*. All her fear was gone. She felt safe again, safe with him.

"You saved me. Again," she replied. "I'm still alive because of you." The small cuts began to sting more, causing her to wince.

Alaric lowered his eyes and took her hand in his. "Do you trust me?" he asked, searching her eyes, delving deeply into her soul.

"There's no one I trust more," she answered breathlessly, her heart pounding in her chest as a flush of heat filled her cheeks.

His fingers ran lightly over her hand and up one arm, carefully removing any small splinters of glass which had become imbedded. He raised her arm a little higher, to his lips and gently kissed each scratch and cut. His lips felt like cool silk brushing against her skin but his touch fuelled a fire inside her hotter than Hades.

As he moved up her arm, she noticed the cuts he'd just kissed had now healed.

Cassie inhaled sharply. "Whoa. What did you do?" Blood still traced lines over her arm where it had originated, but the skin was intact. No trace of any injury was visible.

He didn't answer. He continued to kiss each of her wounds.

As he reached the first shoulder, he lowered her arm gently beside her, before taking hold of her other hand to repeat the process.

His touch created a feeling of euphoria such that she couldn't form a single rational thought, let alone voice one.

"Ahh..." She groaned. She didn't realise she'd groaned out loud but Alaric stopped, his hands began shaking ever so slightly. He sat very still for a few moments with his eyes closed, concentrating to regain his

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composure. He felt every sensation that rushed through her. It would be so easy to give himself over to his vampire nature and share in the rapture he knew his kiss was flaring within her.

"Please don't stop," she begged breathlessly, completely unashamed in her blissful state.

Slowly he continued again. Reaching the top of her second shoulder, he stopped and examined her face, thin trails of blood oozed from a couple of small scratches. The veins in her throat pulsated. Her expression of ecstasy sent his heart racing as he fought to control his desire for her.

He held her hand, still not daring to look into her eyes. He'd skipped over a larger piece of glass deeply imbedded in her arm just below the crease of her elbow. Gripping it between his fingers, he dislodged and removed it. The sudden sharp pain shocked her out of her trance-like state and blood began to flow freely from the deep gash.

"Ooh, I think that one's going to need a few stitches," she declared anxiously, beginning to feel a bit queasy.

"No it won't. Watch and see," grinning his lop-sided cheeky grin she was beginning to recognise as a smile he saved just for her, his lips were flushed with traces of her blood. "You do still trust me, don't you?"

"Yes, completely," she confessed, a little hastily she thought, but she couldn't help herself.

Alaric raised her arm up higher and placed his lips around the edges of the wound and closed his eyes, his face was expressionless but she could feel his cool breath on her skin, quicken.

Moments later he released her arm but his eyes remained closed. He could feel her heart beat in unison with his own and he savoured the moment.

As his eyes slowly opened, he watched Cassie's face, her gaze drawn to her arm in wonder, watching intently as the remaining edges of her wound came together and healed without a trace.

Tenderly he stroked her hair, straightening the sleep ravaged knots and picking splinters of glass from it.

His fingers lightly teased the side of her face along her jaw and down her neck. He could feel the effect that his touch had on her as a ripple of goose bumps rose beneath his fingers and her heart beat faster.

Slowly he drew her closer to him enjoying the warmth of her body, the silky touch of her soft skin. He lightly kissed the scratch on her forehead and then the one over her left cheekbone.

All her wounds were now healed. Each tingled and throbbed from the potency of his healing.

All but one. A long shallow cut across her neck over the jugular, slowly oozed. He resisted the urge to heal it. He was the strongest and most powerful creature in this world but he doubted he had enough strength to resist the compelling attraction he felt toward her, if he so much as tasted a single drop more.... As it was, he'd consumed too much of her blood already and feared his fate was irrevocably sealed. The blood bond between them had been created whether he liked it or not.

Her breath bathed his neck, electrifying his senses.

Cassie laid her head on his chest and slid her arms around his waist, pulling herself even closer against him. The smell of her honey scented shampoo was intoxicating. Their embrace felt so natural. Their soul's vibrations rose in harmony, rhythmic, merging into one.

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He was a goner and he knew it. From this moment on, it would be twice as hard to keep his distance from her. His craving to kiss her and taste her again was almost unbearable.

He had to resist. It was wrong, but nothing had ever felt more right.

The last thing he needed was to fall in love with her. It would be futile, an adventure into masochistic torture. Each day it would eat away another piece of his soul. Forced to watch over her and protect her, and knowing all the while he can never possess her.

"I have to get you out of here. It's not safe anymore," he said, pulling her gently away from him. Her eyes had glazed over slightly. She was having difficulty focusing on his face and his voice seemed to come from a million miles away.

"Ok. If you say so," she replied absently as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. As she was about to stand, Alaric pulled her back again.

"Not a good idea," looking at the floor for Cassie to follow his gaze.

"Wow," was all she could say when she registered the scene around her. It looked like a scene from a war movie. Debris was everywhere. In fact, Blitz Street in WWII would have looked better than this after the German's dropped the K2 bomb. There were holes where the walls used to be, her dressing table and wardrobe were decimated and part of the ceiling was missing. Her bed seemed to be the only thing left, and even that was tilting toward the floor at the far end. The destruction wasn't limited to her bedroom, although she couldn't see into the darkness of the adjacent rooms. There was barely an inch of floor without broken glass and plaster dust covering it.

On second thought, maybe that wasn't just plaster dust. Maybe, that was Jarvis' remains, â††dust.

"Good point. Bare feet and broken glass, not a good combination," she agreed.

A mischievous smirk alighted his face. "You wouldn't want me to have to get down on my knees and kiss your feet too, would you?" Although, he thought, the idea seemed to fit his predicament perfectly. He was, for all intents and purposes, her willing slave, her protector and guardian.

Cassie chuckled. "I don't think that would be so bad," she replied, placing a hand to her head, swaying slightly.

"What's happening to me?" Alaric put his arm around her back to steady her.

"It's just the effects of the healing. It can be a bit overwhelming the first time," he reassured.

"You mean there's going to be a next time?"

He didn't answer. His attention was quickly focussed toward the front door.

"There are people coming. We need to leave, now."

"The noise must have woken my neighbours. I don't think I'm going to be too popular with my landlord tomorrow either." She said, grimacing at the thought of the damage bill.

## Eternal Covenant

Sirens could be heard getting closer and stopped as the police car pulled up outside the building. Through the window they could see their lights flashing, reflected off the wall of the pizza shop opposite.

Her head swam with the effort of moving.

Alaric picked her up and carried her quickly to the window.

"Close your eyes and hold on," he said.

She buried her face in his neck and wrapped her arms around him.

As gravity gave way to weightlessness, she heard the police break through her front door. Her pulse thundered in her ears as dizziness imbued its call of darkness over her mind. The sensation of floating and the frigid wind against her skin lingered momentarily before she collapsed limply in the vice-like grip of his arms and passed out.

## Chapter 9

### Chapter 9

The sound of birds chirping nearby broke her blissful slumber, becoming aware of the soft mattress below her and the light feather doona around her. Her dreams dissolved into a distant oblivion as she slowly woke.

As she turned over lazily, the feel of the sheets and the smell of the pillow were unfamiliar. Her memories returned in an avalanche, shocking her awake in an instant.

Sitting up she took in her surroundings. She was in a large four poster bed with floral print bedding. The scent of freshly cut flowers delighted her nose from the vase on the bedside table, its hand carved design matched the bed. Across to her right were floor to ceiling panelled windows, the open curtains exposing the French doors onto a narrow balcony. Potted conifers flanked the doors at either side and a small cast iron table and two matching chairs sat neglected in one corner.

A pretty little jay bird sang its melodious tune from its perch on the balcony railing.

It was a dull overcast morning. Thick dark clouds hung low over the tall trees of the nearby forest. Distant thunder rumbled outside heralding the imminent downpour as wind whipped through the bare tree tops.

A chaise lounge occupied one corner of the room beside the windows, while the opposite corner sat an enormous hand carved wooden wardrobe, she'd need a ladder to reach the top, she thought. Its design matched both the bed and side tables. Between the two pieces of old worldly furniture was a fireplace.

Distracted in thought, Cassie didn't notice the bedroom door opening.

"Well, look who's awake." Mrs Philpot announced cheerily.

Cassie jumped. As the memory of last night had returned, so did her nerves.

"Sorry love. Didn't mean to startle you. Just bringing you a dress to change into. The master explained your pyjamas could probably use a wash," eying her dishevelled form. "So I've dug out one of my daughters old dresses for you," holding up a beautiful white dress almost as long as Mrs Philpot was tall. The hem was hand made, lace sewn into it in diamond shaped panels, ending in deep points, giving the hem a zigzag effect.

Cassie looked herself over. Her top particularly, was streaked with dried blood which ran through the fabric in a capillary fashion reminding her of her tie dying attempts when she was at school.

"This dress used to look lovely on Jocelyn, but I'm afraid she'll never wear it again," she said cheerily, hanging it on the wardrobe door. "She's had a couple of kids in recent years," a look of grandmotherly pride filling her frame. "Poor girl inherited my genes, now she has my figure," she laughed. "Although fortunately for her, she also has her father's genes. She's much taller than me and carries the weight much better." Her laugh was deep and hearty as she slapped her hips hard.

"If you're hungry, I've prepared some breakfast for you down stairs."

Removing the basket of pine cones and dried flowers from the fireplace, she set to replacing it with kindling and a couple of logs, fussing over the decorative basket as she placed it beside the hearth.

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"Where exactly am I?" she asked in a soft voice that was a little shaky.

"You're in one of the guest rooms at the Manor of course," Mrs Philpot answered thoughtfully while adjusting the dress on the door of the wardrobe.

"The master brought you in early this morning. It sounds like you had a rough night, poor pet," plonking herself down on the bed, patting her hand in a reassuring manner. Her perceptive gaze was shadowed with understanding of her ordeal.

"When you're ready, get dressed and come down stairs. The others are here waiting to see you." She said in her warm and friendly manner. "You have your own bathroom," pointing toward a door between the fireplace and the wardrobe. "It's not terribly large but it's functional."

Cassie couldn't help but smile. This vivacious woman just exuded confidence and humour. It was infectious.

"Mrs Philpot, when you say everyone's here, who do you mean?"

"Your cousin's here and the Professor," the rosy shade of her cheeks deepened at the mention of his name. "And, Lilith too, of course," her brows furrowing together grumpily at the mention of the other woman.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Cassie asked hesitantly.

"Of course. Ask away," making herself more comfortable on the bed. Her short legs dangled over the side.

"What is it about Lilith that you don't like?" She asked, her curiosity having gotten the better of her.

"Before I answer that, I have a question for you. How well do you know Lilith?" she probed.

"Not very well at all actually. I've barely even spoken to her before yesterday."

"Well, in that case, it's an easy question to answer. I find her insincere and a snob. She's as nice as pie to you when the Professor or the Master are nearby, but if you get her alone, she won't give you the time of day. Unless of course she thinks you're of some value to her." Mrs Philpot rarely had an opportunity to chat to anyone and conversation was a something she excelled in, barely taking a breath between sentences.

"She must be quite good at her job or the Professor wouldn't keep her around, I'm sure. Either that or she has him completely fooled." Concluding it was more likely the latter. "And, she's been after the Master's favour for several years, unsuccessfully, I'm glad to say," raising her hands in the air and rolling her eyes in exaggerated exasperation.

"Whereas your cousin, I like. He's very honest isn't he," a rhetorical question.

"Yes, you could say that. You can guarantee he'll always tell you *exactly* what he's thinking," grimacing at the thought of *just* how honest he is, but Alex wasn't the topic she wanted to discuss. Crossing her legs, elbows on her knees, she leaned forward ruffling the doona around her.

"Is the Master, um, Alaric attached already? Is that why he wasn't interested in Lilith?" He was the most strikingly handsome man she had ever seen. It was inconceivable that he'd be unattached.

"No. In fact, in all the years I've worked for him, I've never seen him with a woman or even heard him talk about a one. Until now," she chuckled, patting Cassie on the hand, "I thought he must be gay."



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A burst of excitement pulsed through her. It wasn't just her imagination. There *was* an emotional undercurrent between them, one she had every intension of exploring.

"How long have you worked for him, if you don't mind me asking?"

"More than forty years," she answered.

Reminiscing on the years, she recalled the day she arrived for the job interview. She was a still a young woman with two small children in tow, having recently lost her husband, a soldier killed in action. Alaric had not only given her the job and the servants wing for herself and her children, but had also insisted on paying for their education in the best schools available in the area. She couldn't have asked for a better employer.

At the time she arrived at the Manor, she had looked several years his junior. Over the years as she aged, her attitude toward Alaric also changed. Her children grew and moved away leaving her alone in this the huge house with her perpetually young employer, who humoured her with the indulgence of mothering him instead. Ridiculous really, considering he was hundreds of years her senior.

"When did you find out he was a vampire?" This was the most enlightening conversation she'd had in a long time and couldn't soak up the information fast enough.

"At my job interview," she stated matter-of-factly. "He had to know firstly, if I could handle it, him being a vampire and all. And secondly, whether I could be trusted with his secret."

"How could he tell? Did he read your mind or something?" she asked, fascinated.

Her hearty laugh filled the room and her large bosom jiggled. "No. I merely explained my family background and once he knew my past, he had no hesitation in employing me. My family has been living in these parts for generations and Mr Neumann has been associated with many of my ancestors over the years. No doubt if he didn't think I was suitable, he would've wiped my memory and that would've been an end to it."

"He can do that?" she gasped. Molten heat rushed through her, settling in her loins, along with an equal amount a healthy respect for his abilities. She probably should have been afraid of him, but instead, the more she learned the more captivated she became.

"I'm sorry if I'm probing too much, I hope you don't think I'm rude. I'm just trying to come to terms with everything that's happened in the past few days, it's been a little, â loverwhelming," confessing her uncertainty.

Disoriented. That's how she felt. The world had shifted on its axis in the last few days cracking the concrete stability her life revolved around, stripping away the illusion of her reality and leaving in its wake emotional turmoil.

"Not at all. I have to admit, I enjoy talking with you.

Her smile faded as her face tightened with seriousness. She was fiercely loyal to her employer, her mothering instincts were strong when it came to him. "You understand though, that anything you see or hear inside these walls, stays inside these walls."

"Of course. Who'd believe me anyway."

They laughed together, the momentary tension broken.

## Eternal Covenant

Cassie heaved a deep sigh as her anxiety levels settled to a more manageable level.

"Well, no more dilly dallying, time to be up and about." She said, sliding off the bed and smoothing out the ruffled quilt where she'd been sitting.

"Thanks for the chat," meeting her caring, all-knowing eyes. She had a look of someone who'd experienced a great deal of loss and upheaval in her life. It was an expression she recognised whenever she looked in the mirror. "And, thanks for the heads-up on Lilith."

"Don't take anything she says or does to heart, love. She's a cow to everyone," she said cheerily as she left the room closing the door behind her.

Cassie took the time to explore her room and wash in her small bathroom. The house was old but at least there were some parts of it that were modern, she thought, enjoying the warmth from the heat lamp above the bath before putting on the beautiful dress and heading down stairs. It wasn't her normal style of clothes, she rarely wore dresses but she couldn't deny she enjoyed the feel of it. She loved the way the heavy weight of the hem flared the skirt as she descended the sweeping staircase.

x-x-x-x-x-

"I didn't say it was your fault, I said I was blaming you. There's a difference." Alex stated flatly, running his fingers through his hair in annoyance.

"If you hadn't texted me, I wouldn't have been distracted." Alaric accused. It wouldn't happen again.

Picking up Cassie's hair band from his desk, he stretched it between his fingers. He'd arrived back at the manor early this morning with it in his pocket, although he had no recollection of putting it there.

If he'd arrived only a second laterâ The thought was inconceivable. Alex's voice droned into the background as his mind envisioned the outcome that could have been.

No, it definitely wouldn't happen again.

"What's going on? Are you two arguing again?" Cassie asked, disrupting their animated discourse. Her scolding tone and gaze shrinking their testosterone inflated balls to the size of marbles in an instant. What was this, a pissing competition?

Alex stared momentarily, searching her for evidence of any injury. Only one. A shallow cut along her throat, beginning an inch below her ear, curving around to just above the top of her collar bone in a long thin sweep.

Alaric remained motionless and watched Alex rush to her side for a closer inspection, circling her, scrutinizing her carefully. Only a few insignificant red lines were evident on her arms, nothing of any consequence. Barely noticeable.

Satisfied, he hugged her, his smile full of concern and affection.

"You can let go now," she said, pushing away from him when he continued to hold on.

"Sorry. I'm just glad you're okay. No thanks to him," tilting his head towards Alaric with a snarly glare.

## Eternal Covenant

Alaric remained expressionless, composed, but irrational jealousy simmered just beneath the surface. No other man should touch her. *He* should be holding her, not Alex. And that dress. It never looked so good on Jocelyn. The way it highlighted her curves, it should be illegal.

"Actually, it's all thanks to Alaric that I'm still alive," she replied tersely. "And, the Professor," she continued, nodding in his direction seated behind the desk. "If the Professor hadn't insisted on us coming here last night to see Alaric, I would've gone home from Uni unaware that Jarvis was after me and I wouldn't be standing here now talking to you." She poked her finger in his chest to emphasise her point.

"So, before you go shooting your mouth off any more, think about that," she finished, aiming her wrath in his direction with a cool glare.

He couldn't argue with that. But, he needed something to take his frustration out on and Alaric was such an easy target. Dangerous, but easy. Alex may have been an academic nerd with an IQ to match Einstein, but common sense rarely went hand in hand with intelligence, and Alex definitely missed out in that department, at least when it came to self preservation.

"Apologise." She ordered in an authoritative voice.

"No." he responded sharply, his hands placed belligerently on his hips.

A Mexican standoff. Neither one had any intention of backing down.

"Cassie. Alex has a point. I should've anticipated that Jarvis would wait until my attention was diverted. Let it be." Alaric prompted. His voice was a soft caress sending goose bumps rippling over her body. Her attention turned fully in his direction, her face melting into a buttery smile, her cheeks turning a soft pink.

The Professor cleared his throat.

"Cassie, did Jarvis say anything to you?" he asked "Anything that might give us a clue who he was working for?"

"No. He only mentioned his colleague on the roof with Alaric." She inhaled a sharp breath, her eyes went wide as her focus returned to Alaric. She hadn't even given the other assassin a second thought.

The corner of his mouth tilted up and his eyes glittered with satisfied pleasure. She was concerned for him and, â he enjoyed it. Her attention was a welcome distraction from his normally dull existence.

So long as he kept his distance, a small voice in the back of his mind reminded.

"What happened to him?" she asked, taking a step closer toward Alaric, grabbing his hands and turning them over. She spied her hair band around his wrist and smiled inwardly to herself. Placing her hand on his chest she quickly scanned him for signs of the struggle with Jarvis. Ridiculous really, since any injury would heal almost instantly, and had.

It was going to take some getting used to, dealing with vampires.

"I could have sworn he ripped open your chest and pulled out your heart last night. I must've been tripping," she mumbled, barely audible enough to be heard nearby.

## Eternal Covenant

The warmth and gentle caress of her hand on his chest jolted and invigorated him at the same time. Desire was stirring. He had to get a grip on it. He felt her body temperature rise and the faint scent of sweet pheromones permeated his nostrils, sending a shiver of pleasure rushing through him.

His awareness of her was more acute than he'd expected.

He *really* had to get a grip. Think about something else. Cute little puppy dogs. Warm summer sun on a meadow. The warmth of Cassie's naked body locked in his embrace beneath him in that meadow.

The appeal was devastating.

Hells hairy balls. He needed a lobotomy.

He quickly changed the subject back to the relevant matter.

"His name is Cain, and he'll live. For now he's more valuable alive than dead. Unfortunately I didn't have enough time to get the information we need." Alaric stated flatly. It really irked that Cassie was nearly killed and that he'd let their best lead get away.

Not that Cain would have gotten far quickly. The moment he realised Cassie was in danger, he broke both his legs and threw him from the roof of the building. It had been his intension to interrogate him after dealing with Jarvis. Cain wasn't a very old vampire, no more than fifty years, so it would've taken him some time to heal. Needless to say, he hadn't anticipated the magnitude of the fight which brought the neighbours and police to the door so soon afterward, and he wasn't going to leave Cassie alone again, not even for a moment.

He'd catch up with him again, one way or another, and next time he'd make sure he got the information he wanted.

"Which brings me to another problem," he added. "Cain and the other assassin, the woman, are still out there. I can only assume that they have orders to finish the job that Jarvis failed," his intense gaze bored into her sending a shiver down her spine.

"What are you trying to tell me?" she asked nervously, the repercussion becoming clear.

"You can't leave the Manor." Alaric said bluntly.

She looked at Alex who noticed her subtly wince at his statement, but nodded his agreement with Alaric. He tried desperately to swallow the smirk. He knew what was coming, could see her anger simmering just below the surface, building. She doesn't take orders very well, never did.

"What do you mean exactly, *I can't leave the Manor?*" she asked coolly.

"Just that. You can't leave the Manor grounds for any reason, not until it's safe," he stated matter-of-factly, seemingly unaware of the thin ice he was skating on.

"So I'm a prisoner here. Is that what you're saying?"

Another flash of lightning and thunder ostensibly ignited by Cassie's fiery temper.

"Not at all. You can explore any part of the Manor house and grounds you like, including the entire Savernake Forest if you choose, but you cannot cross the boundaries. You can't leave here for any reason until I tell you.

## Eternal Covenant

"Am I understood?" his voice remained calm and unperturbed by the fire in her eyes and the ice in her voice.

Alex took a step back. He could see she was about to blow and he didn't want to be in the direct firing line. Heaven knows he been there enough times.

"I've already explained to Alex that by now there would be sentries watching both your homes and the university. Sentries who are loyal to the Guild and who would report your location. Vampires hibernate during the day but your scent is distinct and they can track you several hours after you've left a location. If the vampires don't pick up your scent and kill you, then the Guild who the sentries report to, will. Alex can't return home or to the University so he'll be staying here with you. But, you can't leave here until I tell you. I won't allow it."

It was beginning to annoy him that he had to argue a logical point. It bewildered him that his decision about her new living arrangements, which he made for her own protection, seemed to infuriate her so much.

The two men stood either side of her in agreement. They were ganging up on her. She preferred it when they argued with each other.

She shot them both a withering glare. Alex wiped the smile quickly from his face but it lingered along the edges of his lips. He couldn't help but enjoy the fact that the *perfect* Alaric Neumann was facing Cassie's wrath, just as he did so often. He wasn't however, about to inform Alaric that his method of informing her of the arrangements was the cause of her anger. No, it worked much better to his advantage this way. The more angry she was with him, the less likely she was to fall for him.

He did however agree with Alaric one hundred percent. It wasn't safe for her to return home or the University and if that meant he had to stay there too, so be it. In a house this size, surely it would be possible to avoid Alaric most of the time. Besides, he's a vampire. Don't they sleep during the day?

That thought prompted another question. It was ten in the morning, daytime by several hours. He'd just finished telling them that the vampires wouldn't show themselves in daylight. Why wasn't Alaric sleeping in a coffin somewhere?

"Won't allow me?" she snapped furiously. "You *won't* allow me?" she repeated, her voice rising an octave.

Alaric smiled tightly, tamping down the need to spank her stubborn pretty arse. Her eyes narrowed dangerously with her rising anger.

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "Is it so bad, Cassandra, that I want to protect you?" he asked softly, watching her with a heated lust-filled gaze.

Lightening flared through the window, illuminating the dim study as thunder cracked overhead and rattled the air around them. The tension in the room smouldered.

"I don't want to stay here." That was a flat out lie. There was nowhere else she wanted to be. She had a disturbing irrational need to be close to Alaric.

"Please don't take it personally. I may not sound grateful for everything you've done, which I am," she hastily added. "But I'm still trying to process everything. A week ago I was a normal human living a normal mundane boring life and today..." She threw her hands in the air looking for the words to describe the torrent of emotions roiling through her.

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First and foremost, she resented being told what she could and couldn't do. She wasn't a child to be ordered around.

Furthermore, there were matters in her life she had to deal with, which couldn't be ignored despite the well meaning incarceration they were trying to enforce on her. She had to find another job and she needed to get her apartment fixed. She had to contact the trustees of her inheritance. She wasn't due to receive any of it until her twenty fifth birthday except to pay her tuition costs, but due to the exceptional circumstances, they may release some of the money. Not that she could explain how the damage was caused. She'd need to think up something plausible there. Might be tough though, since she couldn't exactly say that two vampires demolished the place fighting.

And on top of all that, she had her studies to complete. She was in her final year of her course in anthropology, and she'd worked too hard to drop out now.

She explained her situation rather aggressively, only to find that the major issues had already been taken care of.

A single brow raised at her petulant tone, his chiselled features softened as he reached out to move a wayward lock of hair behind her ear and stroked her cheek gently with his thumb.

It was a gentle nurturing moment and completely devastating. It affectively lassoed that part of her brain that had decided gibbering was a good thing.

He may not be able to glamour her, but he still had a couple of tricks up his sleeve to achieve the quiescence he desperately needed.

*You're playing with fire*, a small voice whispered in his mind.

Alaric had already spoken with her landlord and arranged to have her apartment repaired. He grudgingly agreed to allow her to repay him the cost of the repairs at a time when she was able. The Professor had made arrangements for her to study at home. All relevant material could be couriered to and from the University via the Professor for as long as necessary, including Library computer privileges giving her access to material not available in books, normally restricted to the Professors and Lecturers. He'd definitely pulled a few strings on her behalf.

As for the job. Apparently, as she was told, neither she nor Alex needed to worry about that while they stayed at the Manor, all expenses were paid for.

Her anger was completely deflated. She had no come back, except to feel guilty about being such an expensive guest.

"What about my things?" she asked as an after thought, spotting Alex's overly stuffed bag by the door. He'd obviously been told before coming to be prepared for an extended stay. "I don't have any clothes or even a toothbrush. It's very kind of Mrs Philpot to lend me this dress but I can't keep borrowing other people's clothes."

Alaric's jaw set in a hard line of tension and his eyes glowed with a covetous iridescent glitter as she held the dress against her body to emphasise her predicament. Lit by a flash of lightening, her silhouette clearly showed her form beneath the fabric. His vampire sight noted the evident lack of any underwear. He barely stifled a groan.

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Having Cassie at the Manor was already testing his restraint and she'd only been there a few hours. If it weren't for his training in the Buddhist temple to strengthen his will against temptation, he'd already be lost to his ever increasing need for her. The pressure in his trousers became demandingly tight as his desire seared a path through him.

"I'll have someone pick up the things you need later today if you like," he offered smoothly, his face expressionless as he casually sat on the edge of his desk to disguise the bulge in his trousers.

Alex's eyes narrowed but he held his tongue, obviously not keen to draw Cassie's attention to his unmistakable attraction to her.

He'd already arranged for her furniture and other possessions to be transported into storage before the renovations started. What was left of them.

"I'll do it." All eyes turned to Lilith, almost forgotten on the sofa quietly observing the conversation.

"I'll pick up Cassie's things. I have to be in town by lunch time anyway. I could be back around four this afternoon if that would be suitable," she offered.

"Thanks. That would be great. Could I give you a list of things I need?" she asked, moving toward the sofa. Maybe Lilith was looking to score more brownie points with the Professor and Alaric but right now she didn't care, so long as she got some clean underwear, her toiletries and a change of clothes.

Alex and Alaric left the study heading in opposite directions, leaving the Professor at the desk to begin more phone calls, while Cassie wrote out her list of essentials for Lilith.

Alex followed his nose to the dining room where bacon and eggs were laid out next to a pot of fresh coffee. Cassie arrived a few minutes later, her own stomach growling loudly.

It was a grand dining room, elegant and refined, much like its owner. The table would easily seat twenty people which seemed superfluous since it was owned by a reclusive vampire who rarely entertained guests.

The few rooms of the house she had seen so far fascinated her. It was a tasteful mélange of an old world blended with the new although the overall ambience was of an undeniably rustic homely feel. There was nothing gaudy or ostentatious.

Alaric had told her she was allowed to explore any part of the house she wanted, and she intended to do just that. She was going to explore every room between the attics to the basement.

She'd get started right after breakfast, she was starving.

## Chapter 10

### Chapter 10

In search of Cassie several hours later, Alaric passed through what had once been known as the Great Hall. In recent years the hall had been converted into an enormous lounge room/entertainment/man cave, complete with a fully stocked bar and tournament sized antique pool table with enough space remaining to hold a convention. The only thing missing was a home gym.

Two fire places blazed fiercely at either end of the room warming the vast space nicely and yet somehow still didn't quite manage to eliminate the slight draft that circulated the large room. When in use, three large crystal chandeliers illuminated the frescoed ceiling two floors above providing the only artwork in the room. Burgundy painted walls remained relatively bare of ornamentation supporting only oyster shell wall lights which reflected a soft ambience, effectively giving the illusion of a smaller, more intimate space. In the centre of the room between the fireplaces, deep plush lounges faced an immense armoire. Along the back wall shelving lined with hundreds of DVD's and CD's interspersed between the lights.

Alaric stood silently by the door of the conservatory, a wondrous indoor tropical rainforest retreat situated off the great hall. He watched as Cassie relaxed in a high backed wicker chair, her feet up on the glass top table in front of her surrounded by an indoor paradise of plants, palms and water features. Her eyes were closed and surprisingly, a serenely peaceful expression suffused her posture. He'd expected her to be a highly strung and an agitated mess, maybe even to the point of needing medication. Generally speaking, under similar circumstances human females coped poorly with the kind of trauma that Cassie had been subjected to.

But then again, she wasn't an average human.

Seeing her so relaxed brought his own anxiety some relief, he could almost believe he'd at least made one right decision by bringing her here.

It was nearly seventy years since the last significant threat to the world had been eliminated. Complacency and arrogant self confidence over the years had resulted in him making several noteworthy mistakes in judgement recently, nearly costing Cassie her life.

To top it off, he'd underestimated the strength and determination of his enemy. The Guild had grown in strength and power. Vampires and who knows what else were counted among their members.

He couldn't afford to make any more mistakes.

He knew definitely that Ahriman was back the moment the cup was stolen. A warning rippled through the atmosphere, a low keening thrum from the ancients calling their defenders together once more.

A new battle was about to begin in the eons old war.

However, this time it was personal. This battle involved Cassie.

Silence filled the air except for the mellifluous trickling of water over the rocks and pebbles as it cascaded into the Japanese water garden. Even the rain beating against the domed glass ceiling and windows seemed muted, absorbed by the dense greenery surrounding her.

She was so beautiful.



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He could never get bored of watching her.

Reluctantly he approached, deliberately rustling the leaves of the plants and walking with heavy steps, not wanting to startle her.

She opened her eyes and smiled. It stole his breath, and his heart.

"Sorry to disturb you while you're resting." His gentle voice stroked her senses, stoking the passionate blaze that seemed to be constantly smouldering inside her whenever he was nearby. The soft folds between her thighs became slick with moisture and pulsing heat.

His body stiffened, once again the pressure in his trousers intensified. A slight flexing of his lips was the only indication of his internal strain to hold himself in check.

"You're not disturbing me. This is your home after all."

If she kept smiling at him like that, he couldn't be held responsible for his actions, he thought.

His eyes raked boldly over her angelic face, then lower to the creamy expanse of her neck, partially covered but by no means hidden beneath the long golden waves falling about her shoulders, the ends enticingly shrouding her full breasts.

Goddamn. He was going to melt. Fire raced along his body and tore through his balls and torched his brain as her sweet scent saturated his taste buds. His fangs ached to extend.

In his kind, sex and feeding were intertwined. Sating one, fed the need to sate the other, although he couldn't afford to do either with her.

"I thought you would like to know that Lilith is back with your things," he announced, offering her his arm to escort her back to her room.

It was an innocent gesture expected of a gentleman, which he was trying his damndest to be, but a dangerous one in his case. Regardless, he couldn't resist the opportunity to touch her.

"Great. Lead the way," she smiled, her multi coloured hazel eyes twinkling at him.

He expected her to clutch the crook of his arm which he'd extended for her. Unpredictable as she was, she slid her hand from his elbow, down the inside of his forearm, her fingers and palm caressing the hypersensitive skin beneath the thin shirt, before clasping his hand in hers. His skin prickled with the heat of her touch.

For a moment he dared not move.

Sweet heaven's mercy.

The points of his fangs began to descend. He swallowed hard and willed them to retract. His cock was burning a hole in his trousers. Either that or someone had switched it for a branding iron when he wasn't looking.

"I wasn't resting. I was meditating," she remarked snapping his brain back into line with the strain of rusty gears.

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"Oh. In that case, you may be interested to meet our new guest. He's a Tibetan monk from the Dalai Lama's temple. He'll be arriving tonight," he answered, flashing a perfect smile as he ushered her through the doorway before him, endeavouring to hide the evidence of his turgid masculinity.

Alex watched with impotent anger as they passed him at the pool table, muttering a string of curses when he spied their clasped hands. The thud of a ball hitting the timber floor, bouncing and rolling, reverberated through the huge room a moment later.

"I take it he's coming about the cup," she stated.

"Yes. It seems he's uncovered some information that might help us find out how they got the cup and who has it now."

Her brain wasn't working very well today. She should be asking more questions but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get her mind off Alaric and all the things she wanted to do *to* him and *with* him.

It was a good thing Lilith was back with her things, if she didn't get some underwear on, pretty soon she was going to leave a snail trail of the thick creamy slick threatening to trickle down her legs from her constant arousal he induced.

"Cassie. Mr Neumann," Lilith began as they entered her bedroom, giving Cassie her most sincere look of pity. "I'm sorry to say there wasn't much left to salvage." Cassie approached the bed to examine the remnants of her clothes.

Her heart sank.

Lilith patted her on the arm, a wooden gesture underscoring the artificial sympathy which oozed from her touch, causing Cassie to inwardly flinch.

But, she was grateful to have some of her things back, the few that there were, and grateful that Lilith had taken the trouble to help her out.

She managed a weak half hearted smile in return.

Alaric felt her disappointment as he watched her sift through the bag.

Guilt forged a hole in his heart. He was the cause of her misfortune.

"Your bathroom was a bit of a mess as well I'm afraid. There was dust and plaster everywhere so I took the liberty of getting you a new toothbrush and razor," she said, adding her reasons, "I know *I* wouldn't want to use anything again that was covered in dead vampire."

Cassie shuddered. "Thanks. I owe you one." Maybe she wasn't so bad after all. Maybe Lilith was just one of those people you had to get to know before she warmed up to you.

"Don't mention it." Smiling sweetly Lilith excused herself and headed toward the door.

Cassie placed the clothes in piles. She had one pair of knickers, two bras, one pair of sneakers and maybe two changes of clothes left, and even those looked like they'd seen better days.

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She sighed, her shoulders slumped as she sank heavily onto the bed, holding her one and only pair of jeans in her lap.

She looked up at Alaric, her brows furrowed quizzically. "You know, I should be angry about this. This is all I have left," she sighed. "Because of that asshole, almost everything I own is destroyed," she stated looking at the small pile around her and brushing the dust off her lap. "But, I'm not. More than anything, I feel guilty," she confessed, perplexed.

"I mean, I am angry about losing everything, but I feel guilty about it too. It doesn't make sense. Was it my fault what happened last night? I don't know. Maybe it was. You told me not to go out after dark, and I did, and he found me. Everything feels all mixed up inside. I'm sorry, I'm babbling again."

Her fingers nervously fidgeted in front of her, picking distractedly at a stray thread on the hem of the jeans she held.

Self conscious of her dodgy mental state, her anxiety only increased. Ten minutes ago she'd felt so relaxed. She was giving herself whiplash from her gambit of sea-sawing mood swings. If she didn't get a grip soon her next place of residence was going to be a padded cell.

Alaric's exterior poker face was flawless. He'd perfected it centuries ago but he couldn't mask his internal feelings nearly as well.

He knew Cassie well enough to know that her normal reaction would have been one of predominantly anger.

Taking a seat beside her on the bed he lifted her chin with his forefinger. Her long dark lashes lifted to look at him as he reached across and covered both her restless hands with his and squeezed gently.

Her body stilled instantly. His touch was like sunshine after a winters storm, filled with warmth and joie de vivre.

He knew why she was feeling so out of kilter. It was the blood bond created when he healed her. Their unique combination together seemed to have formed a connection that went both ways between them. He'd never heard of that happening before. It was common for a vampire to sense a human's emotions who's blood he'd taken, could even sense their location if they'd taken enough blood.

But this was different. Cassie was definitely linked to *his* emotions. It was *his* guilt she was feeling, not her own.

A knot of anxiety settled in the pit of his stomach.

"It stands to reason that after everything you've been through, you would have mixed emotions," he reassured, damping down his thoughts and feelings, stilling his mind and emotions.

"Yes. No doubt you're right," she said, setting aside her clothes to sort through her toiletries.

It appeared that Lilith had also removed the mat of hair from her hairbrush. Not that she really minded under the circumstances, but it still creeped her out a little. It crossed the line into her personal space. Who did that, cleaned someone else's hairbrush? Brownie points or not, that was going a bit too far.

"Don't worry about the clothes," he said handing her a Black American Express card. "There is no credit limit. Buy whatever you need, on-line of course," he added quickly, scowling at her when she opened her mouth to

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protest her shopping privileges.

It was not negotiable. She wasn't leaving the Manor.

Overwhelmed by his kindness and generosity, her eyes welled up as a single tear slipped free.

Yep, she was headed for a padded cell.

Alaric traced its trail over her cheek with his thumb, his hand cupping her face.

"Thank you," she mouthed soundlessly, the words caught in her throat. She leaned into him and burrowed her face against his chest as a silent sob escaped.

He held her against him, one hand wrapped tightly about her waist, the other caressed the length of her tousled locks until her tears stopped.

Alaric pulled back from her gently.

"I think you should spend that money quickly before I change my mind," he said smiling that lopsided smile that would make angels weep.

Thank God she was already sitting or she might just embarrass herself again with her weak knees.

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. Relaxing, she laughed, a soft diffident chuckle. "Again. Thank you. I'll repay you when I can."

"If you say so," he said as he turned to leave her in peace. He had no intension of taking any money from her but if it made her feel better to think he would, he wasn't about to tell her otherwise.

She held up her one and only pair of knickers. A mischievous glint entered her eyes and the corners of her lips curved up in devious delight. She pictured in her mind's eye, the wonderful range of lingerie from Victoria's Secret, and how much fun she could have modelling it.

All of course available on the internet.

She turned at the sound of a growl, the type of growl that caused an electric current to race through her veins like pure liquid fire, engulfing her core. She clenched her thighs together to quench the sensation.

Alaric stood near the doorway, his back to her, stock-still, his fists clenched into tight balls by his sides.

Did he just growl?

There was no chance to find out for certain. Shouting erupted further down the hallway.

Alex's room.

## Chapter 11

### Chapter 11

"I only replaced your tooth brush. There were two in the packet. I gave Cassie one and thought you would like the other." Lilith looked shocked and flabbergasted at Alex's reaction. "I'm a personal assistant, that's what I do. I do everything for the Professor including buying his toothbrushes. I assumed you wouldn't mind if I did the same for you."

"I'm not buying this good Samaritan crap you're selling lady, and I'd appreciate it if you'd get out of my room and leave my things alone."

"You ungrateful bastard. I'm doing you a favour."

"No. You did Cassie a favour. Here," he pointed at his open duffel bag with his underwear and the contents of his toiletry bag strewn on his bed, "You're snooping through my things for no good reason."

The muscles in his neck and shoulders began to bunch and a vein in his temple bulged as he took a closer look at exactly what she had been touching and the evidence of how she'd been touching it. His eyes narrowed on her as he lifted a pair of his briefs that had been turned inside out. What had she been doing, sniffing them? Sick bitch.

"Don't get your knickers in a knot. I was doing housekeeping, I have no interest in you personally," she defended, reading the expression on his face. "But, given your reputation with the ladies, I'm sure there'll come a time when you come knocking on my door," she quipped mockingly.

Bad move.

"Fuck me!" he exclaimed. Exasperation and anger rolled through him like a freight train. "You're so fucking up yourself, your own shit has fried your brain. You're delusional if you think I'd ever lower my standards enough to let you seduce me into your bed or for that matter, even let you put your slimy halitosis tongue down my throat."

"You disgust me. I would rather eat my own vomit," she snarled.

"Yes. I imagine you would," he sniped back. "Dogs are known to eat their own vomit. I just haven't worked out what breed you are. But the term Bitch certainly suits you, in both sense of the word!"

Whatever remaining pretence of civility between them evaporated under Lilith's arctic glare. Whether he realised it not, Alex was one comment away from a painful testicular downsizing.

"I promise you, I will make you regret your comments," she hissed, "Just you wait." Lifting her nose in the air she turned on her heel and headed for the door.

"Oh. I nearly forgot," Lilith stated sweetly when she reached Cassie and Alaric standing just outside in the hall. The smile in her voice however, was contradicted by the ice in her eyes. Cassie stood wide eyed and stunned at the explosive confrontation they'd just witnessed and numbly accepted a card she pressed into her hand.

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"I ran into the police at your apartment. They need to you to go down to the station and give them a statement about last night," she said, shooting Alex another withering glare that could peel pain from a wall.

With her head held high, the three of them watched her rear swagger seductively down the hallway as she retreated from view. No doubt the exhibition was for Alex's benefit.

Alex and Alaric both crowded Cassie as they each reached to take the card from her hand, which she refused to relinquish. Neither was happy about the rebuff and both cursed beneath their breaths as she took a step back from them to read it herself.

Detective Bill Renkin, Homicide, Scotland Yard. That name rang a bell.

Handing it over, Alex grabbed it by the narrowest of margin, shooting Alaric a satisfied grin.

"Hmm. Detective Renkin. I think that's the guy who's handling Anil's murder investigation." Alex churned it over in his mind. It didn't make sense. Why would a homicide detective be involved in a home invasion case.

Obviously Alaric was thinking along the same lines. Their scowls mirrored one another on either side of Cassie.

"Don't worry about it. I'll handle it." Alaric informed them both, already heading for the stairs.

This could present a problem. He'd dealt with the landlord but should have anticipated the police would become involved with the amount of noise and property damage caused by his fight with Jarvis.

If Cassie was seen leaving the University the night Anil was murdered, the police may be investigating a possible link between the two crimes. If Jarvis' companions are still looking for her or even worse, the Guild is looking for her, a police investigation would likely lead them right to her.

If he needed more evidence of how badly he'd handled things, this was it.

No more.

He'd deal with the police and cut off their investigation before it gets started.

Hell would freeze over before he let anything else happen to her.

"Mrs P, I'm here to help you with dinner but first I need coffee. Strong coffee preferably laced with alcohol." Alex said as he marched into the kitchen and began pacing, still muttering a string of curses to himself.

"Well, thank you Alex," ushering him to take a seat on a stool at the bench. "I'd be delighted for the help but I'm afraid I don't have any fresh coffee made at the moment, love. How about I fix you something else?"

"Thanks. That would be great." Even seated he couldn't sit still. His knee jiggled incessantly keeping time with the teaspoon he tapped on the bench top.

"Now love, how about you tell me what's got you so riled up," she asked. Her soothing voice probed gently.

"I've just had a run in with Lilith, that's all." His handsome face twisted, his lips thinned and his dark eyes narrowed, barely containing the bridled anger in his voice.

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"Ah. The lovely Miss Priss." Her chuckle could only come from someone having been in the same situation herself.

Mrs Philpot's tone softened. "That's not the only thing eating at you though is it love."

He raised his eyes to find her watching him intently.

"You're very protective of your cousin. You obviously love her very much and I'm sure it's very hard for you right now, knowing she's in danger and feeling helpless to fix the situation. Am I right?" Mrs Philpot asked.

He hesitated, measuring her for a moment.

"Yes." Alex confessed, his shoulders slumping on his exhaled sigh. "It kills me that I don't know what to do to protect her. I'm not strong enough to fight off vampires and I don't know enough about this war that we seem to have landed in the middle of, to find another solution. I feel like I've failed her," banging a frustrated fist on the bench.

She could hear the bitterness in his voice. It was more than mere male pride that was taking a pounding, it went way deeper than that.

He felt like he was in a counselling session with a grandmotherly version of Dr Phil. She had that painful box of his memories in her hands and she was turning the key in the lock.

"You've looked out for her for a long time haven't you, love."

And Pandora's box was open.

"I've always taken care of her. I don't know how *not* to." he began to explain, sighing heavily as he leaned against the kitchen bench.

"I never knew my father. To be honest, I'm not too sure my mother knew who he was," he confessed. "Cassie's father, Jonathan was like my father. Cassie and I grew up together, like brother and sister, not like cousins."

Mrs Philpot grabbed the kettle from the stove. A strong cup of tea was in order.

"When Cassie was nine, her father died and I became the man of the house, so to speak. I'd only just turned eleven." He grabbed a couple of cups and saucers and placed them on the bench, an insentient action, his mind lost back in the past.

"Cassie's mother, died two years later from ovarian cancer. She was barely sick a day until a month before her diagnosis. She was gone three months later. My mother took up drinking when Jonathan died and it became much worse after Anna passed away."

Mrs Philpot listened intently, sliding a cup of the steaming brew in front of him.

"My mother died of sorosis of the liver when I was eighteen but I've taken care of Cassie and both our mothers since I was eleven. There was no one else to do it," he finished, lamenting the memory.

It had been difficult staying under the radar of the Department of Child Services through those years, but they were determined to stay together in their own home. A couple of times it looked like they wouldn't make it,

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but luck had been on their side.

"Well. I can certainly understand why you're so protective of her. You're very lucky to have had each other by the sounds of it and you've both been through things in life that no young people should have to face," she said thoughtfully. "But, Mr Neumann is a good man. He won't let any harm come to her. He is very old and extremely powerful and I have no doubt he will use everything at his disposal to keep her safe." She said in her quiet motherly fashion.

Good man. Hah. Lecherous blood sucking parasite more like it, he mentally corrected her.

"I also think he will be careful not to break her heart. But she's a grown woman now and she is determined to make her own choices. Be careful not to tread on her toes or she'll push you away," she added, understanding his other frustration.

He had to concede though, she was right. He had to take a step back and let Cassie make her own choices, whether he liked it or not. Just not today. Not while her life was being threatened.

In truth, it was a deep sense of guilt at not being able to help his mother from self destructing at the bottom of a whisky bottle which drove him so hard to protect Cassie. As far as he was concerned, any potential relationship with a blood sucking vampire would be just another form of self destructive behaviour. Nothing good could come of it, only disappointment and, heaven forbid he even think itâ maybe even her death.

A vampire can't be trusted.

She was the only family he had left and he'd fight tooth and nail to keep her safe. He'd lay down his own life for her if necessary.

