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**DESTINY INTERRUPTED**

**BY:**

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Chapter 1

Eris Head, Ireland

1814

 I watched the man as he studied the paintings. The man was well past seventy years of age. His hair, what was left of it, was white and gathered around his head like a halo. The man’s face was creased with age.

 I was the man’s physical opposite despite the fact that I was much older than the man. I appeared to be a man in the prime of life, a man of thirty some odd years. Appearances were deceiving. I was over one-hundred and fifty years old.

 I brushed my pale golden hair to the side and then silently cursed myself for the nervous gesture. Mollifying my pride somewhat, I told myself that it was the fault of this ridiculous hair style that was so fashionable for this age. I stood several steps behind the man, not wanting to hover over him. I was always cautious of accidentally intimidating others. My frame was long and broad and I knew that strength radiated from me. At times this was an advantage, but not today.

 The old man was thin and weak. But his eyes, his eyes were bright. A fierce intelligence shone in those eyes and at the moment, an excitement.

I could understand the man’s excitement. I had felt the same excitement a hundred years before when I had first seen the painting. The difference was that I knew the subject was no figment of the artist’s imagination. It was Muireen, my sweet Muireen whom I had foolishly forsaken so long ago.

 The painting was beautifully rendered, wrought with pain-staking attention to detail. Her features were so life-like one thought that by reaching out you could touch her. I had often done just that only to have his fingers be greeted by the cold feel of oil on canvas.

 The artist had never amounted to much. The artist’s fete d’accompli had been this portrait of Muireen. Her golden blonde hair fell past her knees in heavy waves, covering half of her body. Her full pink lips were slightly parted, making her look vulnerable. Her eyes were the same blue-green of the sea and her face was round and soft. I had always thought of her as a sea angel.

 She was wearing no clothing in this portrait. She was perched upon a rock in the middle of the sea. Her hair was her only covering. A hint of breast peaked alluringly from the cascade of blonde waves. She was exceedingly beautiful, but what stopped the heart was not her beauty, or at least not that alone. It was that the portrait did not show a woman with legs but one with the tail of a fish. Muireen was a mermaid.

 As a mermaid she was one of the most feared creatures of the sea by seaman everywhere. Men had a right to fear the mermaid. One could easily pull a full-grown man from his boat and into the sea where he would be drowned and drug to the bottom to be feasted upon.

 But Muireen was not like that. She was not viscous. She had never offered harm, only kindness and curiosity. Even after my transition she had not reacted with fear or aggression. But I knew Muireen was monster as much as I was.

 The artist had pain-stakingly painted her tail and he had done a splendid job. Muireen’s colors were a menagerie of greens and blues mingled with silver and gold. There were even hints of rose blended in. Of all the mermaids I had encountered over the years, Muireen’s tail, like herself, was the most beautiful.

 This portrait had once adorned the wall of my bed chamber. I had moved it to the drawing room years ago. It had been too painful to go to my death sleep while gazing at her. I had not seen Muireen in over a hundred and twenty-five years. That is why the old man was here. I desperately wanted to find Muireen or at least proof that she still lived.

 The old man was Dr. Vargas, the Dean of Mythology at Cambridge University. Dr. Vargas was a known expert on mythical creatures of the sea. He was also thought by some to be quite senile.

 Ten years ago he had come back from an expedition of the Faroe Islands in the Norwegian Sea with what many deemed preposterous tales. He had made the trip in order to investigate the reported sighting of a siren by a disreputable man known for drunkenness.

 His colleagues had scoffed at the idea that a man of his age and position would undertake such a foolish journey. Dr. Vargas had ignored them. He had always had a special interest in the legend of mermaids and sirens alike.

 Upon returning from his trip he commenced a full-fledged scientific expedition to prove the existence of such creatures. He claimed to have seen such creatures for himself playing in a cove near Bishop Rock in the Celtic Sea. The creatures had fled to the depths when approached by Dr. Vargas and his crew. His colleagues called him mad when he decided to fund the expedition himself to search for mermaids.

 Dr. Vargas spent the following two years searching for the allusive creatures. He never saw one again. He spent the vast majority of his fortune to fund these expeditions, much to the University’s dismay. Finally under pressure from the University, colleagues and friends, he gave up his quest.

 Dr. Vargas had since spent much of his time compiling everything he could find on mermaids. He tracked their sightings and marked them on a map to see where they were seen most frequently. He collected all the ancient stories, myths and legends he could find on the subject. He had even written a book speculating on the habits of these creatures and where they might live.