Bruisingly aware that memories could make you bleed as effectively as any razor, she expertly changed the subject.

"Now, if you've finished your cuppa," Mrs Philpot said, clearing away the cups, "We have dinner to prepare."

"Mrs P?" Mrs Philpot turned to face him.

"Thanks for the chat." Surprisingly, he felt like some of the weight had lifted from his shoulders.

"You're welcome love." Her perceptive smile broadened.

"Now. The vegetable peeler is in that draw and the potatoes are in the box over there," she said. "You'll need to peel a few extras, the Professor and Lilith are staying for dinner too."

"Fucking nosy bitch," Alex muttered under his breath.

"Here. Here." Mrs Philpot seconded the remark, brandishing the butcher's knife and bringing it down on the leg of lamb in front of her. Lilith seemed to have that affect on people.

"So, exactly how many are eating?" he asked as he began peeling.

Mrs Philpot smiled broadly. "Six."



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Six people eating. He quickly did the math. That would mean "The blood sucker eats ah, I mean Alaric eats *food*?"

Her perpetual merriment flashed in her eyes, her laugh was deep, warm and rich. "He's not so different from you, you know, just much older and has a few more tricks up his sleeve."

"Don't forget to add '*drinks blood*' to that list."

Bugger me. He didn't expect that. Make that lesson one in his Vampire Education manual. They eat food.

He really had to learn more about vampires.

A short while later the smell of roast meat cooking lured Cassie from the study, her stomach rumbled. Spending money was hard work.

"Perfect timing." Alex remarked. "You can set the table."

Cassie rummaged through cupboards and draws under the guidance of the effervescent housekeeper. She was delighted to see Alex's mood had improved dramatically, no doubt due to Mrs Philpot's influence.

"You've heard there's a Tibetan Monk coming to stay." Alex asked the rhetorical question.

"I had heard something like that," she replied absently, as they finished setting the table.

Her mind was miles away.

The rain having stopped, ribbons of pink and grey clouds decorated the sky as the sun began to sink toward the horizon. Streaks of light shone through the dining room windows causing small rainbow prisms to be reflected onto the white lace table cloth through the crystal glasses laid out.

It was all very surreal just like the rest of her life had been lately.

Any time now she was going to wake up and find the past week had all just been a dream.

With the dinner dishes cleared away, the Professor and Lilith retreated to the sitting room. He had spent the afternoon contacting other members of the Alliance. Others like themselves who dedicated their lives to stopping the demons rising from the underworld. The Guild had always been a very secretive society and it had proven very difficult for the Alliance to infiltrate them.

Lilith rapidly took notes as he dictated.

When the doorbell rang, it was the Professor who moved to answer it. "I've got it," he called out, knowing Mrs Philpot had her hands full in the kitchen. He'd spent so much time here over the years, it had become like a second home to him.

The door opened silently, a chilly gusty breeze pushed past him as a dark haired man stepped up to the door.

## Chapter 12

### Chapter 12

"Detective Renkin, isn't it?" the Professor asked, a little surprised to see the police officer so far from his precinct.

"Yes," he replied charmingly, extending his hand to the older man. "I volunteered for the home visit. Kill two birds with one stone, you could say," his smile broadening as Lilith appeared at the door.

"Make that three birds." He said, taking Lilith's hand and kissing it chivalrously. Dark eyes framing his handsome square face, glinted with intent.

The Professor raised his eyebrow, looking from one to the other in astonishment.

"I'm here to get a statement from Cassandra McLennan about the break-in at her apartment last night and to up-date you on the murder case at the University," he said, barely lifting his eyes from Lilith as he spoke. Her cheeks blushed a soft rosy shade.

"I've been expecting you. Please, come in." Alaric answered from behind them, scrutinizing the Detective's polished appearance as he stepped over the threshold. At this point in time he wasn't prepared to trust anyone on face value but kept his tone polite and congenial.

"A very impressive house," the Detective stated admiringly. His pearly whites flashing a sycophantic smile.

"Thank you. It's been in the family for generations."

Alaric ushered him through to the sitting room where the fire was already blazing.

"You can understand that Cassie is still quite distressed by the events of last night. I'm afraid she's not in a fit state to speak to anyone as yet. I'm happy to give you the statement you need." Alaric wasn't open to bargain the situation.

"And, as *you* would understand, I require a statement from the occupants of the apartment, I'm afraid," the Detective argued in smoothly. Their eyes met with equal determination.

"Then you're in luck. I was there with her last night and I'd be more than happy to give you any information you need," he smiled charmingly back at him.

Cassie stood in the hall just outside the sitting room, Alex's hand about her wrist, ushering her to be silent and pulling her back towards the lounge room where Mrs Philpot had arranged supper for them.

"Let him deal with it," Alex demanded as he closed the door behind them quietly. "No doubt he's had a lot more practice at covering his arse with bullshit stories than you have. The cop will probably leave here believing he's daffy duck, if fang boy in there tells him so," he said, pointing back in Alaric's direction.

She wasn't going to argue with him there.

Crossing the room to take the remote control from the nearby shelf and aiming it toward the elaborately carved antique-looking cherrywood armoire. The armoire's doors swung open, revealing a large

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state-of-the-art flat screen TV. He thumbed another button to turn it on as he settled himself on one of the large couches facing it.

A cup of tea and two pieces of chocolate cake later, Alaric appeared in the doorway, flanked by the Professor and someone wearing the orange robes of a monk.

Lilith had left only minutes before, having accepted an invitation for a drink at the nearby Cadley Pub with Detective Renkin. Poor sod.

"Cassie, Alex, may I introduce our latest guest, Narayan."

Alex and Cassie both stared, open mouthed as he entered.

"You're a vampire," Cassie stated, her voice almost a whisper she was so stunned.

"Yes." His smile lit up his face. Such a beautiful face. Iridescence, like small flakes of glitter scattered throughout his eyes. "You're very perceptive." The top of his bald head shined under the lights as he bowed to them graciously.

"Alex. I suggest you shut your mouth before you catch flies," Alaric said, trying to emulate Alex's comment the night before.

A derisive snort covered Alex's snigger. "If that's your attempt at humorous sarcasm, it was pitiful. It makes you sound like a dim witted idiot," he replied.

"Yes, well, as they say, *it takes one to know one*, wouldn't you agree?" Alaric quipped, not giving him a chance to reply, "And, I dare not argue with an idiot. *He would drag you down to his level and beat you with experience*," he finished, all the while staring Alex down with a pestering garish grin.

The veins in Alex's neck began to bulge as his face changed to a darker shade of red. His hands clenched into fists by his sides.

"Arrrgh. You two are impossible," This antagonism between them was getting old. "Enough with the pissing competition. If you keep this up, I'm going to need an umbrella," she snapped animatedly, her hands making gestures of frustration. Her skin flushed from her cheeks to her chest as she glared venomously at them. Her soft cashmere sweater abraded the sensitive peaks of her breasts as it hugged her heated skin. They were so sensitive every breath caused a shock wave through her body. She really needed a bra. The only two pair she had were presently being washed due to being covered in plaster and vampire dust.

"That was a much better attempt," conceded Alex through clenched teeth. Enthusiasm for their banter having been deflated by Cassie's reprimand, he couldn't let it be though, not until he had his last word. "I'd say however, that you're as equally qualified as I am in the experience department," receiving another warning glare for his trouble.

Cassie pushed past Alex toward Narayan. "I'm sorry about that. There's a bit too much testosterone around here." Sending another glacial glare to both Alaric and Alex.

Narayan's eyes glittered and his shoulders jiggled with a chuckle. The smile on his rounded face caused the faintest lines at the corners of his mouth and dimpled his cheeks.

Cassie liked him already.

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"A fool thinks he has won a battle when he bullies with harsh speech, only knowing how to be forbearing makes him victorious," Narayan said, bowing once again. Effectively giving both men his own version of a wrap across the knuckles.

Clearing his throat, Alex endeavoured to change the subject. "How did you get here."

"By plane," answering him literally. Sarcasm intended. He knew what Alex was asking, but was curious to know how short a fuse this dark headed fire cracker had.

Clearly Narayan had a sense of humour Cassie thought. Yep, they would get along quite well.

"I meant from the airport." Alex clarified politely. His lips thinned in his strain to maintain civility, his ego still prickled by Alaric's comments, not to mention the monk's verbal smack-down.

Narayan raised one eyebrow, summing up Alex's *issues* in a glance.

Alaric answered for him. "Cassie, I have a surprise for you." His lopsided cheeky grin flashed in her direction, eliciting another huff from Alex.

"What?" she asked, intrigued.

"A friend of yours collected Narayan from the airport."

"A friend of mine? Who?" She couldn't think who she could possibly know who'd be a mutual friend. All her friends were uni students, most of whom didn't own a car.

"Abigail." His eyes glittered with excitement now too.

"Abigail?" She couldn't think of anyone she knew named Abigail.

Her bewildered expression changed to one of confused recognition as the door opened and a woman with short brunette hair, shorter at the back with a sweeping fringe, entered the room. She looked vaguely familiar but Cassie couldn't quite place her.

Alex stared at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her black pants hugged her slender but curved figure. A mauve low necked T-shirt hugged her full breasts while the bottom of her black leather jacket rested loosely on her waist. Her walk was smooth and seductive.

She looked like heaven and moved like sin.

Chocolate brown eyes scanned the faces in the room, fixing on Alex. Her eyes glinted momentarily. The corners of her mouth turned up in a shy smile as her cheeks blushed a delicate shade of pink against her perfect alabaster skin under Alex's hungry gaze.

Turning her focus to Cassie her smile broadened.

"You might remember me better if I wore grungy clothes and had a chicken roll in my hand," her silky voice purred. Watching, waiting for the penny to drop, she studied Cassie's face intently for her reaction.

Cassie's mouth dropped open as it dawned on her. "Oh my God. Abigail. *You're* Abigail."

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She rushed the woman and hugged her fiercely. Abigail tentatively returned the hug. She didn't expect such a zealous response and it was a little overwhelming for the woman who'd spent most of her life shunning human contact. The happiness she felt from Cassie however was welcoming and contagious.

"I can't believe it. What happened to you? You look so different."

Alaric's voice interrupted her excitement. "We'll let you two have a few minutes to catch up but then we need to get down to discussing business." His eyes betrayed his pleasure at their reunion regardless of how he tried to disguise it with his serious tone and poker faced expression.

His commanding tone drew Cassie's eyes sending a shiver up her spine and a flush of heat between her thighs. She bit her bottom lip as her body shuddered. His body stiffened under her gaze, his jaw muscles clenched and his eyes flashed momentarily.

Alex's eyes never left Abigail's face, stepping forward to introduce himself.

She extended her hand and blushed again when his much larger hand engulfed hers.

"I'm Alex, Cassie's cousin. It's a pleasure to meet you Abigail." Mesmerised, that's what he was. Completely gobsmacked. She had the face of an angel and the body of a goddess. He couldn't look away if he tried. For the first time in his life he was lost for words. No tacky pick-up lines or crass comments were forthcoming.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, Alex. And, please call me Abby" she answered in a refined and cultured manner.

His thumb traced the back of her hand unconsciously. Her pale skin was soft and slightly cool beneath his fingers but she held a firm grip causing his cock to harden and flex involuntarily. Her blush deepened.

Alex stepped back uncomfortably but stalled his withdrawal away from her. Over by the pool table Alaric, the Professor and Narayan watched them with curiosity.

As intrigued as Alex was by a vampiric monk, his mind was preoccupied by the vampiric female temptress who'd set his loins on fire. And, there was no doubt that she was a vampire.

Abby's attention returned to Cassie.

"That evening you offered me that roll, turned out to be a very interesting night for me," she began as Cassie dragged her to the couch, Alex in tow.

"Earlier that night a vampire had used me as his pre-dinner snack, which is why I was so hungry when you saw me."

You could have heard a pin drop in the room. Alaric, Narayan and the Professor joined them to listen to her story.

"A few hours later I was attacked by another vampire who was in a rage when he discovered I wasn't you."

Cassie's breath hitched. "Jarvis!" she muttered, quickly shifting her troubled gaze toward Alaric whose slight nod confirmed her assumption.

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"He left me near dead. After being drained earlier, I didn't have much hope of surviving. That's when Alaric found me. He gave me a choice, die or be changed. I opted for the latter, as you can see." Cassie placed her hand on Abby's forearm as emotion began to well inside her, causing her throat to constrict. Jarvis had attacked Abby because of *her*. She had nearly died because of *her*.

"Alaric, how did you find her?" Cassie asked, her voice tight.

Taking a step forward, he placed his hand on Cassie's shoulder, her own holding onto it firmly. He couldn't bear the guilt she felt for Abby's attack.

"I was tracking Jarvis. You left your scent on Abby when you hugged her earlier that evening and Jarvis had tracked it to her," his eyes softened with concern, his full lips thinned.

It distressed him more than it should to see Cassie upset.

"That's why I hadn't dealt with Jarvis before last night. I've spent the past week helping Abby adjust to her new life."

Cassie hugged the other woman again and begged her for forgiveness. Grief and guilt plagued her conscience.

Abby's quiet laughter stilled Cassie's emotional self flagellation.

"Don't be sorry Cassie, Alaric gave me the greatest gift I could have ever hoped for. Peace of mind and freedom."

Cassie sat back and stared at her, confused.

"Do you mean because you're no longer living on the streets?"

Quite obviously Abby was no longer living on the streets, which was a huge plus in Cassie's mind. She was dressed well, she looked healthy, way more confident and happy and her sophistication no longer seemed out of place.

Abby sighed.

"I chose to live on the streets," she said, eyeing Cassie and Alex's confused reaction. "I was born with a gift," drawing the last word out as if it were a curse. "When I touched people, I could hear their thoughts."

It was Alex's turn to blush as she flashed him a knowing look with those compelling, magnetic eyes of hers. She knew every lusty detail that had fluttered through his mind when he first saw her.

"As I grew older, my *gift* also developed, but not my ability to control it. I started to hear people's thoughts without needing to touch them. I believed I was losing my mind, slowly going insane. Sometimes I couldn't distinguish my own thoughts from someone else's.

"So, I turned to living on the streets. I wanted to be left alone, and no one bothers you if you're a filthy homeless woman." It was a sad memory, but that was all it was now. A memory.

"Except for Cassie." Alex said cheerfully, flashing her a cheeky grin. "Trust Cassie not to leave you alone. She's got her nose in everyone's business," hunching over and grunting when her fist connected with his stomach, inducing a laugh from Abby.

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Alaric placed his hand on Cassie's shoulder again. Her body relaxed into his touch, leaning back into the couch where he stood close behind her. Absently his other hand began winding a wayward curl around his finger. She almost purred in contentment.

"When Alaric changed me, I discovered that my gift was no longer my curse. I can control it now. I can filter out any mind around me and I can listen in on several minds at a time without being affected by the melange of thoughts."

Alex was in awe of her but he had to admit, he was a little intimidated. Not by the fact that she was a vampire or that she could and *did* read his mind, which in turn forced him to re-discover his humility. Not an easy feat. No, it was something else altogether. She stirred something in his soul that scared him. A vague feeling that caused butterflies to flutter in his stomach and his brain to lose a hundred IQ points, all because she smiled.

"Well, you look fantastic." Cassie said.

"Another perk of becoming a vampire," she quipped happily. "It takes a few years off your appearance." She looked no more than twenty three or twenty four years old.

"How old are you really?" Alex asked.

"I'm forty." looking him in the eye as she answered. A shiver of excitement ran through her. She had every intention of getting to know this man who stared at her so intently. He was nearly sixteen years her junior, which would make her a cougar by today's standard, but going by the lusty vibes he was giving off, he wasn't the least bit perturbed by their age difference. Hurdle number one conquered.

"Abigail. Alaric tells me you've been using your skills to help us." The Professor reported, coming around to take a seat on a nearby chair.

"Yes. When you're considered to be no more important than gutter scum, you become almost invisible to people, it's amazing the things you learn. While the public are oblivious to the existence of vampires, the street folk are very familiar with them. They're the vampire's easiest source of food. They're disposable and always accessible. In the last few months there's been a significant increase in the number of vampires in the area around Oxford, coinciding with the opening of the Phoenix nightclub. It doesn't take a genius to work out the connection."

Alaric's hand tightened on Cassie's shoulder when she stiffened at the mention of the nightclub.

"Over the past week I've been blending in at the night club," she said. "I've discovered it's a meeting point for more than just the vampires, the Guild is using it as a recruiting office. Ahriman's name has been mentioned several times. Not everyone is happy about the Guild's presence there though."

"I haven't been able to get close enough to the owner of the club, Saladin, to find out if he is a Guild supporter or not, I'm still working on that one. He doesn't mix with the other vampires. He prefers to sit in the lounge area at the back of the room where he just watches everything. No one approaches him unless he calls them over. I don't think he's involved but from what I've seen of him, I don't think he'd go out of his way to dissuade any new recruits either. The Guild's insider has been feeding Jarvis, Caine and Mira their orders. It shouldn't take me too long to find out who it is."

"Several of the vampires at the club seem to believe that Mira is the one to watch out for. She has an obsession for power and is ruthless in obtaining it. Most of the vampires steer clear of her. She does seem to have some sort of casual relationship going with Saladin which is a bit of a concern. He has a lot of influence

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with the other vampires, they look to him for leadership and if Mira persuaded him to support the Guild, I think the majority of the others would follow him.

"Caine is young and easily led but he's a good fighter with amoral tendencies. And Jarvis, well, fortunately we don't need to worry about him anymore," she concluded.

Cassie looked up into Alaric's face, melting the icy fringes of his heart even further.

This wasn't the news they were hoping for, but at this point every bit of information was critical. The situation with the Guild was worse than they had anticipated. Ahriman was definitely back and it was crystal clear he was behind the theft of the cup.

This was not good news Alaric thought. Alaric knew Saladin well in the past. His magnetic charisma and leadership skills made him a very successful Warlord in the twelfth century as the leader of the Muslim's against the Crusaders. Alaric had no doubt that if he were swayed toward allegiance with the Guild, the Guild would have an unstoppable army at their disposal. This was not good news at all.

"It's a wonderful thing that you're doing for us," the Professor commended. "But, you put yourself at great risk. We would understand if you decided it was a risk not worth taking." The Professor's concern was etched on his rapidly aging face. He had no wish to risk her life, even if the information she was obtaining was so vital to them.

"It's the least I can do," she replied.

ACDC's Hell's Bells began playing in Alex's pocket.

"I've been meaning to change that ring tone," he said apologetically as he pulled his phone out. It was Matt, his mate from Customs at the airport.

"Yeh. Matt. What's up?" His face grew serious, his mouth tightening in a thin line.

The cup had been found.



## Chapter 13

### Chapter 13

The cup was found in luggage coming in from India. Ironically on the same flight Narayan had arrived on. A sniffer dog had alerted customs to a bag containing a small amount of hash and the wooden cup hidden in the suitcase and seized it for investigation.

"Tell him you'll be there in half an hour," Alaric said.

Alex scowled at Alaric, although relayed the message.

Lesson number two in the vampire education manual, vampires have annoyingly good hearing.

Fortunately in this case it saved him the hassle of relaying the conversation.

As he hung up, everyone began talking at once.

None of them knew whether to be relieved or concerned. On one hand it was a relief to know where the cup was, but on the other hand the Guild wouldn't have abandoned the cup, not after all the trouble they went to get it in the first place. They'll be sending someone to collect itâ or, the owner of the case is still there and just waiting for a chance to collect it.

They needed to get to the cup before the Guild.

"Alex, Abby, Narayan, you'll have to go to the airport and get the cup. Abby you're driving, take the Huayra." Alaric directed.

"A Pagani Huayra? You have a Pagani Huayra?" Alex asked incredulously. Not giving Alaric a chance to answer. "I'm driving."

He'd never been up close and personal with a Pagani Huayra, a Â£600,000 seven hundred horse power rocket on wheels.

"Only if you have the reflexes of a vampire, which of course you don't. Abby's driving," he insisted with impatience.

Alex bit down on his lower lip and clenched his fists by his sides in order to curtail his testy reply.

It was worth a try. Besides, there was recompense to withholding his tongue.

His masculinity may be slightly challenged in the company of vampires but he couldn't complain about the chance to be in such close confinement with Abby, even if there was a gear stick between them. He had another gear stick in mind that she could drive that could definitely reinstate his masculinity. He was getting a hard-on just thinking about it.

A sidelong glance at Abby's shy grin was a quick reminder to keep his thoughts above the belt. Like that was going to happen. Maybe he should at least feel some guilt for his salacious thoughts. But, no. That wasn't going to happen either.

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Abby regarded him with pensive curiosity.

The hairs on Cassie's neck bristled with the mild rankling of animosity, piquing quickly to become a tempestuous storm brewing just beneath the surface.

Alex sprinted for the door behind Abby and Narayan, leaving Cassie with Alaric. The Professor quickly made his own exit to a safer corner of the house. He knew Cassie well enough to spot a verbal evisceration about to be performed.

Alaric could feel her anger building, flowing from her in an icy surge. His chiselled face turned toward her, his body stiffening ready for the deluge. He didn't have to wait long.

"You said only this morning that neither Alex nor I were to leave the Manor." Hands on hips, her enraged stare challenged him.

"No. Actually I said Alex couldn't go home or to the University. I said *you* couldn't leave the Manor," he answered in staid calmness.

To make sure she had full clarity of recollection, he reminded her that she was of course also able to explore the old woods, Savernake Forest which surrounded Havenswood Manor.

The man was absolutely infuriating, arrogant and altogether too full of himself. Not content with his explanation she prepared another onslaught. Taking a deep breath, her eyes narrowed into slits of frustration, concentrating her anger in his direction.

Maybe he needed to brush up on his 'dealing with women' skills but it was time to bring in the heavy artillery and put out this feisty firestorm.

He took a step forward before she had a chance to reply, his hands coming to rest on her hips, covering her own and holding her in place.

He only did it in the hope of distracting her from another argument. He was getting tired of the constant battles with her.

Her heart forgot to beat as she struggled to remember why she was angry with him. He was so close. His musky scent of sweet spices swamped her senses and shut down any rational cognitive thought.

It worked. Mission accomplished.

Her breathing became laboured and her nipples hardened beneath her top as her arousal spiked to a new high.

He'd circumvented one battle only to find himself in a potentially more dire one as he caught her glorious perfume of desire.

His stern face softened, his eyes darkened languorously with smouldering heat. His fangs throbbed for release, as did the heavy shaft between his legs.

He struggled to maintain that shallow distance from her and put himself out of his misery. Just one kiss. The temptation was almost unbearable.

She was a forbidden temptation.

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No. No. No.

He may be besotted by her, but not enough to want to spend eternity in the underworld of Hell.

All he had to do was pretend. Pretend not to notice the way her beautiful long hair clung to her delicate slim neck, or the manner in which her top clung to her full and pouting breasts or how precisely her jeans outlined her long slender legs and tight butt.

Ah, Hells hairy balls, he was in trouble.

As she moved to close the distance between them, he closed his eyes and took an abrupt step away, keeping her at arms length.

Frustration followed confusion on her beautiful face. Talk about giving off mixed messages.

The very air between them sizzled with electricity. His eyes betrayed his hunger for her and his fangs had begun to descend.

He wanted her every bit as much as she wanted him.

Her awareness of him was excruciating, as though his eyes alone stroked a wicked path along her heated skin.

Her fists bunched at her sides and a flush of heat tinged her cheeks with a delicate pink hue. She recoiled from him as if she'd been slapped. Her face, her chest, her whole body burned with humiliation and frustrated desire. Throwing herself heavily onto the couch she began mindlessly flicking channels on the television.

He rotated his shoulders to work out the tension that strung his muscles as tight as piano wire, his own anger flaring with self loathing. He knew he was hurting her and hated himself for it. If he could get his foot to his own arse, he'd kick it. Hard. Could he do anything right? At this point he doubted he could boil water without burning it.

Turning on his heel with silent steps toward the door, her soft voice halted his retreat.

"Why isn't the forest off limits?" her voice sounded tired.

Alaric warily approached taking a seat beside her, she stiffened, heat stealing into her face once again.

Why couldn't she just keep her big mouth shut and let him leave so she could deal with her shame in private, she chastised herself.

Her face remained diverted away. Regardless of her attempt to avoid eye contact she was humiliatingly conscious of his scrutiny, compounding her embarrassment.

"I'll only answer your question if you look at me." His gentle voice spoke in the tone of an apology. When she lifted her eyes, the pain still flickered there, almost breaking his heart in two.

In a moment of fear, he'd rejected her even though he was the instigator. And now he seemed to have lost some of her trust. A spark of realisation flared to life within him. What he feared most wasn't getting too close to her, but losing her.

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Heaven help him. He was falling down the rabbit hole in Wonderland, only there wasn't going to be any soft landing at the bottom. Not for him.

"So, what's the story about this forest?" she swallowed hard lifting her chin, boldly meeting his gaze.

x-x-x-x-x

Abby made her way quickly to the foyer. The walls were textured with a large Thirteenth century Florentine tapestry and exquisite artwork from both well known and long forgotten gifted artists.

A simple antique hall table sat by the front doors, so elegant and beautifully constructed. Southeby's would have drooled over it. A dish containing several sets of car keys provided its only adornment. Abby pulled the keys to the Volkswagen Eos convertible from her pocket and exchanged them for the set to the Huayra

As Abby grabbed the keys, Alex fished through the other sets of keys left behind.

"Holy crap. He has a Maserati and a Ferrari as well. He obviously loves fast cars. A man after my own heart." Maybe they had something in common after all, besides Cassandra.

"There's nothing more frustrating than driving something as slow as a sewing machine on wheels if you can run faster than the fastest car on earth. Even the Huayra is snail speed compared to Alaric."

"Right." Lesson three in the vampire education manual. Speed. If the Huayra travels at a top speed of 355 kilometres per hour and that's considered slow, a vampire's top speed is probably comparable to a jet plane or a bullet maybe. Superman move over.

Abby and Narayan could get to the airport much faster on foot. But, no doubt they needed his connections to get into Customs. He assumed. Then again, Alaric could've just wanted him out of the house to spend more 'private' time with Cassie. As he stared at the Huayra and its attractive driver, he was willing to give Alaric the benefit of the doubt. This time.

Squeezing into the soft leather seats of the midnight grey two seater car hadn't turned out to be exactly what Alex envisioned. While Abby drove, Alex sat at an extremely awkward angle to avoid his iron hard erection from pressing against Narayan's backside as he sat on his lap. With every sharp bend and bump in the road, his tension mounted with the effort to avoid contact, practically cutting off the circulation to his rod and tackle in his pants and effectively killing his mood. To make matters worse, with his jeans strangling him the way they were, they stemmed any relief of the pressure subsiding. There was no way in Hell he was going to lose his erection anytime soon. The pressure kept building painfully and a small trickle of sweat slid down his back. Thank God they were travelling at light speed, he didn't think his cock would last much longer. It was in serious danger of dropping off.

Abby shot him a concerned glance.

"Don't say anything," he informed her curtly.

"I wouldn't dare." But the concerned look she gave him from those keenly observant chocolate brown eyes only made his situation worse as his body tried to pump even more blood into the already near bursting iron hard length. He groaned in pain.

Narayan chuckled as he leaned forward to relieve some of Alex's discomfort.

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"Don't worry, I'm celibate, have been for five hundred years. I promise not to take advantage of that massive pole you're hiding under there. Although, I'm sure you have no trouble pleasing the lady's," he coaxed with a questioning raised brow, the iridescence glinting in his compelling eyes which Alex noted to be an involuntary reaction to strong emotions such as anger or pleasure. In this case amusement, at his expense.

Goddamn vampires. Nothing was secret and nothing was sacred.

Alex risked a glimpse in Abby's direction who looked to be fighting to stifle a smirk. Yet again at his expense.

"Changing the subject," she said in a silky voice, "Narayan was telling me earlier that they discovered the link between Anil Norgay and Jarvis and his group.

"Yes, yes." Narayan swivelled suddenly on Alex's lap, cutting off his circulation once again. Alex pursed his lips tightly and swallowed an agonizing groan. "Sorry," he apologised, shifting again.

"It appears that the Guild had a vampire glamour Anil into stealing the cup for them. A girl from the village saw the exchange when he handed over the cup to a very attractive tall blonde man with an English accent. He was obviously not a vampire since it was daytime but still there is no doubt he was working for the Guild.

"We believe Anil had no recollection of any of it but when he arrived here in Englandâ " "

"The Guild had him killed to tie up the loose ends." Alex finished for him.

"Yes, exactly."

"By the way, you describing the guy as *attractive* isn't making the situation *here* any better. It makes me nervous."

Narayan jiggled on Alex's lap, deliberately amplifying his discomfort.

"Fuck!" Alex yelped.

"No. I told you, I'm celibate." Narayan ribbed, throwing back his head with a great peel of laughter. Although Abby tried to suppress her amusement, her gentle laughter rippled through the air breaking Alex's tension as he too joined the Monk's infectious laughter.

"I'm glad to see you don't take yourself too seriously," Narayan praised.

Alex's phone buzzed in his pocket before he could respond. Checking the message his expression changed to tempered distress. "How far are we from the airport?" he asked, his voice conveying his trepidation.

"Five minutes. Why, what's happened?" Abby implored.

"Someone has just broken into Customs. They've been attacked," he announced above the sudden ringing silence.

"Pull over." Narayan demanded. Before Alex had finished processing his words, he was slammed against the car door as Abby screeched to a stop on the shoulder of the road.

"I'll meet you there." Narayan was out and gone in less time than Alex had to draw in a breath.

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"If it's any consolation, this is all new to me too. I've only been a vampire for a week." The warmth in her smile echoed in her voice. "Buckle up."

His lips parted in surprise as the sudden acceleration of the car crushed him into the seat with the G force of being strapped to a rocket. The car certainly lived up to its reputation evoking a huge adrenaline and testosterone response. Wow. He had a sudden urge to beat his chest but at the risk of reducing his IQ by half and looking like some Neanderthal retard in front of Abby, he held himself in studious reserve. However, that hardly meant his character wasn't already unblemished in her eyes, he feared.

"It seems to me that you're adjusting to the whole vampire thing much better than I am."

Her smile lit up her face with a calm sense of peace. "You know, it's the strangest thing. As a human I never fitted in anywhere. I was always different. Now, for the first time in my life I feel normal, whole, like I was always meant to be a vampire."

"I can't even imagine what life was like for you before. But, I believe you were always this person I see now, only trapped in a more fragile and less forgiving body." And what a body she had. His mind reverted to thinking below the belt again with devastating results.

Abby chuckled with satisfied amusement as Alex tried discretely to adjust his jeans again.

His stomach was just catching up to the rest of his body as Abby pulled into the curb outside the airport. Sirens approached along the highway and bedlam seemed to have broken out around them.

Abby grabbed Alex's hand and nearly dragged him through the crowd.

In the distance he could just make out the orange robes and bald head of Narayan heading into the shadows behind the terminal.

"Come on, quickly." Abby called. Seeing Alex was already pushed to the limit of his speed she slowed. She was quickly adjusting to being a vampire and didn't notice her extra speed as being abnormal. "Sorry," giving him a quick apologetic smile.

"If you need to, go. I'll catch up." Urging her on. Being a burden wasn't on his to-do list.

"Only if you're sure."

"Yes. Go."

He watched as she powered on her speed and disappeared from view in less than a second. God she was sexy.

A quick pang of guilt struck his conscience as his mind wandered to all the things he wanted to do to her. Could she probe his mind from this distance. Probably not. He hoped not because the way her breasts bounced when she ran, pressing her nipples firmly against the fabric of her top, made his mouth water. She was the perfect size to fit into his palm. He could almost taste the hard bud of her nipple in his mouth as he sucked and licked andâ

Time to rein in his thoughts again. The rear of the terminal was only twenty meters away, she could be just around the corner and he was determined to prove to her that he could keep his mind above the belt at least part of the night. Well, technically he was thinking above the belt that time but they certainly weren't pure, chaste thoughts.

## Eternal Covenant

Rounding the corner he slid to a grinding halt. What the fuck?

On the grassland beside the tarmac Narayan and Abby were fighting several other vampires while a tall blonde lingered in the background. The vampires he had no hope with, but the blonde, there was one he could tackle and hopefully come out the winner.

Running at full speed across the tarmac, he watched as both Narayan and Abby fought with martial arts kicks, punches and the wickedest looking hunting knives he'd ever seen. They were the type of knives that would give Rambo wet dreams. Where the hell did she hide that he wondered. With insurmountable ease they tackled their opponents with skill and speed. It was like watching a Bruce Lee movie on fast forward.

Most guys would find a woman that powerful and dangerous to be intimidating, but not him. Uh-uh. He could easily fall for a woman like that. He was getting hard again.

What better way to fix his damaged manhood than to join the fight, he thought as he tackled the blonde from his left, taking him to the ground heavily with an audible thud, who quickly retaliated with a blow to Alex's jaw. He had hands on him the size of baseball mitts and would probably have taken his head off if he hadn't pulled back at the last split second.

Above the ringing in his ears, Alex heard a woman shout and looked up fearing it was Abby. Narayan held the heart of a spiky haired vampire with more piercings than a porcupine had quills. His body sank to the ground and turned to dust before his eyes.

The blonde took advantage of Alex's distraction and scrambled to his feet, narrowly missing him with a size fourteen shoe to the groin.

Fighting dirty really pushed his buttons and Alex saw red. The gloves were off. If he wanted to fight dirty, he was all for it. Drawing on his inner strength, Alex focussed all his energy into one blow. With the size of this guy he knew he only had one good shot. He dodged another blow, pulling the blonde off balance just long enough for him to king hit him from the side. The blonde collapsed in an unconscious heap at Alex's feet.

His victory dance was cut short as a second vampire joined the fight against Abby. She was holding her own but only barely. Alex raced to her side, a sudden fear that he wouldn't make it in time spawned a spurt of speed he didn't know he was capable of as adrenaline pumped through his veins. Small cuts and grazes covered her skin and blood dripped from a deep cut from her wrist.

"Alex, get back." She cried, trying to manoeuvre herself to protect him.

"No." Determination shone in his eyes like a Berserker demon. Abby knew she would never change his mind and she didn't have the time to try.

"Take this." She threw him the hunting knife. "Go for the head or the heart," she yelled as she delivered another blow to the dark headed Neanderthal she was fighting. "Wound them and I'll finish them off," she grunted, fending off a blow from the second.

"You're dreaming if you think you can beat us," the Neanderthal drawled sadistically, throwing another punch in her direction.

"Your over confidence is your weakness," Narayan called out, a smile beaming on his face. "I haven't had so much fun in years." Landing a foot in his opponent's chest sending him flying fifteen feet backwards.

## Eternal Covenant

This was fun? Football was fun. Skinny dipping in a hot tub was fun. Blowing up a frozen watermelon with a free-electron laser was fun. This was not fun Alex thought. Oddly exhilarating in an endorphin producing kind of way, but he wouldn't describe it as fun, exactly.

As the over confident vamp extended his arm for a swing at Abby, Alex took advantage of the opportunity, plunging the knife between his ribs under his arm, sinking it to the hilt. The blow didn't kill him but it certainly slowed him down, collapsing to his knees. He couldn't reach the knife to pull it out. He turned his head in Alex's direction in disbelief before his attention once again snapped back to Abby who stood brandishing his heart in her hand. "Say hi to your boss in Hell for me," she concluded as his heart disintegrated to dust, followed by the rest of him.

Three down, three to go.

As Narayan and Abby fought, a smaller dark skinned woman with bleached hair calmly tapped Alex on the shoulder. "You're pretty, I hate to hurt you but we can't have everything we want now can we. Be thankful I'm not going to kill you." she purred seductively.

He didn't even see the fist that knocked him out.

Coming to, his head was in Abby's lap. The way his head swam and thumped, he was sure he'd just woken up after a three day bender.

"What happened? We beat them?" he asked groggily, instantly on alert searching for his foremost opponent.

"They're gone." Abby answered.

Sitting up fully, Alex took in his surroundings. Several piles of ashes lay on the ground around them. Sudden panic rose with bile in his throat. "Where's Narayan?"

"Don't worry. He's ok. He's gone after Mira and the blonde you knocked out." A cheeky smile appeared on her face as she looked him up and down salaciously. The thrill of the fight or the burst of adrenaline had certainly curtailed her shy behaviour from earlier. Maybe he might just beat his chest after all.

"You fought well." She praised.

He shrugged matter-of-factly, as if it were an every day occurrence. "I barely held my own," he confessed a little more sheepishly. "You were amazing though. Where did you learn to fight like that. Is it a vampire thing?" Her soft melancholy laugh exposed another glimpse into her painful past.

"No. My grandmother raised me after my parents chose to give me up. Apparently my parents found my *gift* an embarrassment to them. It was easier to hand me over than to burden themselves with the complication of having to explain their *mentally unstable* daughter to their socialite friends." Her words were bitter but mention of her grandmother stirred a sense of happiness within her too. "From the age of five, my grandmother sent me for Jujitsu and Kung Fu lessons, along with elocution lessons of course. She still believed I was a lady but had the foresight to know that with my *gift* I would need to know how to defend myself. She didn't know how right she was, as it turns out." A sad smile crossed her beautiful face as she stared nostalgically into a distant past only she could see, arousing a tenderness in Alex that had nothing to do with his cock.

"What happened to the cup?"



## Eternal Covenant

"Mira and the blonde have it. Don't worry, we'll get it back. Narayan's on their trail." Taking his hand she helped him unsteadily to his feet. "Come on. Better get you home."

"No. Not yet. I need to see if my mate Matt in Customs is okay." Pulling out his phone he dialled his number. As it rang out, he headed toward the baggage area of Customs at the back of the terminal.

"Alex. Come on. We can't stay here. We need to go." She urged, taking his hand firmly she led him towards the front of the building where the car was parked. Police and military personnel had stormed the airport. Several ambulances were parked relatively close to their car. Instinct had him following his feet before his head knew what he was doing. Running, he reached the first ambulance as they were loading a young man with mousey blonde hair and a tattoo of an eagle on his shoulder.

Matt.

His shirt was removed, revealing a bullet wound in his upper right chest. Bruising and swelling on his face had almost closed one eye and several smaller grazes marred his knuckles. At least he got a couple in before he went down he thought.

Spotting Alex, he halted the Paramedics from alighting him into the ambulance, waving for Alex to come closer.

"Sorry," grabbing Alex's hand in a tight grip. "I tried to warn you, but it looks like you had a run in with them too, ha." Matt coughed. Alex only nodded in response.

"The authorities say it was terrorists. I don't believe that but no one will listen me," he pleaded.

"Matt. Listen to me carefully. Just go with the terrorist theory. You don't want to get yourself mixed up in this any further. Trust me." He put as much emphasis on the *trust me* as he could, hoping to get his point across subtly. "I'm going to follow you to the hospital. I'll stay with you okay. You're going to be fine."

Alex wasn't sure if he was trying to reassure Matt or himself. The ambulance officers wheeled his stretcher into the van as Matt coughed again, a splattering of blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth.

x-x-x-x-x

"Mira. I hope you have good news for me," he growled.

"I've got the chalice." She answered coolly. "But we sustained substantial losses in the process. The others are all dead including Caine."

"That's too bad, but not my problem. Recruit others to replace them."

"What do you want me to do with Stedman? He's a liability." The blonde lay crumpled unconscious at her feet, a thin trail of blood oozing from a small cut on the temple Alex gave him.

"Keep him. Take him to the secure location. He's a good specimen. I may need him for my back-up plan. I'm sure you can manage not to bungle that, can't you Mira?" he hissed and hung-up before she could answer, cutting off her scathing retort.

Mira was a killer. Cold. Clean. Efficient. It grated on her to let this pathetic drug addict human live. She hated weakness and she hated failure and Stedman excelled in both. He only had one job to do, smuggle in the cup,

## Eternal Covenant

but he couldn't resist the temptation of hiding a few grams of India's finest weed in the same case for the sniffer dogs to find. Moron. Her consolation was knowing that if he was needed for Ahriman's *back-up* plan, Stedman's personality would take a sudden change for the better. If he wasn't needed however, then she could take pleasure in killing him herself. Slowly.

## Chapter 14

### Chapter 14

"An enchanted forest. What the hell does that mean? Fairies and goblins?" she asked, inconceivable perversion of reasoning left her mind flailing for a sense of validity. Every day recently she seemed to be challenged to accept some new form of the absurd.

"Yes, and no," he began cautiously. She held his gaze with full attention and curiosity. "Fairies do exist but they're not what they're made out to be in fairy tales."

"Nothing is, it seems," she interrupted brusquely.

"Quite right." He agreed, daring a tentative smile. "Fairy tales are usually based loosely on reality but humans are never privy to the whole picture and only ever see glimpses of reality, which is what they base their stories on.

"The real Fairies are guardians of this forest, a race of people who were banished thousands of years ago to another dimension very close to our own, called Fey. In several places around the world in places of nature the veil between our dimensions is thin. Fairies use these places as portals between the worlds.

"You're protected inside the boundaries of Havenswood Manor and Savernake Forest. No creature with ill intent can cross the border into the woods. If you step even one foot beyond though, there is nothing they can do to protect you if there is any trouble." He searched her face for a sense of understanding with an intensity to his gaze that alluded to the seriousness of the implications.

Her implacable expression was unnerving. "I get it. Don't go past the borders."

"For any reason." He added sombrely.

"Right. Thanks for the heads-up," she said turning away from him, "I would like to be alone for awhile if you don't mind." She informed him curtly, her pride still prickling.

"Sure." Being very careful not to touch her again, he quietly left the room.

There was so much to think about. Only a week ago the worst thing she had to deal with was Orlof. Now, now there was the Guild of Ascension trying to take over the world, vampires who want her dead and an enchanted forest with Fairies who want to protect her. Could the world get any stranger. She dared not answer that question, not even to herself and tempt fate.

Alaric checked in on her every hour. He could lie to himself and say it was out of concern for her, but in truth, he needed to see her, to be near her.

He felt like he was losing his own sense of reality.

Several hours passed. Alaric slipped quietly into the room to turn off the television. She breathed slow and even as she slept on the couch, the wait for Alex, Narayan and Abby to arrive home had finally gotten the better of her. He knew why they were late, had known for hours but he wasn't going to cause her any needless distress. She would find out in the morning regardless.

## Eternal Covenant

Very carefully he lifted her from the couch and carried her to her room to her bed. Laying the doona over her fully clothed body he couldn't resist the urge to touch her. It was safe now, he told himself and pressed his lips gently against her forehead. The feel of her soft warm skin tantalised, and her delicate scent left him feeling drunk.

Bad idea. Even sleeping she wasn't safe from him, or was it him who wasn't safe from her. The two seemed so intertwined.

However, that didn't stop him from checking on her again an hour later.

The door remained ajar just as he had left it.

As Alaric pushed it open further, he noticed the pile of clothes on the floor beside the bed. She'd obviously woken at some point and undressed.

She breathed slow and rhythmically, her full pink lips parted ever so slightly, enticing him in, daring him to kiss her.

The curtains were open wide flooding the room with moonlight, highlighting her delicate features. Her beauty never failed to catch him off guard whenever he viewed her from a new aspect, and this was no exception.

Her hair fanned around her head on the pillow in a mane of golden brown waves. Her naked creamy-white arms lay on top of the sheet at her sides, pulling the sheet tightly over her, revealing her clearly outlined form. She was wearing no more beneath the sheet than she was above it. Her scent permeated the air, as sweet and tantalising to him as a rose petal is to a bee in spring. Alaric licked his lips as he breathed her in, and his desire stirred.

He didn't dare go any closer doubting his own self-restraint. He hadn't harmed any human for centuries, not even accidentally, but he'd never before met anyone with whom he shared such an intense bond. A bond which appeared to be growing. He had no intention of testing his limitations now. He couldn't lose control, not with her. And yet he was drawn to her by a passion and need beyond his understanding. He wanted her so badly.

How easy it would be to slip between those sheets with her.

He had to stay strong, stay in control.

As Alaric watched her sleep, his gaze shifted from her face, moving downward, drinking in the contours of her body and imagining the feel of her plump round breasts.

Her nipples began to harden beneath the sheet as he watched as though even in her subconscious state she was aware of his gaze.

He lowered his eyes further, over her flat stomach to the area between her thighs, pulsing with fresh blood. He could hear her heart beat quicken as her arousal rose to meet his own. She groaned quietly in her sleep as she parted her legs, her hand moving to touch the moist folds between them.

With a sharp intake of breath, Alaric went rigid, gripping the door frame on either side to stop himself from entering her room. His fingers gouged divots from the timber with the intense effort.

She was dreaming of him.

## Eternal Covenant

Her dream filtered through his mind, flooding his consciousness, touching him as if it was a physical experience, and his body responded. His flesh began to prickle, his grasp on right and wrong blurring until his need to go to her all but crippled him.

He desperately wanted to surrender to his craving and go to her, touch her, hold her, taste her and fill her with every inch of his heavily engorged cock.

He was so hard it was almost painful.

He couldn't do this, it was too dangerous. He knew that to be the truth at its most basic level, but his senses were so heightened, so attuned to her, in perfect harmony with what she was dreaming he had to force himself to physically move from the spot.

Alaric fled the house to the seclusion and safety of the forest, running as fast as his unnatural speed could take him, but despite the miles of distance between them, he was helpless to break their connection. His body continued to be enraptured by her impassioned dream, consuming him in wave after wave of ecstasy as she drew him more deeply in. It felt so devastatingly real, so arousing that he was swept away into it despite his considerable will.

Their minds and imagination were fused together. Worse still, were the tricks his own mind was playing. Her warm rich scent permeated his senses even though he knew it for the deception it was. His brain made him actually believe he could feel the lushness of her overheated flesh. As she touched herself it was his own fingers that felt the subtle caress, the steady pulse as her blood coursed through her veins with each stroke of her delicate finger through folds moist with her pleasure.

He couldn't fight the physical sensations of her dream which swamped him, so he did the only thing left to him and opened his mind to her to join her in her fantasy. This was safe he told himself. He was the passenger on this ride, not the driver. Perfectly safe. And morally irreproachable.

It was like watching a movie of the two of them, only he felt everything that his movie-self felt, but had no control of the script.

*It felt as if he truly was beside her in the flesh,â His lips skimmed down her neck to the dip at her shoulder, his lips trailing sweet, hot kisses down her collarbone, down between her breasts to her abdomen. She trembled with the overwhelming pleasure of his touch.*

*Stretching out beneath him, she arched into his touch as his fingers pinched the dark pink bud of her hard nipple, kneading it slowly, softly, then harder as pleasure streaked through her like lightning.*

Each touch, each caress she experienced jolted and reverberated through him as an echo of every sensation she felt.

*Her skin was soft and creamy, as delicate as petals of the finest rose. A low moan escaped her slightly parted lips as he kissed his way back towards her forgotten breast, his fingers still teasing the first cherry red nipple as his lips closed around the other. Biting softly, rolling it between his teeth then releasing it at intervals to luxuriate in her reactions, he nearly came as her cries of pleasure echoed in his ears. Sensation cascaded through her body, sparks streaking through every cell he touched, searing a path from her breasts, down her stomach and straight to her core.*

Awareness burst forth inside his mind and body a split second after she experienced its fullness for herself, allowing him the exquisite pleasure of watching her reaction and then feeling it within himself.

## Eternal Covenant

*Her fingers wound themselves into the silky strands of his hair as he sucked and licked and lapped at her breasts.*

Alaric swore he could actually feel the prickle in his scalp as she tugged at his hair, could taste her on his tongue, her scent surrounded him, even miles away from her out here in the woods. His senses were alive with her. His hearing heightened as he listened through the trees for the true sounds of her pleasure. Her rich, earthy scent of passion marked him with her need, washed over him, through him, leaving his will impotent to fight the assault of her ardour.

He wasn't breaking the rules. He really wasn't. How could he be, this was only a fantasyâright? Her fantasy, not his, he reminded himself. He was just a voyeur along for the ride.

*She clutched at him, pulled him closer, pulling him further up her body to cover her fully. He was there watching, feeling, as his hard erection pressed against the heated wet folds of her sex. Her eyes searched his as she drew him down. His tongue licked her bottom lip. Sweet summer strawberries. His tongue thrust past her lips tangling with her own. Her arms wrapped about him, streaking a path down his back with her nails, her legs parted wider, accommodating his large body more fully against her own overheated one as she arched her hips, rubbing her clit against his hard cock in a rocking motion that shattered the world around him.*

Threads of pleasure shot through him in all directions. Never would he have dreamt something like this could ever be possible.

*He shuddered and his cock twitched with anticipation. He was so close, he could feel the tip of his cock pressed against her entrance.*

He wanted more. He wanted to taste her juices that flowed so freely from her hot pussy. He wanted to nibble, lick and fuck every part of her that he could. He was going mad with the need enveloping his senses. He wanted to take her higher than she'd ever been before. Make her as crazy for him as he was for her. But, he had no control over this dream, her dream.

It was like forcing a starving man to stand before a banquet and not taste the riches.

Drawing a tortured breath he gave up trying to change the course of her fantasy and obediently succumbed to her dominance of it.

The last vestiges of his will were swept away under her tantalising onslaught as she kick started the dream with a forceful shunt, dragging him back to her.

As abruptly as he re-entered the dream she changed its direction leaving him reeling for a full second as he tried to once again find his feet inside the captivating and torturous grip of her mind.

*He groaned from the sensation of his mouth lowering to her again, burning a path all the way down to the seat of his joy and torment. His tongue thrust deep inside her as his thumb found the hard nub of her clit and rubbed it in slow circles. She bucked against him, arching her hips into him further to take more of him. His hands came down on her hips, holding her in place as his tongue stroked her from the inside. Once, twice, then again and again until she was almost insane with need.*

This was his fantasy.

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This was her dream, but could it be possible that she had picked up on his craving, his need for her? If he had more grey matter still functioning he probably would have given it more consideration. At the moment however, he had only enough blood left in the top half of his body for one conscious thought: to worship her, to pleasure her, to be a part of her. To make her a part of him.

*Releasing her hips he held her to him with one hand and delved between her lower lips with the other. She keened, deep in the back of her throat as she reached for the release she knew only he could give her. Her inner muscles clenched around his fingers and her pleasure soared. He began to pump them inside her, using his lips, his tongue, the suction of his mouth to drive her higher, exploding into ecstasy.*

His mind fragmented with hers but it was only his mind which rejoiced. His body shook with his need for physical fulfilment, wracked with shuddering pulses as his true need demanded its due.

With one hand fastened to a tree trunk and his forehead pressed firmly against it, he stroked, pulled, massaged and pumped his shaft every which way without the benefit of relief. He couldn't ease the torture of not being with her.

He used every calming technique he could conjure. Meditation, incantation, anything that would allow his mind to free itself of his burden and allow his release.

He could feel it building from deep within himself. A hot, vicious clawing that began at the base of his spine and travelled his endorphin flooded system from end to end in search of that miraculous relief. And as she bucked wildly one last time with her orgasm he lost himself, finally, the liquid fire he sought exploded from within him. His roar echoed around the trees as he spent himself where he stood.

Collapsing onto all fours, his breathing laboured in his chest, his body trembled from the effort to restrain himself from running back to her. The intensity of the experience overwhelmed him.

Rolling onto his back, he lay there listening to the sounds of the forest, willing his desire to subside. Owls hooted far off in the distance, while nearer, a fox scavenged around the forest floor. The gentle breeze danced around him, rustling the leaves about his body, caressing and soothing the flood of raw emotions coursing through him. He'd been completely unprepared for this.

He lay there for hours before returning to the Manor. As he closed the back door into the kitchen, the sun's first rays began stealing their way across the lawn, a sea of glistening dewdrops reflecting in its light.

Alaric was composed on the outside but inside he remained rattled. He locked himself away for the day, aware that Cassie's erotic dream of him was in direct response to his desire for her.

Their bond was indeed growing stronger.

Heaven help him.

## Chapter 15

### Chapter 15

Last night had been raunchy and raw and more graphic than any fantasy she'd ever experienced before. In the light of day, it shocked even her.

It felt so real. She could taste him, feel his powerful arms crushing her to him, feel his dexterous fingers and skilled tongue whip her into a frenzy, could smell the sweet spicy scent she loved about him, and the orgasm he gave her had definitely been real. She woke from her dream still shuddering from the aftershocks.

Closing her eyes, a delicious tightness coiled between her thighs as she remembered everything in exquisite mouth-watering detail.

If Alaric ever knew she'd had such an explicit dream about him, she would die of embarrassment. But her fantasies were private, hers alone to enjoy without fear of being rejected by her dream lover. She could fantasise about anything and anyone she wanted. As often as she wanted.

She wanted to recreate that dream, again and again but she had a feeling it wasn't going to cure her of her growing infatuation for Alaric. If anything, she suspected it would only make things worse. He'd already made it plainly clear last night that he wasn't interested in her romantically. She really didn't need to make the situation worse for herself, did she.

Heading down stairs, the sun had just crossed the horizon. The tiles on the foyer floor were awash with brilliant colour from the stained glass windows beside the front doors. Further down the hall she heard the creak of the study door closing.

"Ah, you're up." Mrs Philpot called in her usual jovial manner, her friendly smile fixed in its permanent position. How anyone could be so chipper at this hour of the morning was beyond comprehension.

"Good morning Mrs P." she answered distractedly.

"I'll have some breakfast ready shortly," she stated equally enthusiastically, sweeping Cassie into a fierce motherly embrace giving her a case of the warm and fuzzies.

She could easily get used to living here. The Professor could be her surrogate grandfather and Mrs Philpot could be her surrogate grandmother.

There was nothing wrong with fantasising about her ideal world, was there? In her mind at least, her fantasies were preferable to her cold stark reality.

"Thanks. But I think I'll pass this morning. I'm not very hungry," she said apologetically. "I thought I'd take a walk through the woods this morning. I need some fresh air. I feel like I've been cooped up so long I'm developing mothballs".

Mrs Philpot's hearty laugh reverberated through the cavernous foyer. "Well good for you love, just don'tâ!"

"Cross the boundaries. Yeah, I got that." She reassured with a smile.

How was it that even just a few minutes with the vivacious housekeeper could buoy her spirits so effectively.



## Eternal Covenant

"Mrs P, do you know what time Alex came in?" she asked, a note of anxiety in her voice.

"He and Abby arrived back only an hour or so ago." Her subdued response set alarm bells ringing. Cassie's heart began to beat double time and goose bumps rose on her arms.

"What happened?" she asked, feeling her momentary calm equilibrium shifting on its axis.

"Now, don't worry yourself pet," patting Cassie on the hand which fidgeted nervously in front of her. "They ran into a little bit of trouble last night but they're fine."

"What do you mean, trouble?"

"Unfortunately the Guild got to the cup before them. They killed a couple of the Custom's Officers and injured a few others. Alex's friend was shot and Alex and Abby stayed with him at the hospital until they knew he was out of danger."

"Matt was shot? Oh my God." Suddenly the supposititious cloud of danger she had been living under for the past week became all too real again. It solidified into an icy block in the pit of her stomach. Until now she hadn't taken it all as seriously as maybe she should have. Now, people were getting injured and dying, people she knew. What if one of those people was Alex, she couldn't bare it if anything happened to him.

"Matt's going to be alright isn't he?" she asked again, a part of her brain clung ambiguously to doubt.

"Yes, dear. I believe he is going to be fine. No doubt Alex can fill you in on the details when he wakes. I can't imagine that will be for a few hours yet though, he looked exhausted, the poor dear." Reassuring Cassie once again with her kindly and magnanimous style.

"Well, in that case I'll be back around lunch time." Cassie smiled weakly, giving Mrs Philpot a quick peck on the cheek before heading for the door.

"Don't forgetâ!"

"Yeah, I know." Don't cross the boundaries, she finished to herself as she closed the door leaving Mrs Philpot as she industriously went about her business again.

She may have considered ignoring that rule before. Despite her run-in with Jarvis, she was still struggling to get her head around the idea that anyone would find her a threat worth eliminating. Her, an almost reclusive, unemployed Uni student. The most dangerous thing about her was her caramel fudge slice which was guaranteed to cause a heart attack or diabetic coma with every bite. But events at the airport served as a reality check she wouldn't easily disregard. The threat was real whether she liked it or not.

Dew clung to her shoes, dampening the fabric and soaking her socks as she crossed the lawn. The impregnable blanket of darkness saturating the forest had begun to lose its heaviness as diffuse light began to breach its interior allowing the browns and grays of tree trunks to become slowly visible. As the light grew stronger, the mostly naked treetops suddenly glowed in a green-gold light, illuminating the forest carpet of grass, fallen Autumn leaves, moss covered logs and evergreen shrubs. Traces of mist left the occasional spider's web bejeweled and sparkling as stray sunbeams flickered here and there through the echoing halls of tree trunks swaying in the gentle breeze.

Cassie followed the lightly beaten path through the forest, marveling at the magnificence of the richly vibrant woods, the smell of fresh air mixed with damp timber, and a multitude of birds chirping their early morning

## Eternal Covenant

calls.

For all its beauty, she was a little disappointed. For an enchanted forest, it seemed quite regular. She hadn't expected streams made of chocolate or trees covered in forbidden ambrosia fruit or anything, but she had expectedâmore.

Her stomach started to grumble. Maybe she should have eaten breakfast before she left. A quick check of the time showed it was 11:00 am. She'd been wandering out here for four hours and she'd covered less than half the forest.

Turning around she made her way back the way she had come. With any luck by the time she reached the Manor, Alex would be up and she could find out more details about what happened at the airport.

"Cassie."

Cassie looked in the direction of the call.

"Alex?"

Through a thicket of shrubs she could just make out Alex's lean form, forcefully thrashing his way through the dense undergrowth. She couldn't keep her bemused laugh silenced. Thank goodness he was never a boy scout. He would probably be the first one ever to fail to achieve even the most basic wilderness survival badges. A dolphin would look more at home in the woods than Alex. If nothing else his zealous effort was entertaining.

"Alex, stop. Back-up. There's a path about six feet to your left." She snorted garishly, trying unsuccessfully to stifle her snicker as he appeared in front of her with what looked to be half the forest still attached to him. Her snicker erupted into a peal of laughter that sent tears rolling down her cheeks until her sides ached.

His pride be damned. She hadn't seen anything so funny in ages.

"I'm glad I amuse you," he retorted irascibly as she picked a particularly obstinate stick from his hair.

"You do," she said, reining in her mirth, "But, what are you doing out here. Have you come to check-up on me? I haven't crossed the boundaries, as you can see." Waving her hand in an arc to show she was deep within the wood and nowhere near its borders.

"If you must know, yes. I'm not comfortable with you being out here on your own." Memories of the fight with the Guild vampires at the airport were still fresh in his mind. It sent a shiver through him to know that they might still be looking for Cassie. Not might. Were. From what he'd seen, the Guild didn't leave loose ends.

"Besides that though," he continued, "Mrs Philpot *insisted* I bring you some food. She said you didn't eat breakfast." Pulling a small bottle of juice and a couple of pastries from his backpack he handed them to her.

As he turned, Cassie saw a dark purple shadow beneath his sunglasses, which like the rest of him were completely out of place in the shadowed forest.

"What happened to your eye." She asked. He was going to be obstinate and ignore her if he could. She planted her hands on her hips, her hazel eyes flaring with impatience.

"Take off your glasses and tell me what happened." She repeated tenaciously.

## Eternal Covenant

He heaved a reticent sigh. "Would you believe I was Mike Tyson's sparring partner?"

"No." She crossed her arms over her chest, her foot tapping out her irritation at his avoidance.

"How about a run-in with a vampire with a bad attitude," he answered again, a little more timidly, expecting her furious response.

What? Are you serious?"

"Yeah, actually I'm very serious," wincing as she tentatively pressed a finger lightly at the fringes of the puffy dark mark that framed his eye.

"You could've been killed." A sick feeling rolled through her, looking about for a log to sit down on as her legs began to shake.

"I was doing my very best not to," he assured her. "And, as you can see, no serious harm was done."

She wasn't buying it but there wasn't any point in arguing with him.

"Ah huh." She scrutinized him carefully probing for other signs of his fight with this vampire but could see no other injuries. Fortunately. "Well, since you're out here, would you like to explore the rest of the forest with me?" she asked, much more calmly than she felt, assuming he'd decline the offer and retreat back to the Manor and his laptop.

"That sounds great."

You could have knocked her over with a feather. "I was planning to explore the far side of the forest this afternoon, over near the little village, Cadley. You sure you want to come?"

"I'm up for it."

"Alright then," she answered, giving him a disbelieving sideways glance. "Let's get going."

"Lead the way."

They walked in silence for a few minutes, each brooding about their own concerns. Not surprisingly both their thoughts involved lascivious thoughts about vampires of the opposite sex, the beneficiaries of those thoughts currently resting the day away somewhere within the walls of Havenswood Manor.

Cassie replayed her dream over and over in her mind. Each time her heart raced a little more. There was something so compelling about Alaric. Something that felt so intimately connected to her. She barely knew him but she felt as if she'd known him all her life.

Alex likewise languished in his thoughts of Abby. He never thought a woman who fought like a demon could be sexy, but sexy she was and the steamy look she gave him when he came to with his head in her lap, almost drove him out his mind with the need to touch her, taste her and fuck her until she was screaming his name. He could feel the growing sexual need tightening in his abdomen and pounding in his brain. He wanted to shake his head, push the thoughts away in an attempt to make sense of it. He had never known a reaction so intense, so immediate to any woman. His jeans suddenly felt too tight again as his hard cock threatened to burst the zipper from the pressure behind it.

## Eternal Covenant

"Goddamn it." He grumbled to himself.

"What?" she responded indifferently.

"Nothing. Ah. You'll be pleased to know that Narayan killed Cain last night, but unfortunately Mira got away with the cup." He gave her a casual glance as she came to a stop and turned to face him.

"It turns out she had her escape all planned. She had a charter flight to France waiting for her on the tarmac."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I'm telling you now."

Cassie huffed and sighed, throwing her arms in the air as she mumbled how insufferable he was and stomped a frustrated pace further into the forest.

A couple of hours had passed by the time they reached the far side of the forest. The narrow track they'd been following opened up to a wider, more frequently used path. As the vegetation began to thin, they could see thin trails of smoke rising from the chimneys of nearby buildings and traffic noise filtered through the usual forest noises. It was the first time in nearly a week Cassie had heard a car. Funny though, she didn't miss it. She'd enjoyed the peace and quiet.

Rounding a bend in the path Alex pulled Cassie to a stop. "I think this is close enough to the boundary." Fifty metres ahead the old wooded forest came to an abrupt end, opening out into a small park and the main road of Cadley. A tall, older but still well muscled man approached, his grey hair had vacated the top of his head, leaving unruly tufts at the sides blowing about in the breeze.

Looking behind him, he whistled, followed a second later by a young Irish Wolf Hound. "Tilly. Come." He yelled as the dog bolted past the man and headed straight for Alex and Cassie, its tongue hanging out the side of its mouth and tail wagging furiously. "Tilly. Come!" He yelled again, putting a bit of speed behind his steps to reach the dog before she could reach the cousins. Unsuccessfully.

Alex stepped in front of Cassie as the enormous dog rushed them, jumping up on Alex leaving a paw print the size of a saucer in the middle of his chest, switching between barking and licking his new found friend.

"I'm so sorry." The man apologised, pulling the dog back and putting it back on its leash. Alex and Cassie laughed as the great dog with its grey wiry coat fought its owners grip to reach the cousins again for another pat, whining and barking, crouching and springing forward to get to them, all the time its tail wagging madly.

"Tilly. Down." The man growled. "I'm really sorry about that. Matilda is still young and not very smart I fear. She's a very slow learner," growling once again at the lively canine.

"You called your Wolf Hound, Matilda?" Alex asked bemused, giving the dog a scratch on its head. Its fight to slip its leash curtailed under the new attention.

"No. My wife called her Matilda. I call her Tilly." He answered gruffly. Obviously Alex had hit a sore point there. "The names' Harlow. Brian Harlow," holding out his hand in proper greeting.

His grip was unexpectedly strong for someone who looked to be in his 70's, Alex noted.

## Eternal Covenant

"Pleased to meet you Mr Harlow," he grinned. "I'm Alex and this is Cassie," gesturing to Cassie who had taken over scratching Tilly's head.

"You visiting these parts or new neighbours?" he asked curiously.

"We're staying at Havenswood Manor." Cassie told him. Alex shot her a warning glance but Cassie couldn't see the harm in telling the older man. He seemed quite a nice chap, she didn't get any threatening vibes from him or his energetic dog.

"Havenswood you say?" his interest in them increasing. "Mr Neumann's a good man, a bit reclusive mind though, but there's not a soul in this village who'd speak a bad word against him."

"You know Alaric. Ah, Mr Neumann, sir?" Cassie asked.

"Yes love," his warm smile reflected memories, neither happy, nor sad. "We go back a few years we do.

"If you don't mind me saying, if you two are planning to get back to the Manor, I suggest you get going," he said, checking his watch. "It's a hefty walk back and light is getting thin. You don't want to be out here in the dark."

"Why is that Mr Harlow?" Alex asked. "So we don't get lost out here, I'm assuming."

"Well, yes, there is that. But, besides the obvious, there's a reason none of the locals will come out here at night," his sharp brown eyes took on a more serious tone, his brow furrowed and his lips thinned to a narrow slit as he pressed them firmly together. "Folks in these parts believe these woods are haunted."

He waited a moment for either of them to scoff at his claim but as neither showed anything other than curiosity, he continued.

"Some folks have come into these woods and never come out again. Just vanished like they never existed. Some nights a green misty light can be seen in the centre of the forest and some folks have said they have heard the trees talking to them."

"Thank you for the warning Mr Harlow," Cassie replied politely. "We'll be sure to be out of the forest before dark. It's been a pleasure to meet you." She added, smiling thoughtfully.

Alex and Cassie each shook his hand and gave Tilly another scratch on the head before turning around to head back to the Manor.

"I think the old codger's got a screw loose, don't you?" he whispered when they were far enough out of ear shot.

"Think about it Alex. We've already been told that this forest is protected by fairies," she sighed. "I can't say I believe what he was saying but I'm willing to keep an open mind, and so should you."

"Yeah." Again, his fight with the vampires the night before sprang to mind. "Nice dog though." He muttered, his mind already switching subjects. One of the side effects of having such a high IQ, his brain moved from one topic to the next, processing each thoroughly at twice the speed of everyone else. Cassie used to tease him that he had the brain of a computer, the only program missing was 'common sense'.

## Eternal Covenant

Lost in conversation, neither of them noticed that the trail they followed seemed to have diverted. Deep in the heart of the forest they came to an abrupt halt, both gasping in astonishment.

"Fuck me! Where did that come from?" Alex breathed the words almost inaudibly.

Cassie had expected to find something special in an enchanted forest, and she believed she had definitely found it.

Directly in front of them, stood the largest tree she had ever seen. It would take the arm span of at least twenty very large men to circumnavigate its base. In contempt of the early winter chill, it retained its vibrantly green leafy branches, successfully camouflaging the top of the tree which stretched to a lofty one hundred metres into the sky, at a conservative guess.

Despite its height, its lower branches were almost low enough to touch, dipping gracefully, allowing their dexterous ends to move softly in the gentle breeze. It sat idly in a clearing, no other tree or shrub grew within ten metres from the ends of its longest branches which stretched a good fifteen meters from its trunk, almost as if to do so would be an insult to its beauty. Lush green grass carpeted the ground between its roots.

"Wow. I've never seen anything like it." Cassie's broad grin beamed on her face.

"Vampires, Fairies and enchanted forests. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it all with my own eyes."

"You saw a fairy?" she asked incredulously.

"No. But I'm sure if we hang around here long enough we will."

Couldn't dispute that.

"We'd better be heading back." Alex said, his eyes still riveted to the enormous tree. "What's the time anyway?"

"Where's your phone?" she asked.

"It died last night." He answered nonchalantly.

"During the fight or from the usual causes?" The usual causes for Alex meant a short circuit in the phone. He seemed to produce an unnaturally high amount of static electricity which tended to short out phones and digital watches. Analogue watches tended to either lose time or gain time when he wore them. Needless to say he had a box filled with dead electronic gadgets.

His unusually high static electricity also made him more sensitive to electrical currents around him, and right now, every hair on Alex's body stood to attention from the energy pulsing through the air around the tree, like an electrical heart beat. The feeling was so intense it set his teeth on edge.

"The usual cause I'm afraid. I think I'm going to have to start buying them in bulk. Maybe I can get a discount if I buy them a dozen at a time." He'd find it amusing if it didn't cost him so much money, so regularly. At least he was always guaranteed to have the latest model phone.

Cassie looked up between the tree tops. The light was definitely beginning to fade.

"I'd like to come back here tomorrow." She announced as they headed back up the obscure trail.

## Eternal Covenant

"Sure. We can do that if you like." He answered a lot less enthusiastically. He had a distinct feeling of being watched making him itch to get away as quickly as possible.

"You don't need to babysit me, you know. We've been told this forest is completely safe. You are allowed to have your own life. Besides, you have studies to do, just like me."

"I've deferred my Doctorate until everything is back to normal." He announced, dodging her questioning look. "I can't concentrate on my research if I'm worried about other things. Besides, like you I'm not allowed near the University and without access to the lab, I can't complete my research." He quickly added for clarification.

"Well, I'm determined to not let all this interfere with me finishing my course. I've only got one semester left. I'm going to bring my books down here to study." The tree had such a friendly, relaxed vibe about it, she thought. She didn't feel the electrical buzz that pulsed in its vicinity. "I'll get a lot of work done under its shady branches."

"I get the impression that underlying all that soothing, relaxed vibe you describe, is something more than just an enormous tree. There's strong energy coming from it that isn't altogether harmless. To be honest with you, that tree gives me the heeby jeebies."

They'd only walked twenty feet or so from the tree, but when she turned to look back at it, it was no longer visible beyond the general forest foliage. A tree the size of the Eifel Tower seemingly disappeared before their eyes.

"Come on, we'd better hurry." The shadows in the forest had stretched to blend together until there was more darkness than light and they still had a couple of kilometres to go.

Only a few minutes and they'd be free of the forest. The temperature had dropped considerably over the past half hour as the sun sank deeper onto the horizon. The breeze had dropped, leaving an unnaturally still silence. Their previously muted footfalls through the forest bed now echoed loudly about them. The birds had fallen silent as if holding their breath. The hair on Alex's arms began to prickle.

The feeling of being watched surrounded them, engulfing them both.

Through the advancing darkness, they could see the lights from the Manor.

Only one hundred meters to go.

With each step through the undergrowth, their agitation increased. A sense of foreboding, of something just out of reach of their vision waited for them, stalked them.

Their funky jitters catapulted into a cold sweat as panic gripped them.

"Alex, do you hear that?" Cassie asked nervously.

"Yeah, I do."

"Oh, crap. I was hoping it was my imagination." She squeaked.

Echoing around them in all directions the silent trees whispered their names.

## Eternal Covenant

Cassie's heart beat a staccato rhythm against her ribs, her feet taking flight of their own volition, running effortlessly through the last confines of the suddenly oppressive trees, breaking free of their cloying spectral shadows. Her hand clutched tightly in Alex's grip.

They bolted for the Manor.

From the cover of the trees, a pair of glowing golden eyes watched them flee.

The voices stopped the moment they crossed onto the lawn but neither of them slowed to look back, colliding into one another as they reached the back door to the kitchen.

Bursting through the door together, all hell broke loose in front of them.



## Chapter 16

### Chapter 16

Mrs Philpot gasped and Lilith squealed in shock as the vase filled with beautiful flowers she was holding, shattered on the floor.

Although she'd been startled by Alex and Cassie's abrupt entrance, it was the appearance of Alaric next to her in the doorway, naked, dripping wet with only a hand towel clutched about his waist that caused her to lose her grip on the glass vase.

"Cassie. What's wrong, what happened?" Alaric's eyes were wild with panic.

A wave of fear had crashed into him so violently, he was sure something had happened to her. He'd rushed from his shower, barely thinking enough to grab the hand towel on his way out the door. Stepping forward he was halted as all the women in the room shouted at once.

"Stop!"

Cassie rushed toward him, concern for him replacing her fear of a moment before. Concern for him? Why should she be concerned for him?

Mrs Philpot crouched beside him. "Lift your foot you silly man. What were you thinking?" she growled.

Forcing his eyes from Cassie he looked down. Lilith too had crouched beside him, her handkerchief in her hand dabbing at a cut to his foot.

Oh. The broken vase. He was standing in the middle of the broken glass.

"Lift your foot." Mrs Philpot demanded again, slapping his calf for his obstinacy.

Unperturbed, Alaric returned his gaze to Cassie, captivated by the tenderness and concern on her face. His attention shifted to the heat in her eyes, their touch was akin to physical contact melting away another layer of ice that surrounded his heart.

He had the features of a Greek God. Short, blonde locks fell over his forehead and nape in wet spikes that dripped cool drops of water onto his heavily muscled shoulders, arms and broad chest. His washboard abs bunched beneath the smooth skin, beaded with moisture.

He shuddered as her eyes ranged lower, fixing on the small towel about his waist as best he could to disguise the first hint of the bulge beginning to form beneath it. Her eyes flared with hunger.

Down, her eyes continued to rake over him, lingering on the tree trunks he called thighs, to his calves and finally to his feet and his naked toes she dreamt of sucking on.

There wasn't an inch of him not worth ogling.

"Young master, sometimes I worry about you. Lift. Your. Foot." Mrs Philpot bellowed, her patience fraying.

## Eternal Covenant

Absently, Alaric lifted one foot allowing Mrs Philpot to remove the shard of glass imbedded in it, the wound closing instantly. His body continued to heal the smaller cuts, expelling the slivers of glass as a matter of course.

He couldn't keep his body from reacting to Cassie's visual scrutiny of him. His fangs peeked out from behind flushed lips.

He drank in her sweet scent, it clung to him, invading every pore, getting high on it. If he could simply roll around in it or soak in it, he would.

"I'm so sorry," Lilith apologised.

Appearing not to hear her, Alaric ignored her.

"Cassie, what happened, what were you so frightened of?" he asked her again.

"It was the forest. There was something in the forest." She stammered, her mouth dry. She swallowed hard and licked her lips, her cheeks flushed as her eyes beat a path over his taut body once again. Alaric barely stifled the growl in his chest threatening to rumble free.

He was a hairs breadth away from losing control and kidnapping Cassie up stairs to his bed andâ Oh, God. Get a grip.

"What's all the commotion?" called Narayan rushing into the kitchen, the Professor close on his heels.

The Professor chuckled when he saw Lilith crouched at Alaric's feet. How long had she tried to get that close to Alaric's naked body, unsuccessfully.

"This was your fault." Lilith glared at Alex. "If you hadn't barged in here like that, this wouldn't have happened." She snapped caustically.

"Don't blame me for this, you spiteful shrew." Alex was doing his best to tone down his vitriolic reply. Although there wasn't a person in the room who hadn't been exposed to his fiery temper, he was determined to rein it in, although the effort took all his fortitude to hold himself in check. His body shook with the effort.

Looking in Narayan's direction, the monk nodded to Alex, his eyes glinting his approval. The time he'd spent with Narayan and Abby the night before had given him an insight into his own behaviour. He wanted to learn more self control and fortunately Narayan had agreed to teach him. Who better to learn from than a Buddhist monk with more than five hundred years of experience.

"I don't have time to clean this mess up. I have a date." Lilith announced. "Mrs Philpot, be a *pet* and put those flowers in a new vase?" she ordered with a sardonic leer.

"Who died and made you Master of this house?" she replied incredulously, her hands coming to rest on her generous hips.

"Oh, I'm sorry, did I forget to say please?" Sarcasm dripped sweetly from Lilith's barely civil words.

"Even in a declaration of war one observes the rules of politeness, particularly if you're in a hostile environment." The disapproval in Narayan's voice snapped Lilith's head around, pulling her attention into sharp focus on him with a snarl.

## Eternal Covenant

She had only known Narayan twenty four hours and already his proverbial quotes were getting on her nerves.

If he thought she would be intimidated by a room full of vampires, he was sadly mistaken. She'd been dealing with vampires for more than ten years and she was pretty sure she knew all their weaknesses. They should be intimidated by her.

"We'll talk about this later." The Professor bristled at Lilith. He'd noticed a change in her behaviour recently that he didn't approve of. She could always be a bit surly, but lately she had become downright rude and disrespectful. Disappointment and concern tugged at him. There had to be a logical explanation. The change started when Anil was murdered and Cassie and Alex became involved. Could she be jealous of Alaric's interest in Cassie, he thought. No. He disregarded that hypothesis immediately. Although she'd always seemed to have been attracted to Alaric in the past, she had her own man now. A man who seemed to bring a light into her eyes when she talked about him that he'd never seen before. Maybe it was just a clash of personality between her and Alex combined with stress of the recent events. That had to be it. Still, he intended to have a good talk with her when she was calmer.

Alaric made a hasty retreat from the kitchen with Cassie in hot pursuit.

Rushing ahead of him, she stopped across the foot of the staircase, blocking his escape. She felt as though she was being drawn to him, pulled to him by some unseen force. She cleared her throat as she slowly inhaled, fighting for control.

Lifting his eyes, they lingered on the long bare curve of her throat where her vein pulsed a rapid beat. His fangs ached with a swift, brutal hunger.

She shivered, a tremor racing up her spine at the intense lust, pure driving need she saw in those eyes.

She was only distantly aware of her surroundings. All that mattered was getting closer to him.

Moving to step around her, Cassie moved with him, her hands settled on his chest, not to push him away, not to pull him closer. Just to touch him, to feel the cool warmth of him. His body temperate was only a few degrees cooler than hers, the temperature of tepid water, but the feel of it made her body burn.

Alaric had imagined the sensation of her hands running over his skin a hundred times. Had experienced the ethereal touch through her dream, but nothing could have prepared him for the actual reality. He shuddered beneath her exploring touch, his arousal tearing at his restraint.

She wanted to taste him, kiss him. She'd dreamed of his kiss. A kiss she was certain she would never have, going by the way he continually dodged her.

As she stood there in front of him, he couldn't help wondering how those lush lips would taste under his own. How they would feel wrapped around his tongue, or even better, his cock. His fingers lifted to trace the slender curve of her neck, his mouth watering. He wanted to run his tongue down her neck to the pulse at the base of her throat, and wrap himself in her sweet scent.

"How did you know I was afraid?" she asked. The tone she used was firm, no nonsense, but her voice was as smoothly seductive as moonlight on silk sheets. The contradictions were enough to almost drive him insane.

She watched him with equal parts frustration, innocence and hunger.

Her eager eyes bore into his with an intensity that made him itch and burn.

## Eternal Covenant

Heat pulsed through the moist folds between her thighs as her soft fingers continued to gently explore the hard expanse of his chest. His hard male nipples stood to attention, as did his steel hard cock.

Swallowing hard, he grabbed her hands to still them but did not remove them.

Dammit, if she didn't get her scent of arousal away from him soon, they were going to have a very big problem. It was killing him. It was hot, liquid sweet and he was dying to lap at the soft cream he knew was spilling from the heart of her sensuous need. It would be as rich and sweet as the finest liqueur.

"It's called a blood bond. When I healed you and tasted your blood, it created a bond between us. It means I can feel when you're afraid." There was a quiver of strain in his own voice he'd not heard before.

He tamped down on the heat rushing through his blood like a goddamn volcano set to blow, and tried to concentrate on being normal. Polite. Harmless. Penitent.

"Does that mean you can feel *everything* I do?" she asked. Alaric sweltered under the rapacious hunger in her nearly breathless voice. He began to melt under the sultry attention of her fingers raking lightly over the hard muscles of his chest, snaking lower, down over his washboard stomach toward the top of his precariously placed towel.

Cassie had no idea how much her touch tormented him, how close to the edge of control he was. She only knew that she needed him more than she needed to breathe.

His hands grasped her shoulders pulling her closer to him as his head lowered, his eyes firmly fixed on her flushed lips he was desperate to taste.

Footsteps approached down the hall shocking him back from the edge of the abyss he was hovering over.

Saved by the bell, in more ways than one.

Only one more second and he would have been lost.

He didn't want to lie to her but he had no intension of telling her the truth either.

Lilith appeared in the entrance hall on her way to the door for another date with the nice policeman, Detective Renkin. Poor bastard, Cassie thought.

"Alaric, I'm very sorry about the vase. I can see that you've healed already though." She stated in her nonchalant manner. Her eyes shifted from Alaric to Cassie, studying their body language. Alaric tightened the towel at his waist and angled his body away as her gaze slid over the bulge tenting the towel.

"Think nothing of it. Now if you two lady's will excuse me, I need to change." Smoothly sidestepping Cassie, he dashed up the stairs like the hounds of Hell were after him, leaving the two women to stare after him.

"Well. What do you make of that?" Lilith asked offhandedly, an irreverent smirk painted on her face as she turned on her heel and headed out the door. Her handbag clutched under her arm, a corner of the blood stained handkerchief protruding from her overstuffed bag.

The front door closed behind her silently.

## Eternal Covenant

Cassie slowly sank down onto the steps holding the bannister tightly for support as her body seemed to lose all strength. He was gone again, and once more she was left in lonely solitude. A hollow void invaded her soul tightening her chest, leaving her gasping for breath.

Further down the sparsely lit hallway the study door creaked softly. Measured footfalls of a near silent vampire approached her.

Not now, Cassie thought. She did not want to face anyone right now. What she wanted was to find a hole she could crawl into and hide herself and her humiliation. She was a glutton for punishment, she knew it. She was the one who kept coming onto him and he rejected her every time. When was she going to learn to just keep her distance.

The problem was that when he was near, her mind and her body were separate entities. She seemed to have no control over what her body did and her mind was helpless to watch as another embarrassing moment unfolded.

She was getting closer to that straight jacket and padded cell by the day. Goddamn men.

She quickly got to her feet and turned to head up the stairs, but it was too late.

"Abby." Cassie smiled half-heartedly.

"What was all the noise before?" she asked. There was no need to ask Cassie what had her so despondent and forlorn, she had projected her distress so loudly it would have given her a headache if she were still human. Yet another benefit to her new life, Abby thought.

"Long story." She sighed heavily, heading back down the stairs. "Alex and I might as well explain it together."

x-x-x-x-x-x

Alaric slammed his bedroom door, his heart hammering hard enough to break a rib.

Two minutes with her and he was back to being hot and hard and raging for release, which only made him pissed off, out of sorts and so damned aroused that breathing had become an Olympic event. He probably would have hyperventilated to death if he actually needed oxygen to live.

Dropping the towel, he fisted his cock and with gritted teeth attempted unsuccessfully to give himself relief. What was wrong with him?

The need to feel her sweet lips sucking the sensitive crest of his cock had his entire body tightening to its breaking point. Or, to bury himself deep inside her, thrusting, pounding into her. His entire body trembled, his cock screamed for release that wouldn't come.

He growled in frustration and punched the wall gouging out a large hole in the plaster and the stone behind it.

Dressing quickly, he moved silently through the house, retreating down into his private chambers in the bowels of the Manor. A few hours in the gym could do no harm. It probably wouldn't do him much good either, but the alternative was not an option. Cassie was off limits.

## Eternal Covenant

Damn it. Damn it to hell. He wanted her. And he couldn't have her. Even fantasising about her had become dangerous, now that his emotions weren't entirely his own. He felt the lance of fresh pain from his rejection of her pour through him, ripping at his mind. The weight of the knowledge that she was hurting so badly because of him weighed heavily on his heart, like a stone threatening to crush it.

He couldn't do this.

He couldn't be around her any more.

His sense of obligation would not be swayed.

x-x-x-x-x-x

"You actually saw the Elder tree?" The Professor asked again.

"Yes. It's as big as a fucking skyscraper." Alex elaborated, quickly backtracking his words feeling self-conscious of his language with Abby standing so close next to him. "I mean, it's huge. The biggest tree I've ever seen, and I swear it knew we were there. You could almost feel it thinking. I know that sounds weird, but you could."

The Professor sat down hard on one of the bar stools.

"That's incredible. Humans aren't supposed to see that tree." Mrs Philpot said. Although she had known about the tree most of her life, she had only seen it for the first time herself a year or two ago.

"Why is that? Is it because the fairies protect it?" Alex asked.

"No. How do I describe this." The Professor answered. He rubbed the back of his neck, then chewed on his bottom lip, trying to decide how to explain it in the simplest manner, clapping his hands together when he got it. "That tree is a bit like a private telephone, a direct line between the Elders and those of us here on Earth who are working to keep the Underworld from rising." The Professor said.

"So, how come Alex and I saw that tree?" Cassie asked.

"I don't know." The Professor scratched his head perplexed. "I really don't know. But seeing that tree means you've come to the attention of the Elders for some reason."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" queried Alex warily.

"Again, I don't know," puzzled at how entangled the cousins had become in their war against the Guild and the Underworld. It was no coincidence, that was one thing he *was* sure of.

"What were the voices we heard in the forest? Were they the fairies or something else?" Cassie asked.

"Should we avoid going near that tree or even the forest for that matter?" Alex asked, shooting Cassie a quick look, knowing full well she intended to head back to that tree tomorrow regardless of the Professor's answer.

"Most likely it was the folks from Fey you heard." Giving them both a sober look. "If you've come to the attention of the Elders, they would've been curious about you too." The Professor clarified.

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"They wouldn't have meant to scare you though. There's nothing in there that could or would harm either of you," added Mrs Philpot.

So much for keeping Cassie out of the forest, Alex thought.

"Are we likely to see a fairy in the forest and how would we recognise one if we did? Are they four inches tall with rainbow coloured glittery wings with sharp pointy teeth, or what?" Cassie probed.

The Professor and Mrs Philpot laughed together, sharing a knowing look between them. Fairy tales had a lot to answer for.

"No, love." Mrs Philpot said still chuckling. "They're between six to seven feet tall, probably dressed like warriors and they have no wings. Only the angels have wings and the Fey folk you're likely to see are only half angel."

Cassie's brain ticked over with all the legends and tales she'd either read or studied about involving half breed angels and fairies. It was right on the tip of her tongue but she just couldn't quite reach it. Her brain was so clogged with thoughts of Alaric it was a miracle she could remember her own name. It was so damned annoying. Correction. *He* was so damned annoying.

"Alex." Narayan called. "After dinner you can start your training."

Cassie wondered at the transformation on Alex's face. He was genuinely excited to study the Buddhist teachings with Narayan. His smile warmed further when Abby squeezed his hand in encouragement.

A sudden pang of sadness struck her. She didn't want to go back to her old life. She didn't want Alex to back to his. Somehow this place, these people felt like home, their family. She didn't want to loose any of it.

## Chapter 17

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Ooof. Alex hit the mats with a hard thud expelling what little air he had left in his lungs.

"Again," Alex croaked as he struggled to draw breath into his winded body. His body was slick with sweat soaking his clothes. His normally shiny black hair hung limply in damp strands and clung to his forehead, his face flushed from the exertion of his training session with Narayan. "I'm not stopping until I get this right."

"Your persistence is a credit to you, but I think we are finished for today," Narayan replied.

"No. Once more, then I'll let you call it quits," his determination clearly showed in his eyes even if his body was ready to collapse.

"Very well. Once more." Narayan grinned with a mischievous slant to his mouth. He had something special up his sleeve, Alex could feel it way down to his toes. He'd spent almost every waking hour over the past week with Narayan, when Abby wasn't visiting that is, and was quickly learning the monk's idiosyncrasies and enjoyment of sly trickery and artful deception. All in the name of training, which usually meant Alex was most likely to finish his session exactly where he was right now, flat on his back, only with a few more bruises and a little less pride. It was worth it if he could master this manoeuvre. He'd spent enough time recently memorising the pattern of the mats while his face was plastered to them, pretty soon he would introduce Narayan to them as well, he thought with enthusiasm.

Alex was a fast learner and had thrown himself into his studies with Narayan with much more clarity of understanding and maturity than Narayan had expected. He suspected that Alex's outward appearance of a short attention span and shallow personality was a ruse. There was depth to him that belied his young years and Narayan was determined to push him to the point where he would reveal his true self. And, he would have fun doing it.

"Up, little grasshopper," his grin broadening.

Alex stumbled to his feet unsteadily planting his feet far apart in a ready stance. "Again," he wheezed as he gulped down another desperately needed lungful of air.

Alex made his move towards Narayan just as the door to the gym opened.

Abby.

Oh crap. A second later Alex was slammed back into the mats, Narayan's hand clasped about his throat.

"Little grasshopper, never lose your focus."

"Butâ ;"

"But nothing. Your enemies will seize every opportunity to defeat you in a fight. Only, if they get the upper hand it'll be 'that's all she wrote', 'good night Irene'. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Alex flashed a look to Abby, her seductive leer made him burn inside, sending a fresh rush of blood to his groin and simultaneously deepened the flush to his cheeks.



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"You have added a couple of new phrases to your repertoire, Narayan. Where did you pick them up?" the Professor asked as he stepped into the room.

"I have watched a lot of American television, there is not a lot else to do at the monastery besides training," his eyes sparkling as he chuckled.

Alex gained his feet once again, his expression sobering quickly. He hadn't expected Abby to visit tonight and the Professor had never come down to the gym before. It made him nervous.

"What's up?" he asked cautiously.

"We had confirmation that Ahriman is looking for the Spear," Abby responded.

"Well, we assumed he would since he already has the cup. From what you've told me he needs both to become the world's ugliest monster. So why come all the way out here to tell us? Why not pick up the phone?" he asked as he grabbed a towel and dried off his face.

Abby's eyes never left him for a moment. Alex was already lean with good muscle definition but with his recent exercise program she could see evidence that his body was rapidly filling out with fuller more powerful muscles. His wet T-shirt clung to his torso outlining every ripple of his abdomen and his bike shorts did nothing to cover the bulge beneath them. She closed her lips tightly to cover up her descended fangs. She was still a baby vampire and hadn't yet learned how to control her fangs under the influence of strong emotions. She smiled tightly at Alex and looked to the Professor to answer for her.

"We couldn't take the risk of any bugging devices since Alaric is one of only a few people who knows where it's been hidden. We've learned that Ahriman is sending a team to find it, but we couldn't discuss the subject over the phone, just in case," he replied. "If Ahriman is so boldly looking for the spear, he either has someone passing him insider knowledge, or he's hoping to cause the Alliance to panic and inadvertently lead him straight to the spear themselves."

"So, have you talked to Alaric about this yet?"

"Yes, he needs to make a few arrangements but he's going to retrieve the spear himself. He might be gone for a few days." The Professor ran his hands through his thinning hair, his expression tightening momentarily. If Alex wasn't watching him so carefully, he would have missed it.

"Does Cassie know?" Alex asked in a more subdued tone. Alaric had avoided all contact with Cassie for the past week and in that time he'd watched Cassie become more withdrawn and pale, as though a part of her was slowly withering away. Alex hated to admit it but the pompous self-absorbed vampire seemed to brighten Cassie's spirit. She seemed more content and happy when he was around. This past week had eaten at him to watch her slowly wither away before his eyes and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

"Alaric is talking to her now," Abby replied gently, knowing Alex's concern for his cousin and his tendency to over react. She too had been disturbed by the sudden decline in Cassie's health. Although her telepathic gift gave her an insight into Alaric's mind also. His body didn't change, but mentally and emotionally he wasn't faring any better than Cassie. The control it was taking for him to stay away from her was destroying him.

x-x-x-x-x-x

Cassie stared at the darkened forest just beyond the kitchen door and gardens of which she stood at the threshold of, hugging her sides tightly, holding in her sadness, a sadness which had grown a little more each

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day over the past week. She'd never been one to dwell on unrequited love or let it affect her mood, but somehow this felt different. Alaric had made it clear he had no intension of pursuing any kind of relationship with her, but her heart and body had other ideas. Her mind was clear about letting it go but each day she felt his absence all the more acutely.

Over the past week she and Alex had found their own routines to fill in the day and night. While Alex spent the majority of his time with Narayan learning martial arts and techniques to kill vampires, which he studied with exuberant enthusiasm, he balanced this with evenings learning meditation to improve control of his mind, body and soul. Cassie on the other hand found herself spending her days in the forest, exploring new areas but always managed to end up at the Elder tree, initially for a couple of hours but each day she extended her stay beneath that tree longer and longer. The tree had a comforting presence about it like a mother's nurturing embrace which she found heartening especially since the rest of her world seemed to be falling apart.

Alaric stood in the doorway between the dining room and kitchen watching her silently. She appeared different to him, she seemed to be less than whole, fragmented somehow. He couldn't explain what he saw but it resonated deep within his own soul.

Cassie felt his presence like a tap on the shoulder and her heart beat doubled its pace as she turned to face him. Her cheeks were hollow, her eyes shadowed and flat. Her spark of life faded.

"What are you doing here?" her hurt tone grating at his conscience and his heart.

Alaric took her soft delicate hand as she instinctively reached for him. Her slender fingers slid into his palm with natural ease as he lifted it to his lips. His eyes closed in rapture, drinking in her sweet scent as if it was the elixir of life itself, letting it fill every cell in his body, rejuvenating his soul. His lips brushed her fingers lightly as he raised his gaze to her face. Her pale skin flushed to radiate its natural peachy cream complexion and the blue tinge to her lips faded, replaced with the dusky pink that drove him crazy for a taste.