 It was his expertise on mermaids that had prompted me to invite him to my home on Eris Head where few others had been allowed in. For near about Bishop’s Rock was where I had first encountered Muireen.

 Dr. Vargas peered over his shoulder at me. He motioned for me to join him by the painting. I stepped forward, obliging the old man. Dr. Vargas gestured towards the tail of the mermaid

 “It’s like the ones I saw near Bishop’s Rock,” he told me. “We were never able to get close,” he continued, “for they fled when we neared. But I used a pair of binoculars to get a closer look at them,” he said, looking at me. “I was able to view them in their play and their tales were much like this one in your painting,” he said. I nodded my head, wanting the old man to continue. If my heart could still beat it would have been thumping erratically, so great was my excitement.

 “See the way the artist has painted the scales?” the old man asked. “They don’t layer like that of a fish. They overlap in a more intricate pattern,” the doctor murmured. I had noticed this for myself many years ago, but I said not a word as the doctor continued.

 “This patterning catches the light more easily, giving the colors a more vibrant hue. They shine like jewels,” the doctor continued. Andrias allowed silence to fill the room as he thought out his words carefully.

 “Have you seen one colored such as this?” I asked at last. The doctor shook his head.

 “No,” he answered, “I’ve seen ones in blues and green, but not in shades such as this.” My hopes fell. He had not seen Muireen.

 “Whoever the artist,” commented the doctor, “he has seen her in life or else he would not have been able to paint her so vividly.” The doctor paused, thinking.

 “It’s incredible to think she may have actually posed for him,” said Dr. Vargas. “Who is the artist?” he asked. “I must speak to him.”

 “Dead,” I said sadly, “long ago dead. I once sought him out myself,” I admitted. Dr. Vargas turned his shrewd eyes towards me.

 “You have seen them,” Dr. Vargas stated. I locked eyes with the doctor. There was no reason not to tell him. I had kept Muireen a secret for over a century. If I was to find her I needed to trust someone. I nodded my head slowly.

 “I have seen her,” Andrias told the doctor, “and others like her.” Dr. Vargas appeared ten years younger at this news, so excited was his countenance.

 “Did you speak with her?” asked the doctor excitedly. “Were you able to get close to her?” the doctor rushed on. “Was she as docile as this painting suggests?”

 I raised my hand to calm the doctor and gestured to the chairs near the fire. Dr. Vargas took up a chair as I poured the doctor a whiskey. The doctor took the drink happily and I sat down across from him.

 I did not wish to give the doctor specifics on his relationship with Muireen but if I was going to solicit his help in finding her, I had to tell him something.

 “Her name is Muireen” I told him. “I encountered her some years ago and we did speak,” I continued. He could not tell the doctor exactly how long ago since that information would evidence that he was not human.

 “She was a gentle and curious creature,” I continued. “She never tried to harm me” I finished. Dr. Vargas’ eyes sparkled.

 “She told you her name?” he asked softly. I shook my head.

 “She had no name in our language” I told the doctor. “I named her Muireen from the Gaelic meaning…”

 “Born of the sea” Dr. Vargas finished. He chuckled softly. “A fitting name for one such as her.” I smiled. It was indeed fitting. I decided to get directly to the manner at hand.

 “I wish to speak to the man whose sighting you investigated,” I told the doctor. “I wish to speak to him myself and to solicit your help in setting up an expedition, completely funded by me of course, to find Muireen.” Dr. Vargas looked steadily at me. A look of sadness shadowed his face.

 “I’m afraid that’s not possible,” he said sadly. “The man, James Dumas, died a year after I spoke with him,” the doctor continued. “He drowned in the sea not far from where he claimed to have seen the creature.” “James had become fixated on the matter and he often returned to the area to lie in wait for her to return,” he explained. “Apparently, one night drunk on ale, he slipped on the rocks, hitting his head, and drowned in the sea.” The doctor continued to look at me stead. I was careful to keep my face void of expression. The doctor, no doubt, knew it was highly unlikely the man had slipped. More likely he had found his siren again or another like her.

 “And his body…?” I asked.

 “Washed up on shore weeks later, the fish having made a meal of him,” Dr. Vargas answered calmly. I nodded. It was as I had thought. He had been feasted upon. Neither spoke of the truth but they both knew it. Mermaids were known not only to drain the blood from their victims, but at times, to also nibble their flesh.

 “The expedition then,” I entreated, “would you be interested in helping me?” The doctor smiled broadly and drank down his whiskey.