The change in her was dramatic and instantaneous.

Was it possible that their symbiotic bond extended further than their emotional exchange? Surely he was misreading things. Unlike vampires, humans reacted to their emotional state he reminded himself.

Doubt lingered in the back of his mind. This was unknown territory. He had never formed a blood bond with one of her kind before. She was unique in this world, the last of her line, so it would stand to reason that a bond with her would also be unique.

If things weren't complicated enough already.

"You haven't told me what you're doing here," she demanded dryly. Her body may have received a jolt of new life with his contact but her heart remained broken.

"I live here." Smiling his cheeky lopsided grin that usually managed to make her melt at his feet, but this time she seemed immune to his light hearted quip. She pulled her hand from his as though his touch stung her.

Cassie pinched her lips tightly together to hold her tongue but the promise of a verbal backlash was etched in her scowl if he didn't hurry and get to the point. In this moment his presence caused more pain to her than his absence did. He was so near and yet so far. The need to get closer to him tore at her soul but he might as well have been on the other side of the world for all the good it would do her. The hole inside her remained raw and gaping, and growing steadily wider.

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Her emotions raked through Alaric with the effect of a thousand razor blades.

"I've come to tell you that soon I'll be going away for a few days. I won't be gone long, two or three days at the most."

"Why are you telling me? You've already avoided me quite well for a week. If you left for a month I probably wouldn't notice any difference," she snapped angrily.

Alaric bowed his head, forcing his hands into his pockets to stop himself from grabbing her in a comforting embrace. He took a deep breath before raising his head to look her straight in the eye. She could see straight to his soul, he knew she could, as hard as he tried, he couldn't hide his feelings for her, which of course was the whole point of avoiding her for the past week.

"Ahriman and the Guild are going after the Spear. I have to make sure they don't find it." Despite his calm words and body language, his anxiety was growing, forming a hard knot in his stomach. Ahriman already has the Cup, if he got his hands on the Spear he would have two of the three elements he would need to become immortal. All that was left was the key to make it work.

Alaric swore an oath to himself that he would give his life a thousand times over before he would ever let Ahriman get his hands on the key. Fortunately the Cup and Spear on their own are useless to him but none the less dangerous in the wrong hands. The key was his biggest worry.

Alaric's heart skipped a beat at the thought, his breath caught in his throat.

Cassie's heart began to race and her chest felt tight and short of breath.

In a panic she opened the kitchen door and made a dash outside to draw in a few deep breaths of the cold night air.

Alaric followed close behind.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I just became really anxious all of a sudden," she said, an expression of bewilderment on her face. She had nothing to feel anxious about, maybe it was a symptom of her looming insanity causing her to hyperventilate.

Alaric took her hand and led her further into the shadowed verdant spread of the gardens. He'd been afraid of this. It was his anxiety she was feeling. Their connection flowed both ways between them. Not that he was going to tell her that though.

Cassie shivered, her track pants and long sleeve t-shirt were no match for the early winter's breeze. Alaric put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close against him to protect her from the wind, an automatic reaction which he regretted as soon as he'd done it.

She turned to face him, tipping her head up toward his. The air between them actually seemed to sizzle and spark. But only for a moment. Alaric removed his arm from her shoulders and took a sudden step backwards away from her.

What was the problem? She couldn't understand it. For something that felt so right, why then, was he denying himself and her, the chance to explore the possibility of being together. She knew they both wanted it.

Whatever the reason, he wore his secret like a suit of armour, pressing heavily down on him.

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"I don't know what the problem is. Every time I get near you, you freeze and run away. I'm pretty sure you know how I feel about you," she said taking a small step, closing the distance between them. "And, you're giving off all the signals that you feel the same about me," she said, taking another step in his direction.

"I can't. As much as I want to, I can't." he replied miserably, appealing for her to understand a reason that he was both unable and unwilling to explain, which only upset her all the more.

"Kiss me. Just this once. Kiss me the way you really want to," she pleaded, staring deeply into his tormented eyes. She held her breath for the longest moment waiting for his response.

She watched him. Her knowing gaze, as sharp and direct as arrows, but infinitely more arousing. He felt his already hard cock strain for her attention.

He watched her with hunger. A hunger that was fast putting something other than his brain in the driver's seat.

Slowly he raised his hand to her face, sweeping a long curl behind her ear, his fingers raking into her hair as he cupped her face, his thumb stroked her cheek gently and lovingly. She could see signs of chinks developing in his impenetrable armour as he waged an internal battle between his head and his heart.

"Please," she whispered, placing her own hand over his, holding it against her cheek.

Her eyes flashed with frustration and impatience, and what he interpreted as the first hint of certainty. She thought he was weakening.

And, God help him, he was. His foundations were fracturing beneath him.

Taking a step, he closed the remaining distance between them. He bent his head and kissed her, tentatively at first with feather light kisses. The sweet taste of her warm lips lured him in for more. The memory of her dream which he'd shared so intimately with her, crumbled the last piece of his self imposed barricade and his body responded. *Just this once*, he told himself, as he released his inhibitions completely and kissed her deeply. It was long and slow, a soul-deep kiss filled with passion and longing, tinged with his tormented sadness. This kiss would need to last him throughout eternity.

He held her against him in a possessive embrace. His tongue traced the soft fullness of her lips, parting them to explore the recesses of her mouth. She moaned softly as their tongues melded, seeking one another intimately. He drank in her sweet scent until every breath he took was of her, wrapped around his very soul.

She tasted every bit as good as he imagined, as sweet as honey mead and just as intoxicating. His body was burning from the inside out.

His hands traced the length of her back, feeling every curve beneath his fingers. Slowly they moved across her ribs, the pads of his thumbs gliding circles across the outskirts of her breasts, edging ever closer to her hard ripe nipples. With a groan, she relaxed further into his embrace, urging him on to continue his exploration.

He was close to crossing the line of self preservation. He had to stop. Stop now.

With painful effort, Alaric gently pulled away from her. The look on his face told her all she needed to know. He loved her, every bit as much as she loved him.

A litany played in his head, small and weak. A plea for his own sanity.

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Then his armour fell back into place.

"There can never be anything between us," he said sadly.

"You keep telling me that, but you never explain why. *Why?*" raising her voice in temper and frustration.

"You're not going to let this go are you?" his own self pity and misery making him sound angry.

"No. Not now that I know you love me," defiantly standing her ground, her own voice hoarse with emotion. "You can deny it all you like but I know it's true. I, I can feel it."

He felt trapped. His desire for her was too strong to ignore but she was his forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden. He was her protector and until he knew for sure that she was no longer in any danger, she had to remain in his home, tormenting him with her scent, her voice, her smile, her warmth. Everything about her drew him to her. His impoverished soul was doomed to be incessantly plagued by forbidden desire.

Maybe this was his punishment for all his crimes as a vengeful vampire he committed over the years.

In his early years he'd been angry for being made a vampire. He watched his family die one by one and had wanted to join them but that was not a choice he had been given. Instead he had inflicted his retribution on any and all those souls that crossed his path until the river of blood he had created finally washed away the darkness in his soul.

His mind was made up.

He would retreat back into solitary confinement once again, however pointless that might turn out to be. No matter how much distance he put between them, he feared he couldn't escape the constant torment of their connection. Fortunately, he thought, as yet she hadn't wised up to the depth of their bond, but feared it was only a matter of time. She was smart, she'd soon work it out and he had to prepare himself for the inevitable repercussions.

"Cassie, I'm sorry."

He avoided eye contact with her, his posture stiff and tense. A moment later, Cassie stood alone in the garden, a vacuum of wind pulled her off balance in the direction he disappeared, forcing her to take a step forward to stop from falling over.

A solitary tear escaped her eye as a flood of emotions bombarded her, some of which seemed so foreign and out of place to her. She knew in her mind and her heart what she wanted. Him.

So, why did she feel so torn?

*She* wasn't torn. That's how he was feeling, not her. Come to think of it, she'd had a few unusual feelings lately that she hadn't been able to quite discern. Why did she hyperventilate earlier when they were discussing the spear?

The full moon rose high above the trees filtering light through the bare branches of the forest below. She wandered from the garden into the thicket of trees.

She didn't want to go back inside, not just yet. It was peaceful out here and she needed to get a handle on the quagmire of emotions she was wading through. Her feet followed one after the other deeper and deeper into

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the forest. The further she got the denser the foliage, blocking out the moonlight. Unaware of how far into the forest she wandered she continued her slow meander along the narrow beaten path.

An assortment of thoughts rolled through her head, tangling incoherently together.

Up ahead she could see a faint glow. Towering over the rest of the forest in front of her was the Elder tree.

Oh, dear. She'd definitely wandered too far. She was in the heart of the forest. Looking behind her, the path she had followed seemed to blend into invisibility.

This wasn't good. She had to get back to the house. The temperature had dropped a few more degrees and was bordering on freezing. Her light weight clothes weren't going to do her much good if it continued to plummet.

Damn. Why hadn't she been paying attention to where she was going.

Because her mind was so corrupted with thoughts of Alaric, she couldn't think straight.

No point dwelling on it now though. She had to get back.

Turning, her foot caught under a tree root, wrenching her knee and twisting it. An audible pop and tearing sound broke the silence of the forest, her head coming to blows with a rock as she fell heavily. Pain ripped through her as she grabbed her knee and a trickle of blood flowed down her forehead, dripping into her eye.

Now she really was in deep shit. Why the hell did she come into the forest at night anyway. She needed her head read,â and stitched, she thought numbly.

Pulling herself up, she took a tentative step on her injured knee. A jolt of pain roared through her leg, giving out beneath her and landing her exactly where she'd started. Crawling, she pulled herself over to the Elder tree, bracing her back against its trunk.

"Help. Can anyone hear me?" she cried.

Her answer was the rustle of trees and a deep rumbling growl.

Whipping her head around in the direction of the growl, two glowing golden eyes assessed her from the body of a wolf the size of a small horse on steroids.

Holy crap!

## Chapter 18

### Chapter 18

Several hours later Alaric arrived home. The sun had not yet risen but the sky had begun to turn a deep red on the horizon.

Slipping silently down the first floor corridor, he poked his head into Cassie's room. He expected her to be tucked in bed. No doubt she was still angry with him and he couldn't blame her. But when he stuck his head around the corner, she wasn't there. Her bed was still made. Fear struck its iron fist into his soul.

Where was she? He searched for Cassie's scent. Maybe she was curled up on the couch again or retreated to another part of the house.

He got nothing.

She wasn't in the house.

Sending out his senses further, he searched again and was instantly struck with a searing pain. Her pain.

With the desperation of a madman he ran from the house following his blood bond to her.

Panic overwhelmed him. Running through the trees would only slow him down. That was not an option. Leaping into the air, wings unfurled from his back taking him higher, above the trees directly to her.

x-x-x-x-x

Cassie woke just as first light was beginning to reach the forest floor. She felt cold even though the wolf that was wrapped around her was putting out more heat than a supernova. Her head throbbed and the stabbing pain in her knee made her jump when she tried to straighten it.

Sitting up gingerly, the wolf uncoiled behind her. She would have sworn there was concern in its eyes.

A wolf.

As far as she knew there hadn't been any wolves left in England for at least a century. But then this was Savernake Forest, the enchanted forest. Why shouldn't there be giant sized wolves living here too.

The wolf nudged her shoulder with its muzzle and whimpered, looking more like a love sick puppy than a ferocious predator. His eyes returned to the cut on her forehead still oozing with a slow trickle.

His eyes still glowed a golden yellow but less noticeable in the faint morning light. His thick grey coat boofed-up as he stretched himself. His muscles were obviously stiff from staying in the same position for so long wrapped around her, keeping her warm and protecting her.

"I don't know who you are but thank you. I don't think I would have made it through the night without you." She mumbled, giving his head a scratch.

He snorted and dipped his head bashfully.

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Bashful. Now she *was* losing it. That blow to the head must have been harder than she thought. It was unnerving. It was like talking to a human in wolf's clothing. Intelligence beamed from those golden eyes.

He took a step forward, his face so close to hers, she could feel his warm breath against her skin. With a grunt he tentatively licked his tongue across her cut forehead, she jumped in surprise at the feel of his slightly rough tongue. Taking a step back he waited until she seemed composed again, before resuming his cleaning of the wound.

"Well. I seem to have made a mess of things." She told him. "How am I supposed to get home now?" It was a good half hour brisk walk back to the Manor from where she now sat beneath the Elder tree. Without being able to put any weight on her injured leg, it looked like she would have to wait there until someone came looking for her.

The wolf stepped back again. His head held high, and chest puffed out, he snorted to her and gestured his head toward his back.

He didn't mean for her to ride him back to the Manor did he?

Before she could put her thoughts in order, a whooshing sound above the trees caught her attention. A dark figure burst through the tree tops landing a few metres in front of her.

A man with silvery wings and glittering iridescent eyes.

Alaric.

She must be having some kind of freaky dream or she'd swallowed some magic mushrooms she wasn't aware of, because this was too much.

He must have looked as insane as he felt. What little colour she had in her face instantly drained away at the sight of him.

Alaric took a step toward her and she instantly put up her hand to stop him.

"Why are you out here?" he demanded. Not the opening line he should have used he knew, when she sent him a withering glare.

His eyes flashed towards the wolf who had come to stand protectively by her side.

"Marcus, thanks, but I'll take it from here."

Ignoring Alaric, Cassie turned to the wolf and gave him a hug around the neck. "Marcus. Is that your name?"

The wolf's head moved up and down in reply.

A low growl grumbled from Alaric's vicinity.

Cassie looked up. His eyes glowed and his fangs were fully descended. Jealousy cut a scathing course through him. *Mine.*

She's mine.



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But then, he'd cast her aside the night before, yet again, and by the look on her face she was far from having forgotten or forgiven him.

Regardless, she was injured and cold and he was going to take her home. When he took another step forward she again halted him.

"Not on your life," she sneered. "I'm not going anywhere with you, thank you very much! You can just spread your wings and fly away home without me." Turning tentatively, she limped off toward the path, gritting her teeth against the pain.

"Don't be ridiculous. You're injured. You can barely put weight on that leg, how are you going to walk?" he demanded.

She shot him another look that would freeze the devil's balls.

A ripple of impatience threatened the unsteady hold on his fragile calm demeanour. There was an unmistakable air of challenge about her that touched his more primitive nature and threatened to expose the possessive demon within.

Energy rolled off him in palpable icy waves and the wolf cringed slightly, taking a wary step away from Cassie.

He felt as stable as a keg of dynamite with a lit fuse. The fact that he couldn't stop staring at her when she seemed hell bent on ignoring him, made the fuse burn that much faster.

"Where are you going? We haven't finished our conversation."

"I wasn't aware we were having a conversation," she countered, her voice holding an edge of censure. "As I recall you were about to dictate your opinion that I should go home with you, and I was ignoring you. Now if you don't mind, your mood swings are giving me whiplash." Turning away she took another tender step.

"You can't leave."

"Watch me."

He watched her take yet another torturous step away from him.

"Stop. I'm sorry. Please just let me take you home," he pleaded.

"No. I don't want your help. Just leave me alone." Her voice trembled from pain and a broken heart.

"Dammit Cass, I can't let you walk all that way. Not like this."

Her whole body stiffened and her fists clenched. "Let me. *Let me*. Where do you get off thinking you have the right to control *me*. I'm following your rules out of need for self preservation, but you don't own me and you certainly don't get a say in what I do.

"Besides I already have a ride home thanks," she said flashing him a biting smile. "That's if the offer still stands." She asked turning to Marcus.

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Her face was full of strength, shining with a steadfast determination. It was so sexy it was driving him certifiably crazy.

He was scum, he thought. He was worse than scum. Here she was hurt and bleeding and his mind was focussed on his cock burning a hole in his pants.

Marcus shot Alaric an anxious look. When he made no move to intervene, Marcus hunched down so Cassie could climb onto his back.

In silence Marcus carried Cassie back to the Manor with Alaric in-tow, brooding.

Maybe she'd been a bit hard on him but she was tired, cold and in pain, and her 'give-a-shit' button was broken.

The early morning sun radiated warmth on Alaric's face as he opened the back door into the kitchen to a delighted squeal from Mrs Philpot.

"Marcus, what a wonderful surprise." She yelled, running across the kitchen to greet him. "Oh my, Cassie what's happened dear," her attention quickly diverted to Cassie's bloodied state.

"A minor accident in the woods. Nothing serious," she said grimacing as she climbed off Marcus' back onto a bar stool, propping her leg on top of the bench. Her knee was now double its normal size and ached like a bitch. The cut on her forehead wasn't so bad. It wouldn't need stitches but it would probably take a day or two for the swelling and bruising to dissipate.

"Well love, we need to get you cleaned up before Alex comes down for breakfast, hadn't we."

Ah. Alex. Alaric winced at the thought of facing her over protective cousin. Well, he might as well prepare himself now for yet another argument. No doubt Alex would blame him for Cassie's accident, and rightly so. He couldn't deny it. It was entirely his fault.

"Marcus love, go get cleaned up. There are some clothes in the cupboard in the back room. I'll have breakfast ready for you by the time you're finished."

Cassie's ears pricked up at the mention of clothes. She took another good look at Marcus who continued to hover around her despite Mrs Philpot's instructions. A glint of humour filtered through his eyes and the corner of his mouth turned up into a grin.

Oh my God. He couldn't be a .could he?

"Shoo." Mrs Philpot said to him again. "Out you go. You're not doing anyone any good here," giving Marcus a pat on the backside to get him moving.

"That goes for you too," chastising Alaric as well. "Leave Cassie with me. Everything is under control."

One last look at Cassie to satisfy himself she wasn't going to fall apart or pass out or â .the list was endless, before he too, grudgingly made a move to leave.

He wasn't altogether sure, but he thought her real anger might have dissipated. There was a glint of softness lurking in the back of her eyes. A look of forgiveness he desperately needed. Without that reassurance he felt antsy and tightly wound, just barely over the border from the land of impetuous irrationality.

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"Mrs P, who *exactly* is Marcus?" Cassie asked warily.

Mrs Philpot chuckled. Her generous bosoms jiggled with her humour. "Well, Marcus is my grandson, just turned eighteen last month. He'll be leaving to join the Army in January." she stated proudly, "And he's a Lycan," she tagged onto the end with calm and premeditated prudence, her eyes seeking Cassie's for signs of disbelief.

"A Lycan, as in Werewolf?"

"Bingo."

x-x-x-x-x

"No, Alex. I'm not going to any hospital. It's not that bad."

"Bullshit. You've sucked back half a box of pain killers and you're still in pain," he retorted.

"Look Alex, I don't have the energy to fight with you. I'm fine. I'll just keep my feet up for a few days. No big deal, ok."

"Sorry. Not good enough, You are the most stubborn and infuriating person I've ever met, do you know that," he chastised, pushing splayed fingers through his hair as he paced in front of her, exasperation wearing a crater sized hole in his patience.

"I've got three words for you. Pot. Kettle. Black." she replied.

"Fine. If you won't listen to me, I'll get someone who you will listen to."

Hardly likely, she thought. Her mind was made up.

Finding Alaric wasn't hard, he hovered expectantly just outside the door.

"I know you want to take her to a hospital but it's not safe. Until we know for sure Mira or one of the Guild subordinates doesn't still have orders to remove Cassie as a threat to them, she can't leave here, it's too risky." Alaric stated before Alex had a chance to even utter a syllable.

Although Alex understood the reasoning, he couldn't bear the consequences.

"Get a doctor here then," he demanded.

"Alex," Alaric began with as much compassion and as his raw nerves could muster. "Cassie has damaged her knee quite badly. She'll need surgery to fix it. Any doctor we call out here can only give her pain killers and sedatives to make her more comfortable."

Alex's frustration and anger were almost at breaking point but surprisingly, for once it wasn't directed at Alaric.

"There is something I can do though," he said, facing Alex with a wary eye.

"What is it? Can you heal her if you feed on her?" he asked tentatively, knowing that was how he healed her after Jarvis' attack.

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"No. The chemical in my saliva can only heal surface wounds, not internal wounds. But," Alaric shuddered inwardly at the words he was about to speak. To do what he was thinking would most definitely increase his blood bond with Cassie to a considerable degree, but what else could he do, he'd run out of options. "If she ingests my blood it would heal her."

Without a moment of hesitation Alex replied.

"Fine. Whatever you need to do, do it."

It came down to a simple fact that neither he nor Alaric could stand to see her suffer.

"You understand that if I heal her, it will increase the blood bond we already have." Alaric was having a hard time getting a grip on Alex's change of heart toward him. Two weeks ago nothing would have pleased Alex more than to rip his head off, today he behaved like he had adopted Alaric into his family.

"If you heal her, I don't care. Besides if this blood bond thing is everything I'm told it is, having a direct tap into her brain is likely to drive you insane. Good luck with that." His smile was without malice, almost apologetic. "Besides, you still have to convince Cass it's a good idea."

Hmm. Truer words were never spoken.

"One question though." Alex said, stepping forward toward him and dropping his voice, "Will this make Cass a vampire?"

His honest and naive question shocked Alaric a little. It hadn't occurred to him that Alex might assume that as the result of sharing his blood with Cassie. He'd spent so much time with Narayan lately, he actually forgot for a moment that all this, vampires, demons, werewolves and the like, were all still a new concept for Alex to wrap his head around. And still, without knowing the answer to that question, he had whole heartedly and without animosity, agreed to him giving Cassie his blood. Had Alex had a change of heart about vampires in general or specifically, him?

"No. No, she could only be transformed if she died with some of my blood inside her. Otherwise it will only heal her wounds and then pass from her system in a few days."

"But, the bond it creates is permanent?"

"Yes," he answered, a little more grimly than he would have liked.

Alex slapped a supportive hand on Alaric's shoulder and pushed him towards the door, towards Cassie.

x-x-x-x-x

A faint, wistful smile lightened her brooding face. He loved her. He admitted it. But, there was always a *but* with Alaric. He still believed that any attachment between them was not possible, insisting that their current situation made it *complicated*. They would need to continue to be solitary but sorely smitten souls.

She could live with that for now, but only for now. Maybe.

The fact that he loved for her made all the difference, or maybe it was all the pain killers kicking in that made it seem like a good proposition.

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He pushed back his sleeve, brought his wrist to his mouth and bit down. His fangs sank into flesh, pierced the vein. A trickle of blood oozed from the wound as he pressed his wrist to her mouth.

She drank. Her lips parted and closed over the punctures, warm and wet, and she suckled him. Desire shot through him like an electric charge. She licked and swallowed, sucked harder. She clutched his arm, her delicate fingers weaving incessant caresses over his cool skin as an avalanche of sensation joined them together and she groaned in mindless pleasure. His breath came faster as he grew hard with arousal. Finally, with gritted teeth he pulled his wrist from her mouth, licking the wounds closed. Tasting her on his flesh, he shivered with barely checked covetous demand.

Warmth soaked into his soul. It felt strange and intimate, as if he had somehow expanded his awareness to encompass them both completely.

She looked at him dreamily as she licked her bottom lip, collecting the last of his blood there. The potency of his blood was ecstasy. A drug made just for her pleasure. She felt as though she was floating in space, she felt detached from her arms and legs, her head swam with thoughts and feelings that bombarded her senses. She felt drunk.

He held her hand tenderly and watched as the cut on her forehead healed and the bruising and swelling in her knee slowly subsided.

It was done now. He couldn't take it back. He would have to learn to live with the consequences. Although it was hard enough to resist her before, how was he going to manage it now with such an intense bonding.

What's done is done, he reminded himself.

"I know who you are," she said, slurring her words.

His head whipped up to meet her gaze, his heart stopped beating in his chest.

"I know who you are, Sammael."

"How did you figure it out?" he asked nervously, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Oh, lots of things really, but when you flew in with those lovely fairy wings of yours this morning to rescue me," she giggled drunkenly, "I knew for certain then.

"Who told you I can't be your girlfriend, anyway?" she asked miffed, her eyes beginning to droop with weariness as the healing hormone took full effect.

"The Elders have threatened to exile me to the underworld if I break an oath I made to them," he whispered into her ear, his lips softly brushing the fair skin of her neck just below it.

"They might control you, but not me," she muttered defiantly, almost incomprehensibly as she drifted off to sleep in his arms.

Carefully picking up her still battered and bruised body, he carried her up to her bed.

The memory of the last time he had done this and the resultant erotic dream, fanned the impulse that nearly had him climb into bed with her, not in anticipation of a repeat performance, but for comfort, both hers and his. Just to curl his body around her and hold her until she woke, healed and safe.

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But, he had other responsibilities that couldn't wait. He'd wasted the previous night wallowing in his own self-pity, now he had work to do. It wasn't just Cassie he had to protect, he was responsible for an entire world.

No pressure or anything.

## Chapter 19

### Chapter 19

After sleeping until early the following evening, well over a full day after Alaric healed her, Cassie rose refreshed and energized. Her body was completely healed. The cut and egg shaped lump on her head were gone, as was the pain and swelling in her knee.

Her mind swam with thoughts and feelings, many of which conflicted with each other just as they had for the past few weeks. Although, now there was a difference. There was a different tone to some of those thoughts as if she were an antenna tuned into a radio station. She could hear and feel what was projected to her but now she could feel it as an echo, its clarity more pronounced but separate. It didn't originate from her.

For the first time in, well, what seemed like a very long time, she felt as though she wasn't losing her mind. There was logic to what was going on with her.

She felt smugly confident as she dressed and headed down stairs to find Alaric.

Entering the study, Alaric sat in his wingback chair facing the blazing fire, his chin resting on one hand thoughtfully as he stared sightlessly into the fire. He immediately straightened when Cassie entered. She was looking for him he knew. Their connection was so much stronger since he gave her his blood to heal her. He could almost feel her stomach grumbling from the long absence of food. He also knew that what she was hungry for was not to be found in the kitchen. It was residing in the wingback chair in front of her.

"I've figured it out," she said, leaning close to his ear.

"What have you figured out?" he asked, noticeably agitated by the playful look in her eye.

"We're connected. We share *all* of each other's emotions. You know when I'm afraid or in danger, among other things," looking him deep in the eye with a seductive leer. "Am I right?" probing for acknowledgement as she sauntered around to the front of his chair to face him, trailing her index finger along the arm in a sultry manner.

"It would appear that way, Yes," came his hesitant reply. His eyes followed her attentively. He didn't need to enquire why she was asking, even without their bond, her body language left no doubt in his mind that she intended to experiment with this connection and test his power of self control. And, he was powerless to stop her.

Her will was clearly determined, powerful and so utterly seductive, it burned a path of arousal more compelling than any temptation he had ever experienced before.

She levelled her purposeful gaze on him. Leaning down to him, her flushed lips brushed lightly over the ridge of his ear. "I crave the time when your body is wrapped around mine," she told him, the heat of her breath and her words flying through him like an arrow to its mark. He suffocated the groan in his throat, but only barely.

The Professor and Lilith had left earlier and Mrs Philpot too had retired to her rooms. Alex and Narayan were deep in a discussion about the Buddhist way of life, so she announced casually to the three men present that she was going to have a long hot bath and turn in early. Alex and Narayan absently bade her goodnight.

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Every muscle in Alaric's body stiffened as she bent down and sweetly kissed his nose, his agonised cock stiffened most of all. He could smell the liquid heat of her arousal tantalizing the air, intoxicating his senses.

She was determined to get her way.

He was determined that she wouldn't.

The minutes ticked by as he sat in his chair by the fire, resolved to stay strong and not give in to her obstinate will. Ten minutes passed, then twenty minutes, and when it reached thirty minutes, he quietly congratulated himself on winning his inner battle.

As he began to relax, a potent wave of sensation of arousal washed over him engulfing his senses and his will. His breathing quickened as his desire mounted. His cock was a steel rod in an instant. His craving became too great to bear. He didn't know what she was doing but it was working. He knew he would be utterly compliant with her demands. A tormented groan escaped his lips as the heavy length in pants jerked with need.

Alaric had spent the last five hundred years of his existence strengthening his will to overcome temptation, and this one woman had broken down all his barriers without any effort, leaving him barely capable of a feeble attempt at denying her.

He followed her scent to the top of the staircase and along the hallway. He expected to find her in her room, but that wasn't where her scent led. Further down the corridor, *his* bedroom door lay open. The aroma of sandalwood bath oils and the sound of water splashing in the tub lured him closer. The light within was dim, pulsating with a soft amber glow of a multitude of candles.

She didn't turn when he entered. Her hair was bundled up on top of her head, but loose enough that curling whisps spilled around her like a crown of spiralling silk. The ivory claw-footed bathtub brimmed with bubbly, steaming water. She lay in the bath with her eyes closed, one hand on the rim of the bath, the other engaged in finding the tender spot between her thighs.

The sly vixen had found his weakness. Cassie projected to him the sensation of her nimble fingers caress of the sensitised hardening nub of her clitoris and her vision of him being the owner of those talented and dextrous fingers. Her quiet mewling sounds of pleasure fuelled his imagination.

His craving for her grew in unison with hers. This was one fantasy he could experience in reality.

He moved forward and sat silently on the edge of the bath beside her, removing the sponge from her hand and soaked it in the water.

"I'll wash your back," he offered, his voice husky with restrained desire.

She leaned forward, barely breathing, afraid at any moment he would come to his senses and run away again.

His hand moved over the incredibly soft and smooth skin of her neck and down across her back, caressing every inch of her as he went. She leaned back against him and drew his hand around in front of her, aching for the feel of his hands all over her body.

Gently he sponged her throat and she turned her head to the side to nuzzle into him. His hand moved downwards to her breasts, his thumb skimming over the taut thrust of her clearly aroused nipple. Cassie practically melted under his touch. He caressed them, first one, then the other, cupping them and kneading them gently, feeling their fullness and softness. His fingers teased and pinched them lightly as she arched her



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back and leaned into him further. Her body pressed into his harder one with a barely audible groan of pleasure.

His hand moved lower across her stomach, engraving the contours of her body into his memory. Tendrils of steam wrapped around him, carrying the potent perfume of erotic desire and seductive oils making him giddy. He was entranced by her siren's call.

Every searching caress was like a slow heady beat that thrummed through her body. She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath.

His lips brushed her neck, kissing her softly, his tongue licking at the beads of moisture there. The sponge forgotten, his hands moved smoothly across her abdomen, down to the soft curls at the base. His fingers explored the space between her thighs replacing her own, parting the folds of soft flesh to find the tight swollen nub of her desire. Her pulse quickened and she groaned with pleasure at his touch, her legs opening further, arching her hips up into his caress. Her hands grasped his strong arms as he held her from behind. His heated musky scent intoxicated her already roused body.

"Do you have any idea how much I want you?" he asked, his voice hoarse with pent-up need and barely leashed impulses. His free hand cupped her face gently to keep her pressed against him.

"Probably not half as much as I want you," she answered breathlessly, her tongue licking out over his neck in a sweeping stroke. Such a sensitive and erotic part of a vampire's body, his control shuddered with growing weakness. She knew how to push all his buttons.

"Don't bet on it." His eyes were alive with the fire that burned through his veins.

The faint amber glow painted her eyes with a mysterious light, seductive and alluring.

"I knew you'd figure out our connection eventually," he whispered, nipping at her damp neck.

Rising from the tub, covered from her neck to her toes in bubbles, he watched her, his eyes blazing with passion and lust. Seductively she let down her hair and took the towel from the railing and offered it to him to dry her. Still sitting on the edge of the bath, he turned her around and dried her back and legs tenderly, thoroughly. A slight tremor rippled through her body of nervous anticipation.

He sat still, his attention riveted with awareness to every movement and every touch she made, and she knew that she literally had his attention and desires at her fingertips.

An instinctual primitive part of him bucked and reared at her wickedly seductive confrontation. His hands clutched her waist and turned her back to face him, her breasts only inches from his face, goading him to explore them further.

Cassie heard him utter an oath beneath a guttural sound of desire. A sly, knowing smile touched her lips.

"You didn't think you could avoid me forever, did you?" she answered back, returning the nip to his ear. "Do you have this sort of connection with everyone you exchange blood with?" nipping at his neglected ear.

"No. Just you."

"Then why have you tried so hard to stay away from me? And, don't give me some story about a promise to the Elders."

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"You talk too much." This wasn't a conversation he wanted to have with her now. It wasn't a conversation he wanted to have with her, ever.

He grasped her firmly and drew her up his thighs and into his lap, seating her with incredible intimacy against him. She made a gasping sound of surprise as his iron hardness rubbed through her moist exterior folds, her gasp turning into a long, sweetly pained moan.

"Ahh," he growled softly in her ear. "Finally, you understand that two can play at this game."

"All evidence seems to point in my favour," her sly tone daring him to refute her as she flexed her hips to rub him more firmly against her.

The torturous manoeuvre he had initially intended as a teasing reprimand, once again backfired as the passionate friction drove his body into an inferno of desire.

Never one to be outdone or manipulated, he was faced with a conundrum. "We'll see about that," he growled hoarsely.

Her snicker of feminine victory turned to a groan of surprised delight when his hips flexed, grinding himself against her with great precision. Her back arched as a teasing finger slid into her welcoming heated flesh between her thighs, caressing the responsive depths with equal skill as she lifted into him. Her sweet scent washed over him, as did a surge of craving that struck him hard.

She could feel his impressive arousal against the very centre of herself. His body was hard, hot and straining against barriers of fabric to reach her, so close and yet just beyond reach. She made an abandoned sound of pleasure, wriggling up his dominant frame instinctively.

Her fingers curled through his hair, twisting and stroking as he pulled her closer. His body ached for her, his mind was captured by her, his soul needed her and his heart loved her more deeply than anything he had ever experienced before. It drowned out the last rational thought in his brain that urged him to run far, far away.

His lips brushed her nipple, teasing the peak until it became tight and hard in his mouth, her naked hips pressed hard against him. He felt the thunderous beat of her heart against her breasts, the vibration throbbing through his entire body, a mantra of hunger that licked through his body at an intensifying pace.

She began unbuttoning his shirt one by one. His shirt fell from his chiselled torso, muscles rippled beneath the smooth skin as he stood to unfasten his trousers, reluctantly lowering her to the floor. Her hand slid inside to tenderly caress his iron hard erection, eliciting a groan of delight as his hips flexed in anticipation.

He looked so damned sexy standing there. Tall and broad and aroused. His face was tense, his body taut. The muscles in his abdomen were tight, drawing her gaze to his thighs as his trousers hit the floor. Oh man, he was like a perfect sculpture of a sex god. And all hers.

"You are beautiful," she whispered as she closed her fingers over the rigid evidence of his need.

Colour deepened in his cheeks. "If you say so," he groaned.

"You're not going to push me away again?" she asked, caught between disbelief and relief.

"You have my cock in your hand. I have no will left to fight you. Just don't stop."

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He devoured her mouth. His aggressive kiss so masculine in its flavour and force, thrust past her lips, his velvet tongue demanding reciprocation from her. She clung to him as he carried her to the bed, laying her gently on top of the soft sheets, nestling himself in the heated cradle between her legs, her thighs arching up to meet him.

He was beyond the capability of holding back.

Her body melded perfectly with his, her soft form like putty, meant to take the impression of his form against her. They were two pieces of a puzzle, cut apart but always meant to be perfectly reunited together.

His lips caressed her jaw, down the pulsing temptation of her throat, his hands continued their thorough exploration. She made a small sound. Alaric groaned as her sweet erotic flavour filled his senses. Cassie grabbed his face and pulled him back to her lips. Her bold, sweeping tongue forced a heightened clarity of need and sensation through every cell in his body. Her deft fingers wound themselves deeply into his hair, sending chills of awareness down his spine.

A more aggressive pleasure filled groan escaped her lips and radiated through him. What that simple sound did to him was indescribable. It burned a path through him, scorching him in unbridled escalating need. He was only a breath away from losing all control.

He didn't want to hurt her.

His hands were suddenly surrounding her face, cupping it between his palms in an effort to pull away from her, to recover his breath and his control. He wanted to take it slowly and savour every moment, memorise every touch and movement between them.

She writhed beneath his dominant frame, unable to get her body close enough to him, as though she was a compass and he was magnetic north, drawing her closer. His mind touched hers with a gentle caress. Her eyes lifted to meet his strong and steady gaze, radiating into her every pure and untainted pleasure he found in her touch, anchoring them together on every level. Their hearts beat in unison, their minds melded as one. She had never experienced anything like it. How was it possible to feel so much pleasure and remain sane.

Her entire body lit up with the heat of response, a flood of molten liquid rushing madly to the silky crest between her thighs. Every nerve was on fire. The swollen bundle of nerves between the sensitive folds throbbed with demanding need.

Her desire flooded his senses, solidifying his weighted flesh into granite, the ache of brutal need impossible to bear.

His mouth came down on hers. His tongue flicked against her lips, teasing them, heating her further, devouring her greedily as his tongue explored the sweet depths with his savage kiss until she was gasping for air and practically chanting a sound of encouragement that scraped over his already raw senses.

His arms held her so tight she could barely breathe. But, it wasn't enough, she neededâ more.

Purposefully she trailed her fingers across his lower back, reaching down to grip the cheeks of his backside, her sharp nails digging in until he flexed his hips into her again.

She felt the swell and pulsing urgency of his erection, pressing so close to the entrance of her incessant desire. It sharpened her own hunger, the need to have him deep within her body surged through her. "Please, I need you," she pleaded, her hips lifting further, rubbing against him in an effort to seat him where she so

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desperately needed him to be.

Her nails bit into his shoulders when a guttural growl rumbled from deep within his chest, sending an erotic vibration through her body. She threw her head back, a fevered gasp escaping her control when her internal muscles convulsed in urgency, inadvertently exposing the soft skin of her throat and the vein pulsing wildly beneath.

His response was raw, primal. A driving hunger of pure instinct. In that moment the physical needs of his body transcended his centuries long celibacy.

With a deep growl, Alaric held her fast beneath him as his cock breached her hot tight entrance, sheathing himself deep inside her in one long hard thrust.

His mind probed hers to feel every sensation he caused in her as his hard cock penetrated her depths to the hilt. Powerful strokes burned her senses, igniting nerves she never knew existed. Sensation cascaded through her body, breaking apart and reforming again as he branded her with his strident rhythm.

The sweet, hot flesh that surrounded him clasped at him, in a demanding embrace, tight, rippling caresses washing over his erection as he worked it into her, first short, desperate thrusts and then hard lunges as his desperation and hunger surged through him. She met him stroke for stroke, so eager and wild, doubling the sensation of every movement he made into her.

She clutched him tighter as each thrust threw her higher, driving her closer, culminating in an implosion of such strength, such depth that there was no control, no restraint.

"I love you. Oh God, Alaric I love you." The truthful words whispered free, her heart expanding as her soul slipped free of its bonds, lifting, shuddering, opening to accept him so deeply inside herself, she knew even death could never separate them.

He was lost in the searing inferno of sensation inside her. She tightened around him like a passionate vice, milking him with dynamic thoroughness until his own release began bursting deep inside her core, a cataclysmic explosion that turned him completely inside out.

His blood lust rose in parallel need and he sank his teeth into her neck increasing their climax threefold. Her body milked his as he suckled her throat in spasms of ecstasy, leaving the most powerful vampire in the world without a single ounce of strength.

He fought for breath. He had no idea that pleasure could tear the world out of his grasp, that a release could recreate heaven and earth itself. For the first time in his unnaturally long life, he felt complete. A freedom of his soul so pure, it felt like life itself.

She gripped him fiercely, refusing to release him, whispering his name, shudders of pleasure still racing up her spine. And, he didn't want her to release him. He wanted her to hold him inside her forever.

They lay in each others arms reliving the shivery aftershocks of orgasm, exhausted and sated.

"See you didn't hurt me," she laughed after they'd recovered their breath. "But I might have hurt *you* if I didn't have my way with you tonight. You have been driving me crazy." she chided playfully.

Alaric laughed with her, although in his mind she had already done a pretty good job of tormenting him well before his willpower crumbled under the pressure.

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"How did you know I was worried about hurting you?" he asked.

"This mind connection goes both ways, remember?"

"Right." That was going to take some getting used to.

Alaric lay there silently, stroking the tangle of knots from her hair.

"Alaric," her sexy voice stroked through him. "Are you okay?"

He didn't know how to answer her. On one hand, he felt better than he ever imagined possible. On the other, he had just crossed over into wild, uncharted territory.

But, when her eyes met his own, he could see her need for him and her affection. It mirrored the depth of his own feelings for her. It melted him completely.

"I'm just contemplating the future," he sighed.

"You worry too much. You should try living in the moment sometimes, it would do you good."

There was a concept he hadn't tried in a while.

He chuckled against her warm neck, holding her tighter against him and did just that, enjoyed the moment.

"Now my love, I must go. I have to pay a visit to someone tonight which unfortunately I can't put off any longer."

The night air held a winter chill. Alaric pulled the blankets over her and kissed her tenderly as he moved to get dressed.

"I don't want to leave. Believe me, I would much rather be here in this bed with you." He added when her bottom lip dropped in a pout.

"So don't go," she appealed, dejectedly. Her hand slipped from under the covers to wrap around the heavy length of his growing need to possess her again. He groaned as he pushed himself further into her palm, a shiver of remembered rapture pulsing through him. Her caress was hypnotic perfection.

The heavy weight of his arousal rested in the palm of her hand. She opened her mind to him sharing her feelings of wonder and excitement of what it was like to touch him so intimately.

He was torn. His body screamed out its need to stay, but their future might very well depend on the results of this meeting.

He reluctantly removed her hand from his iron hard erection. The loss of her touch left him feeling hollow and empty again. How was it possible that one person could become so much a part of him, so easily. He was irrevocably attached to her, his very soul sewn to her own. He could not imagine taking himself away from her and managing to survive the segregation.

"Are you upset with me for seducing you?" she asked contritely, expecting to be chastised at least a little.

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"No," taking her hand in his and kissing it, tracing the outline of her long slender fingers, interlocking his with hers. "I've wanted to be with you more than you could possibly know. I promise from now on, you'll find me a very eager partner, but I right now I really must go," he answered, smiling as she drew him down for another kiss, deep and passionate.

"Then, don't go *yet*," she mumbled against his lips, her body sliding against his seductively, pushing the blankets off with her feet to get closer to him.

What did it matter if he left in another hour or so. The night was still young he thought, as he began memorising every inch of her body again, this time much more slowly and thoroughly.

## Chapter 20

### Chapter 20

She sighed and practically purred with contentment as he pulled the covers over her once again. This time without complaint.

His hand cupped her face, his thumb tracing the line of her cheek with loving tenderness. He could no longer fight his feelings for her. It was a battle doomed from the beginning. He knew the serenity of his blissful happiness wouldn't last, couldn't last, that he would lose her in the end. But, he no longer had the strength to resist the lure of happiness that she brought him, however brief it may be.

Despite his pessimistic outlook, a tiny voice deep inside refused to listen to the gloomy logic. *Mine!*

"And you're mine," she vowed belatedly. Although he was already half way down the stair case, she knew he heard her when he began to laugh. Their mind connection was definitely growing stronger he thought shaking his head, although unable to remove the smile of proud satisfaction from his face.

On entering the study, Narayan and Alex were both seated in the lotus position meditating. Before Alaric could retreat, Narayan opened his eyes and gave him a knowing grin, nodding his head in approval before resuming his meditation. He was pleased that his friend had finally found someone who filled the void in his soul.

"Damn." Alaric muttered. "You just can't hide anything from a vampire."

"No. And he can't even read your thoughts," announced Abby from behind him, her grin eclipsing the monk's.

"Hmm." Alaric gave Abby a smug smirk.

"You're positively glowing. And, her scent is all over you," she chuckled.

Alaric's face changed into a frown in a nano second. "Should I shower before we go?" he asked her. He had come to rely on Abby's counsel. Besides her unique skill in mind reading, she was uncannily wise, which had made her invaluable to him.

Since she had spent quite a bit of time at the Phoenix Night Club in recent weeks, she was also far more informed of what to expect than he was. Her inside knowledge of the people in particular, made her a precious treasure beyond compare.

Even without her extra skills, she was his progeny, his vampire daughter and with that comes a bond from sharing each other's blood. Even after centuries of existence they would feel akin to one another, similar to human family ties. A bond he was hoping to call upon tonight with another of his progenies.

"No. In fact it should go in your favour if they know that you're Cassie's mate."

"Mate? What are you talking about?"

"Cassie is your Mate. Everyone knows it, even Alex understands that. I've watched you, both of you, and neither of you function properly unless you're in close proximity to one another. Cassie even seems to suffer physically from any separation from you.â But you already know that," she pointed out casually.

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"No. That can't be true." his anxiety leaped a couple of notches towards panic.

He knew without a shadow of doubt that he loved her, but he hadn't considered her attraction to him to be anything more than just that, a very strong attraction. He had convinced himself that regardless of what the Elders did to him as punishment, Cassie would recover from her infatuation of him and fall in love with a human male, get married, have children and live a normal, happy life. If Abby was right and this truly was a '*Mating*', he has not only doomed himself to an eternity of misery but also Cassie, when the Elders separated them. "I know I've crossed the line." An under statement of magnanimous proportions. "What can I do? I have to fix this."

Abby gave him a serious look as his inner turbulence flipped the switch in his brain from acceptance to denial. "You can't change what nature has intended for you," she said gently. "Have you considered that the Elders may have changed the rules recently? It wouldn't be the first time, would it?"

A very valid point, although his consternation to the contrary clearly overshadowed that possibility. Why would the Elders see a *Mating* with Cassie to be reason enough to change the rules they had enforced upon him over so many previous generations of her blood line.

He wasn't sure if he really wanted an answer to that question. Hope was a dangerous thing, at least in his case.

But still that inner voice kept up its cadence, *Mine*.

"Nothing stays the same forever. It's the universal law. Things change. There's no point stressing over something that hasn't happened yet. I think you would be best served diverting that energy into enjoying the happiness that you've found," she answered thoughtfully, her eyes resting momentarily on Alex's form seated peacefully on the floor.

Alaric may have lived more than two millennia, but as evidence was proving, when it came to Cassie, he was still ruled by his emotions every bit as much as any human.

Only a month ago, no one could have convinced him that such a thing was possible. He had been a recluse who neither cared about, nor had even the vaguest interest in anything or anyone. He had slipped into an emotional coma somewhere in the past millennia and hadn't even realised. He had thought himself immune to the horrors of the world and the mundane dramas of human life. At least that was until Cassie and her cousin Alex entered his home bringing a whirlwind of dramas with them and kick-started him back to life. Now, he was behaving no better than a teenager with newly discovered emotions and hormones raging out of control.

He sighed as he absorbed Abby's words. He at least owed it to Cassie to make their time together happy and fulfilling.

"Are you ready to go?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"What form of transport do you want to take," Abby asked holding up the keys to the Huayra.

Alaric thought for a moment. "The car is flashy, but I'm in the mood to ruffle a few feathers."

"The kind of transport that induces speechless grovelling?"



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His blue/green eyes sparkled with roguish devilry as he flicked his hair back off his face and offered her his arm. "I think it's time that Sammael is resurrected back into the world, don't you?"

"Flying it is then." She praised excitedly. Abby loved her new life as a vampire.

x-x-x-x-x

Dray's ear piece crackled with static. "Say that again?" he asked Hawke.

"I said, you might want to come out here. That guy Alaric is back. Wants to see Saladin," he repeated.

Dray grumbled under his breath. Tonight was turning out to be one of those nights that seemed to roll from one pain in the arse situation to the next. Unfortunately as the head of security at the Phoenix Nightclub, it was his job to maintain the pretence of normality in and around the club's vicinity, things like keeping the vampires in line, keeping the humans alive and disposing of the occasional 'accidental' vampire related ones who aren't. It also entailed being Saladin's personal bodyguard. No one got within a bull's roar of Saladin without first being okayed by him.

Dray turned to enter the VIP section where Saladin sat entertaining his 'guests', aka dinner, only to find Saladin already heading in his direction, his expression eager and mildly amused, completely out of character for his brooding boss. This was not a good sign, when his boss smiled, someone usually died.

Yep, he was definitely going to be kept busy tonight.

"I've got this. Follow me." Saladin said, moving quickly through the crowd. He'd waited for this day for a very long time, although the fact that Alaric was coming for a visit now meant that trouble was following right behind him. Hell, what was he complaining about, he'd been bored out of his brain for the last two hundred years. If nothing else, he knew life was about to become a lot more interesting, at least temporarily.

Hawke stepped aside as Dray appeared at the doorway, though he remained tensed ready for trouble, his eyes never straying from the disturbing sight before him. Saladin moved with supple grace, his loose clothing hung from his fit and muscular body, neither concealing it nor emphasising it. He pushed past them both to get to Alaric, his electric blue eyes glittered with delight as he broke into a broad grin dimpling his cheeks and pulling his pencil thin moustache up at the corners and lessening the severity of his short anchor style beard.

Despite his Middle Eastern good looks, Saladin radiated a deadly power that very few had ever thought to challenge. He kept Dray as his body guard not out of concern for his safety but because he wanted a buffer against all those social climbing vampires who sought to become his BFF and in turn increase their own perceived importance within the vampire community. He had no interest in false friendship from parasitic grovelers who would quite literally try to stab him in the back at the first opportunity.

"Well Alaric, I see you've finally come out of the closet, or should I call you Sammael," he laughed as he slapped him on the shoulder.

Dray and Hawke looked at each other, baffled as to whether they should be welcoming Alaric/Sammael, preparing to fight him, or the third option, to run far, far away. Every vampire ever made had heard the stories about Sammael, the first vampire, the only true immortal with enough power to decimate an army single handed. He was the scary bedtime story you told new vampires to stop them from misbehaving.

Abby looked around them, carefully assessing the reaction of the crowd. It was easy to determine who was vampire and who was human among the potential patrons gathered on the sidewalk around them. The

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vampires were the ones staring with mouths gaping wide, while the humans ogled the group of deliciously attractive men like they were edible sex toys, seemingly oblivious to the pair of enormous silvery wings folded at the giant blonde vampire's back.

"Put those things away and come inside." Saladin nodded towards his wings. "I'm assuming you have something specific you want to discuss?" he enquired, slapping him on the shoulder once again.

The air around Alaric shimmered for a moment and his wings vanished. He was back to being a *normal* unassuming vampire.

"A couple of somethings actually and a favour to ask," Alaric replied, giving Saladin a hug of familiarity to greet his old friend.

Alaric entered the nightclub with Saladin, Abby and Dray following silently behind. People filed from the VIP room, relocating to the private nooks in the lounge area and dark corners of the club.

Reaching a quiet area in the far corner of the room Saladin turned his attention to Abby, extending his arms for an embrace. Not one for showy affection, she reluctantly complied. Grabbing her arms he looked her over carefully with satisfied approval. "Well Abby, it's a pleasure to meet the youngest member of our family at last," he said, ushering them towards the plush lounges. "I'm sorry I haven't introduced myself earlier but it was a necessity I'm afraid. Alaric and I have kept our association very quiet over the past centuries for the reasons I believe we are about to discuss. Am I right?" he asked Alaric who only nodded silently.

"Sammael, let me introduce Dray. He's the head of security here and a very trusted friend. Nothing happens around here without him hearing about it. He may be able to shed some light on recent matters," he offered. Alaric eyed Dray with scepticism until Abby nodded her agreement.

"I would still prefer to be called Alaric. It's been more years than I can count since I was known by Sammael, it feels foreign to me now. Besides, I'd like to maintain a low profile if possible."

"I think that ship has sailed," Saladin laughed returning his gaze back to Abby. She was his vampire sibling. They shared the same connection to Alaric and as such, a connection to each other. He had known from the first moment she stepped inside his club as a vampire, who her sire was. He knew too that she had a very rare gift which she used covertly as she blended into the crowd night after night, which was one of the reasons he had been so careful not to come into close contact with her before now. He harboured secrets he didn't want shared with a telepath, particularly a young sibling who may be put at risk by them.

However, given that Alaric had made such a monumental appearance as his alter ego, Sammael, it appeared that their history together and the secrets they shared were about to become common knowledge. He wasn't sure whether to feel nervous or excited by the prospect. Alaric's agitated state didn't instil much confidence. In all the years Saladin had known him, totalling in the vicinity of eight hundred or so, Alaric had always appeared composed and calm, the poster boy for Xanax, which was in stark contrast to how he appeared right now.

"So, tell me old friend, why choose now to bring Sammael back into the world?" he asked leaning forward, his forearms resting on his knees, his hands clasped in front of him eager for his answer. He could make a very accurate guess, but he wanted to hear it from his own lips.

"Ahriman has returned as you know. He is threatening something very dear to me and I find myself eager to ride the waves of that threat," he answered cryptically. Saladin gave him a humourless smile.

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"*You can prepare your abilities for what comes over the next horizon but you cannot control the tide that brings it. You are along for the ride. Pick the waves you wish to surf instead of trying to create them,*" he recited to Alaric.

"I see you haven't forgotten your time with Narayan," he chuckled with repressed mirth.

"No, those damnable quotes and philosophies of his somehow manage to stick with you," he replied reminiscently. "How is the old goat? I hear he's currently staying with you. We'll have to get together and have a proper family reunion."

"He has his hands full training my *Mate's* cousin."

"Mate! I see we have a *lot* to catch up on."

"Yes, we do. And my Mate is on the top of that list. The Guild has her on their hit list." The word *Mate* rolled off his tongue much more smoothly than it did an hour before, but still the implications of the fact practically gave him hives. Regardless of his anxiety, this was not the time to show his insecurities regarding his relationship status.

"Cassandra McLennan is your Mate?" Dray asked.

Alaric had to admit he was impressed. Dray certainly had his finger on the pulse when it came to accruing his information. "Yes." He answered in short.

He wasn't under control nearly as well as he would have liked. Just thinking about Cassie being in danger stirred his inner demon to life. The temperature in the room took a sudden dive momentarily until he got hold of his turbulent emotions once again.

"Ah ha. Now I understand." Saladin offered, as the gravity of his predicament sank in.

Dray shivered and took a careful step back, wary of Alaric's obvious power. A lot of things were beginning to make sense. Saladin's strength and healing abilities were unnatural even for a vampire, and he had an exceptional tolerance to sunlight, able to withstand twice as much exposure as any other vampire he had ever met. A consequence no doubt from being sired by the original vampire.

Meeting Saladin's expectant gaze, Alaric sighed heavily. It didn't come easily to him to probe such a trusted friend with those questions which weighed so heavily on his mind, especially when those answers could possibly implicate his betrayal.

"Saladin, I have a personal question to ask you," his indomitable tone cutting to the chase.

"Ask away," he replied stoically. Although he had nothing to hide, he couldn't help feeling like the boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar by his father. Bazaar really, considering how old he was.

"I am told that you have a relationship with one of the Guild's assassins, Mira. What exactly is your relationship to her?"

"Mira." Her name rolled off his tongue with a contentious growl. "She is a power hungry female who kept my bed warm a few times, but nothing more," he emphasised. "She had an interest in me when she thought I commanded the most influence in this region. Of course, she switched teams when Ahriman appeared. I haven't seen her for a few weeks." As much as he hated to admit it, it dented his pride to be cast aside so

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easily. Not that he had any feelings for her, because he didn't. He was just unaccustomed to be *dumped*.

Saladin looked to Dray for his input on her whereabouts.

"No one has seen or heard from her since the attack at the airport. The last we heard, she took the cup and the blonde male to somewhere in the Carpathian mountains." Dray offered. "I haven't had any confirmation, but I believe that the Guild has a stronghold up there. They haven't had a home base since WWII which is why it has been so hard to track them in the past. But, the reports I'm getting lead me to believe they're planning something fairly significant and need a base for their operations.

"Again, I haven't had any confirmation, but I believe they have been experimenting with radionuclides,â radioactive isotopes," he clarified when he was met by blank expressions.

"What would they want with radioactive isotopes?" Abby asked.

"I don't know. We can only speculate at this point I'm afraid."

"Alex would be the one to talk to about this. Physics is his area of expertise." Alaric nodded in agreement with Abby.

"Do you know if Mira's working for the Guild or Ahriman specifically?" Alaric asked.

"Knowing Mira, she would be working for whoever wields the bigger stick. There has been a change of leadership within the Guild, someone by the name of Morgan, although from what I can tell, no one has actually seen him."

"I'd heard something similar." Alaric agreed. They had to assume that Ahriman was the one pulling the strings. It would suit his own interests to replace the last Guild Master with his own pliable puppet.

"I haven't been able to find anyone who has actually seen Ahriman either."

"That's not good news. Is there any way to find either Ahriman or Mira?" Alaric queried.

"I'm working on it." Dray confirmed. "I've been informed that the blonde she took is to be used in some sort of ritual but I can't confirm this. Unfortunately that source is often âunreliable." Dray added in his usual apathetic manner.

Alaric looked directly into Saladin's eyes. "Is there any chance that Mira has discovered the location of the spear from you, either directly or indirectly?" This was the most pertinent question he had been hedging around.

Saladin didn't flinch at the uncertainty behind the question. It was a valid question considering he'd been sleeping with the whore bitch who had since tried to murder his sire's Mate, has stolen the cup of life and was now one of the Guild's most avid supporters.

And, besides all that, it had been him, Saladin, who was with Alaric when they handed over the cup to the Dalai Lama and placed the spear in its current hiding place. That made for a lot of incriminating evidence against him.

"No. Absolutely not." Abby nodded to Alaric to allay any doubt that might have lingered. Saladin was definitely telling the truth.

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"Thank God." He felt like the wind had been whipped from his sails. His body slumped forward as relief replaced the tension in his muscles. He never truly doubted him but had to be one hundred percent sure.

"But," Saladin continued, a devious grin alighting his youthful face, "I *may* have been behind a rumour that the spear was being stored in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church at Axum."

"You mean, the treasury at the *Church of our Lady Mary of Zion*?"

"The one and the same."

"That's brilliant!" Alaric exclaimed.

Alaric and Saladin both broke out in jovial laughter. The in-joke was lost on Abby.

"What's so special about that church?" she asked.

"The Church of our Lady Mary of Zion guards the *Arc of the Covenant*."

"And that's important why?" she asked again.

"The building is heavily guarded. No supernatural creature can gain access to it. The building itself is protected by an impenetrable defensive magical ward and the priests who guard it are impervious to any forms of compulsion and glamouring. We know this because Alaric and I originally tried to hide the spear there." Saladin explained.

"I take it you *didn't* leave the spear there?" she asked.

"No. The power it contains is too great. There was no guarantee that at some point one of the priests wouldn't become corrupted by the temptation of that power. It would have left too much to chance."

"And, you couldn't leave it anywhere you had no access to it yourself, if the need arose." Dray surmised.

"Exactly. Like now." Alaric agreed.

"Leaking that false information hasn't bought much time though, I'm afraid."

"You've given me more than enough time to retrieve it myself, my friend. We can hope they'll waste a week or more trying every trick they have to gain access, before they come to the conclusion it isn't in there." He couldn't rule out the possibility there may be more than one search being conducted simultaneously in a process of elimination. Ahriman was too clever to put all his eggs in one basket. They learned that when he controlled Germany's SS in WWII.

"So, what about this favour?" Saladin finally asked.

"I want to get Cassie off the Guild's most wanted list. Since you're so good with rumours, I was hoping you could spread one that will deter any bounty hunters from pursuing her."

"You don't need a rumour. Just tell them yourself. To most vampires you're the boogyman," he chuckled. "I think you're all the intimidation they need to convince them to back off on your Mate."

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A few minutes later the room was filled with every vampire in the club, considerably more than usual. The word was out that the living legend, Sammael was at the club, drawing in every curious vampire within a twenty mile radius.

Alaric stood to address them.

Alaric's assured and authoritative aura was a palpable thing, his dark clothes wrapped about his fit body with sultry sophistication barely concealing the physique they covered.

"I am sure by now you all know who I am. For those who don't, I am Sammael." Not a soul blinked in astonishment. Not that he should be surprised, between texting, Face book and Twitter, by now half the vampires in the world would know he had returned. "I have left you alone to live your lives in whatever manner you choose, but I'm here now to inform you that whoever chooses to join with Ahriman and the Guild, I will consider my enemy.

"Furthermore, any of you who attempt to harm my *Mate*, Cassandra McLennan, for the bounty on her head, will suffer a very painful and very slow death at my hand." His eyes glittered with lethal promise. A growing desperation to put an end to the Guild's threat to Cassie was rattling the cold logic he had always taken such pride in. His inner demon stirred restlessly beneath his skin, his power prickling the air around him.

Hushed murmurs and nervous whispers rumbled amongst the vampires as Alaric pinned each one with his deadly stare.

"I do not take orders from you," called a deep guttural voice from the back of the crowd. "You know nothing," the vampire blustered. "You're a washed up has-been. Ahriman will wipe the floor with you. *He* will be the greatest immortal to ever walk the earth. He has promised all his followers true immortality like him." He declared in oily tones in blatant challenge.

Alaric shook his head in disgust. This idiot was nothing but a weak minded porn destined for Hell. "If you believe the hollow promises he's making, I pity you. He is a self serving evil creature who has no regard for anyone but himself. If he becomes immortal, you will all find yourselves not his equals, but his slaves."

"Bah!"

A silver haired behemoth rose to his full height in anger. With hands the size of dinner plates, he looked as if he could crush the world between them, and his fulgid wild eyes held the rage it would take to do it. A vile stench, the putrescence of a corrupted soul clung to him.

The Silverback was poised on the edge of a rapier but did not have the sense to back down and retreat, instead he took a defiant step toward Alaric and gave him a mock, open armed bow.

The temperature in the room plummeted, blistering the air with an icy chill as Alaric allowed his alter ego out to play. Every tiny particle of moisture in the humid nightclub air was snap-frozen, fluttering to the floor in a mist of microscopic snowflakes. Drinks froze in glasses and the moisture which clung to their skin and hair froze instantly into a cloying skeletal crust in the subzero temperature.

But still the silverback didn't halt. He topped Alaric's height reaching a full six feet seven inches tall, and had twice his muscle. A genuine bad boy. But only a fool would play with this kind of fire. Of course, intelligence obviously wasn't his forte. He might as well have had 'strike match here' tattooed on his forehead.

A space around them cleared with alarming speed in expectation of the impending confrontation.

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Alaric stood his ground, didn't move a muscle as the silverback circled him slowly, stalking him. The man was pure predator. The anticipation of the hunt, cornering his prey induced a euphoric pseudo orgasm in him. A natural born psychopath, a creature potentially more dangerous than he himself was, a blight upon the world, Alaric thought.

Alaric's awareness of him was intensely acute, as though someone had stroked the flat of a razor blade along his bare skin with the promise of a deep cut. Alaric's power coiled around him in preparation for the attack. Only his eyes moved as he caught the telltale diminutive alterations in his adversary's posture. A moment later the silverback sprang at him in a violent rush.

Alaric stood his ground without moving a muscle, allowing him his attempt at a killing blow.

Punching a hole into Alaric's chest, he ripped out his heart, it continued to beat its slow relaxed cadence in the palm of his hand. The silverback turned to face the spellbound crowd, letting out a triumphant war cry and brandishing his prize high above his head.

It was merely a show for the other vampires present. It wasn't going to change the silverback's fate. Gullible fool.

His excitement faded as the heart in his hand began to dissolve. Turning to face Alaric once more, his elated smile faded to consternation. Alaric was still standing and whole again.

Muffled gasps echoed around the room. The rumours really were true, they muttered.

"I will give you one more chance. Stand down now and I will spare your life," Alaric calmly declared.

"Never!" he cried in defiance. The dent to his pride spurred him on. In a frenzied move he attacked once again.

The air around Alaric shimmered as his silvery wings unfurled on his back. He stretched them wide open. The silverback seeing a possible weakness aimed his attack for the silky smooth and downy soft wings. A mistake he would not have an opportunity to make twice.

Alaric dropped low on one knee. In a slicing action he drew in one of his wings in front of him forcing a rush of frigid air around the room. The silverback realised too late that the edges of those pretty wings were as sharp and strong as any sword and as efficient as a guillotine, decapitating his head from his shoulders. His lifeless body fell at Alaric's feet disintegrating into dust.

"Is there anyone else who would like to challenge me?" he asked with an even voice as he snapped his wings in tight behind his back. Not surprisingly, there were no volunteers. Not a soul moved, or blinked.

"That went well don't you think?" Alaric asked after the room had cleared once again.

"I, for one, don't want to get on your bad side," muttered Dray as he stared at the remains of the vampire on the floor.

His intuition had been right. He did have a body to dispose of tonight, but fortunately it was nothing that a vacuum cleaner couldn't handle.

## Chapter 21

### Chapter 21

The front door swung open, revealing the faces of Alex and Narayan in the dark foyer waiting anxiously for Alaric and Abby to step inside.

As hard as both Alex and Narayan had tried to focus on their training, neither one had effectively succeeded. The hours had dragged by at a tedious pace until even Narayan's composure began to develop chinks under the strain of waiting. They were both acutely aware of how important the meeting at the Phoenix was, not just for Cassie but for everyone. Its outcome would determine who were their allies and who were their enemies, effectually drawing a line in the metaphorical sand and sending a clear challenge to Ahriman and the Guild.

"How did it go?" Narayan asked.

"As well as could be expected." Alaric answered noncommittally as he stepped inside, ushering in Abby before him.

Alex's eyes were drawn immediately to the Rambo knife beneath her jacket she was removing. A twinge of nervousness rushed through him. Did she have need to use it tonight? The idea of her fighting without him there, even if he was barely above useless when compared to her, rattled his cage. Regardless, he couldn't help the irrational need to protect her. Instinctively he reached out to her. Taking her hand he drew her closer to him.

Her hands were ice cold from the flight home through the oncoming wintery wind. Not that she seemed to notice. Releasing one of her hands, his thumb and forefinger lightly gripped her chin, turning her head one way and then the other, in search of signs of fighting.

"Nothing happened." She reassured him. "Well, actually something did happen, just not to me." She clarified. Abby met Alex's concerned eyes with a demure wistful smile. How long had it been since someone had fussed over her this much. Never. Not even her grandmother who doted on her, had taken so much care to make her feel *special*. It was so unfamiliar to her, she didn't quite know how to respond. She felt awkward and self-conscious of her lack of experience with physical contact. She was however, definitely becoming more familiarised with casual contact. It was hard not to, with Mrs Philpot and Cassie around to give her a hug every time she walked in the room. But Alex was different. There was nothing casual about his touch. Every cell in her body lit up with excitement when he just looked at her. And, when he touched her, she almost believed it was possible to spontaneously combust.

"Your hands are so cold," he accused, rubbing her hands vigorously between his own. It was another pathetically blatant excuse to touch her, he knew, but he couldn't help himself. Abby was a vampire, she didn't need to warm her hands like a human. She wasn't affected by the cold. But concentrating on her hands took his eyes and his mind off her succulently soft rosy lips. She was reading his mind even now, he could tell, and he wasn't going to degrade himself again by thinking of all the things he'd love to do to her wickedly dangerous little body.

Damn it. He just couldn't help himself. The moment he tried not to think of her soft and curvaceous body, it was the only thing he *couldn't stop* thinking of.

Fuck a duck.



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Abby stifled a snicker but didn't attempt to pull her hands away from him. She enjoyed his thoughts of her equally as much as she enjoyed his touch. It was just another way he made her feel special.

Alaric's long strides through the foyer suddenly stopped at the base of the staircase, his eyes sparkling with delight as Cassie's barefooted steps could be heard running along the first floor passage.

He climbed the stairs, meeting her half way. Her sunny smile warmed his heart once again, relegating the world around them into the background, close to oblivion.

Cassie leapt into his awaiting arms. Her fingers latched onto his hair as he brought his lips down to hers. Her fleecy robe gaped at the top uncovering her naked body beneath. A covetous growl rumbled from his chest and his fangs instantly descended. His hands skimmed down her back, reaching lower to her backside, gripping each cheek in his hands, lifting her higher against him, his fingers kneading the muscular curves of her arse in rhythm with his demanding kiss.

His tongue slid past her lips, stroking hers in an erotic dance of passion. Cassie groaned with playful delight as she pressed her body harder against him. The hard ridge of his erection pressed firmly against her lower belly sending electric shocks of excitement through her. His hands guided the tease of her pelvis more tightly and accurately against himself. It was utter torture and pure bliss that drove his need steadily higher.

Alex watched in open mouthed shock as Cassie and Alaric groped at one another feverishly, the image burning a hole in his retinas. They seemed completely unaware that they weren't alone. Embarrassment quickly overtook his sense of hollow pride as Alaric gripped Cassie's hips to lift her higher. He didn't need to add the image of Cassie's legs wrapped around Alaric's hips to his repertoire of awkward moments. He'd have nightmares for a month on that one.

"Uh Hmmm."

Still locked in their intimate embrace, Alaric opened an eye to look over her shoulder to see Narayan, Abby and Alex staring at them at the bottom of the sweeping staircase.

"Excuse me, do you mind? That's my cousin you're mauling. I'd prefer it if you did that somewhere I can't see, thank you very much."

A small squeal escaped Cassie's lips as Alaric let her drop back to her feet, a primal possessive growl rumbling free. Cassie hid her face against his chest as her cheeks burned a hole in his shirt.

"Oh God, I'm so embarrassed. I didn't see anyone else down here," she squeaked meekly.

Narayan cleared his throat. "We'll meet you in the study."

Alex flashed a look to Abby who enviously eyed the two in their passionate embrace. Turning her head toward him, her sultry heated gaze fixed on Alex with devastating effect. He was so tempted to replicate the kiss with Abby, his body began to sway of its own accord, gravitating toward her.

"Not now." Narayan whispered in his ear, reluctantly bringing him back to reality. The intoxicating scent of male musk hung thickly in the air, mixing with the lighter feminine scent of arousal. If he wasn't a celibate monk, he'd be tempted to find himself a Mate, at least for one night.

In the study, and slightly more composed, Alaric and Abby related the events of the evening at Phoenix nightclub.

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"You need to leave before dawn, today?" Cassie asked disenchanted with the prospect.

"Yes, within the hour if possible." Alaric was even less happy about it than Cassie but he couldn't afford to delay any further. He'd already wasted too much time. He couldn't afford to let Ahriman get his hands on the spear. If he got both the cup and spear, Alaric was convinced it wouldn't take him too long to discover the key as well. If he got all three, he would become the unstoppable immortal he's so desperate to become. Sporned directly from Hell.

The cup on its own is useless to him. Alaric already had the key in his possession and very soon he would have the spear as well. The atrocities he committed in his early years as Sammael, would be child's play compared to what he would do now to protect them.

Clasping his hand firmly in hers, Cassie walked with Alaric outside onto the sheltered porch.

"Do you *really* need to leave now?" She'd managed to tempt him to delay leaving for his meeting earlier and she had her hopes set on convincing him to delay this trip too. Her sultry little body rubbed against him, once again igniting his libido. He closed his eyes, drawing in a deep breath as his arms flexed around her. The passionate friction of her body easily driving him into an inferno of desire.

The satisfied glint in her eyes spoke volumes.

He swallowed hard, quashing the urge to take her right there and then.

He had a duty to perform, he reminded himself.

Behind the heavy grey cloud cover the sun marched ever closer toward the horizon. Every minute counted. "Yes, I have to leave now." He answered, his arms wrapping tightly enough around her to curb her body's seductive caress. Tilting her head up to meet his gaze, he couldn't resist the temptation to nip her pouted bottom lip in retaliation for her deliberate torment of him.

As the moment drew closer to leave her, his trepidation mounted sharply, its claws raking at him. As desperately as he tried to hide it from Cassie, its echo rolled through her in a subtle caress of fear.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me." She reassured him, as if he'd spoken of his anxiety out loud. "Narayan and Abby will be here the whole time you're gone."

That was true. She had two other vampire protectors and an over protective cousin. But only he could fully protect her during the daytime. Although both Narayan and Abby were his progeny, sired from his blood and as such naturally stronger and more resilient than other vampires, they were still weakened and more vulnerable during daylight. Abby was still very young and required sleep during the day, and Narayan, although he no longer needed to rest as often, was still confined to the shadows. He didn't have the ability to withstand sunlight any better than other vampires. That left Cassie vulnerable during the day.

But that wasn't his only concern about leaving her.

"Last time I left you alone for a few days, you became sick. Our bond seems to affect you physically as well as mentally and emotionally. I'm afraid that if I leave you again, you will be harmed by the separation."

Her hazel eyes sparkled with love as she drew him down for a deep passionate kiss.

*Feel me.* She whispered into his mind. *Feel our connection.*

## Eternal Covenant

He did. He felt everything she did. Her strengths, her weaknesses, her love and adoration of him flowed through him. The depth of those feelings almost brought him to his knees.

"I may be wrong," she began, "But, I don't think I'll be weakened by physical separation any more. Since I drank your blood, I feel like you're a part of me. It's like my soul is fused to yours. I don't think it will matter how far away you are, I will always feel as though you're right here with me."

He felt it too, but his need to protect her made him the ultimate pessimist. He couldn't bare the thought of her suffering in any way.

"Besides, don't they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder?" she asked, the mischievous glint returning to her hazel eyes. "Just imagine how much fun we can have making up for lost time when you get home." Her full breasts pressed harder against him as she stretched to stroke her wicked tongue along the sensitive base of his throat.

Her sensuous tease hit its mark again. His body shuddered, sending the ripples of his desire back through her. As her lips parted on a gasp, his tongue flicked against her lips, heating them and teasing them as his thumb and forefinger of one hand flicked across the sensitive tip of her nipple which hardened furiously to his touch beneath her robe. Her skin so soft and warm, her body all graceful curves. She had the strength of a butterfly but the power of a Titan. She weakened him and strengthened him simultaneously.

Sweet Heaven. Heat blasted through her as his tongue expertly parted her lips and dipped inside. The hungry press of his lips, the enticing stroke of his tongue, arms that held her so tight she could barely breathe. If she spent eternity with this man, it still wouldn't be long enough.

He savoured the moment to breathe deeply of her richly decadent scent. Pure Bewitchment.

"I'll be back tomorrow night," he promised, pulling back from her before his conviction crumbled.

"Not a minute longer," she insisted, drawing him in for one last long kiss.

Cassie watched as he disappeared into the stormy clouds above, as large rain drops began to fall, the first of a heavy deluge that was bound to keep her indoors for the day.

x-x-x-x-x

Cassie returned to the study with the intension of sitting in Alaric's wingback chair. His scent infused in the soft leather would offer her the comfort she needed.

The fire had burned down to glowing embers. The only light came from the dull desk lamp, casting more shadow than light in the vast room. It took Cassie a moment to realise that some of that shadow was coming from the gaping hole appearing in the floor.

Abby stood by the fireplace.

The fireplace slid back and the stone hearth fell away in tiers, cascading into a well concealed staircase. A silent invitation to the stone walled corridor below, leading to the underground level of the Manor.

"Wow. That's how you get in," Cassie exclaimed, excited to see the complex hidden entrance at work.

"You've never been down here?" Abby asked.

## Eternal Covenant

"No. I haven't, but I'd like to some time."

"Cassie, you should learn everything about this house. Since you live here, you should know all the hidden passages and where they lead. A couple of tunnels take you directly into the forest, others will take you as far as Cadley Village. You should know where Narayan and I sleep, where the gym is and the swimming pool."

"There's a pool?" she asked. Why didn't she know all this before, she thought.

"There's an Olympic sized heated pool down stairs."

"That's all good to know. But I don't think Alex and I will be here for that long. Once we get word that the Guild has cancelled their death warrant against me, we will be going back to our old lives. My apartment is almost fixed andâ"

Abby chuckled. "I don't think you or Alex will ever leave the Manor."

"Why do you say that?" her curiosity was definitely piqued. What else did Abby know that she didn't?

"You are Alaric's Mate. Your souls are bonded together. Even if you did try to live apart, he is so possessively protective toward you, he would only become your indomitable shadow. I doubt he'd let you out of his sight. I think you should get used to the idea that this is your home now."

"Your hypothesis is flawed." Cassie countered. "Alaric is convinced that the Elders are going to separate us. He believes he will be punished for breaking some vow," she answered, throwing frustrated hands in the air. That got Cassie thinking. Abby was also bonded to Alaric, and *she* could read his mind. "Do you know anything about it? Is he barred from having a relationship with anyone or just me?" she asked.

Abby's brow furrowed. "I don't know. Alaric has a very strong mind. He keeps some thoughts very well hidden, even from me."

Somehow that didn't surprise her. Alaric had been keeping the secret of his vow from her and even with their new powerful bond, she hadn't been able to discover it either. What she did know, it was eating away at him like a tumour. If she ever met these Elders, she was going to have a few very stern words with them.

Changing the subject, Cassie asked Abby another very important question close to her heart.

"What's the deal between you and Alex?"

"There's no *deal*, as you put it." Abby replied, a little flustered.

"You'd like there to be though, right?" dragging Abby over to the sofa to get more comfortable. She wasn't about to let Abby escape this conversation any time soon.

"Maybe. But there are so many reasons why it can't happen."

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Name one."

"I'm forty and Alex is only twenty three." She pointed out belligerently.

"Alex will be twenty four in about three weeks, and you my fangy friend, have turned back the clock and now look the same age as he does."

## Eternal Covenant

"I'm a Vampire and he's human." She countered.

"I don't see you poo-hooing my relationship with Alaric? You can't even pretend to make than an excuse." This was one conversation Abby had no chance of winning. Cassie had a lifetime of practice butting heads with Alex. She was a master at verbal bantering, second only to Alex. It was hard to compete against someone with the brain of a super computer. "So what's the real reason?" she asked, giving her a supportive smile.

Abby's shoulders slumped as she sighed heavily. "I'm afraid."

Afraid? Abby wasn't afraid of anything. She was the most fearless person she knew. Afraid. Incomprehensible.

"I have no experience with men," she added shyly.

Ahh. The penny dropped.

"Let me tell you about Alex. The two of you have more in common than you realise." Cassie began. "Like you, he was taunted by other children when he was young. He was so smart, he knew more than his teachers did. He was left out of games, picked on and beaten up. He was the nerdy kid everyone loved to hate. As he got older he learned to camouflage his intelligence and his insecurities about fitting into society by using bad language and reckless, impulsive behaviour, to the point where you had to wonder if he'd halved his IQ."

"Where I became a recluse, Alex became an extravert." Abby interjected.

"Yes, exactly. I've never doubted his intelligence but I wondered if he would ever develop a few mature brain cells and behave like a sensible adult. But, now I can see, all he needed was a reason to."

Abby listened intently to Cassie's enlightening biography of Alex.

"He finally feels like he fits in somewhere. He's no longer the odd one out. With Narayan, he has found the tools he needs to become the person he wants to be. But *you're* his motivation driving him to be that better person. He's even accepted Alaric," she giggled at the incredulity of it.

"Do you really think it could work between us?" Abby asked, hope lightening her voice. "But, I don't know what to do. I've only ever been kissed once." A memorable kiss for only one reason. Thomas Masters had lost a bet with his friends and his punishment was to kiss the crazy girl in public. It was supposed to be his humiliation for losing, but she wore that mantel forever afterwards, shunning all physical contact. It was the first step towards her becoming a recluse and eventually a homeless woman living on the streets.

"Just let nature take its course. No experience is necessary. Besides, Alex can teach you everything you need to know. I have no doubt he would be very happy to be your tutor." Cassie reassured with a cheeky smile.

Abby yawned. Although obscured by the dark stormy sky, the sun was up.

"Thank you for the talk," Abby returned the smile, voluntarily hugging Cassie as she rose from the sofa.

As the entrance to the Manor's lower level closed up to become the unassuming fireplace once again, Cassie stared out the windows into the gloomy morning light.

A forest walk was out of the question today. Fortunately, she had a new focus to fill in her time.

Match making.

## Chapter 22

### Chapter 22

Alaric flew low through the clouds. The sun couldn't harm him but it did irritate his eyes, especially since his energy levels had been drained over the past two days retrieving the spear.

In his weariness, Alaric's focus wavered although his grip on the spear was solid. Its power tingled in his fingers unlocking memories from the distant past. So many memories, some filled with regret and others of satisfaction. It had been the ruthless Muslim Chieftain, Yusuf Saladin, who had taught him to trust again.

The year had been 1187. Alaric had been following the Crusaders through the Holy lands, or more precisely, he was following one of the Templar Knights through the Holy lands.

Alaric carried the cup and spear with him. He had attempted to leave the cup a few centuries earlier with Druids in Britton which unfortunately had not been successful. Stories of the cup had already become legend throughout Europe, the Middle East and Britton exposing it as a beacon of temptation to those who sought instruments of power to achieve their own gains.

The burden of protecting such powerful tools, weighed heavily on Alaric. After so many centuries he no longer knew how to trust anyone. He had created many vampires over the years, most had died in their first few years of having been made. Some died at the hand of others or the sun, and the remainder Alaric had killed himself. The power he protected had easily corrupted the more feeble minded humans and vampires. Eventually he became a recluse, neither seeking out companionship nor trusting those who offered it. That was until he met Saladin.

Alaric had arrived with the Knights Templar in Jerusalem for the Battle of Hattin in 1187. Carrying the Knights Templar banner, the Beauseant, the spear was hidden in plain sight disguised as one of the two pikes upholding the banner. Its black and white standard represented the duality of the world, the dark and evil side and its opposite, that of light and hope. The irony had amused him as he carried it about the outskirts of the camp.

At the Battle of Hattin, his ward, Gerard of Ridefort, had been captured by Saladin and held prisoner for almost a year. Not permitted to interfere directly to save Gerard, Alaric did the only thing left to him.

He befriended the Warlord Saladin to ensure his eventual safe release.

Saladin was indeed ruthless, although he fought not to give himself glory but to ensure the survival of his people. He had no care for material possessions or for tools of power. He already had all the power he needed and much more than he wanted. He understood the responsibility of power and wielded it wisely. Although not a man to be trifled with, he had earned his title of Warlord, he always considered the repercussions of his decisions before acting upon them.

Over the year Alaric came to enjoy his conversations with Saladin. He admired his determination to make a difference to the world he knew and questioned Alaric constantly about those things that were foreign to him, eager to understand.

After Gerard of Ridefort was released, Alaric continued his friendship with Saladin. For the first time in a millennia, Alaric found himself trusting someone.

## Eternal Covenant

In 1193 in Damascus, Saladin contracted a fatal illness. Alaric deliberated for days on what to do. He had sworn never to turn another human to become vampire. Every other attempt had ended in disappointment. But Saladin was different. He had a spirit that none of the others had.

In the end, Alaric gave Saladin the choice.

Saladin chose to become a vampire and continue to fight the evil in the world.

For the next three centuries they were constant companions sharing the burden of keeping the spear and cup hidden from the world. After delivering the cup to the Dalai Lama, they had sought a suitable hiding place for the spear.

In the end, as it turned out, it was the Vatican in Rome which offered the best security.

As with all places of power, it had a history of being occupied by men with both the purest of souls and also the most corrupted. The Vatican didn't discriminate against those who wished to pass through its gates, no matter which side of the moral coin they fell on.

They placed the spear in a damp, musty tomb deep inside the tunnels below the Vatican, securing it with a powerful Druid's ward, a protection spell which could only be broken by the Druid who cast it or one of his descendants.

Soon after, Alaric and Saladin parted ways. Alaric returned back to Britton, Saladin left to explore the world.

The spear had remained hidden for five hundred years.

Until now.

Once again, gaining access to Vatican City had been easy. Finding a gypsy with the same Druid lineage however, did prove somewhat more difficult.

Beneath the Vatican lay the tombs and vaults just as he had remembered them, filled with all manner of artefacts and creatures, some kept to protect them from the world beyond, and some kept to protect the world from them.

It had been centuries since he had seen the spear, but its power pulsed through his veins, pulling him, leading him through the labyrinth of passages directly to it.

Unfortunately the gypsy he had found, although descended from the Russian Ivanov line, had very little of the power that his Druid ancestors had possessed. It had taken all his own power combined with the gypsy's to break through the ward.

Crossing the English coastline, Alaric flew with all his speed. Although he didn't intuit any danger to Cassie and he didn't sense that she was distressed in any way, there was something wrong, he could feel it. His connection to her had suddenly faded a couple of hours earlier, as though shrouded by something.

Coming in to land by the fountain in Havenswood Manor's driveway, he stumbled with fatigue.

Before he could take another step, Mrs Philpot's face appeared in the window, followed a moment later by Alex, his anxious expression mirroring the aging housekeeper's.



## Eternal Covenant

Cassie.

He knew there was something wrong. Where was she? Sending out his senses, he quickly located her. She was at the Elder tree. His anxiety dropped a notch. There was nothing in Savernake Forest that would harm her. That didn't mean that there wasn't something else going on.

At least he had time to put the spear safely away.

"Thank God you're back," Alex blurted anxiously. "Cassie's missing. She went out this morning for a walk and hasn't returned."

"She's at the Elder tree." Alaric advised wearily.

"No. She's not." Alex countered. "I've just come from there, and I'm telling you, she's not there. Something's happened to her, I can feel it."

Alaric frowned, confused. He could sense her there, although Alex seemed adamant with his conviction to the contrary. Alex didn't take Cassie's safety lightly. He would have left no stone unturned in his effort to find her. He also knew him well enough to know that he and Cassie shared a special bond. If he too felt that something was wrong, then there must be. They both can't be mistaken. His uneasiness began to solidify into a clump of ice in the pit of his stomach.

"Give me one minute." Alaric disappeared inside the Manor with the spear, appearing again a couple of minutes later.

Wrapping his arms about Alex's chest, Alaric unfurled his wings once more. "Hold tight," he warned as the ground disappeared beneath them.

Landing lightly on the ground before the Elder tree, they immediately began to circumnavigate its enormous base.

Nothing. She wasn't there.

Alaric's senses buzzed with nervous tension. She was there. He could feel her.

"She's here." He insisted, meeting Alex's conjecture with careful optimism.

Raising his hands toward the tree, he spoke ancient words in a guttural language. The air around them vibrated and like an oasis emerging from a heat wave, the mirage was gone.

Cassie sat peacefully at the base of the tree, deep in some form of trance. The branches of the tree wrapped around her, cocooning her in a protective embrace. The leaves caressed the exposed skin of her face and arms gently and lovingly.

"What the fuck is this?" Alex cursed.

"The Elders have her."

"I figured that part out for myself, but why?"

"Because of me," he answered bitterly.

## Eternal Covenant

This was the day he had been dreading. The Elders probed Cassie's mind, harvested her memories and her emotions. Any moment now he expected to be struck by a bolt of lightening and sent straight to the Underworld.

Alaric grabbed Alex by the arm to thwart his attempt to tackle the branches encasing her.

"Wait. The tree will attack you if you try to approach. They won't harm her."

"How can you be so sure?" his anger escalating into a tidal wave of fury.

Alaric ignored him, closing his eyes in concentration and drawing in a deep breath. His hands rose again as he spoke in the ancient language once more.

Alex watched in amazement as the tree complied with Alaric's orders, uncoiling its branches from around Cassie's still body.

He never would have believed it if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes. A mantra he'd been repeating rather a lot lately, he thought solemnly.

Cassie's eyes opened slowly, as if waking from a deep sleep.

Alex rushed forward and hugged her. His relief palpable.

Alaric wasn't sure how he felt, angry, relieved, cheated. He didn't know how to deal with his feelings. His tempestuous emotions radiated through him, creating waves of turmoil in their wake.

She was safe, but any moment now the Elders would seek their retribution and separate them. He had failed her.

Getting to her feet, Cassie spotted Alaric standing as stiffly as a statue, his complexion was ashen. The pain in his eyes nearly crushed her heart. She never thought anyone could look so defeated, so filled with loss.

Crossing the clearing toward him, he dared not move, dared not touch her. The Elders were watching, waiting for...for what? They already had all the proof of his betrayal. Why was he still standing there? Did they have some special torture arranged for him before he was banished?

Cassie reached her hand up to cup his face. He shuddered beneath her touch. His pain consumed him. "I'm so sorry, Cassandra," he whispered hoarsely, barely forcing the words from his constricted throat.

"Shh. Everything is okay," she reassured him gently, pulling him down toward her.

"No, it's not okay. I've condemned you to a life of misery. I will never forgive myself for that." His apology and anger suffused in the tone of his voice. He was really good at self loathing. He'd had two millennia to perfect it. Now he would have an eternity to wallow in it, in Hell. He couldn't bear to look into her eyes, afraid his last memory of her would be her disappointment in him.

"Look at me," she demanded softly, lifting his face up to her again. Reluctantly he raised his eyes to meet hers.

Her eyes sparkled with all the love and adoration she felt for him. It nearly broke him in two.

## Eternal Covenant

"The Elders gave me a message for you." She began, her breathy voice filled with reverent devotion.

His gaze fixed to hers instantly, his breath hitched and caught in his throat.

"They told me to tell you that, and I quote," she paused, a smile gleaming in her bright eyes, "*You have been forgiven.*"

His heart skipped a beat. Did he hear that right?

"They also said, that *You have earned your happiness and your family.*"

"They're not going to separate us?" he asked in disbelief.

"No. They're not," she answered, her eyes filling to the brim as his rapacious elation melded with her own.

His legs could no longer hold his weight, he slowly sank to his knees on the ground before her. His arms wrapped around her, his *Mate*, clutching her tightly to him. An overwhelming relief flowed through him. He drew in a ragged breath, releasing his fears as hope and happiness took their place in his heart. The floodgates of his emotions were open, there was no way to hold back the current he was riding. Another ragged breath caught in his throat as a flood of tears washed away his despair.

He hadn't shed a single tear in two thousand years. Not since the day his wife Jessica had been murdered. This time however, his tears were tears of joy.

Never had he dared to hope that this day would come. He was a cynical creature from tip to toe, and no one who knew him to any degree would argue to the contrary. His mind reeled as his thoughts and emotions struggled to come to terms with his new fortune. Not only had he found his *Mate*, the one person in all of time and space who made him whole, the other half of his soul, like yin and yang, but he was released from his vow to the Elders. He was free to explore eternity with her.

Cassie smoothed back wind blown hair from his face and kissed the top of his head. Wrapping her arms around him she clutched him tightly to her breast, her own tears flowing freely.

Never one to be outdone, Alex stood beneath the Elder tree, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. He would however deny it if it was ever spoken of. Ensuring Cassie's future happiness was one thing he could safely cross off his 'to-do list'. He may not have always liked Alaric but he had grown on him over the past few weeks. There was no doubt in his mind that Alaric would always take care of her. There was nothing that meant more to him than Cassandra.

Rising to his feet, Alaric took Cassie's face in his hands and kissed her. A soul deep kiss that branded her as his.

"Why didn't they punish me?" he asked. Now that his personal Armageddon had been averted, he was eager to know the reasons why he wasn't currently another demon's new play toy in the Underworld.

"They were going to," she confirmed sheepishly, "until I convinced them otherwise."

"What? What did you say to them?" He winced, his stomach churning with apprehensive curiosity. No one ever talked back to the Elders. Those who did were all presently residing in Hell. In this case, ignorance of the possible consequences was a godsend. He had no doubt she would have given them a decent ear bashing. Cassie could never be accused of being shy of an argument.

## Eternal Covenant

"Well, first I demanded they tell me what this vow was you made, and why you would be banished for having a relationship with me."

"And, did they tell you?" he asked timidly.

"Yes. They told me everything. They told me about my ancestors and that you're my great grandfather, fifty thousand times removed," waving her arms about in exaggerated movements.

"Being just over two thousand years old, it would be more like sixty," Alex corrected as he joined them for the conversation.

"Sixty three, to be exact." Alaric clarified.

"And, what happened?" he asked again. He had to know more. He had to know everything. He still felt like he was balanced on the edge of a rapier. The Elders didn't let *anyone* have their way without a *But*, and there was always a *But* with the Elders.

"I told themâ!"

"Hold on," Alex interrupted. "Back up a minute. You need to fill me in here."

Alaric looked toward the darkening sky. "I think we should finish this discussion as we walk. It's going to be dark soon."

"Can't you just fly us out of here?" Alex asked.

"Normally, I'd say yes. But I don't think I have enough energy left to carry all of us. There's nothing I wouldn't love more than to get my *Mate* home and into bed andâ!" he began to elaborate.

"You can leave that thought unfinished, thanks. Anymore information on that subject might fry my brain." Alex quipped. "Now, can we get back to the important topic here?"

Cassie took a closer look at Alaric. His flawless porcelain features appeared hollow, dark rings circled his eyes and even his silky smooth hair appeared dull. He needed to feed, she realised.

They walked along the narrow path, Cassie in the lead since she knew the trail almost by heart, Alex stumbling close behind with Alaric following silently at the rear. The only indication of his presence was his clear voice as he spoke.

"Do you remember when we explained the story of how I became the first Vampire," Alaric asked Alex.

"Yeah. You drank Jesus' blood from the cup."

"Yes. Jesus' blood contained a gene that he inherited from his mother, Mary. She had this gene implanted into her DNA by the Elders before her birth. Every one of her children inherited that gene. Jesus' sister, Jessica, was my wife. We had a daughter who also inherited the gene."

Alex stumbled on a semi buried rock. His training with Narayan had improved his reflexes, but unfortunately it hadn't made him any less ungainly in the woods.