 “Mister Colburn,” the doctor began, “I would be elated to help you search for your lost siren.” I smiled and refilled the doctor’s glass. We began making plans for the expedition.

Chapter 2

Celtic Sea, Near Bishops Rock

1676

 I made my way to the crow’s nest, careful not to spill the last of the KilDevil I had pilfered from the small Spanish vessel we’d overtaken two nights ago. If I had not hidden the last of it, the others would have surely relieved me of it by now. I was thankful I had had the foresight to stow it away. It was a cold night on the Celtic Sea and I was going to need it to warm me.

 Entering the crow’s nest, I waved at Gavin to let him know he could go. I was on dogwatch for the next two hours. No doubt Gavin was nearly frozen by now and thankful his shift was over. He would head directly to the scuttlebutt to warm himself as we all did after the wind had beaten us for several hours. Dogwatch was a wretched duty, but it was necessary.

 Perching on the crate we used as a makeshift stool, I took a swig from my bottle. The rum warmed me as it went down. Although chilly, the night was calm. We were nearing the rocks. I would need to stay alert. It wouldn’t do to smash into them and send us all to our watery graves.

 There were many rocks to dodge in these waters. Why had the captain insisted that we take this route? It would have been wiser to be on the open sea. He must have his reasons though. As a captain, he was a good one. Most likely he was scouting out ships near the harbor, ships, which perhaps, would be targeted by us along their next voyage.

 Half an hour into my watch the wind picked up. I was prepared to turn and call down to the others and suggest we move to deeper waters until the wind calmed when it suddenly began to hail. The wind blew ferociously, tossing the ship like a toy. Hurrying down from the crow’s nest , I found the boatswain already giving orders to the crew.

 Men were running in every direction, trying to bring down the sails and steady the boat. Fear coursed through me. I was only twenty-two years old but I had been sailing since I was three. I had never seen a storm rise so suddenly or so violently before.

 The captain suddenly appeared on deck. I could barely make out the string of curses he shouted over the roar of the wind.

 “It’s them!” he cried angrily. “They’re the ones causing this!” I looked to Marcel who was trying to pull in the ropes all the while sliding on the deck made slippery by the hail. I reached out and took hold of the ropes, helping him to secure them.

 “What’s the captain talking about?” I asked. “Who could possibly make it storm like this?”

 “Mermaids,” he replied matter-of-factly. “These waters near Bishop’s Rock be full of’em,” he told me. I laughed out loud almost losing my balance on the icy deck.

 “Mermaids?” I laughed. “That’s ridiculous. Mermaids are just legend. They are not real. Surely the captain does not believe in such creatures?”

 The winds began to die down and the hail stopped just as suddenly as it had started. Marcel looked at me hard.

 “Aye,” he said laughing, “You don’t believe in them now, but you will after tonight,” he assured me. “There’s only one reason for a storm such as the one we have seen tonight and it’s them.”

 It was incredible that a bunch of grown men were worried about fabled creatures such as mermaids. I had lived on or near the sea my whole life and never have I seen a single one. These pirates whom I look up to and aspire to their greatness were trembling like women because of imaginary creatures.

 Seeing the disbelief on my face, Marcel took me by the arm and dragged me to the side of the ship.

 “Look out into the darkness boy,” he ordered, “and tell me what you see.”

 I looked into the black night. Someone had lit a beacon and was shining it into the darkness. All I could see was endless black until…perhaps a flash of lightning had caught my eye. A flash of something, shimmering in the night waters caught my eye again. This time I was certain it was a fin, a bright magenta colored fin. Never had I seen a fin such as this, so brightly colored and so large. What the hell was it?

 A chill swept over me and it was not from the night air. The others were certain that mermaids were real and now this odd colored fin. What if they were right? What if the legend was true? Part of me believed but part of me still screamed out that all of this was preposterous.

 Suddenly they were all around us, surrounding the boat. From every direction I looked I saw a flash of tail. Laughter tinkled across the water. The laughter was musical and sweet as that of a woman’s.

 An auburn haired beauty rose up from the sea. Her long hair flowed all around her. It was like a dream. I had never seen such a beautiful woman before. She began to sing. I was in awe of her. I had a brief moment where I wondered how the woman had come to be in the sea before realizing the men had been right all along. These were mermaids.

 Fear coursed through my veins like hot coals had been dumped inside me. If mermaids were real and could create storms like legend said, was the rest of the legend true as well? Legend said that mermaids devoured men of their flesh and blood. They lured them with their music and then drug them to their watery graves. Trembling I pushed away from the side of the boat.