## Eternal Covenant

"I made a vow to watch over her descendants. I wasn't permitted to directly interfere with their lives but I did help the occasional ones indirectly."

"There must be thousands of your descendants running around by now." Alex guessed.

"No. Cassie is the last." Alex stopped and turned around to face him.

"How's that possible?"

"The Elders realised that they had introduced something into the human race that could very likely become a weapon against them if it wasn't carefully regulated. They saw to it that no matter how many children were born with the gene, only one would be permitted to procreate in each generation, thus keeping the number of humans carrying the gene to only a small handful at any given time. The gene remains dormant in their DNA. It can only be activated by the Elders or the cup, so they all live normal human lives, oblivious to the immortality gene they carry."

"So how is it that Cassie is the last? Who was the carrier before her?" Alex asked. This was a question that Cassie too, was more than a little curious to get the answer to.

"Her father."

"So, what happens now?" Alex asked. "I take it that the Elders have kept the blood line going for a reason. Cassie was supposed to get married to a human and have a family of her own. Pass on the gene to the next generation, wasn't she?" he very shrewdly concluded. "That's why you were banned from having a relationship with her?"

"Yes." Alaric agreed. This was the part that was making him nervous. The Elder's wouldn't just cancel their 'save the world back-up plan', not when they had spent two millennia cultivating it so carefully.

"They haven't abandoned that plan," Cassie shyly acknowledged.

"What do you mean?" Alaric asked apprehensively, the feeling of foreboding increasing.

"I made a deal with them. The Elders. I, um, well, Iâ " her nervousness began to cut off the blood supply to the part of her brain that allowed for coherent speech.

Alaric approached her, clasping her hands in his, he watched her numbly as she searched for the words that filled in the *But*, from the Elders.

"Well, it's like this," she stalled again. "When they said you had earned your family, they didn't just mean that you could keep your *Mate* and your Vampire children." Cassie removed her hands from Alaric's and began to fidget.

"What *did* they mean?" he asked her, his voice barely above a whisper. His heart pounded in his chest.

"It means,â I'm pregnant."

He was speechless, as was Alex. The two of them stood staring at her, mouths agape. Stunned silence filled the air.

## Eternal Covenant

"That's not possible." It defied comprehension. "Vampires can't procreate. They don't produce any living sperm."

"Well, it appears that the Elders can resurrect more than crucified men. I still had a few of your 'swimmers' inside me from the other night. And thanks to the Elders my cycle has jumped into ovulation, and, well, you can guess the rest," she answered contritely.

As the minutes ticked by, the memory of her encounter with the Elders began to fade, just as a dream dissolves on waking. She couldn't remember their faces or names. What remained of her clouded memory was the distinct impression of the energy that surrounded them, wrapped around her. And, the vision of her pregnancy as it was shown to her as a hand was laid on her belly instilling deep warmth in her womb. Even now every cell in her body tingled from the power they had infused in her body to speed up her cycle.

Her chest constricted cutting off her air supply to her brain.

Cassie couldn't meet Alaric's eyes. She was terrified of his reaction. It wasn't every day a man was told he was going to be a father, without his prior consent.

Alaric remained silent, didn't move a muscle, just stared at her.

She hadn't expected that her soul mate would turn out to be a vampiric angel, or been prepared for the hierarchy of Elders who dictated the terms of their relationship, and she certainly hadn't planned to take a leisurely walk in the forest and come back pregnant. Could an inner monologue hyperventilate?

"I'm sorry. I couldn't let them send you away and I didn't have the option to talk to you about it first," she blustered as new tears began to roll down her face.

His arms came around her so quickly she didn't even have time to gasp.

Alaric felt his heart clenching tightly with emotion, and bent to catch her tear on his lips, treasuring it with all his soul.

She lifted her head to look at him, quietly searching his eyes for a minute.

"You have no idea how happy you have made me," he declared breathlessly before claiming her lips. His *Mate*. His *Family*. He had found Nirvana. In that moment his heart could have burst from the exquisite joy he felt.

"You do realise you're going to make an honest woman of her, don't you?" Alex threatened.

"You're absolutely right I will. Just as soon as we can make arrangements," he confirmed, picking Cassie up to carry her the rest of the way home.

"Hang on a minute, do I get a say in that decision?" she asked, miffed.

"No." Both Alaric and Alex answered together.

Right. Well. She could live with that, she thought, as she wrapped her arms around him and nuzzled into his neck.

## Chapter 23

### Chapter 23

"Oh dear. Love, what's happened?" Mrs Philpot rushed across the kitchen as Alaric carried Cassie through the door.

"Everything's fine Mrs P," she declared cheerfully.

"Alex can fill you in," Alaric called back to her as he disappeared through the next doorway.

The world dissolved in a hazy blur. When her stomach caught up with the rest of her body and her eyes could focus again a few seconds later, they were alone in his bedroom.

Wow, that was a buzz, Cassie thought as her momentary vertigo subsided.

"Are you sure you're not even the tiniest bit angry with me?" she asked, still trying to absorb the turn of events. She felt like she'd been sucked into some whacky computer game and told to play, but she seemed to be the only one who didn't know the rules.

"Not in the least," he confessed happily, his face turning more serious a moment later. "Although I feel I should be the one to ask for your forgiveness," a soft plea imbued his tone.

"Whatever for?"

"You, Cassandra, are my personal miracle. Because of you, my greatest and most secret wishes have been granted. But, I feel that my selfish aspirations have cost you quite a deal more than you bargained for."

"How do you figure that?"

"It has cost you the chance to have a normal life. Your *Mate* is a two thousand year old moody, possessive vampire who you are now pregnant to, thanks to Elders blackmailing you."

"That's all true," she confessed demurely, placing her hands on the flat of his stomach, gliding them slowly upwards to release the buttons of his shirt. "But, let me set the record straight.

"My life was never going to be normal again anyway. I chose you as my Mate and, I couldn't be happier about being the mother of your child," she finished. She had always wanted to have children some day, she just hadn't planned on it happening quite so soon. Cassie had learnt a long time ago that life doesn't always go the way you planned. Adapting to the unexpected situations was sometimes the only thing between a good or a bad outcome. Fortunately this time the hand of fate had dealt her one of the better situations to deal with.

Sliding her fingers between the folds of his open shirt, she raked her nails lightly over the hardening male nipples, shooting a jolt of electricity through him.

"You truly are a miracle." He whispered. "My perfect Mate. We'll have an eternity together."

"I think you've missed something. I'm human," she reminded him.

## Eternal Covenant

"A minor detail. You can remain human for as long as you want, a year, a decade, longer if you want. You will return to look just the way you are now no matter what your age when you're made a Vampire. I just won't turn you before the baby's born."

Cassie's brow furrowed, her lips pursed tightly together and her eyes bore into him with the force of an impending tornado as her vexation bubbled rebelliously to the surface.

"That's assuming you want to become a Vampire," he quickly added before she could hit him with a verbal conflagration.

Her temper cooled slightly, but she pinched his hard nipples lightly in warning. "Of course I want you to turn me. I just don't like it when you make my decisions for me."

Yeah, he figured that one out a while ago. He just hadn't worked out how to stop himself from doing it. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to sharing decision making. I've been alone for a very long time, but I am trying." He really was trying, regardless of evidence to the contrary. Most of the time however, he felt as though he was removing one foot from his mouth only to put the other one in.

There was a plus side to upsetting her though. The make-up sex afterwards would no doubt be very enjoyable.

Alaric's head turned slightly to the side as he listened to a conversation beyond Cassie's hearing, erupting into jovial laughter a moment later.

Cassie had never heard him laugh before. The occasional amused chuckle, yes, but never this light and carefree laughter. "What's so funny?"

"Mrs Philpot is very happy about our news," he informed her. "I believe she has begun wedding plans," he laughed again.

Cassie frowned. "Don't you think we should do something about that? Between Alex and Mrs P, there'll probably be a Priest waiting for us by the time we get down stairs," she grumbled.

"That's a distinct possibility." His eyes sparkled with blue/green iridescence. "We can worry about that later though. I have more immediate plans to occupy us." Cassie's fingers had continued to absently trace the outline of his hard nipples, stoking the wildfire beginning to burn in his veins. Her fingers gripped his nipples, rolling them, between her fingers, making his cock pulse and bead at its tip.

Eliminating the inches that separated them, he claimed an unashamedly sexual kiss that melted her bones.

Her fingers reached higher and tightened in his hair as he covered her lips with drugging kisses before seeking the scented pulse at the base of her throat. She shivered as his tongue stroked her skin. Leaning back, he peeled open her shirt, savouring the sight of her full breasts, their rosy peaks beneath the delicate lacy fabric, hard with need.

As Alaric stripped away the layers of her clothing, he worshipped every inch of her revealed body with kisses and caresses, created partially of his fiery craving, but mostly of devotion.

Alaric knelt before her, laying hungry kisses to her delicate lace panties, his fingers hooking the sides to lower them further, desperate to gain access to the sweet nectar between her intimate folds.

"Ah ah ah. It's my turn to play with you," she chastised playfully.



## Eternal Covenant

"Later," he promised, not willing to give up his prize.

"No. Now." she insisted, taking a step away and pulling him back to his feet.

Maybe giving her the power to explore his body in this way was the safest course, he thought, chastising himself for not having fed before coming to their room. The word *their* sent a flutter of warmth through his veins that inevitably became a pulsing throb in his cock. He didn't want to risk hurting her or *their* baby. He could contain his blood lust if he could stay in control of his sexual hunger. Yes, giving Cassie control was the best thing.

He leaned back giving her the opportunity to do as she pleased. To touch him in whatever manner she wanted to. She needed this. She needed to take back some of the control she had recently lost, he realised.

No less important was his need for her touch, her acceptance of him, all of him.

A tortuous growl left his throat as her nimble fingers released his zipper, freeing him of the restrictive confines blocking her enthusiastic exploration.

Control.

He slammed the barriers down within his mind.

The heavy weight of his arousal rested in the palm of her hand as his leather pants hit the floor. Lightly she stroked the heated length. Velvety soft skin encased its iron hardness. Sliding one hand lower she diligently explored, her nails scraping lightly over the sack below which reflexively drew up tighter under her touch. Her caress was pure ecstasy.

She felt his massive body shudder beneath her hand as she continued her gentle strokes, his rigid erection pulsing and flexing as she gripped her hand around him with gliding strokes from base to tip.

Her lips parted over the point of his hard male nipple sending shockwaves of pleasure spearing through his blood, her tongue licking, sucking, spreading fire across his flesh with every nip of her teeth.

Her thumb lightly played over the sensitive tip of the heavy length, around the flushed hood and along the moist slit. Her heated eyes flared with need. She needed to feel him on her tongue, fill her mouth with the contradiction of silky smooth skin enveloping his powerful arousal.

She *needed* to taste him.

"Cassie," he groaned as she descended lower, tasting every inch of his hard body, licking and kissing her way down his torso. She dropped to her knees and nuzzled him torturously with her sweet, soft face and sexy lips, as her tongue peeked out to lick at his straining flesh tentatively, her hot breath caressing his sensitised skin.

His heavy cock jerked in rising anticipation of the moist depths of her mouth around him.

For weeks he had dreamt of this. His whole body ached with the need to feel her sucking the sensitive crest of his cock.

He swallowed slowly, clenching his teeth as his cravings intensified, rising steadily higher.

Cassie could feel his desire, his hunger. It raged around her, inside her, whipping through her senses.

## Eternal Covenant

She stroked her tongue over the silken crest, down the shaft to his balls and back before her moist lips parted for the damp flanged head, all the while her hand continuing its encompassing caress in slow easy strokes.

Sweet merciful God. His entire body tightened as pleasure slammed through him, his fingers spearing into her hair.

The taste of heated male, salty and wild, filled her with an addictive hunger, a pure undiluted need to give him as much pleasure as he gave her.

Her lips parted. Rubbing them over the engorged tip of his hardened flesh, sending his pulse rocketing and his heart hammering in his chest.

Her lips enclosed the tip of his cock, slowly, very slowly sliding down until the entire head was enclosed, wet heat sucking him.

Cassie lifted her gaze to his. His control was tenuous. She could sense his struggle to bridle his own need, deny himself his full pleasure, even if it drove him to the point of madness.

She was not going to allow him that control. She wanted all of him. No more holding back. She was done yielding to his dogmatic need to hold himself in check, to keep her at bay, well meaning or not. She was neither weak nor fragile and she would have what she needed, give him what he needed.

She took him deeper into the depths of her hot mouth, sucking harder. Her tongue stroked his heavy length repeatedly, lashing against it and stimulating nerve endings that sent his senses reeling, as she devoured him with savage hunger.

His hips jerked and his cock seemed to swell even further with pulsing desperation beneath her grip. His head fell back as he began thrusting, unable to stop the movement of his hips. He pushed into her hot hungry little mouth in small rocking motions. It was irresistibly exquisite.

Her lips tightened around his cock, drawing out the pleasure as she learned the shape of him, her curiosity and pleasure wrapping around him. Feminine hunger rocked him to his foundations as her suckling mouth began to move with more confidence, greater intensity.

Saints have mercy. He didn't know if he could hold onto his control. She was burning him alive.

He prayed for control.

His torment became hers as his rising need flowed through her.

"Sweetheart, you're playing with fire, you have to stop." He begged, his gravelly voice coming in pants.

Alaric reached for her face, his fingers seeking refuge in her hair, holding her still. He couldn't take it any more. Her wicked little mouth had him on the brink. One more stroke of her tongue and he would be gone.

Halting her exploration of him threw her into a frenzy of frustration and need, desire catapulting her higher, her desperation pouring through him, sinking into him, heightening the sensations rippling through his body.

Control.

He couldn't lose control. Not at this point.

## Eternal Covenant

His jaw ached where his fangs strained for release. His mouth watered from her delicate scent.

Holy Hell.

He was losing his battle.

"Ahh," he growled softly in her ear, his lips playing over the sensitive lobe. "Baby, please don't push me. I'm barely holding on here."

"I don't want you to hold on," she purred.

His head bent lower to capture her lips. Her hot little body pressed firmly against his. Lifting one leg, her thigh rubbed his, her knee hitching on his hip pressing his hard cock against her moist folds. His hands gripped her hips, grinding her more accurately against his turgid length.

She needed him. She needed him now.

"No." Alaric answered her unspoken demand. "Not before I taste you," he growled, running an erotic sweep of his tongue down the length of her throat. She was exquisite.

He also needed to reclaim a modicum of control if he had any chance to regain his fragile hold on his hunger.

Grabbing her hips, he lifted her effortlessly, wrapping both her legs around him.

Cassie gasped as his strident steps toward the bed rubbed his thick hard cock against her swollen clit. She gripped him tighter with her thighs. She wanted more.

Lowering her onto the bed, cravings so intense they practically blistered her skin with heat. She arched her hips to meet him, pressing him more firmly into the cradle of her thighs. His soft full lips stole her breath, his searing kiss melting her from the inside out.

Alaric grabbed her wrists, pressing them onto the mattress, sliding his muscular body lower over hers.

"Mine." His voice was little more than an erotic growl of hunger that weakened her to the core.

His tongue flicked over the straining tip of her dusky red nipple briefly on one, then the other, sucking and licking her in a slow easy rhythm until she bucked beneath him.

Alaric released her breast, pulled back a little so that he could see her gorgeous nipples. Tight and peaked, they were the sexiest red he'd ever seen, matching her full pouting lips. They begged for his attention, and he trembled with the need to devour her, one glorious inch at a time.

Closing his teeth around her nipple he bit softly and nearly came as her cries of pleasure echoed in his ears. He switched to the other nipple, drew it into his mouth and rolled it between his teeth. Cassie moaned uncontrollably, her lithe body bucking against him with each pull of his mouth on her breast.

Releasing her wrists he lowered himself further.

"I can smell you." His voice was almost reverent, drawing her gaze. "As sweet as honey. I want to taste you."

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Pushing her thighs farther apart she was completely open to him, and beautiful. The dark pink lips of her pussy spread so that her clit emerged like a delicate little pearl. His mouth watered with the need to taste her, to fill her with his fingers, his tongue, his cock.

She groaned under the intimate assault of his tongue, tickling, teasing, suckling, as he pushed her closer to the mindless abyss of endless pleasure.

Every fiery brush of his tongue against the over sensitized bundle of nerves had her screaming breathlessly. Her hips jerked in rhythm to his torturous caress, driving her overheated flesh harder against his talented tongue as she begged for release.

Still not content, Alaric stroked a finger through the syrup-laden silk of her intimate folds, thrusting deeply inside her, caressing the responsive depths as she lifted to take more of him.

Small mewling cries left her lips under the combined assault, her fingers spearing into his hair, her sharp nails dragging against his skull.

"No more," she cried breathlessly, "I can't take any more," tugging at him with all her strength, she drew him back up her body to press his pulsing cock against the seat of her desperation.

Shuddering with hunger so deep it was painful, he began the slow, exquisite slide into her body. Her spine arched, her pleasure a living current that burned sensation over every inch of him. Her hands gripped his arms, her legs keeping him captive.

Moving against him, her hips ground into his, feeling every inch of the heavy, thick spear penetrating her, filling her so completely, body, mind and soul.

Her legs wrapped around his hips as he pistoned into her. The rhythmic contractions of her inner muscles gripped him tightly.

Her orgasm exploded through her with the force of an atomic bomb that stole her breath, lifted her against him and sent a keening cry spilling from her lips.

He choked on the thirst clawing at him, turning his head aside so Cassie couldn't see the distress building in his eyes. He should have fed first, he chastised himself frantically.

Cassie could feel his desperation to hold back his own climax, contain his thirst, the two so intimately entwined. "Don't hold back. Bite me," she fiercely demanded, knowing that forcing him to sate one hunger would drive him to sate the other.

"No." he growled. "I won't risk hurting you or the baby." His body shook violently with the effort to hold off his own orgasm, building to a critical point, his fangs already half extended.

"You won't. Don't think you're going to wrap me in cotton wool for the next nine months. It's not going to happen." She growled.

He needed the supreme starch kicked out of his domineering shorts.

Alaric gasped, trying hard to remain coherent as her inner muscles gripped him tighter, trapping him as deeply in her hungry body as she possibly could, filling his thoughts and his soul, leaving him at the mercy of her pleasure.

## Eternal Covenant

He reached for her hips, trying to anchor himself in the middle of the storm of sensation she was bombarding him with.

He had no hope. He couldn't fight his nature or his Mate.

A muted scream escaped her as she began to come again. The rhythmic contractions of her inner muscles gripped him. A furious growl erupted from deep within his chest as she convulsed and shuddered around him. She felt his restraint shatter.

He was buried to the hilt inside her, thrusting, pounding. He howled her name as his orgasm roared through him like a goddam freight train, coming inside her with hot, vicious jerks, he emptied himself into her as he came and came and came.

Cassie grabbed his face and pulled him down to the pulsing vein in her throat. He hesitated only a moment, shuddering as his aching fangs plunged into her creamy flesh, taking long draws of her rich, sweet blood, it transcended the purity of a perfectly aged fine wine. She was pure perfection in every way.

Exhausted, Cassie lay blissfully in his tight embrace, his gentle kisses lulling her further into contentment.

"Can I ask you something?" she asked, rolling onto her stomach. She folded her hands on his chest and propped her chin on them.

"Anything," he assured her.

"You said earlier that you weren't permitted to interfere with your descendant's lives directly, only indirectly."

"Yes," he answered warily.

"Did you help Alex and me indirectly when we were younger?"

Alaric watched her for a moment for a hint of any animosity but for once he only saw curiosity.

"Actually, I did," he answered reluctantly. "After your father died. Alex's mother wasn't sober long enough to hold a job and your mother was too sick. I made sure there was always enough money in the bank to cover your bills and keep a roof over your head. I never interfered in the problems of my adult descendants, but I always helped the children."

"Did that include the trust funds that Alex and I have to pay for all our education costs, or getting the Department of Child Services off our back when they wanted to separate Alex and me and put us in foster homes?" she asked.

Considering that her family barely had enough money to fix the leaky roof of their old house, or the dodgy wiring and noisy plumbing, she was confident his answer would be, yes.

Alaric felt uneasy about this conversation. Any moment now he was going to have to start defending his actions to her, again.

He nodded.

"Thank you."

## Eternal Covenant

That was it? No argument? In the future he'll have to remember to have sex with her before tackling any delicate discussions.

Like every good masochist, he looked forward to each and every argument they would have, now that they had a future to argue over.

She lifted onto her elbows and kissed him sweetly, following up with a deeper, more passionate kiss.

Alaric stilled.

"What's wrong?"

"Saladin is here, and he seems to be in a good mood," he frowned.

Saladin eclipsed even him, in the surly arsehole department. If he was happy, something was up. Not necessarily in a good way.

"We'd better get dressed then, ha?" Cassie's stomach chose that moment to grumble loudly.

"Yes. I'll meet you down stairs. Mrs Philpot has put some dinner aside for you. I'll have her heat it up."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard her mention it earlier."

Hmm. With his Vampire hearing, she'll never have a private conversation again.

## Chapter 24

### Chapter 24

"Mrs P, this stew is *really* good. Thanks." She was so hungry, her taste buds practically absorbed its meaty goodness through osmosis on contact.

"You're welcome dear. Now eat up. You're eating for two now," hugging Cassie again in a zealous bear hug. "I don't know what I'm more excited about," she confessed. "My boy finally getting married, or having a baby in the house. My own grandchildren are practically grown andâ " "

Cassie placed her hand on the aging housekeepers arm to silence her excited banter. "My own mother died when I was young as you know, and you've been like a mother to me since I came here. I would love it if you would think of it as another grandchildâ .And, help with the wedding plans." Cassie reluctantly tacked the wedding part on when she could see Mrs Philpot waiting for an *And*.

Mrs Philpot's eyes welled up with emotion. "Love, you make an old woman very happy," she sniffled into Cassie's shoulder as she hugged her once again.

How could she disappoint her, Mrs Philpot had done so much for her. Cassie had no idea what kind of wedding it would be, but one thing was for sure, with Mrs Philpot in charge, there wouldn't be any forgotten details.

If she had to be honest, Cassie was grateful for her help but she wasn't about to admit it and openly confess her lack of organisational skills.

Cassie listened. Several voices transfused with only one set of footsteps as they approached the kitchen. A moment later four familiar faces appeared in the doorway, Alaric, Alex, Narayan and Abby.

"Where's Saladin?" she asked, leaning over on her stool to get a better view around them for the missing guest.

"He couldn't stay, unfortunately." Alaric answered, eyes sparkling. "He only came to give us some news he thought we might like to hear personally."

Cassie climbed down from her stool when Alaric continued to maintain his tenacious composure. "Well, spit it out. What did he tell you?"

"He received word a couple of hours ago that the Guild has officially taken you off their most wanted list."

"What? Are you serious?" her face breaking into a broad grin.

"Yes." Alex jumped in. "It seems that Alaric's appearance as Sammael the other night has convinced them that you're not worth the trouble."

"It's also the reason Saladin couldn't stay." Abby added. "The nightclub has doubled its patronage since then too. It's the new Mecca for vampires looking to get a glimpse of the legendary Sammael."

Wrapping her arms around him tightly, Cassie laughed at Alaric's obvious discomfort.

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Being catapulted to movie star status from his preferred reclusive lifestyle, was not a welcome change. Fortunately his privacy was still secured at Havenswood Manor. Protected by Savernake Forest on three sides and a Druid's ward on the fourth side along the road. No one could approach the Manor without first being invited by one of its occupants. Any unwanted guests would either find themselves unable to find the driveway leading to the Manor or have a sudden change of heart about entering, turn around and leave.

"Does that mean I'm allowed to leave the Manor again?" she asked hopefully, her hazel eyes half pleading and half daring Alaric to deny her the opportunity to have her freedom. His eyes darkened and his lips pursed into a thin crease. The thought of letting her leave the protection of the Manor and forest even for a few hours made him itch with anxiety, but he had more chance of containing water in a sieve than he did of containing Cassie in his protective cocoon.

Conceding the futility of arguing, he nodded with a disgruntled huff. "We'll discuss the conditions later." He added quickly before she could start planning trips to London and Paris and where ever else she might decide to go.

Cassie chose to ignore the last comment and instead drew him down for a *very* appreciative kiss.

The room filled with sounds of clearing throats and embarrassed snickers before the couple finally drew breath and rearranged their clothing into place once again.

"Oh. I got so carried away with all the good news, I almost forget." Mrs Philpot piped up, her hands coming to her flushed cheeks. "The Professor called a little while ago. He isn't coming up tonight. He and Lilith are following a lead on Ahriman."

"It seems things are finally turning in our favour." Narayan encouraged. His cheerful enthusiasm almost breaking through his practiced calm exterior.

"I told the Professor the news about your engagement, I hope you don't mind." Mrs Philpot disclosed apologetically.

"No. Of course not." Alaric reassured.

"Did you tell him about our other news?" Cassie asked, pointing to her stomach, unable to bring herself to say the word 'baby'.

"Heavens no." she declared. "I admire the Professor greatly, but he tells Lilith everything. I don't know about you, but I for one do *not* want that cow of a woman to know *that* piece of good news until it's absolutely necessary. You're entitled to enjoy your happiness without her spiteful comments." Mrs Philpot opened a draw and pulled out a very large, sharp knife and began cutting into a bag of oranges. Whenever Lilith was discussed, she had an uncontrollable urge to dissect something.

Cassie sighed with relief.

"Lilith suggested you might like to celebrate with a night out. She thought the Drunken Duck in Cadley. And, as hard as it is for me to say this, I agree with her. Especially now you're no longer being hunted by the Guild." Her knife sliced through another orange before grinding it to pulp in the juicer with a little more force than was probably necessary. "It might be nice for you two love birds to have a night out and celebrate."

There were moments, Cassie thought, that Lilith wasn't such a cold hearted, self-serving bitch. She was capable of thinking of others, sometimes. After all, she did volunteer to go to her apartment after Jarvis' attack



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and retrieve what was left of her things. She also went to the trouble to buy her a new toothbrush and razor. She did however take the whole 'Good Samaritan' thing a bit too far with Alex's toiletries and underwear. She doubted Lilith would ever live that one down, at least not as far as Alex was concerned.

"That sounds like a great idea." Cassie agreed, not in the least bit discouraged by the rumbling growl in Alaric's chest. This could work, she thought as her gaze flicked between Alex and Abby. A double date.

Alex and Abby both crossed their arms and glared at her. Having read Cassie's mind, Abby glowered at her in silent warning for setting her up. Alex glowered at her suspiciously, her brewing mischievous scheme betrayed in her expressive eyes.

Cassie's smile beamed.

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As twilight shadows lengthened, Cassie's anxiety increased until she was a jittery mess, pacing a track through the grand foyer.

"Is anything wrong?" Alex asked, his brows furrowing with concern as he descended the stair case.

"No. No. Everything's fine," she assured him, taking a deep breath to compose herself. "I think I'm actually nervous about leaving the Manor, do you believe it? For weeks that's all I've wanted to do, and now when I get the chance I've got butterflies in my stomach."

"We can cancel. We don't have to go out tonight." Alex squeezed her hands in his in an effort to ease her anxiety. Her hands were cold and clammy and shook ever so slightly beneath his grip. Alex's gaze darkened as he lifted her chin meeting her agitated eyes to study her more carefully. Maybe he was as over protective as he'd so often been accused, but he knew Cassie better than anyone and she wasn't the skittish type.

"Yes we do," she retorted quickly with a cheerful smile. Tonight was not about her neurotic insecurities, she quickly reminded herself. It was about getting Alex and Abby together. "Don't worry about me. I'm sure it's just my hormones going on the fritz."

"What's this about cancelling?" Alaric asked hopefully as he approached along the long corridor from the study. He'd been searching for an excuse all day to cancel their dinner outing.

"Nothing. I was just feeling a bit nervous, that's all." Cassie visibly relaxed as Alaric's arms came around her. Her nervous tremor morphing into a sultry shiver of delight as she melded to the hard contours of his body. If it wasn't for her determination to play match maker or the frustrating two hours she spent struggling to put her hair up in an elegant twist, the accomplishment far exceeding her normal effort of a ponytail, Alaric could have easily talked her into staying at home and having dinner in bed.

Alaric and Alex's troubled expressions mirrored one another. Neither man was likely to relax during their evening out. Realistically though, how dangerous could it be? They were going to have dinner at the local pub, situated next to the safety of Savernake Forest and she'll be escorted by two vampires and her newly trained vampire killing cousin. Not to mention the fact that she was no longer on the Guild's hit list.

"Sorry I'm late. Are we ready to go?" Abby asked as she joined the group in the foyer.

"Wow. You look gorgeous," Cassie proclaimed.

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Alex could only stare at Abby's mid thigh length, form fitting black dress as it hugged her figure intimately. The low neck line accentuated her full pouting breasts and tiny waist and her short dark hair was styled elegantly to frame her beautiful face. Her make-up had been applied immaculately, highlighting her chocolate brown eyes, long lashes and high cheek bones. She licked her glossy red lips nervously as she blushed from all the silent stares she was receiving.

"Wow." Alex seconded Cassie's comment, only a little more breathlessly. His cock had hardened into a steel rod in his pants and at least a dozen carnal images were running through his mind, none of which contained either of them wearing a stitch of clothing. For the first time he was not going to apologise for his thoughts. In fact he was glad she could see what he was thinking. It was forewarning of all the things he planned on doing to her, with her.

"Narayan helped me." She advised shyly, pointing to her hair and make-up.

"Narayan, I think you missed your calling. It appears you're a man of many talents." Cassie praised.

"I used to watch 'The Next Top Model'. It was very informative." He replied modestly.

"If you get tired of being a philosophical, kick-arse Monk, you could become a make-up artist or hair stylist." Alex smirked, earning himself a back hand to his stomach from Cassie. Not that Narayan seemed to mind the comment. To the contrary, he was quite chuffed that Abby had turned out to be such a masterpiece.

"What?" Alex protested with false innocence.

Abby's attempt to cover her snicker turned into an unladylike snort and quickly covered her mouth to try and stop anything else embarrassing from coming out, like the groan of desire that was building from much deeper within at the way Alex's eyes intimately caressed her body from the top of her immaculate hair-do, right down to the tips of her ruby red painted toenails.

Cassie smiled to herself. The night couldn't have started better. The way Abby and Alex were staring at each other, she doubted that they would need any encouragement to get together tonight.

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The Drunken Duck in the nearby village of Cadley, was a quaint old blue stone pub with numerous small panelled windows and a heavy batten door at its entrance. Set off the main road, it stood alone in a clearing only a couple of hundred metres from Savernake Forest. Soft plumes of smoke wafted on the chilly breeze from its large chimney, hinting at the inviting warmth inside.

"I think we're a little over dressed." Abby remarked as they entered the busy pub. Hearty cheers from a group watching footy on TV and general chatter filled the room along with aromas of home style cooking, malt beer and aromatic wood burning in the open fire place. Plaques and photos covered the walls celebrating the achievements of locals both past and present.

"We have a lot to celebrate. It's worth dressing up for." Alaric replied sitting back onto the bench seat facing the doorway, his eyes skimming over every individual in the room assessing them for potential trouble.

A lifetime of paranoia was hard to overcome.

Alex nodded in agreement as he too scanned the inhabitants of the pub.

## Eternal Covenant

"Alex, isn't that Mr Harlow coming this way?" Cassie asked, drawing his attention away from Abby.

"Yes, I think it is," he agreed.

"You know Brian Harlow?" Alaric asked them, puzzled how they would have met.

"Yes. We met him in the forest a few weeks back. He seems like a very nice man." Cassie's smile broadened as Brian Harlow stopped at their table, depositing a pot of beer in front of each of them. Alaric casually slid Cassie's aside and replaced it with iced water.

"Brian, it's good to see you again. It's been a while." Alaric stood, shaking his hand and drew another chair over to their table for him to join them.

"Alaric, it's good to see you too," he replied, shaking his hand vigorously. "Alex and Cassie, isn't it?" he asked, turning his attention in their direction. "But, I don't believe we've met yet," his eyes settling on Abby.

"You have a very good memory Mr Harlow," Alex replied as they each shook his hand in turn.

"This is Abby." Alaric introduced her as the older man took her hand, his eyes flashing back to Alaric with a questioning glance.

"Abby is my progeny."

Brian Harlow's momentary tense stance relaxed as he changed his grip on Abby's hand, raising it to his lips to kiss the back of her hand. "It's an honour to have you all here. Have you come to celebrate anything specific?" he asked, humour flashing in his knowing grey eyes.

"I believe you already know the answer to that question, Brian." Alaric acceded, shaking his head slowly, a lopsided smirk encroaching on his ageless face. Mrs Philpot accused the Professor for having a loose tongue when she herself has probably already informed half the village of their 'good news'.

"Yes I do. Congratulations on your engagement." Picking up his glass he offered a toast to them. "But, rest assured, I believe Edwina has only spoken to my lovely wife, who told me. It hasn't gone any further than us I can assure you. She mentioned something about catering?"

Well, at least she knew who would be doing the food for their wedding.

"How is Tilly?" Cassie asked.

"Silly Tilly," he grumbled, shaking his head sadly. "I'm sorry to say, I don't think she's going to be maturing any time soon. Unfortunately I don't have the time to walk her and train her, so much of my time is occupied here at the pub and my lovely wife Fran, has a hard time managing the mutt," he sighed wearily.

"If you need someone to walk her regularly, I'd be happy to help out." Alex offered. The giant sized Irish Wolf Hound *puppy* had found his soft spot when they'd first met. He'd deferred his post graduate course at Oxford University and now couldn't restart it for another semester. He had more than enough time on his hands to walk the energetic dog.

"That is a grand offer. I may take you up on it. Thank you Alex." Gratitude clearly evident in his voice the older man shook Alex's extended hand.

## Eternal Covenant

"Great. That's settled then." Alex announced happily.

"Have you been in touch with the Alliance recently?" Alaric asked.

"Yes. I'm kept informed. We've started sending out extra patrols at night. There's been more activity around here in the last few weeks, scouts we think, assessing the area."

"The Guild?"

"Possibly. They don't hang around long enough for us to question them."

"You know you can call me if you need."

"That's good to know. Thank you," his serious expression falling by the wayside as he spied a potential disaster about to unfold at the bar. "Well, I'd better get back behind the bar. My grandson, Callum and his friend Marcus are helping out tonight, they're still learning the ropes I'm afraid." He grimaced as the dark headed lad knocked over the pot of beer he'd just finished pouring. "I'll send Fran over to take your dinner orders in a few minutes. Enjoy your evening."

If they had planned on a quiet cosy meal, they would have been sadly disappointed. It seemed at least half the patrons in the bar knew Alaric and all wanted to stop by for a chat with little more than a minute between visitors. Among them was Marcus, Mrs Philpot's grandson and Damon Harlow, Brian's eldest son, an extremely serious man with little sense of humour and the shortest crew cut Cassie had ever seen. Muscles bulged and stretched his army fatigues, emphasising an intriguing tattoo, a symbol which snaked around his upper arm. Between his outward appearance and his intense mind drilling stare, he was without a doubt the scariest dude Cassie had ever seen. Thank goodness he was one of the good guys.

Finally the traffic to their table died off and Cassie had the opportunity to ask Alaric something that had been bugging her since Mr Harlow stopped by for a chat.

"Who exactly is Brian Harlow that you would tell him Abby is your progeny?" she probed.

All three of them leaned closer to Alaric for his answer. "He's the Lycan clan's Alpha."

"He's a Lycan?" Alex asked.

"Yes. This is the local hangout for his clan."

"And, Brian Harlow is the clan's leader?" he asked again to clarify he heard correctly.

"Yes."

"And he knows who you are?" Cassie asked.

"He knows exactly who you are." Abby interjected before Alaric had a chance to answer. "I think every supernatural in the region now knows you're Sammaelâ. I read it in his mind and everyone else's who've come to pay their respects to you," she tacked on sheepishly.

"That explains why we've been so popular tonight," he grumbled. Cassie squeezed his knee, massaging his inner thigh causing him to shift in his seat to relieve the pressure building behind the zipper of his pants. "I think we should be going home, don't you?" he propositioned suggestively.

## Eternal Covenant

She couldn't agree more. She still hadn't shaken her earlier jitters, curbing her appetite and dampening her ability to follow the various conversations throughout the evening. She hadn't felt this wired and agitated since she pulled her last all nighter cramming for a major exam with more than double the amount of caffeine that should be legal to consume, running through her veins.

However, it hadn't skipped Cassie's attention that Alex and Abby had at least one body part touching all night - knees, hands, shoulders. They might just need a little push to take the next step.

"Why don't Alex and Abby take the car, we can fix the bill here and catch up with them at home," she prompted, punching Alaric in the thigh when he opened his mouth to object. A little slow on the up-take, he finally caught onto her train of thought.

"Wonderful idea." Alaric handed over the keys to the Porsche. "Here, it's all yours."

"What? For the night?"

"No. To keep. I think it's time you retire that rusted metal death trap you call a car."

"Are you serious?" Alex stared at Alaric and then again at the keys in his hand, a huge grin broadening across his face.

"It's all yours. But, any speeding fines come out of your allowance," he added resolutely.

"I don't get an allowance." Alex retorted grimly, his brows furrowing together in serious thought. He'd given up his tutoring work when he came to the Manor. He was the poor cousin, a penniless pauper.

"Hmm. I see how that could be a problem. We'll discuss fixing that, tomorrow." Not giving Alex a chance to question him further or thank him, Alaric left the table and headed for the bar to pay the bill.

Alex's mouth flapped open and closed wordlessly in shock.

"Don't you two have somewhere else to be?" Cassie asked, maintaining a weakly suppressed grin in an effort to keep a straight face. She would never make a good poker player.

"You're behind this aren't you?" he accused.

"I have nothing to say." Cassie answered innocently. "But I would suggest you leave now before he changes his mind." Walking Alex and Abby to the door, she gave them each a hug and kiss before turning for the bar to join Alaric.

A light breeze swirled the fallen leaves about their feet as they stepped out of the doorway.

Alex couldn't believe his luck. The woman of his dreams walked beside him, her smaller fingers intertwined with his, and in his other hand he clutched the keys to his new Porsche.

Reaching the car on the far side of the car park, he couldn't wait any longer.

Placing the keys in his pocket, he drew her closer to him, trapping her between his heated body and the cold metal of the car. Her body was soft and delicate in his arms and he couldn't help the unfamiliar surge of emotions that welled within him. He held onto her, his hands moving to her back as he pulled her more tightly against him.

## Eternal Covenant

His hand lifted and gently swept his fingers through her hair, tracing the outline of her ear and stroking the length of her neck.

Breathing was a chore. Her chest was so tight with the need to hold back the moan rising inside it, she felt light headed from the effort. She was trembling so hard her shudders vibrated into his body, heating it further.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured against her ear, his lips brushing lightly against her flushing cheek.

Alex caressed the nape of her neck gently as she raised her eyes to meet his covetous gaze. Hunger and heat, emotion and need. It all began to clash and coalesce inside her. Her lips parted, her tongue flicking out to lick her bottom lip in anticipation of his kiss.

Alex hesitated in closing the last few inches between them as Abby's long dextrous fingers reached to grab his waist, gliding strokes traced over his ribs, his back and around to caress of his rock hard stomach. She was fascinated by the feel of his warmth and firmness under such a soft and smooth exterior. She felt his muscles clench beneath her touch, his whole body becoming rigid as her curious hands explored the hidden secrets his body offered her.

Alex groaned as her full breasts pressed against him, catapulting his awareness of her and sharpening his arousal with spearing intensity. The need to taste her lips consumed him with a haze of hunger.

Closing the distance between them, Alex felt her cool breath mix with his as his lips brushed every so lightly against hers.

Abby's breath caught on a hitch as a sudden gust whipped up from the opposite direction.

In a flash their positions were reversed. Alex was pressed against the car with Abby standing protectively in front of him.

An ambush.

## Chapter 25

### Chapter 25

"You've got to be fucking kidding me. Now?" Alex growled with frustration as Abby reversed their positions and pushed him against the car, a fraction of a second before she snatched a dart from the air which had been aimed at Alex's back.

"Under the car seat, there are katanas, quickly, grab them," Abby urged as she scanned the surrounding car park for the shooter.

x-x-x-x-x

Standing at the bar, Alaric's body went rigid, his power flashing to life, dipping the temperature inside the cosy pub. His eyes glittered fiercely and his fangs peeked beneath furious lips.

"It's a trap," he snarled. "Abby and Alex are in trouble."

"What?" Cassie's legs began to shake. Now she knew why she'd been feeling so agitated all night. She should have listened to her instincts and stayed home. But, no, she was determined to play match maker.

"How many?" Brian Harlow asked across the bar.

"More than a dozen vampires and a handful of humans," he answered, his attention quickly falling back to Cassie. "Call Narayan. Get him here now. And, whatever you do, *do not* leave this spot until I come back for you." His steely gaze bored into her with sufficient gravity to cement her feet into place.

Cassie nodded silently as he leaned down to kiss her forehead briefly.

In a flash he was gone.

Oh God. This was all her fault. If she hadn't insisted they come out tonightâ

Cassie jumped when Brian Harlow gave a sharp whistle interrupting her mental self-flagellating epitaph. Every head in the room lifted instantly. Except for the cheering commentary on the big screen television, the pub fell into silence as several very large burly men stood to attention and began shrugging off jackets and shoes. Their wrestler physiques rippled with muscle and power as they hurried towards the door, a trail of clothes left in their wake.

"Not this time." The aging Alpha grabbed Marcus and Callum by the scruff of their necks as they prepared to march out with the other men. "Your turn will come soon enough," he reassured. "You two boys stay here. No one comes in and no one goes out. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," they both agreed with staunch obedience. Although the wolf inside them both clawed and snarled at the command, *nobody* disobeyed the Alpha.

"Good lads. I'm counting on you." And, he too disappeared out into the darkness. Sounds of shouting and fighting filtered past the two boys to Cassie's straining ears before the heavy door closed. Quickly they slid home the three sturdy bolts on the door, sealing them in before moving on to shutter the windows as well.

## Eternal Covenant

More than once the quaint country pub had doubled for the Lycan clan's refuge against the numerous threats that menaced their lives over the years.

Cassie dialled quickly.

Narayan picked up on the first ring. "I'm already on my way," he blustered as the line went dead.

Narayan's bond to his sire was strong. He felt Alaric's distress the moment his power flashed, alerting him to the danger they were in. A couple of swords in hand, he was half way through Savernake Forest before Cassie had begun dialling his number.

x-x-x-x-x

Alex drew the katanas from their sheaths and gave them a twirl, handing one to Abby. Back to back they waited to face the first wave of attackers approaching from the shadows.

"God dammit. We were set-up." she growled as Alaric appeared at their side. His eyes glowed so fiercely they illuminated the area around them. His power lashed the air in angry pulses, forming ice crystals on the windows of nearby cars. His fangs fully extended into twin blades of instant death.

Alaric needed no weapon. He was a living breathing eternal weapon, and severely pissed off.

His only thought was to neutralise the threat to Cassie and get her home where she was safe. His fists clenched open and closed in anticipation of the retribution he intended to inflict.

Several vampires descended upon them in a violent clash of blades, fangs and claws, targeting their focus on Alaric as their major benefactor.

This was a suicide mission and they knew it. The fear in their eyes, the knowledge that they wouldn't leave this car park alive radiated from them in varying degrees of regret, dismay and even madness, but they persisted with their attack.

He was Sammael, the most feared creature on the planet. What then, could they be more afraid of, that facing him in a Lycan stronghold was the better option.

Ahriman, Alaric thought, as he ripped the heart from the vampire he held in his grip. A young vampire, little more than a fledgling, his eyes closed as he prayed for mercy.

A swift death was the only mercy he would receive from Alaric.

War cries, howls and pain filled screams shattered the peaceful night as the Lycans joined the fight.

More gun shots were fired from high powered rifles from a distance well beyond the car park, aimed directly at the pub's front door and the Lycans exiting it as they shifted into their wolf forms.

A gangly curly headed vampire rushed at Alex. He had no weapon drawn and dodged the swing of Alex's blade with great efficiency. The vampire circled him, taunted him, drawing him further away from Alaric and Abby, closer to the edge of the car park.

While fighting raged around him, no one attempted to fight Alex. That didn't mean he felt any less inclined to despatch their sorry arses back to Hell. It only meant it gave him a better shot at a quick kill.



## Eternal Covenant

Alex was seething. Abby had been right there against him, not even a millimetre existed between their lips, so close he could almost taste her, when these dumb fucks ruined the moment he'd been waiting weeks for. He fully intended to claim compensation for their intrusion.

Alex struck with one brutal slash across the throat of his attacker, relieving the vampire before him of the burden on his shoulders. Mere seconds later, the next one was upon him with stunning speed.

A swift glance toward Abby, Alex momentarily lost his concentration and his new opponent took full advantage.

Reaching to take Alex in a choke hold, Alex retaliated with a quick set of blows, spinning out of the vampire's uncertain hold.

A ball of dread lodged in the pit of his stomach as he felt the blade of a knife slice through his inner thigh in their struggle.

Fear encroached the vampire's eyes as the smell of Alex's blood reached his nose. Nostrils flaring, the vampire dropped the weapon and attempted to flee, escaping only as far as Abby's wrathful blade barely metres away.

Pain struck his thigh as the adrenaline which had flooded his body, waned. The strength left his legs and his knees gave out. Panting, he sank to the ground, his hands landing in something hot and sticky.

Blood.

His blood.

Abby crouched between Alex's legs and ripped his jeans open further, exposing a deep gash to his inner thigh.

There was too much blood.

"Alex, you're going to be ok, just hold on." She locked eyes with him. The fear he saw there stilled his movement.

How bad was his injury?

"I'm going to try and heal you. But, if I can'tâ!" She couldn't finish the sentence, her voice choked in her throat.

"If you can't, give me your blood before I die," he finished for her in a steadfast calm manner.

Their eyes burned with a thousand unspoken words and emotions between them. Time was against them, he could feel it.

Abby dipped her head to the wound on Alex's thigh. Her lips closed around the edges of the wound, her tongue lashing the inside of the gash, filling it with as much healing hormone as she could, gulping down mouthfuls of blood as it gushed from the torn femoral artery.

The moment her lips touched his skin, the wall of restraint in his mind crumbled and the floodgates of pleasure opened and rippled through him.

## Eternal Covenant

Abby felt his reaction. She felt his cock hardening and swelling against her, the rampant burn of heat flaring in answer to his uncontrollable need for her.

Breathing was a chore. Her chest was so tight with the need to hold back the moan rising inside it, she felt light-headed from the effort. His fingers speared into her hair holding her firmly against him. She was shaking so hard her shudders vibrated through his body, intensifying their combined hungers.

The taste of him was ambrosia, warm and sweet. The feel of him was heaven.

Abby held his leg down with one hand, the other pressed firmly against his pelvis to hold him in place. She had to staunch the bleeding, seal his wound as quickly as possible before he bled out.

He was losing too much blood.

He began to move more aggressively beneath her as the healing hormone she was pumping into him created a whirlpool of desire that spiralled out to encompass them both. She felt liquid heat slither throughout her entire body just from the understanding of her effect on him, the heated sap coiling into intriguing puddles of arousal.

His blood flowed through her body, his thoughts touched her mind and his soul joined with hers. Their hearts beat as one as the world around them imploded in a kaleidoscope of sensation, bonding them together.

Alex had no words to describe what he felt. For a brief moment he felt whole. It was as though they already knew each other with perfect intimacy, from thought to touch, from soul to soul. Nothing had ever felt this perfect or so real.

The pressure from her mouth receded, replaced by the light caress of her body as she moved over him. The loss of their intimate contact had him reeling instantly in distress.

"Shh. I'm here," she soothed, brushing his dark wavy hair from his face.

Relief flooded his system as he took a shuddering breath and reached to touch her face. His head felt foggy, loss of blood and the healing hormone taking its toll but he fought the darkness that threatened to engulf him.

"Narayan." Abby called desperately.

"Abby, baby." Alex drew her attention back to him. His hand moved around her waist as he attempted and failed to sit up. His head swam with the sound of a thousand bees buzzing in his ears as he grappled against his body and willed himself to remain coherent. "Abby."

"I'm here." Shifting her weight she raised his head to her lap. "Shh. Everything's going to be fine. Narayan's here. We'll get you home and get some blood into you."

"I can't do this anymore. I'm dying here." Alex reached up to stroke her face.

"You're not going to die." She cried, pressing her cheek into the palm of his hand, tears welling in her determined eyes.

"Baby, I need you to put me out of my misery." Her eyes widened to the size of saucers in panic. She couldn't let him die.

## Eternal Covenant

He had lost a critical amount of blood. His life still hung in the balance.

She couldn't let him die. She couldn't lose him.

Abby dropped her fangs and raised her wrist.

She wouldn't let him die.

"No. That's not what I mean." Grabbing her hand he smiled bashfully pulling her down toward him. "I thought you could read my mind," he chuckled weakly.

"I'm sorry. I'm a little bit stressed here, ok?" she blustered.

"Abby. The need to kiss you is killing me. Please baby, put me out of my misery and kiss me." His voice slurred drunkenly but his eyes conveyed his desperate need. The need to touch her, taste her, to be a part of her.

Abby's breath hitched in her throat. Relief flooded her body.

Relief that he hadn't given up his fight for life.

Relief that he needed her.

Relief that she could still give him her blood if need be.

She held her breath momentarily, entranced as hunger licked hotly through his irises, skimming over her, devouring her without so much as a touch.

He reached for her face, his fingers seeking refuge in her short hair, his thumbs at her temples, soothing away the tension pulling her forehead into deep furrows of concern.

"Kiss me," he whispered again, drawing her lips closer for a soft lingering kiss.

Abby looked upon the strong, bold lines of his face. His facial bone structure had a refinement that was echoed in the frame of his body. A masculine elegance that caught her eye and tugged at her heart.

His mouth was sensually carved with full lips, but it was his worldly, knowledgeable gaze that drew her closure. Those breath taking eyes were smiling at her, despite his perilous situation.

He needed her touch like parched land needed rain. He needed to soak in it, feel it inside him, soothing him, healing him.

She hesitated for only a moment before releasing her shyness and propriety.

Abby cupped his face, his lips touched hers, burning hot passion simmering beneath the gentle kiss. The pleasure so intense, so fiery, it would seem impossible from such a simple caress.

Alex drew in a sharp breath, desire curling stridently through his entire body and soul as he deepened the kiss.

He was acting purely on impulse, every wild twist of his mouth against hers a reflection of that mindless need for connection. She moaned and her body became more pliant against his demanding lips.

## Eternal Covenant

"I don't mean to interrupt this touching moment, but we need to get out of here." Narayan urged quietly at their back.

"Narayan, your timing sucks, do you know that?" Alex chastised but there was little fire in his voice. His energy was fading fast. The buzzing in his head increased as he fought against the darkness that blurred the edges of his vision.

The brisk wind bore the scent of coming snow, biting through the layers of his torn clothing and elicited a round of almost convulsive shivering.

The fighting had ended but the fight for life still hung in the balance for two in their alliance. Alex desperately needed blood, without it he most likely wouldn't see out the night.

Brian Harlow too, teetered on the brink of life. The human attackers came prepared to take out the Lycans, firing hollow tipped bullets filled with silver nitrate. Damon Harlow had taken a bullet in the calf and although he would survive, the silver neutralised his body's ability to regenerate. It would take him weeks to heal completely. Likewise, another Lycan had taken a shot to the shoulder.

Unfortunately Brian Harlow had not been so lucky. He had taken two bullets to the chest. He was the oldest of the Lycans, and as the Alpha he was also the most powerful, but it would take a miracle for even him to survive such an injury.

Angry howls echoed throughout the region as the pack relayed the news.

"Alex." Cassie's terrified cry drew their attention as she skidded to a halt at Alex's feet. His normally olive complexion so pale, he rivalled the vampire's skin tone for pasty white perfection, only with a blue tinge to his lips. There appeared to be more of his blood covering his body and the ground than was left in his veins.

Alaric's unfurled wings extended around the group protectively as he stood behind Cassie, wrapping her in his arms as she began to tremble.

"Oh my God. What happened? Is he going to be okay?" she demanded, slipping Alaric's hold to get to him.

"Hey kid," Alex answered, his voice slurring thickly. As hard as he tried, he couldn't get his eyes to focus on any face by Abby. "I'll be fine. Some fuck knuckle stabbed me in the leg is all." He quickly shot Abby an apologetic look who just chuckled quietly. He'd been trying his best to be more mature and not to swear around her, but he just couldn't help himself sometimes. "Once I soak up a couple of bags of blood like my fangy friends here, I'll be good as new," attempting to reassure her with a weak smile.

"We need to go." Abby stated, as Narayan bent down to pick Alex up.

"No. Narayan, let Alaric take him." Cassie turned to Alaric, her eyes pleading with him to take her cousin.

Alaric was torn. He was forced to choose between protecting his Mate and saving her cousin. Every molecule in his body screamed at him to take his Mate home, not to leave her side. But, he couldn't take them both together and Alex desperately needed immediate attention. Since the fastest form of transport was by air, and he had the only pair of wings, he grudgingly nodded in favour of the latter.

Both Cassie and Abby sighed with relief as they hovered over Alex protectively, shielding him from the bitter wind.

## Eternal Covenant

It was getting harder to speak. Alex just couldn't find the energy to make his mouth move.

"Abby, I think I love you." He thought to himself as she gently stroked his forehead, her worried eyes never leaving his face.

"I love you too."

Confusion resonated in Alex's large expressive eyes.

Brain fade. He must be suffering some form of delirium from lack of blood or shock. Although, he could have sworn he heard Abby speak to him *in his mind*.

"You did," she answered him aloud, a little sheepishly.

Alex cocked his head to examine Abby more carefully. His tongue felt like it had been glued to the roof of his mouth, attempting to speak only ended in garbled noises. "*How is that possible? Why can I hear you in my head?*"

"*We created a blood bond when I took your blood. Does that upset you?*" she asked him silently, her past rejection issues rearing their ugly head causing her stomach to do back flips in the seconds she waited for his reply.

Alex dragged his hand to hers, linking their fingers together. "*I just told you I loved you, and I meant it,*" he vowed, as though that was the only answer that mattered.

"Abby, is everything okay?" Cassie asked anxiously as a tear rolled down the vampire's cheek, her joyous almost hysterical giggle seemingly out of place for their current situation. Maybe with her mind reading abilities she was somehow experiencing Alex's delirious euphoria from the healing hormone, Cassie thought.

"Everything is great," Abby assured her. Sniffing back her tears, she leaned over to give Alex a soft kiss on his very blue and ice cold lips. He was shivering so violently she worried he might be having a reaction to the healing.

Pulling him tighter against her, her lukewarm body couldn't offer enough heat to stop him from going into hypothermia. She rubbed his arms, his legs, chest, cheeks, anywhere she could reach, rubbing with her vampire speed, desperate to build enough friction to warm him. As she did, she listened carefully to the beat of his heart, now tuned to the beat of her own. At the first sign of a stutter to its rhythm she was ready to give him her blood.

She would not lose him.

"Leave the car here," Alaric ordered. "We'll collect it tomorrow." The only safe route home was through Savernake Forest. A much slower trek on foot but at least they couldn't be ambushed again. "Narayan, could you take Cassie? I don't want to take any more chances tonight. They might make another attempt at her," he hissed venomously.

"Of course," he replied instantly.

"Those fucking sons of bitches. I should never have believed the Guild would lift the bounty on Cassie," Alaric continued his self deprecating rant, his choice of expletive words eliciting a few startled looks. Maybe he'd adopted a few words from Alex's vocabulary. So what? It was hard not to when the language was so

## Eternal Covenant

liberally used and suited his current mood perfectly.

"Killing Cassie wasn't their objective." Abby reluctantly announced. She had picked up the thoughts of their vampire attackers, their minds loudly broadcasting their intentions.

"What do you mean?" Alaric asked, a quizzical frown between his brows, his eyes beginning to glitter with an otherworldly light once again.

"It appears the Guild have rescinded the order to kill Cassie, that wasn't a lie. But, they have issued a new order." Looking between Cassie and Alex anxiously she continued. "The Guild wants to capture Cassie alive, and they want Alex."

"What?" Cassie's head was spinning. Why would they want to kidnap her and Alex? What possible reason would they have, except

"Oh my god," Cassie gripped Alaric's arm as the world shifted on its axis. "It's my blood," she uttered breathlessly, on the point of hyperventilating. "My blood is the Key isn't it? I carry the immortality gene that would make Ahriman immortal. He wants my blood."

Cassie doubled over to put her head between her knees in an attempt to avoid the embarrassment of fainting.

A violent growl erupted from Alaric's chest. His jaw clenched with enough force to fracture bone. The audible crack barely registered in his conscious thought until Cassie's gasp drew his attention to his re-setting jaw. His eyes blazed in his darkened face, deep blue flames of determination, dominance and retribution.

Alaric rose over Cassie, the width of his angel's wings shadowing her as he wrapped his arms around her comfortingly. She could feel his power flowing through him, the strength that was so much a part of him, wrapping around her, sheltering her. Protecting her.

"Why would they be after Alex, if it's my blood Ahriman needs?" she probed, her heart still hammering in her chest.

"We can only assume that Ahriman doesn't know which one of you carries the gene." Narayan replied, his large frame moving to stand behind Abby and Alex, his eyes locking with Alaric's, mirroring the same determination to protect them. They were his family now too.

Alaric turned Cassie in his arms to look at her, his hands reaching for her pale face, threading his fingers through the golden tendrils of hair which had escaped her elegant twist in the frigid breeze. His stalwart conviction tempered the bubbling undercurrent of fear amongst them.

"I won't let Ahriman get anywhere near you or Alex. I promise." Despite his exterior mask of calm, he couldn't quell the raging sea of trepidation building within. His most primitive instincts to protect his Mate were being stirred to fever pitch.

Cassie cuddled up against him and rested her head on his chest. With a heavy sigh she pulled herself together. This was no time for a pity party. Things could be a lot worse right now, she reminded herself.

"Time to go," Alaric ordered, lifting Alex's limp and barely conscious body from the ground.

"Did any of the Guild attackers survive?" Cassie asked as they marched to the edge of the forest.

## Eternal Covenant

"One human sniper," Alaric answered, his top lip curled back revealing his protruding canines. "He won't get far though. He shot the Lycan's Clan Alpha. They won't rest until they've caught him."

"But, what about the human bodies? They don't disintegrate into dust like the vampires," she asked him, breathing heavily between every other word. She had always considered herself to be reasonably fit but keeping up with the pace these vampires set and talking tested her lungs abilities to draw in enough air to do both at the same time.

"Lycans are experts at covering crime scenes and body disposal. Even the best CSI team won't find a single piece of evidence by the time they're through cleaning the area. That's how they've managed to stay hidden from the world for so long."

"And the people inside the pub? Surely not everyone in there was Lycan. How do they hide all this from them? Even if they couldn't see what was going on out here, they could quite clearly hear the fighting and gunfire," she asked when they reached the edge of the forest.

"You worry too much love," Alaric chastised, one corner of his mouth curling into an adorable lopsided grin. "Mrs Harlow or one of the other females will take care of it."

"Take care of it, how?" she asked suspiciously. "Will those humans become the main course at the Clan's next banquet?"

Alaric and Narayan laughed. Abby was still new to all this too to know quite what to think and shrugged her shoulders when Cassie looked in her direction. "No love. The female Lycan's can't shift into wolf form but they do have their own gifts. They can wipe the memories of humans. Those people in there tonight will wake up tomorrow and have no recollection of anything that happened.

"Well, that's good to know." At least she could rest assured that there wasn't going to be any 'exotic' meat kebabs or funky roast de Homosapien served at their wedding.

Alex's convulsive shivers abruptly ceased as he finally passed out.

"Alaric, you really need to go. Alex isâ!" Abby couldn't finish the thought.

He was fading.

"Go. Quickly," Cassie urged him. "We're safe in the forest, now go." A fresh injection of fear crawled beneath her skin. Alex had always been there for her. He was her friend, her protector, often her adversary and the only family she had, until now. She couldn't imagine her life without him.

He had to make it.

The pain in Cassie's eyes trebled Alaric's anger.

He was going to enjoy killing Ahriman, very slowly. He'd start by peeling away one layer of skin at a timeâ just as soon as they discovered the identity he was masquerading. The longer it was taking to find him, the more pain he wanted to inflict on something, anything, just to let of steam.

At this rate, if his anger and frustration continued to increase, it was highly likely he could reverse global warming and freeze over the polar ice caps with the power that threatened to explode from him.

## Eternal Covenant

"We'll just be a few minutes behind you," Narayan told him as Alaric's silvery wings launched him into the air with Alex's limp body in his arms.

Alaric watched As Cassie climbed on Narayan's back and disappeared into the forest.

For now, at least, she was safe.



## Chapter 26

### Chapter 26

Alex sat on the couch by the fire. His complexion no longer pasty but still not yet back to its characteristic tan glow. He'd taken three pints of blood and could have used a fourth if they hadn't run out of O negative bags. However, three was enough to get him out of danger. It would take him a few days for his body to recover and replace the rest naturally. Until then he had strict orders to take things quietly. Between Mrs Philpot and Cassie fussing over him during the day, and Abby fussing at night, he doubted if they'd even let him wipe his own arse.

Abby's fussing he could handle. After they'd given him the first two pints of blood, he'd come to. He was lying on this very same couch wrapped in Abby's arms. She'd cuddled him, kissed him and stroked her fingers through his hair and refused let go of him until the first rays of sun sent her ruefully retreating below ground. If he could've escaped Mrs Philpot's eagle eye, he would have been perfectly content to sleep the day away curled up next to her.

"Alex, I'm so sorry about last night. This was all my fault. If I had've listened to my instincts and stayed home, you wouldn't have been hurt."

"I knew something was up with you last night. You just weren't yourself."

"Yes, well, in my own defence I didn't put two and two together until it was too late. I assumed I was feeling anxious because I hadn't left the Manor for so long. If I had've thought for even a minute that I was having one of 'those feelings', I would've insisted we stay home last night. I promise."

"Don't beat yourself up, it wasn't your fault. Besides, the night wasn't a total disaster. After all, you did accomplish your main goal." His bashful smile managed to bring the first hint of colour back to his cheeks.

"That's true," she replied unashamedly with a cheeky smile. "You make a wonderful couple." Cassie plonked herself on the couch next to him to give him a huge hug. "I'm really pleased for you. I honestly don't think I've ever seen you so happy."

"I don't think I ever have been. When I'm with her, I feel completeâ" he paused to scrutinize his feelings, not something Alex was accustomed to doing. "And, when we're apart it feels like a part of me is missing. Even now while she's sleeping in her chambers down stairs, I feel her absence. It's like I can't breathe properly. I don't know how else to describe it," he explained, his tone mildly exasperated with his inability to adequately communicate the depth of his feelings.

"You don't need to explain it to me," she smiled sympathetically. "I know exactly how you feel. I felt exactly the same way with Alaric until I took his blood."

"What changed when you drank from him?" Alex asked, his curiosity sparked partly by the need to compare experiences and partly for scientific evaluation. His brain never stopped ticking over, analysing, compartmentalising and accumulating information.

"Since I drank Alaric's blood, I no longer have that feeling of separation. I feel him with me all the time, as if he has become part of my soul. I can tune into how he is feeling at any moment. I know if he's happy, sad, angry," she frowned. "Right now he's angry. Very angry. He's been pacing the study for the past hour waiting for the Professor and Lilith to get here."

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"That would explain the minor earthquakes I've been feeling all morning. I thought my muscles were having more convulsive fits," he joked, breaking the building tension with his light hearted quip. "Have they had any luck tracking down Ahriman?"

"I don't know. Hopefully they'll be here soon and we can find outâ before the ceiling starts caving in on us," she added as the house trembled again.

The thought of volatile situations brought to mind another question she'd been meaning to ask. "Alex, what does Abby think of Lilith. With her telepathy, has she gained any insight into her. I mean, on hand Lilith seems eager to help but on the other, she's always so, soâ"

"Bitchy. I think the word you're looking for is bitchy."

"That's the one. Thank you. What does Abby think of her?"

"Abby hasn't met Cruella yet." Cassie rolled her eyes at his choice of yet another 'canine' associated word to describe Lilith.

"What? Are you sure?"

"Positive. Lilith has never been here after dark on the nights that Abby has."

"Here they are now, and not a moment too soon," she informed him. Moving to the window, Cassie watched Lilith's car disappear from view as it rounded the fountain in the driveway.

It bothered her that she was so dependent on the protection of others. What bothered her more was that Alex was now in as much danger as she was, just for the privilege of being her cousin. She had no self-defence skills, and now that she was pregnant, she doubted she'd allowed to learn any. At least not until after the baby was born.

Her mind waded through scenarios of their unknown future, both good and bad. All of which depended on the news the Professor and Lilith were bringing with them. Had they found Ahriman? Did they know his identity? If so, who was he and how soon could they get to him to eliminate him as a threat. If they hadn't found himâ how do you eliminate a threat you don't see coming?

Minutes later, the Professor's drawn and worried face answered that question for her. He appeared to have aged beyond his years in a matter of days. The stress was taking its toll on him, but not so Lilith.

Lilith appeared relaxed. Dressed uncustomarily casually in loose fitting trousers and a knitted top, she was the epitome of relaxed elegance.

"Elijah. Glad you could get here so early. What can you tell me," Alaric greeted, concern crinkling his brows together.

"Nothing I'm afraid," he answered, his voice tired and strained. He'd been working with the Alliance for weeks to uncover as much information as they could about Ahriman and the new head of the Guild, someone named Morgan. Both of whom seemed to exist in name only. The trail of fragmented leads they received all led to a dead end. He was at his wits end to know where to go from here.

After the ambush at the Drunken Duck, Alaric had called Saladin and enlisted the help of Dray, who immediately had his team double their efforts to acquire information from their network of spies. Needless to

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say, after flushing out the Guild spies and the more questionable and untrustworthy informants, aka scum of the earth, the streets now had a few less undesirables lurking about this morning than they did yesterday.

All to no avail. The Guild remained one step ahead of them.

"I don't want to add insult to injury," Mrs Philpot said as she entered the room behind them, "But, we have some more bad news."

Opening a path through the doorway Mrs Philpot entered the room with Marcus in tow, towering over her, his face grim. She stepped aside ushering him to relate his message.

All eyes turned to Marcus but his gaze rested squarely on Alaric. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a set of keys. "I brought your car back," he offered hesitantly, placing them on the sideboard inside the door.

"That's obviously not the news you came to tell us." Alaric surmised calmly, using the least menacing voice he could manage, not wanting to scare the kid any more than his formidable vampire exterior was already doing. He had known Marcus all his life. Marcus had spent all his school holidays here since he was five, but he had only ever known Alaric as kindly and gentle, never what he was now, aggressive and borderline terrifying. He knew he was, even Cassie was looking at him with troubled eyes.

"No," he stuttered, looking to his grandmother for support. Mrs Philpot gave him a reassuring maternal smile and nodded to continue. "Our Alpha is not expected to live through the morning. He is asking that you attend his death bed. He needs you to preside over his succession."

"He's expecting trouble?" Alaric asked. "Who has he chosen to be his successor?"

"I don't know. He refuses to announce his choice until you arrive."

Alaric's mood shifted from moody grey to stormy black. There was no way he was leaving Cassie and Alex unprotected, and that is exactly what they would be if he went to the Lycan Clan in Cadley. With the sun up, neither Narayan nor Abby could be of any help to them if there was any trouble.

Cassie crossed the room to Alaric's side. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her into a covetous embrace. His anxiety receded with her soft, warm body pressed hard against his.

"You have to go to see Mr Harlow," she urged gently.

"No," he bit out defiantly, his eyes glittering wildly with frustration.

"I don't believe you have much choice." Lilith piped up, her presence almost forgotten amongst the group once again. "If Brian Harlow dies before he announces his successor, there will be a blood feud between the Lycans. We need everyone in the Alliance to be focused on eliminating Ahriman and the Guild, not each other."

Logic. He hated logic.

"Come with me." Cassie grabbed Alaric's hand. "Excuse us for just a few minutes, would you?" she called back as she dragged Alaric from the room.

Alaric followed closely at her side into the study. Locking the door behind them, she pushed him down onto the sofa and seated herself over him, straddling his thighs. Alaric slid his hips forward enough to seat her

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weight over his groin and the thick ridge that was swiftly swelling beneath her.

"What are you doing?" he asked as he cupped his hand at the nape of her neck, drawing her closer, hungry for a taste of her lips. "You tell me to go, and then you drag me in here to have your way with me?" he chuckled darkly, his pent up aggression finding its outlet in the warmth of his Mate's touch.

"You know exactly what I'm doing," she answered biting his bottom lip playfully. "You need to get your shit together and I'm here to help you.

"Besides, since the first night I came to this house and sat with you on this sofa, I've wanted to have sex with you, right here on this spot." The roll of her hips along the length of the zipper had him instantly reaching to remove her clothing from the waist up. A groan of pleasure rumbled through her as his lips and teeth latched onto her breast.

"Well, love. I never want you to be disappointed," he growled as he switched to her neglected breast.

"We need to make this quick though. They'll get suspicious if we're gone too long," she drawled amorously.

Lifting herself off him, she proceeded to remove her remaining clothes. She watched with greedy eyes as he too, stripped down to nothing but glorious skin and hard, thick cock.

He opened his arms for her, lowering her once again in his lap, spreading her thighs further to accommodate his large taught frame beneath her and took her mouth hungrily.

His kiss stole her breath. She was alive with sensation. Electricity whipped his body into a frenzy as the friction of her body against his intensified.

As his tongue slid deeper into the heated depths of her mouth, he pulled her more intimately against him, rubbing through her moist exterior folds, grinding her clit against the iron hard ridge of his lethal arousal until she was begging for his shaft to breach her hot tight entrance.

"Tell me what you want, love."

"I want you," she answered breathlessly, desperately.

"Tell me where. Where do you want me?"

"I want you inside me. Deep inside me, where you belong." Her gasp turned into a long, sweetly pained moan as he shifted her weight above him.

The head of his hard flesh slowly penetrated the heavenly confines beyond. Cassie lowered herself further, sheathing him inside her. His cock throbbed, buried to the hilt inside her heated channel. The way she clenched around him, her walls fisting him, holding him increasingly tighter as he began to move within her, had him on the edge instantly.

His balls were drawn up so tight he could feel the cum rising, building within them. Alaric gripped her hips as she rode his cock hard, her inner muscles gripping him like a vice as he shuttled deeper and deeper within her with every thrust.

A growl ripped from his chest, his hips lifting off the sofa, his back arching. He buried himself in her completely as he exploded inside her with the force of an atomic bomb, releasing the pressure valve on his

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repressed anger and frustration.

His fangs sank into flesh seeking the hot, wet crimson gold that flowed like the sweetest nectar.

"Do you feel better?" she asked him sweetly, still shuddering from the last ripples of her orgasm.

"Mmm." Alaric licked closed the wounds on her neck in a slow and easy manner.

*"If you want to tame an angry bear never poke him with a stick. Instead offer him his favourite comfort food."* She cited with smug satisfaction.

"I think you've been hanging around Narayan too much sweetheart. You're starting to quote him." It took a moment, but the penny finally dropped. "Are you telling me I'm the angry bear that needed to be tamed, and my comfort food is sex?" he asked shaking his head, amused at the analogy.

"That's exactly what I'm saying," she proudly smirked. "But, you feel better now, less homicidal?" She quizzed.

"I don't know whether to thank you or be annoyed with you."

"I'd stick with being thankful. If you go with annoyed, we'd need to have make-up sex and then we could be here all day," she laughed.

At the mention of make-up sex Alaric's cock began to twitch, still buried deep inside her.

"And, we can't be here all day when you need to go and see Brian Harlow. He needs you." She emphasised in a pleading tone but couldn't resist the temptation of nibbling at his earlobe.

"I think I'll go with annoyed," he grouched, pinching the dark pink nub of her nipple between his fingers, rolling it gently until she rocked harder against him.

"Stop that." She berated. "I'm supposed to be taming your beast, you're not supposed to be temping mine," her pleasure filled moan cancelling out the chastisement.

It was too late. Her inner *beast* was well and truly alive and careening along *'the world can wait'* road towards the precipice on *'please don't stop'* ridge.

Alaric lifted himself from the sofa gracefully, her legs still wrapped around him.

"What are you doing," she gasped, her over-sensitised clit rubbing on the crest of his pelvis with each step he took sending jolts of renewed need vibrating through her body.

"This is my study, and that is my desk," he indicated with a mischievous glint in his eyes at the enormous piece of furniture he was heading towards. "And, I've always wanted to have sex on my desk."

"Well, far be it for me to be the only one to live out a fantasy in this room," she answered breathlessly.

"Sweetheart, this is only the tip of the iceberg of fantasies that I want to fulfil with you in this room," he promised, his smooth voice liquid silk in its hypnotic perfection, its beckoning low pitch, caressing her from the inside out.

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A whirlpool of desire deep in her soul spiralled to the surface. Her hands lifted, her slim fingers sliding along his arms to his shoulders, gliding to the nape of his neck and into his hair, pulling his mouth down on hers, aggressively seeking his tongue, tasting him possessively.

Laying her on the desk, Alaric moved over her, locking his hard unforgiving body against her, with wild savagery, his arms wrapped tightly enough around her to steal the breath from her lungs.

He returned her scorching kiss with ferocity. His body was pure strength against hers, hot and hard and burning her with wildfire.

Reaching between their bodies Alaric circled a finger around her swollen clit. Cassie groaned a fevered gasp of delight, lifting her hips into the caress. Alaric sank his steel hard erection deeper into the liquid silk within the burning centre of her tight little body with pulsing urgency, her body craving, demanding he deepen his strokes.

He surged forward against her, driving his hips between her thighs until he was situated tightly against her, his broad torso casting her into shadow beneath him. She made an abandoned sound of pleasure, her hips meeting him thrust for thrust.

Cassie ignited beneath him. Her back arched in one long inconceivable spasm. Her hoarse wail of ecstasy snapping the last thread of restraint he had left. Locked inside her succulent core, she milked him of every last drop.

Arms and legs twisted together in a boneless, utterly sated manner, his head rested on her chest atop of what was now an extremely disorganized shuffle of papers and books on the desk, expanding to cover a two metre radius around them on the floor.

"Will you go and see Brian Harlow now?" she asked lazily.

Alaric growled softly against her.

Re-entering the sitting room a few minutes later, the gathered group relaxed with a sigh of relief when firstly, Alaric agreed to go with Marcus and Mrs Philpot to see Brian Harlow, and secondly, because he no longer looked like he was ready to kill something or someone by dismemberment.

"So," Lilith said. "Who's up for some tea? Since Mrs Philpot has left for a while, I've made some. I have to warn you though, it's not as good as hers but it should do the trick. It's a special relaxation blend, to calm everyone's frazzled nerves," she offered cheerfully.

Alex eyed her with suspicion, but nodded. Still lacking a significant amount of blood in his system, he was left in a constant state of fatigue and dehydration. As such he was not inclined, in this case, to decline the offer.

"Thank you Lilith, that's very kind of you," the Professor replied, a tired smile touching his drawn face.

The Professor, Alex and Cassie each took their cup graciously and swallowed a mouthful of the most disgusting tea they had ever tasted. The bitter strong tea tasted of dirty socks, almost triggering Cassie's gag reflex and causing Alex and the Professor to both purse their eyes and lips closed tightly to force the vile liquid down their throats.

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"Very interesting flavour," the Professor coughed. He stared into the cup at the remaining tea, wishing there was a pot plant near by he could offload the other half of his cup into. No such luck.

"It took me ages to find just the right blend. Make sure you drink it all up," she encouraged enthusiastically."

Not wanting to disappoint Lilith when she was obviously trying to do a good deed, they each did their best to down another couple of mouthfuls of the tea.

"I feel strange," the Professor stated a few minutes later. His body suddenly felt weak and heavy and unresponsive to his brain's instructions to move any muscle groups.

"What *exactly* was in that tea?" Alex growled, as his body also failed to respond to the command to rise up and choke the breath out of Lilith.

"Just a mild paralytic sedative, it affects mainly your extremities," she answered in a jovial tone. "It's fairly short acting and completely harmless. I wanted you all to be very relaxed when you meet my *friend*."

"What are you talking about?" Cassie asked, attempting to rise to confront her but she too was unable to make her muscles respond.

"I didn't tell you, did I?" she snickered with contemptuous delight. "A very special friend of mine has been dying to meet you, so he's going to pay you a visitâ And, he's right on time."

Alex, Cassie and the Professor exchanged uneasy looks as the sound of a helicopter approached, growing louder until finally the engine stopped.

It had landed on the Manor's lawns.

"What the hell is going on?" Cassie demanded, her mind racing, her heart pounding.

"Who exactly is this friend of yours?" Alex bit out at her.

"That would be me," answered a dark headed man as he entered the room.

"Detective Renkin?" the Professor asked, confusion suffusing his weary features.

"That is one name I go by, but you may know me better as Ahriman."

"Oh, and Alex, remember when I said I'd make you pay for the way you treated me? Well, today is payday." Lilith sneered, scraping her fingernail down his cheek hard enough to leave a welt.

Alex recited a string of curses as the veil of deception was lifted and everything suddenly became clear.

Fuck.

## Chapter 27

### Chapter 27

Alaric pulled into the car park at the Drunken Duck where two heavily armed Lycans waited anxiously at the door.

"Mr Neumann, we're so glad you could make it," Oliver Harlow, Brian Harlow's younger son greeted as he quickly ushered them towards the building, through the crowded pub and towards the Alpha's private quarters below. Mrs Philpot and Marcus remained upstairs in the company of what appeared to be the entire clan.

The air was thick with grief and tension as he passed by the crowd. The sound of muffled voices and discrete sniffles was a stark contradiction to the jovial melee of the night before.

The small bedroom was cramped with family members and Clan Council, every face grim.

"Alaric, thank you for coming." Hobbling over with a solemn greeting, Damon's mouth was drawn into a thin line. Worry and pain from his own injury taking its toll. The wound on his calf continued to ooze through his bandaging. Under normal circumstances as a Lycan, he would heal completely from his injuries within a matter of hours, no matter how bad the wound. Unfortunately the use of liquid silver in the bullet had muted his ability to regenerate.

Lycans, like vampires were supernatural beings, but there was nothing in *this* world which did not conform to the laws of the universe. Nature had seen fit to create them with a weakness in their design. They may live well beyond human years and be immune to mortal susceptibilities but they were not infallible, and in the case of the Lycans, their supernatural abilities were only available to them under specific conditions.

For a Lycan to become the Clan's next Alpha, he must be given that privilege directly from the current Alpha or, in the event that the Alpha dies before passing on the mantel, the contending Lycans must fight to the death. The last one to remain alive receives the Alpha title and the gift that comes with it. His normal Lycan abilities: speed, strength and healing, all become heightened. An Alpha must choose his successor wisely. If the wrong Lycan succeeded him, all that power could be disastrous for the Clan.

Alaric levelled his gaze at Brian. His frail body barely clung to life.

The old man's face broke into an awe struck, reverent smile. "I've known you my whole life, and I've never seen you before," he said, reaching for Alaric's hand, fascinated by the angelic glow that surrounded him.

Alaric was a vampire first and foremost. But, before that he was Sammael, an Angel of Death performing the duty of sending souls into the next world at the time of their death. His body may have been human at one time, but his soul was always that of an angel. Becoming a vampire had fused his soul to his human flesh to become the perfect exoskeleton. His flawless soul gave him an unearthly radiant appeal to his appearance, and although his angelic wings once again became an integral part of who he was, they were only visible if he willed them to be. However, his angelic glow was clearly visible to those whose souls had begun to loosen from their earthly body, just prior to death.

"Alaric, could I ask you a favour?"

"Of course."



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"Will you help me cross over? Can you still do that?"

"It would be my honour, old friend," Alaric reassured.

Brian Harlow relaxed back into his pillows, his strength foundering.

"Where are the Council members?" Brian asked, waving them to come closer as Alaric took a step aside.

"We're here, father," Damon answered him, stepping up to take Alaric's place at his side, joined by his younger brother, Oliver and four other Lycans. Each man crowded around nervously, anxious for their Alpha's decree.

Brian looked each man in the eye as he addressed them.

"Each one of you have leadership qualities and could fill the role of Alpha," he began haltingly, a soft rattle in his lungs. "It has not been an easy decision for me to make but I believe I have chosen correctly."

He coughed weakly, a trickle of blood escaping the corner of his mouth.

"Damon, Oliver, give me your hand."

The two men did as instructed.

"Damon. You are an excellent military leader and tactician. You have proven yourself many times in combat and you are greatly admired by your men. Your skills and your sharp analytical brain are likely to be needed with increasing frequency in the times to come.

"Oliver. We are moving into dangerous times. The Guild and Ahriman bring a threat that we haven't faced in a very long time. The Lycans need a leader who is strong but level headed and who is not afraid to make the tough decisions. It is likely that the Lycans will be called upon not just to defend and protect our own kind, but also the world in general. The next Alpha is likely to encounter a greater diplomatic role than ever before."

Brian coughed again through a groan of pain, taking a few deep rattling breaths before continuing.

"You will both be needed to defend and lead us in your own way, but only one of you can be Alpha." With that, he drew Oliver's hand toward him, biting down into the soft tissue between his thumb and forefinger and into his palm, marking him as Alpha.

Damon and Oliver exchanged a look of surprise which Damon quickly covered with a congratulatory smile. Everyone had expected Damon to be chosen. He was the older brother, a Captain in the Special Forces and a natural born leader.

Brian drew his older son's attention. "Damon. You see everything as black and white. You deal with every situation with a great deal of gusto, best suited for the military. But, Oliver sees the shades of grey and understands the subtleties of dealing with the general public. He is the better diplomat. If I could make you both Alpha I would, but my decision is final. Oliver will be Alpha."

"Of course father. I fully support your choice. Oliver will make a great Alpha." He removed his hand from his father's grip. He needed some air. "Please excuse me for a moment."

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All eyes watched as Damon strode from the room and marched upstairs. He had not been prepared to be overlooked as the next Alpha. He had spent years working to prove himself to his father and the Clan.

Taking the back exit from the pub, he sat on an empty keg by the door. He was happy for his brother. He'd meant what he said, Oliver would make a great Alpha. The decision had just come as a shock. In a few weeks when his leg had healed, he would return to his Command and it would be as if nothing had changed, he reassured himself.

Right now he just needed some space and some time to process everything.

A short while later Alaric joined him, placing a consolatory hand on his shoulder.

"Your father has died."

"Yes, I know. And, Oliver is now Alpha."

"The other Council members are with him now, helping him while he receives his Gift." It was a very painful process. Nobody understood how the process worked exactly, but assumed that while the human half of the Alpha passed on, the wolf half of him is transferred to the new Alpha, doubling his natural abilities.

The two men stared out at the woods, neither seeing what was in front of them, each lost in their thoughts.

x-x-x-x-x

"Alejandro Delgado. Cassandra McLennan. It's a pleasure to finally meet you," Ahriman greeted in a jovial manner, as though he was meeting a long lost relative or family friend.

"Can't say I feel the same." Cassie replied, her eyes locking onto Lilith.

Traitor.

No wonder they kept running into dead ends in their search to find Ahriman, The one person with access to all the Alliance's Intel, was planting false information and passing onto Ahriman and the Guild everything the Alliance was doing, everything they suspected, subverting them at every turn.

Cassie had reached the point where she considered bitch-slapping an acceptable form exercise. If she could just get her arms to move.

"Fucking slapper. Isn't there somewhere else you should be?" Alex addressed Lilith. "The kitchen? The sewer? The fires of Hell?"

"You take that back!" she demanded. Her fulminating glare and tone so saccharine, it should have tipped him off that his testicular health was in serious peril. "Apologise now."

"No."

"You will apologise." She ordered again, her fists clenching tightly, her eyes narrowing into deadly slits of barely controlled rage.

"No," he repeated in a slow, deliberate tone, one might use on a very irritating small child. "Disappointment is a bitch, get used to it."

## Eternal Covenant

Lilith took another step towards Alex, her trailing knee launching a direct blow forcefully into his groin.

"I'm sorry," he bit out through gritted teeth, the pain sucker punching him with every breath. "I meant to say: Shouldn't you be back in the lab getting your bolts tightened, you fucking whore bitch?"

Lilith raised her hand but was stopped mid swing by Ahriman's grip. "We want him whole and unharmed." He reminded her calmly.

Lilith was seething, itching to make him pay for his insults. "Prick!" she yelled at him.

"Yes, well. I have to admit it Lilith, of the two of us, you have the bigger dick."

Lilith thrashed in Ahriman's grip, a snarling growl of anger and hatred tearing from her throat.

"Now, now, pumpkin. Calm down. We don't have much time here. You can have your fun with him another time," he promised.

Lilith paced the room in circles to rein in her hostility.

"That was really smooth, very mature." Cassie chastised Alex.

"I thought so," he rasped through gritted teeth, unable to move his hands to rub the pain from his balls.

"You're funny," Ahriman laughed. "Isn't he funny?" he asked Lilith, moving to stand over Alex, eyeing him as one would do a new species of bug.

"Side splitting," she answered dryly, one hundred and fifty percent unamused.

"I think I'm going to enjoy having you around for a while."

"What the hell are you talking about, dumb fuck?"

Ahriman *tsk'ed* Alex. "Come now, I think you'll agree, I'm hardly dumb. But, *you're* not as smart as you think you are," Ahriman drawled in a malevolently gentle intonation. "I know something that you don't," he declared only inches from Alex's face, his finger tracing the length of the angry red welt on his cheek.

Alex and Cassie shared a look, both dubious and intrigued.

"If you behave yourself and play nice, I won't hurt your *sister* too badly. Misbehave and she dies. Do you understand?"

Ahriman's cold eyes conveyed the chilling truth. This was no empty threat. He would carry out his promise with callous satisfaction.

The synapses in Alex's brain misfired. "What did you say? Sister?"

"You didn't think I rescued your things from your apartment and replaced your toothbrush, cleaned your hair brush and bought you a new razor, because I wanted to do something nice for you, did you?" Lilith mocked as Cassie's jaw flapped open.

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"Lilith has been my most loyal supporter," Ahriman confessed, drawing her closer for a peck on the cheek. "She has collected DNA samples from each of you."

"That's why you were going through my toiletries and my underwear." Alex deducted, dividing his anger between Lilith and himself for having not suspected her earlier for the depth to her perverse deceit.

"Your DNA showed conclusively that you shared the same father. Alaric's blood sample that Lilith collected, also showed him to be a blood relative of yours. So naturally, when it was confirmed that Alaric is actually Sammaelâ '!"

"Are you shitting me?" Alex cut him off.

"You're lying, I can tell, your lips are moving." Cassie accused. "Alex, you were justified in all your comments about Lilith. My only criticism, I don't think you were harsh enough."

Could it be true?

Despite all their lies and deception, could Ahriman and Lilith actually be telling the truth?

It made sense. Disregarding the different skin tones, hair and eye colours, they had numerous physical and personality characteristics too similar to be explained away by having been raised together.

For their entire lives, Alex and Cassie had been led to believe they were merely cousins, and not even blood related cousins, due to the fact that Cassie's father had been adopted into Alex's mother's family as a child. They knew that Jonathan McLennan and his adoptive sister Renata were close, since she had lived with Jonathan and his wife Anna, raising Alex and Cassie together *like* brother and sister.

Did Anna know of the affair her father had with Renata? Cassie thought. Was it an ongoing affair or was it a once off drunken tryst from which Alex was the result? These were questions to which she would never learn the answers.

The past was irrelevant. What mattered now was that Alex was her brother, not her cousin.

She had a brother.

A tear of happiness escaped her eye, closely followed by a tear of despair. If Alex was her brother, then he also carried the immortality gene. Ahriman now had two of them to fulfil his demented 'take over the world' plot.

Panic seized her. The drug they had been given robbed her of her ability to move, to struggle. Her pulse spiked. She could do little but watch with dread as each second passed and Ahriman advanced on her, his surgical knife glinting in the morning sunlight.

They needed help and they needed it fast.

They had no way of reaching Narayan or Abby, sleeping in the lower level of the Manor, or the safety of the underground tunnels that led into Savernake Forest and Cadley.

Alex yelled a string of curses at Ahriman as he fought against the paralysis in his limbs. His fingers moved, then his toes. He shuffled a foot as he watched the unfolding horror in front of him.

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He couldn't protect Cassie, his sister.

"Where is the spear," Ahriman demanded.

"I have no idea," Cassie answered, her eyes clenched shut as she felt the edge of the knife slice into the skin of her forearm. "I swear. I don't know where Alaric took the spear," she whimpered.

Blood welled in the cut, overflowing, dripping into the chalice Ahriman's henchman held against her arm.

Ahriman's gaze shifted to Alex. "I'll ask the question again. Where is the spear?"

Alex growled. His rage had pushed him beyond the point of inventive insults. "Let her go, asshole. We don't know where it is. Let her go. My blood's as good as hers. Take mine, let her go" he pleaded.

"I would consider your proposal," Ahriman said, "except you seem to be lacking in the blood department right now, thanks to that incompetentâ.what was it you referred to him as?" he quizzed, searching his memory for the term. "Fuck knuckle. Besides, I have other plans for you, Alex."

Ahriman dragged the blade across Cassie's arm once again. A second line of blood flowed into the cup, slowly filling it.

Cassie's scream tore a hole in the Professor's soul. How could this have happened? How had he not seen Lilith's deception? Was he so blind to a pretty face and a kind word that he couldn't see the truth when it was staring him in the face. With hindsight he recognised all the clues. A fat lot of good that did them now.

"I will ask this question one last time," his dark eyes shifting menacingly to the Professor. "Where is the spear?"

"Only Alaric knows where it's hidden."

Cassie screamed as the knife sliced through her arm a third time.

"You won't get away with this?" The Professor seethed, his gaze locked onto the full cup of blood in Ahriman's hand.

"I already have!" His malicious chuckle, cold and callous, sent shivers down their spines.

Ahriman lifted the cup to his lips and drank down every last drop of Cassie's warm blood.

"Not yet you haven't." The Professor promised him defiantly.

The drug was beginning to wear off. Feeling and movement was coming back into their hands and feet, quickly spreading up their arms and legs.

Just one more minute.

Ahriman dropped the cup, scuttling beneath the lounge as he collapsed onto all fours, his body shaking violently.

His transformation was beginning.

## Eternal Covenant

Ahriman's face turned toward Lilith, his eyes turning a crimson red, his whole body seemed to shimmer in a hazy aura.

"Take them, now," he ordered the two goons standing close by, his voice dry and raspy. Power radiated from him in increments, the intensity increasing by the second.

Cassie fought weakly as she was hefted like a bag of wheat over one goon's shoulder, her muscles still failing to register her brain's command to move more than the barest of margins.

Alex let out a vicious war cry, focussing all his energy into making his body move, thrashing to break the grip of the second goon's hold, dropping him to the floor with a painful thud, landing on the point of his shoulder and face.

"Fucker," he groaned, spitting blood from his cut lip in time to see a fist heading straight for his face.

"Alex." Cassie cried. His limp body was dragged out through the French doors, across the patio and lawns, towards the awaiting helicopter. Lilith smiled sweetly and waved as the chopper lifted off.

To her right Ahriman began chanting, his body radiated waves of malevolent energy, the magnitude so intense she began dry retching, in turn inspiring the goon carrying her to drop her in case she actually puked down his back.

Ahriman continued chanting until a circle formed on the lawn, filling with a murky haze, swirling lazily within the confines of the ring.

Cassie watched in horror as the repugnant mist smothered the lawn beneath it, the grass withering and dying on contact.

"I'm bait now? You want to blackmail Alaric into giving you the spear so you can complete your transformation, is that it?"

"Of course. What other need would I have to keep you alive?" Ahriman drawled, his voice much deeper now, closer to a gravelly hiss.

"It won't work. He'll never give you the spear," she fumed.

"Of course he will. He would do anything to save his *Mate*"

"I really don't like you." Cassie confessed.

"I'm glad we've got that out in the open. Put her in the circle," he hissed.

"No," she screamed. Cassie crawled to her knees, her arms and legs shaking with the effort to get away. Terror flooded her senses as thick strong arms lifted her at the waist and tossed her towards the circle. Adrenaline burst into her blood, blinding panic overcame her every thought. She prayed with every fibre of her being that Alaric could feel her distress.

The Professor watched from the doorway. He had ingested less of the poisoned tea than Cassie or Alex and was regaining the use of his limbs. Turning, he stumbled his way back towards the study.

## Eternal Covenant

He couldn't allow Ahriman to get his hands on the spear. Very soon he would be unstoppable, stronger and more powerful than even Alaric, and he would stop at nothing to find it, and use it on himself. The result then, was too frightening to even contemplate.

There was only one thing left to do.

x-x-x-x-x

The world around Alaric snap froze instantly as his power exploded. Cassie's terror bombarded his senses, overwhelming him with pain so intense he couldn't see straight, before it abated as quickly as it had struck.

He cursed himself for leaving her. What in the world had he been thinking?

He sent out his senses. Where was she? Nothing. He got nothing.

Panic mixed with rage.

Why couldn't he sense her?

His wings unfurled as he leapt into the sky. His power lashed the land and skies leaving behind him a path of falling snow, a frozen landscape and one stunned Lycan.

## Chapter 28

### Chapter 28

Alaric's powerful wings swept back as he crossed the border of Savernake forest, swooping in low to extricate Cassie from the noxious mist surrounding her, licking at her body as it swirled with cloying malevolence.

"Stop. It's a trap." she yelled.

Too late. He couldn't slow his momentum.

Cassie screamed as Alaric hit the barrier surrounding her. A loud, sickening thwack of bones cracking sounded as he hit the invisible force, ricocheting him off in a tumble to land nearly fifty feet away.

His inability to reach his Mate snapped the last shred of sane thought left in his brain. His inner demon surfaced with vengeance, a vicious growl erupting from his throat, morphing into a howl of rage as the scent of Cassie's blood reached his nose. His rage was an overriding force with a life all its own and bucked against his attempt to control it.

The mercenary took a sharp step backwards in disbelief as the winged being hit the ground and roared. The sound froze the blood in his veins, immobilised in fear he wished he had become an insurance salesman like his mother had asked him to. Too late now. His whole adult life was a succession of bad choices, the regrets too numerous to count, and now he had no more time to rectify any of them, he realised, as the enraged vampire ran at him with unearthly speed. He was royally fucked.

Cassie closed her eyes but she could not block out the sound of joints popping and tissue tearing. The man's terrified cry silenced as his head disengaged from his neck. She opened her eyes to see the two halves of the man's torso dropping from Alaric's grip, landing haphazardly between his already dismembered limbs.

Cassie closed her eyes again, distressed, not by the sight of the man being torn to pieces, but distressed that she felt unaffected by it. The satisfaction at seeing someone dead was something she never thought she could feel. She was the sort of person who rescued baby birds and fed the homeless, not someone who revelled in the suffering and torture others.

But then again, this was her family being threatened. Her *brother* had been beaten and kidnapped, her *Mate* was about to face-off with the ultimate demon spawn and her unborn child was also at risk. Her heart had hardened. Not only did she revel in suffering and torture of her captors, she intended to do everything in her power to help destroy them.

"Cassie!" The insanity in Alaric's eyes lifted as his gaze met hers, but were no less determined. Ahriman was a dead man walking.

"I'm fine," she reassured him, gesturing her hand toward Ahriman. "You deal with him. Worry about getting me out of this later."

Tentatively she extended her hand toward the invisible barrier. A sharp electrical shock stung her hand. More alarmingly, it swirled the mist at her feet which bubbled and boiled, clinging to her legs and reaching higher momentarily. The mist clung to her skin, an evil presence that leached into her pores, raking over nerve endings in a malignantly hostile fashion. She fought back the scream that was building in her throat.



## Eternal Covenant

"Set her free," Alaric demanded, stepping forward a couple of paces towards Ahriman.

He needed to get control of his rage, but the barrier that contained Cassie, blocked his connection to her, leaving him feeling unhinged. He hadn't realised how much he needed to feel her presence in his soul, to feel her emotions, her thoughts and her heart beat. Without it he felt lost and manic.

It was more important than ever to keep a clear head. He knew from experience that a battle fought with the heat of emotion, was a battle lost. He needed to harness his anger and channel it through cold hard logic.

"Nice to finally meet you too." Ahriman drawled sarcastically, earning him only a furious growl.

Considering how much trouble he'd caused Alaric and the Alliance, he was hoping for a bit more respect than that, at least an awe inspired gasp or a tremble of fear. Fear was beyond doubt, the most acceptable mark of respect in Ahriman's eyes, and if it wasn't offered freely, he was more than happy to draw that respect from anyone, in any manner he deemed fitting—torture, intimidation, blackmail, the list went on.

Alaric couldn't give a damn who he was. Right now all he wanted to know was how to release Cassie from her prison and get her somewhere safe. Then he'd deal with the arsehole who put her there.

"When you give me the spear, I'll gladly set her free," he answered smugly. Ahriman had spent years planning for this day, and so far everything was going so much better than he'd hoped. He had Alaric over a barrel, the ultimate blackmailing chip. He couldn't have planned it better if he'd tried. Not only did he have Alaric's *Mate*, but he also had her brother, that was a surprise. With the two of them, he had all the tools he needed to make himself a true immortal and open the portal to the underworld.

"I will never hand over the spear to you. But I promise you this, if you harm Cassie, I will make you pray for death."

"Do your best. You're no match for me." he sneered with a contemptuous hiss.

Ahriman's body shimmered. Ripples of heated energy rolled off him, his body concurrently appeared to grow larger, thicker, stronger.

"Yeah. This is what I'm talking about," he laughed with demented glee. The feel of all that power flowing through him was exhilarating, and that power was still growing.

"How did you get on my property?" Alaric demanded. The property was surrounded on three sides by Savernake Forest. The front border, along the road was protected by a Druid's ward. It should have been impossible for Ahriman to enter the Manor grounds, unless he was invited by a resident of the property, which was a possibility impossible to contemplate.

Ahriman laughed, more of an evil chuckle than a true laugh, sending a shiver down Alaric's spine.

"It would seem you have a loop hole in your protection spell. I took a chance that since your protection spell was created back in the days when aircraft weren't yet invented, that your property wouldn't be protected from above. And, what do you know? I was right." He scoffed.

"Getting you away from Cassie and Alex long enough for me to swoop in," he chuckled at his own pun, "took a bit more planning, but see how well that worked out too. I got my prizes, and I killed off one of the Alliance's strongest leaders in one blow."

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Alaric seethed, furious with himself. Once again he had failed to anticipate the cunning and logic of his enemy. He had become so complacent with his own invincibility, had felt untouchable, an arrogant belief that no one would dare challenge him. For two thousand years, Alaric had been the biggest and baddest creature in this world. Now, his arrogance had put Cassie in danger again.

Ahriman hit a nerve, he thought with satisfaction. "You have grown slow and weak. You will always be bound to the curse the Elders forced on you. I, on the other hand, am free," he grated in cruel taunting tones. "I am free of my prison and soon I will rule this world."

Alaric snarled, his fangs glinting with furious determination.

"You will return to the Underworld where you belong," he stated without emotion.

"You think you can challenge me?" he hissed. "Make no mistake, I can destroy you whenever I choose." The antagonism lay heavily in the air with near smug amusement.

Closing the distance between them, Alaric drove his fist into his enemy's chest. His intention was to rip out his heart in one savage blow, but Ahriman was already too powerful to make it that easy. He threw Alaric off, sending him flying back twenty feet into the trunk of a mighty tree. The crack of wood rendering under the impact echoed around them.

The surrounding landscape froze and thawed in rapid succession as the two opposing powers clashed. Alaric's incandescent eyes blazed brightly illuminating the darkening gardens, the sky turning an iron grey as angry clouds rolled in. Rolling thunder and flashes of lightening mimicked the dark forces below them.

They were evenly matched, but for how long Alaric didn't know. A dark aura flickered around Ahriman. Sparking tendrils of energy rolled off him warning that time to stop him was running out. He wasn't yet fully transformed but very soon Alaric would be out of his depth, and he knew it.

Ahriman couldn't destroy Alaric as he was already immortal, but with the corrupted power of an angel of Thrones, an angel more powerful than even an archangel, he could make a sport of torturing him over and over for an eternity if he chose. With the soul of an Angel of Death, a lower level angel, Alaric's power didn't even come close to matching that of a Throne.

The rest of the world would have no hope against him.

He had to be destroyed before he could become that powerful.

Removing his head or his heart was his only chance of killing him, and even that would be an impotent measure if he got his hands on the spear.

Alaric tore a splintered shard from the tree, sharp and thick enough to impale Ahriman. It wouldn't kill him but it would slow him down, buy him some time.

Ahriman dropped into a fighting stance, his back leg bearing his weight ready for the oncoming attack. His clawed hands clenching and unclenching, his lip curled back in a gluttonous sneer, hungry for the damage he would inflict.

-X-X-X-X-X-

## Eternal Covenant

As the entrance to the underground level of the Manor closed behind him, the Professor flicked the switch to light the labyrinth of tunnels ahead, one of which would lead him into Savernake Forest, directly to the Elder Tree.

Dragging his feet, he stumbled along the length of the corridor. His heavy steps echoed through the concrete tunnel. The poison from the tea Lilith had given them was wearing off but its effects still hampered his progress through the long tunnel, his limbs heavy and sluggish.

The spear was down here somewhere with him but he had no way of knowing exactly where to find it or how to get into the vault he knew Alaric was keeping it in. Not yet anyway.

The Professor struggled against a sense of disorientation as he stepped from the shadows of the tunnel, pushing aside a thick tangle of foliage covering the entrance, stepping into a clearing.

The ancient tree stood silently before him, watching, waiting.

Out of breath, his muscles burning from the effort it took to move his limbs, he approached the Elder tree more slowly.

Laying a trembling hand on the rough bark of its trunk, the Professor closed his eyes, feeling the energy pulsing from it, absorbing it, using it to centre himself.

Only once before had he summoned an angel through this portal, an experience he wouldn't forget and he had hoped he'd never need to repeat. The Professor wasn't completely human, he wasn't completely an angel, really, he wasn't completely anything. He existed purely for the purpose of keeping the spear out of the wrong hands at any cost.

Focussing his thoughts, he began to trace a sigil onto the tree and called the angel's name, then repeated this twice more. The sigil's outline burned into the bark and began to glow. The air began to shimmer around the tree, the sigil's glow growing in size to encompass a seven foot section of its trunk, from which a man too beautiful to be human, stepped through. Immediately the Professor dropped his eyes in respect.

The angel's brilliant radiance framed his intimidating presence. Of the nine levels of angels, this one was only ranked in the bottom three but since he had not been born into human form, his power had not been diluted or caged.

Nathanial stood before the Professor in his true form, all seven feet of him. His wavy ebony hair brushed his broad shoulders. Thick muscles rippled beneath flawless bronzed skin as he took a gliding step towards him. He was the embodiment of perfection.

"Why have you summoned me?" the angel asked. His brilliant sapphire blue eyes glittered with annoyance.

"Ahriman has obtained two of the three elements he needs to become immortal."

"Two? We were aware he had the chalice. Which of the other two elements does he have?" his testy expression becoming concerned.

"He has the Key, andâ!"

"Has he used the Key?" Nathanial asked cutting off the Professor.

## Eternal Covenant

"Yes. He has begun the transformation."

"This is not good," the angel began pacing, one arm crossed his chest, the other crooked at the elbow, his fingers stroking his strong jaw.

"It gets worseâ" Nathaniel stopped his pacing, his intense gaze boring into him until the Professor continued, a nervous quiver in his voice.

Angels were a surly bunch, even the nice ones like Nathaniel. The Professor was well aware that he was little more than a bug to an angel, and very expendable, especially since he didn't fall into any category of life that required protection. He was soulless, and would remain that way unless he fulfilled his purpose successfully. If he failed, he would return to the elements from which he was created and cease to exist - period. No pressure or anything.

"Alaric has the spear hidden in a vault inside the Manor. Ahriman has his Mate and it's only a matter of time before Alaric gives in and hands him the spear."

"So, why are you telling me? Why aren't you retrieving the spear yourself? You won't receive your reward if you fail." Once again the angel was back to being surly and the Professor's nervousness increased.

"I need your help," he pleaded. "I was poisoned and don't have the time to wait for it to leave my body. I cannot reach the spear with the poison in my veins." The Professor dropped his eyes again, waiting tensely for his answer. "Please," he begged.

"Give me your hands." Nathaniel's voice lost its terseness. He was in a pissy mood after having a disagreement with one of his superior's. It wasn't fair to take it out on this poor creature before him, who after all was only trying to do whatever he had to, to protect this world. And, in fact wasn't that the cause of his own disagreement? His own granddaughter was soon to be sent into this world. Whether he liked it or not, she has a role to play in the coming years. He knew this because he was the one who foretold it.

The Professor watched intensely as Nathaniel took his hands in his. Spreading his magnificent wings he encompassed them both. The angel of fire had wings the colour of flame, a deep azure blue at the base, changing to violet, then a blazing red, through to orange, yellow and then pure white at the tips. He appeared to be a living flame.

A tingle radiated from his hands, up his arms and spread throughout his body. In moments the tingle turned into a burn, a blaze so hot he didn't think he could live through it. The angel's fire burned a path through his veins, through every cell in his body, purifying it of the toxins.

The Professor dropped to his knees, panting heavily when Nathaniel released his hands. A hum of vibration took root deep inside, intensifying as it radiated throughout every molecule of his being.

"If you succeed in your task, you will receive your reward and be made whole. You will also be given your true name." Nathaniel announced respectfully a moment before he disappeared back through the doorway in the Elder tree.

He'd be really excited by that prospect if he wasn't so scared for the fate of his friends right now. He had to get back to the Manor, fast. The booming sounds of opposing powers clashing vibrated through the silent forest. A tense apprehension had settled over the region.

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The caged light bulb came on as once again he entered the tunnel, his instincts leading the Professor to the vault deep beneath the Manor containing the spear.

X-X-X-X-X

Cassie watched as Alaric and Ahriman battled. Graceful motion belied the viciousness as they ripped, punched and slashed into each other.

For an hour they had fought. Cassie could see Alaric tiring, the intensity of the fight taking its toll.

Ahriman too was weakening. Every blow took a little more out of him and as he weakened, the putrid mist clung to her more closely, inching up her frame, caressing her flesh beneath her clothing with a feeling of thousands of spectral fingers, penetrating every layer of her being all the way to her soul, a torture threatening to send her into the abyss of madness. Cassie clamped her hand over her mouth to contain her cry.

Now was not the time to distract Alaric. Her saving grace was the barrier surrounding her prevented him from feeling her distress.

Two demonic angels faced each other, both breathing heavily as they ploughed head long into one another yet again. Smoothly efficient blows pounded to and fro.

Alaric revelled in the crunch of cartilage and bone beneath his knuckles.

Ahriman raked his claws across Alaric's face, laying open his cheek.

Blood streaked their frames, shredded clothes hung from their bodies by threads.

Ahriman's body shimmered once again. His transformation was almost complete.

Alaric couldn't wait any longer. Taking advantage of Ahriman's momentary weakness, he gritted his teeth, bent his knees and leapt upward. His powerful wings swept down, lifting him higher into the darkness of the stormy sky leaving behind a whirlwind of leaves and debris from the demolished garden. Out of view amongst the clouds, he changed the direction of his descent, aiming towards Ahriman's back. He would have his killing blow. His razor sharp wing tips angled to slice through his neck and remove his head in one clean, efficient strike.

"If you kill me, your Mate dies too," Ahriman yelled in warning, as he spun around to find Alaric almost upon him.

Caught off guard, Alaric lifted his wing at the last split second, knocking Ahriman off his feet with a deafening thud.

He was an expert liar, but Alaric couldn't risk that he was telling the truth. He had to change his tactic. Weaken him, torture him into freeing Cassie, then kill him.

"You pathetic fool," Ahriman sneered gleefully. "You had your chance and you lost it," he hissed. "You can't save your Mate no matter what you do. When my body dies, the mist will fill the chamber that surrounds her, suffocating her. Only after my death can the spell be broken," he gloated, chuckling at his own ingeniousness.

One look at Cassie and he knew it was true. The noxious mist had thickened, increased in volume and was slowly working its way up her body.

## Eternal Covenant

"I'm sorry. I love you," she whispered, a tear falling over her pale cheek. Even if she didn't suffocate, she would still die. She could feel the poisonous mist leaching her life slowly from her body.

The world imploded around him. Aggression rushed over Alaric in an avalanche, threatening to bury him alive. His top lip peeled back in a vicious snarl. He saw nothing but red, fifty shades of it.

Ahriman gained his feet, and turned to advance on Alaric. His eyes literally blazed red with savage fire. Vocalising a vicious roar in contemptuous disdain, he flashed a gleam of huge, pointed teeth, not a pair of sharp vampire fangs. No, Ahriman sported a mouth filled with razor sharp teeth, each one as lethal as the next. The very air around him seethed and boiled in the putrescent heat that rolled from his body.

Ahriman stalked him slowly, savouring the knowledge that he was undefeatable.

Alaric's head was spinning. This couldn't be happening. Any way he looked at it, he was screwed. He had to kill Ahriman now, before he got his hands on the spear, but if he did, Cassie would die. If he did get the spear and used it on himself, Ahriman's body would still suffer physical death, a necessity to complete the transformation into immortality, and Cassie would also die.

How could this have happened.

There had to be another way to break the spell and release Cassie.

Think. Dammit, think.

"Alaric, you have to kill him. Don't worry about me," she called, trying desperately to hold back the pain in her voice.

"No. I won't lose you." His anger intensified with every syllable.

"You have to," she pleaded. "You can't save me. You have to do what's right. Kill him before it's too late." Those were the hardest words she had ever spoken. She didn't want to leave him but she had no choice. She was going to die no matter what happened. Alaric at least, could save the world from a fate worse than death. Ahriman.

Alaric stared unblinking at her, unwilling to comprehend the finality of her words.

Damn him to Hell. He would not lose his Mate.

Ahriman's fist slammed into Alaric's jaw.

Alaric's head snapped back, stumbling backwards a few steps, blood spraying from his lips. He touched the back of his hand to his mouth. It came away with a smear of blood.

Alaric's fist tunneled into Ahriman's midsection, sending white-hot bursts of agony through it, only to receive a retaliating blow to his nose, blurring his vision, another punch crunched his cheekbone until his whole face ached and throbbed with the pain of breaking and re-setting bones.

"Where is the spear?" he demanded, his voice a low, guttural growl.

Ahriman was bigger and stronger, and Alaric was well past fighting fair, dropping low he spun, sweeping his leg and driving it into his gut, the swift kick sending him tumbling backwards. Alaric slashed down with his

## Eternal Covenant

elbow catching Ahriman in the throat.

Shaking with rage, Ahriman drove his knee into his groin, sending him stumbling to one side. His face was a mask of evil, his teeth bared, blood staining them as red as his eyes.

Fists flew. The sound of knuckles hitting their mark, satisfying, even as a retaliating blow caught Alaric in the jaw hard enough to rattle his teeth and make him see stars, putting him off balance as his equilibrium was sent for a six.

Ahriman let out a high pitched ear shattering sound as he shrieked in pain.

His look of shock turned into a triumphant grin.

"No!" Alaric cried, his eyes fixated on the spear protruding from Ahriman's chest. "What the hell have you done?"

The Professor met Alaric's panicked eyes with calm determination. "I'm fulfilling *my* purpose," he answered in a tired voice. "Trust me." Extending an arm out with alarming strength, he blocked Alaric from reaching Ahriman and pulling out the spear. Fear and fury shot through Alaric with the force of a tornado.

Ahriman's jubilation faded as a cold tremor went up his spine and his body began to weaken. The power coursing through his veins was receding. This wasn't the reaction he was expecting. Something was wrong.

Blood and air bubbled and gurgled through the gaping hole in his chest wall.

Cassie's cry ripped a hole in Alaric's soul. The toxic mist roiled and bubbled, climbing higher up her body. She strained on her toes, stretching desperately to get away from its poisonous touch. She swiped her hands down her arms, trying to slough it off but instead it clung tighter, climbed higher, smothering her arms, prickling her flesh with goose bumps as it crawled slowly upward.

Alaric watched in horror as the putrid mist overtook her body. He let loose a keening cry of anguish that echoed around them.

Pain exploded through her body with the sensation of a million jelly-fish stings. Terror and agony overwhelmed her. A scream died in her throat when she failed to get any air into her lungs. Her eyes burned with tears and her lungs burned for oxygen. Her eyes locked with Alaric, desperately hoping for a miracle, committing to memory every detail of him, until everything around her finally went dark. Her legs lost the last of their strength, sinking to the ground, engulfed by the suffocating mist.

"Cassie!"

No. No. No. This isn't right. She can't die.

*Please.*, he pleaded silently, attacking the invisible barrier. In a frenzy, he threw his whole body against it relentlessly, beating at it, tearing at it, although it did not weaken. "Please don't let her die," he pleaded again out loud.

Ahriman stared up at the Professor, his eyes growing wide in shock. A luminescent glow radiated through his translucent skin.

"Who the hell are you?" he gurgled.

## Eternal Covenant

"My name is Professor Elijah Cohen, also *now* known as the Guardian, Estenrah," he answered with delight. He finally had his true name.

"That's impossible," he stuttered. "Guardian's are a myth."

"So are Vampires and Werewolves, but they're every bit as real as you, and *Me!*" he answered, twisting the spear a little more in Ahriman's chest.

Payback's a bitch. He'd been fooled for ten years by Lilith and Ahriman. He'd dedicated his entire existence to protecting this world from the likes of him, only to discover that he'd been used, tricked and manipulated into being instrumental in the Guild and Ahriman's attempt at taking control of this world.

It was satisfying that Ahriman was dying by his hand.

The Professor pulled the spear from Ahriman's chest, collapsing onto his back, the wound bled profusely. A painful groan gurgled from his lungs, his body convulsing as he returned to his previous normal human form.

Ahriman locked eyes with the Professor, the corner of his mouth curling into a grin, his chest heaved as though his was laughing, although the only sound that came out was a gurgling rattle.

"You won't be so amused when you're returned to where you belong. Hell."

The comment seemed to amuse Ahriman even more, his grin broadening. "Ah. But, that's where you're wrong," he gloated.

The Professor stared at him for a moment, puzzled by his strange reaction. He was in the throws of death, his immortality had been reversed. There was nowhere for him to go from here but down, all the way back to the Underworld where no doubt, he'd start planning his next return to this world.

With a shaky hand, Ahriman reached for the front of his shirt, pulling aside the tattered fragments from his abdomen, revealing a tattoo, a symbol of some sort. Its meaning though was lost on the Professor. Nonetheless, the sight of it sent a shiver up his spine.

"Game over," he bleated, his voice barely more than a hiss of sound.

Death was such a solitary event, even in the company of someone you love, crossing the bridge from this life to the next was a journey you take alone. The solitude of death was familiar to Ahriman although he had never experienced love, not once in his twenty thousand year existence. He was a misanthropic creature. He hated everyone, so the lack of love in his life was a welcome relief. Of course to live on Earth, he'd had to pretend to have formed attachments but he had never actually felt anything for humans, apart from disgust.

And now, yet again, his human body had failed him. However, if his preparations were accurate and his Plan B was performed correctly, this time he wouldn't be crossing that bridge back to the Underworld.

As Ahriman drew his last breath, the grey mist surrounding Cassie began to recede as the spell containing it, broke. The veil thinned until only tendrils swirled about her still and lifeless body.

Alaric's eyes glowed with emotion. "Don't leave me," he pleaded, his voice hitching on a sob, pulling her into his arms, cradling her against his hard body.

A gentle hand pressed into his shoulder, squeezing it lightly as he sat on the ground clutching his Mate.



## Eternal Covenant

Alaric turned his head towards the Professor, hatred and pain burned in his eyes. "You did this. You killed her."

"Yes. It was necessary I'm afraid, but it was for the best I assure you."

*For the best.* How could he say that? How could Cassie's death be for the best.? There had to have been another way to destroy Ahriman.

"It was for the best," he repeated more gently. "Look at her. Look at her carefully."

He did. The grey splotches on her skin from the poisonous mist had faded. Her skin had smoothed out. Gone was a childhood scar high on her forehead. Gone too were the dark circles beneath her eyes. Alaric stared in disbelief.

What was happening to her?

He turned to the Professor. His eyes asking the question his lips seemed helpless to form. His confusion deepened as he gazed on the luminescent form of the Professor as though he was only now seeing him for the first time.

He had an angel's glow but he had no wings. His body hummed at the same frequency as the spear in his hand as though it was a part of him, and no doubt it was. The Professor truly was a Guardian. Alaric had suspected over the years, but never truly believed it was possible. He was an elemental being, made by the Elders, he was neither human nor angel but created from both and the five elements, earth, air, fire, water and ether. His life force, was bound to the spear, its essence was a part of him. He was the only being able to change the polarity of the spear. Instead of giving immortality, in his hands, the spear took immortality away, making a being mortal.

Warm fingers caressed his cheek, jolting him away from the distraction of the Professor's presence.

His heart skipped a beat when he saw Cassie staring up at him, her full lips pulled into a tentative smile lighting her beautiful face, her expressive hazel eyes glittered with luminescent flecks.

With one tug, Alaric pulled Cassie tighter into his lap and wrapped his arms around her trembling body.

"I thought I'd lost you." Alaric felt her violent shudder. He had lost herâ for a moment.

"Shh," she soothed. He buried his face in the fragrant silk of her hair. "I'm not that easy to get rid of," she reassured him.

"How is this possible? Is she a vampire?" he asked the Professor, his eyes never leaving Cassie for a second, almost fearful that if he did, he would look back at her and find he had been dreaming and she was in fact, still dead.

"No," the Professor chuckled. A sound so familiar to Cassie she had a hard time reconciling the sound to the being standing in front of her. "Cassie didn't die with any vampire blood in her system," he answered. "But, the Elders gave you another gift at the time you conceived the child you're carrying," he added, directing the comment to Cassie.

"They activated your dormant Immortality Gene. Ahriman had to be killed, but, your life was never truly in danger," he finished.

## Eternal Covenant

"The baby." Cassie gasped, her hands clutching at her stomach.

"It's fine. It's still no more than an embryo. I can assure you it has not been affected by your momentary death. I can also assure you, that you will never need to worry about dying ever again. You are now a true immortal."

"Does that mean the baby will be born immortal too? Do I have special powers now, mind control, supersonic speed or strength like a vampire?" she rattled off a list of questions in fast succession as her mind raced excitedly through the possibilities. Although she certainly didn't have the super sensitive hearing or eyesight like a vampire, maybe it would develop later. In fact, she didn't feel any different than she did before, except for feeling really healthy and full of energy. "Is Ahriman really dead?"

"I'm afraid I don't have all the answers," the Professor answered, his brows furrowing together with concern.

"What's wrong?" Alaric asked. He'd underestimated Ahriman in the past, he wasn't about to give him the upper hand any longer.

"I think you should see something."

Alaric set Cassie on her feet and instead threaded his arm about her waist, holding her tightly against him as they crossed the devastation of what had once been a beautiful garden, leaping fallen trees and shrubs and circumnavigating crater sized divots in the lawn, as they followed the Professor to Ahriman's lifeless body.

Alaric stared at the tattoo for a moment. Recognition played at the edge of his memory and suddenly the penny dropped.

"I know this symbol." It had been so many years since he had last seen this mark, he had almost completely forgotten it. As an Angel of Death, it was ingrained in him to know every ritual, every symbol that could cause or manipulate death.

"What does it mean?" Cassie asked.

"It's called a necto animus. It was once used as a punishment. It binds the soul of the person to the earth. He has not returned to the Underworld." Alaric's statement sent chills up Cassie's spine.

"What exactly does that mean?"

"I'm not sure, but I have a feeling we're going to find out." He was positive however, that Ahriman wouldn't have bound himself to the earth to spend eternity as a ghost, but whatever provisions he made for himself was unfortunately only speculation at this stage.

They were back to playing a wait-and-see game to discover Ahriman's next move.

Crap.

The clouds had begun to disperse, replacing the dark grey canopy with a red hue as the sun reached towards the western horizon.

"I have left a letter on your desk in the study," the Professor began, drawing their attention away from their thoughts. "I have also left a key to a safety deposit box. In it is my Will and a Grimoire. It has a very sordid history and is best kept sealed in its lead lined casing. Keep it secret and keep it safe."

## Eternal Covenant

"What are you talking about, where are you going?" Cassie asked, a lump forming in her throat as moisture filled eyes to their rims and silently trickled over. The Professor was the grandfather she never had. He'd taken her under his wing from the day she entered the University. He was her mentor and now also, her friend. She had never anticipated the day when she might need to say goodbye.

Don't mourn me, he smiled warmly. My life was full and well lived. I was fortunate, some might say, blessed." His caring smile brightened his luminescent face even further. "Besides, I'm not dying, I'm ascendingâthere's a difference." For the Professor, being allowed to ascend was the greatest reward. It meant he had earned the right to have a soul and a future.

She barked out a soggy laugh and swiped at her cheeks.

His corporeal body continued to brighten, becoming less substantial, until both Alaric and Cassie had to cover their eyes from the blinding light. The vibration of his exit reverberated through them like a mini earthquake.

The Professor was gone and with him, the spear. It would never be a threat to this world again. Alaric sighed with relief. He had carried its burden for two millennia.

The moment was followed by the silence of uncertainty as they stared down at Ahriman's lifeless body with the necto animus tattoo on his abdomen.

## Chapter 29

### Chapter 29

Abby woke, her body slick with sweat and shaking like a leaf. It was still two hours before sundown, well before her normal waking time. For such a young vampire, waking this early was almost unheard of. But, Abby's dreams had been so troubling she had slept fitfully since late morning. A sick feeling settled in her stomach. Her bond to Alaric was still growing but she had felt his distress and his pain through the preceding hours. Even earlier and more alarmingly, she had also felt Alex's pain and distress. Something had happened to them. Something bad.

She leapt from her bed and dressed for battle, black leather pants, a long sleeve t-shirt, leather jacket and her favourite knee high black boots, accessorised with various throwing stars, knives and blades.

Abby followed the scent of blood through the house, leading to the sitting room, almost bowling over Narayan in the hallway in her haste to get to Alex and Alaric.

While most vampires could tolerate at least an hour or two in sunlight before succumbing to it, Narayan's sensitivity to sun was far greater. He couldn't bear so much as a few minutes. He paced back and forth in the shadows just beyond the sun's reach, his mood as black as midnight.

Abby had never imagined that the softly spoken and always cheerful monk could ever look so dangerous. His eyes glittered almost pure silver as his anger and frustration rolled off him.

"What's happened?" she asked him warily, her eyes almost as wide with fear as his were angry.

Not waiting for his reply, Abby raced through the room and out onto the patio. The clouded sky disguised the painful touch of the sun, but it was still there, prickling her skin, sinking deeper, the burn spreading throughout her body. Not a physical flame but a pressure inside her veins, expanding them, similar to the bends which a deep sea diver gets after a fast ascent. The longer she spent in the sunlight, the more pressure would build within her body until finally, her heart would explode. It was the equivalent of ripping out a vampire's heart and would leave her just as dead.

Regardless, she stood there on the patio, stared out onto the wreckage of the garden beyond and watched as Alaric and Cassie slowly made their way back towards the Manor, both looking as though they had just been to Hell and back.

Abby's heart skipped a beat. Where was Alex?

The sound of car tyres skidding to a halt on the gravel driveway was quickly followed by a door slamming. A moment later Saladin stood on the patio beside her, his body humming with fury and menace, barely maintaining self control. Abby gingerly took a step aside. Although she herself was now a vampire, strong and dangerous in her own right, it was still a shock to see just how dangerous her new family really were, each of them carried an air of regal countenance, supreme dominance and were impressively powerful. She was sure that if Alaric and his other two progeny, Saladin and Narayan fought an army bare handed, they would be the only ones left standing.

"What the hell happened here?" Saladin demanded as Alaric and Cassie reached the patio, their grim faces telling almost as much as their decimated surroundings did.

## Eternal Covenant

A vicious growl erupted from inside the house drawing their attention. Narayan had stopped pacing but his anger seemed to have intensified when he saw the state of Alaric and Cassie. He had watched helplessly from the shadows of the house as Alaric fought Ahriman, unable to help either of them, guilt and frustration fused into resentful rage.

"We'd best go inside, there's a lot to discuss." Alaric recommended, ushering them all in before him and closing the doors and curtains behind them to block out the sunlight, before guiding Cassie towards her favourite chair. The same chair she had been seated in earlier that morning when Lilith poured them some tea. Her skin prickled with goose bumps at the memory.

"No. I'd rather stand, if you don't mind." Her legs were shaky and her voice even shakier as she filled them all in on the events of the morning, Alaric joining the narration regarding the showdown with Ahriman and the Professor.

"Where did they take Alex?" Abby asked anxiously, her brows furrowed with her growing concern.

"I don't know. Ahriman said he was planning on keeping him around for a while. He wanted to keep him unharmed for whatever he has planned," Cassie replied.

"Don't worry, we'll find him." Narayan affirmed.

"Abby could track him." Alaric suggested. "You took enough of his blood last night when you healed him, you should be able to sense his location. I can show you how if you're willing to try."

"Of course I'm willing," she snapped, her own nerves frayed to the point of aggression. "Sorry. Yes, I can track him but I need to find him as soon as possible."

"I agree, but we need to get as much information on his location before anyone goes in there after him. We don't need any more surprises from Ahriman or the Guild. If Ahriman wants Alex alive and well for a while, then I think we can afford the time to make some plans." Saladin replied, his patronising tone raising the hackles on Abby's neck. She may be his latest *young* sibling, but she wasn't a child.

"You don't understand. Alex may not stay *well* for long if I don't find him soon," she paused to make sure she had their attention. "He's my *Mate*."

"Has Alex taken your blood?" Alaric queried tentatively.

"No."

Their faces all dropped as Alex's situation became clear.

"Fuck. This complicates things." Saladin cursed. His sentiments were repeated around the room with a rumble of expletive murmurs.

With a Mating bond having been created between Alex and Abby, although was as yet incomplete, Abby would have no trouble locating Alex. Unfortunately, every day that she was separated from him, he would grow weaker, if his genetics worked in the same way as Cassie's. This, on top of his already weakened state from blood loss the night before could be fatal if Abby can't get to him soon.

"I need to leave as soon as the sun sets," she insisted.

## Eternal Covenant

"You need to come back to the Club with me before you run off half cocked and get yourself killed on your noble quest." His eyes narrowed on her, looking her over carefully, as if looking for faults that only he could see. Once, long ago, Saladin had been a Warlord. He'd fought many battles, both physical and intellectual. He had no doubt Abby could hold her own physically, but mentally, and under such severe emotional stress she was at a significant disadvantage. She was way out of her league for what she was running headlong into. She needed a crash course in *Spy: 101*. "Do you have a plan?"

"Not yet. I thought I'd find him and then work things out from there." That sounded like a recipe for disaster, even to her ears.

"You need a plan and you need to be prepared for any situation. You're not leaving until you talk to Dray. He'll give you a few tips. I'm sure he's probably got a few gadgets you can take that might be helpful as well," he added using that patronising tone again.

Abby pursed her lips and glared at him but didn't respond. He may be an arrogant bastard, but she had to admit, he had a good point.

Banging and crashing in the foyer distracted their attention.

Instantly Alaric was in the hallway, fangs and eyes flashing with aggression, ready to tear apart the new intruder.

"Heel. I said Heel," Mrs Philpot screeched at the excitable oversized Irish Wolfhound 'pup', who was dragging her along the hallway.

Alaric's expression darkened. When did he agree to have a dog in the house, especially one as uncontrollable as this one appeared to be?

"Tilly. Stop!" she yelled, finally coming to a panting halt.

Cassie appeared in the doorway, a smile lighting her face. The moment the dog recognised her, she was off again, heading straight for Cassie, her tail wagging madly as she whimpered and barked her way into the room. Tilly jumped at Cassie, her large paws reaching her shoulders, laying a wet sloppy lick on Cassie's face, who could do little more than try and hold her ground and giggle at the pooch's enthusiastic greeting.

"Mrs Philpot, is there something you want to tell me?" Alaric asked testily, planting his fists on his hips, his frown and fangs flashing with dangerous menace. He wasn't in the mood for any more surprises today.

"I'm sorry. Mrs Harlow knew that Alex and Cassie were fond of the mutt and felt that Brian would have liked them to have her. I didn't have the heart to say no," she answered matter-of-factly, not perturbed in the least by all the fierce expressions on the vampires faces surrounding her.

The aging housekeeper looked around her, taking in their appearances.

"Oh my, love. Young master, what on earth has happened?" she gasped.

They related the events of the day once again as she opened the curtains just enough to discern the destruction outside. Her eyesight keen enough to spot Ahriman's body lying on the lawn and what she supposed used to be a human male.

## Eternal Covenant

"What about the bodies? Would you like me to arrange a clean-up crew and the gardeners?" she asked, her nose scrunched up ever so lightly. The bodies were an eye-sore, but what tweaked her knickers was the thought of having to listen to Harold and his son Lionel, complain endlessly about the amount of work needed to restore the garden. For Lycans, they were a sorry pair, but unfortunately beggars can't be choosers. Regular landscape gardeners weren't permitted at the Manor. Maybe in this case she could get Alaric to make an exception, or he may have another couple of bodies to remove before they finished rebuilding the garden. If anyone could make her flip her lid, that pair could.

Alaric too, cringed slightly at the thought of Lionel and Harold spending more time there than they already did. "Thanks Mrs Philpot, the clean-up crew would be helpful but tell them to hold off until tomorrow. We need to see how much information we can get from the bodies first."

They discussed again everything that had happened in more detail and began plans to rescue Alex. Abby paced while Saladin called Dray, his head of security at the Phoenix nightclub and an intelligence expert.

"Well, on that note, I think I'll take the latest member of the household to the kitchen for some dinner." Mrs Philpot said, tugging the strong willed canine toward the door. Her plump cheeks flushed bright red as she pulled on the lead while Tilly pulled away equally as hard, hell-bent on getting something beneath the couch. With a final hefty tug, Tilly slid backwards still crouched on all fours. In her mouth was a wooden cup.

The Cup!

Tilly had the cup in her mouth and was lapping at the remains of Cassie's blood within it.

Before anyone else could react, Narayan dived to the floor wrestling the cup from her.

Hairy Hell Hounds.

If immortal blood drunk from that cup could create monsters from humans, what the hell would it do to that mangy mutt, Alaric thought.

Hopefully nothing. Nevertheless, he had to keep the dog now, at least long enough to make sure she wasn't a threat to anyone.

The room finally cleared. Narayan took the cup to the vault beneath the Manor, its magically sealed door still laying wide open after the Professor's procurement of the spear, and Abby left with Saladin just as the sun crossed the horizon, the inky black sky shielding the view of the macabre scene beneath it.

Alone again at last.

The room shrank as he closed in on her, erotic energy pulsing off him and making her skin tingle.

Cassie tilted her head up to meet Alaric's. Those gorgeous hazel eyes of hers glittering as they locked onto his, heating and making him feel like she was caressing him from the inside out.

What had been mild arousal suddenly became a high voltage blast of lust that seared his thoughts, blinding him to anything else but her and damn near had him taking her where she stood. The need to reclaim her as his, mark her as his, and wipe away the taint of Ahriman's touch was overwhelming. He made a desperate sound deep in his chest, sending a surge of passion roaring through her, uncoiling the need simmering beneath her skin, flaring it to a red hot burn.

## Eternal Covenant

She too felt the uncontrollable urge to claim her Mate, a desperation born from the certainty that death had separated them, however brief that may have been. She needed the warmth and security of his body surrounding hers, a comfort that only a Mate's touch could offer.

Alaric's arms hooked her about the waist, pulling her hard against him, her soft curves met the hard lines of his, gaining intimate contact with all her sweet spots. Her full breasts pressed against his chest, his thigh parted hers and pressed against her mound, her soft belly cradling his aching erection with just enough pressure to be considered torture. His tongue swiped her bottom lip while his hips rolled into her, putting pressure against the swollen bundle of nerves between the moist folds at the apex of her thighs.

She gasped at the shockwave of pleasure that rippled through her. Threading her fingers through the silky length of his blonde hair and locking them around his neck, she parted her lips. Instantly, his tongue penetrated, a domineering slide against hers demanding her participation. A manoeuvre she reciprocated with devastating efficiency.

She ground against him with an untamed urgency that swamped him with a fever so intense it blistered his skin. His thickly muscled arms locked her within their confines against his body as he lifted her higher, wrapping her legs about his waist and revelled in her heated shudder as his steel hard erection massaged her clit as he raced her to their bedroom, slamming the door hard enough to crack the frame.

Sharp, panting breaths from his tightly reined control faltered as a low moan dredged up from deep within his chest, vibration buzzing through his entire body and into hers as he laid her carefully on the bed. His whole body hardened from the way her body was exposed to him, her golden brown hair tumbling wildly in waves about her lithe form, her unbuttoned shirt, open, revealing the swell of her plump ripe breasts and her belly.

Alaric's eyes filled with emotion as they locked onto her soft, smooth and flat abdomen where she nurtured and protected their child. Climbing onto the bed, he settled between her legs, his hands gently caressing her belly, his lips laying small adoring kisses all over it. And just like that, the burning urgency to claim his Mate was suddenly replaced by the need to worship her slowly and tenderly.

Alaric climbed higher up the bed. Cassie swallowed a lump in her throat, going lax in his arms as he rolled her into him. Her heart still raced, but her mind quietened under his caresses drugging influence. This was her home, in his arms. She felt safe and loved and whole. He was the other half of her soul she didn't even know was missing until the first moment she saw him at the Phoenix nightclub a life time ago it seemed, but had in reality only been a matter of weeks. So much had happened and changed in her life, she would never be the same again, and she didn't want it to be.

Lying on their sides, her head resting on the hard expanse of his chest and their legs interlocked, his arms caged her sweetly against him as he continued his adoring kisses to her face and neck, and anywhere else he could reach without releasing his hold on her.

"I was so scared today," he confessed, his voice strained with emotion, reliving the pain he felt as he watched her die. "I was sure I was going to lose you."

"I thought I'd lost you too," her chest tightening on a silent sob.

Alaric tucked her into his body more tightly and soothed her with his loving caresses.

Her pain and fear lanced his soul, sending an invisible dagger through his heart. "Cassie," he said, concern evident in his tone. "I will never leave you. We have an eternity together and no one will ever separate us again," he promised with tenacious conviction.



## Eternal Covenant

"I know."

"Then what is it, you're worrying me."

"Iâ I don't mean to," she answered softly.

*Alex*, he thought. He wanted to plough through her mind to the root of her pain and replace her fears with the reassurance she so desperately needed. Unfortunately he had little to offer. Until Alex was found and returned to them unharmed, Alaric doubted he could ease his Mate's heart or mind for her brother's welfare and safety.

He would however, leave no stone unturned to find him and would make the Guild severely regret ever starting a war with him. He had won this battle, but there was no doubt that this war was just beginning.

Alaric stroked her back until her breaths became slow and rhythmic and her body relaxed into him further. He held her sleeping form. Their bond was strong, even in slumber he felt her passion and hunger for him, and him alone. He hadn't realised how much she was a part of him until he thought he'd lost her. From the moment she stepped into his life, she took her place in his heart with an ease that took his breath away, filling the void as though it had been waiting for only her. She breathed life back into his barren soul and filled him with happiness and contentment. He couldn't imagine life without her now, and fortunately, he would never need to worry about that again. She was immortalâ and his.

Silently he made a new vow.

Once, long ago, he had made a covenant with the Elders to protect the elements of his own immortality, the spear and the cup, and watch over his descendants, people who were no more than strangers to him, merely faces with names whom he had no emotional attachments. Now, with an immortal Mate, a child and a family he could call his own, his covenant had become eternal. He would protect and defend his family and the world they live in, as ruthlessly as necessary, until the end of time.

x-x-x-x-x

Mira answered her phone, snapping irritably at the caller. "Give me some good news."

"Lilith is on her way to you with Alex, butâ !" he answered in hushed tones, pausing when a figure appeared in the doorway to the Manor's patio, opening the curtains briefly to examine the scene beyond. He doubted that even Alaric's sensitive hearing could hear him from so far away, or see him amongst the bracken of the forest, but he wasn't willing to take that risk.

"But, what?" she snapped.

"Ahriman is dead."

Damn.

If she wasn't already in a foul mood, that news certainly would have tipped her over the edge. Mira had been looking forward to killing Steadman, the moron entrusted to bring the cup into England. A simple task even an imbecile could manage. Except, this imbecile chose to stash some local Indian hooch in his bag, the same bag that he'd put the cup in. Not only did it draw the attention of the Customs Officers, but also the Alliance. Steadman's stupidity had cost Mira the life of her progeny, Cain.

## Eternal Covenant

Killing Steadman wouldn't bring back Cain but it would've made her feel a bit better. Now however, she wouldn't get that satisfaction.

"Where's his body?" she ground out between clenched teeth, her eyes glittering with fire and ice.

"He's laying on Sammael's lawn." He chose to use Alaric's alternate name to emphasise the fact that he, himself, was sitting in a very precarious position right now. "About twenty feet from the various pieces of one of the Merc's you hired."

"Well then, I suggest you get busy before you're caught, and clean up the mess," she snapped back. "Leave Ahriman," his body was of no use to them now, not worth retrieving. "Dispose of the human. Make sure there is nothing left behind that they can use to learn his identity." If they knew his name, the Alliance would know which cells of the military the Guild was recruiting from. And, any more interference from the Alliance could be detrimental to her own health.

"Of course. It's my specialty," he answered in a condescending tone. "I'm Lycan."

Mira ended the call and shoved her phone back into her pocket. Twisting around she glared at Steadman lying prostrate on the stone altar, hands and feet tied down. The corner of her mouth curled up in satisfaction at the fear in his eyes as he thrashed against his fastenings, and gloated that what he was about to go through was most likely going to be painful.

"Well?" asked Morgan beneath her hooded cloak.

"Ahriman's dead. Start the ritual." She answered apathetically. She may not get the satisfaction of killing him, but after this, Steadman's body would play host to Ahriman's soul and Steadman the person, would no longer exist.

## Chapter 30

### Excerpt from *Eternal Possession* (Book 2):

"Nobody touches you but me!" Abby decreed when the door closed behind them, her eyes burning with anger. Her approach was so volatile and aggressive that Ahriman wasn't sure what she would do, so he backed up from the path of her advance.

Until he hit the wall.

The minute she had him cornered, she reached to thrust insistent fingers into his hair, pulling his head to capture his mouth, thrusting her body hard up against his. His reciprocating kiss was hard and equally aggressive.

She broke away from him to place her fingers inside his shirt and raked her taloned nails down his bare skin with barely repressed anger. "Alex. Fight!" she screamed. "Damn you, fight him!"

She watched his eyes widen. Saw the surprise that filled his expression.

"You're mine damn you, and I won't stand by and watch you be beaten. You're stronger than this. Fight him! Fight for me!" she yelled with furious determination.

Ahriman roared in outrage and pain and then found himself glued to her mouth once again.

Ahriman reeled. His world turned on its axis under her assault. She worked her kiss, hot and hard and with unbelievable aggression. He was assaulted by too much stimuli, hers, his and Alex's. Very quickly he found himself struggling to decipher the borders between them.

It was wild and intoxicating. For a minute all three were blended together.

Ahriman growled when she pulled away, something between regret at the sudden absence of her lips and fury for her assertive abuse.

She pushed him where she wanted him.

Too far.

Beyond thought, beyond pain, beyond reason to pure instinct, naked emotions and reaction.

## Eternal Covenant

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