 A gunshot echoed through the night causing me to jump. Losing my balance on the slippery deck, I fell onto my backside. I stayed there looking around to see who had fired a gun. I spotted the captain leaning against the side of the boat. He held a pistol in his hands and he was firing rapidly into the water. He fired twice more and suddenly the swishing tails around us began to disappear. A few leapt into the air before diving back into the black depths of water. As quickly as the commotion had begun, it was over. Everything was silent. They were gone.

 The men began to raise the sails again and the captain retreated to his quarters as if nothing out of the ordinary had just occurred. I was ordered back to the crow’s nest. The night air no longer felt chill. Fear had warmed me. Grabbing my rum bottle, I tipped it to my mouth and downed the last of it before tossing the bottle overboard. I stared out into the darkness, trying to make sense of what I’d just seen.

 The sails were up and the ship began to move again. As we moved closer to a rock outcropping I saw something shining in the night. I peered into the darkness and there she was.

 She was golden haired and had the face of an angel. She studied me as I studied her. Her face was full of what looked like curiosity. She made no move to approach the ship or change the wind and tides. She simply looked at me with the most beautiful, innocent face I had ever seen.

 Suddenly she smiled at me, looking more like an angel than she had before. She was simply the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. Before I realized it, I was smiling back at her.

 As we neared the rocks she began to sing low and sweet. She was singing for me, of that I had no doubt. I longed to dive into the waters and go to her. I raised my foot to the edge of the rail. A gunshot went off next to me and I stumbled back onto the deck in surprise. The golden haired beauty leapt into the air, flashing her tail of greens and blues before disappearing into the night.

 I turned around to see Marcel standing next to me, pistol in hand.

 “You’d be wise to fire upon any you see lest you become her next meal,” he advised. “Ain’t any as sweet as they seem,” he told me before turning to leave again, “They all be monsters.” With that Marcel made his way below to the deck, leaving me alone in the dark once more.

Chapter 3

1814 Cork Harbor, Ireland

 Five strong men hefted the stone box onto the ship. They asked no questions. They were being paid three times their normal hire not to ask questions. The stone box would serve as a place for me to go to my death sleep each day. The lid was much too heavy for any one man alone to move. I felt I would be relatively safe in it, as safe as I could be on a journey like this.

 The men struggled with the box until finally managing to get it below deck to the storage area. There I would have relative assurance that no light would penetrate the box. The Galleon I had chosen was not large but it would do for our journey. We were only planning to be out for a week this trip. If we did not find Muireen in the Celtic where we had first met, we would plan another voyage to search the Norwegian Sea.

 With the stone box in place, the men began loading the rest of the supplies we would need for our voyage. Although the men had not spoken out loud about the strange box, I was certain that in private they had whispered about it. I was also certain they had wondered at the strangeness of the orders they had received. They were not allowed to enter the cargo hold during the day. They were to bring anything they thought they would need for the next day on deck the night before. They were not to bother me during daylight hours. Dr. Vargas would be in charge during the daytime.

 If Dr. Vargas had thought my demands were strange, he never mentioned it. He was so excited to search for his beloved sirens again that he probably wouldn’t have cared what I demanded of him and our crew.

 Our crew was small. It had been difficult to find the seven men we were employing as it was. So terrified were sailors of mermaids that few dared to actually go in search of them. It was enough to chance an encounter on the sea as it was let alone to go looking for them. No matter. We did not have need for more crew than we had. Seven was plenty enough.

 Dr. Vargas joined me on deck. I gazed into the endless sea as he spoke to me.

 “I have spoken with the captain and he has assured me we should be able to set sail tomorrow,” he told me excitedly. “The wind is supposed to die down sometime tonight,” he continued. I nodded.

 “The sooner the better” I told him. I too was anxious to undertake our voyage. I longed for my siren as much as he did his. Dr. Vargas glanced at me as he peered over the deck. The wind blew his soft wisps of hair.

 “Have you taken any thought to weapons?” he asked quietly. I looked blankly at him.

 “In case we do run across some mermaids who aren’t as gentle as your sweet Muireen,” he explained. “It’s a good idea to be prepared. The crew has already armed themselves,” he confessed. “Do you have a pistol of your own?”

 I shook my head and tried not to laugh. Since I had been turned I hadn’t needed a weapon for anything. No mortal would dare to cross me, at least not to live and tell about it. I couldn’t remember the last time I had even picked up a pistol or considered one for that matter. Dr. Vargas reached into his coat pocket and produced one now.

 “Take this one,” he told me. “I have another. No man should go unarmed on this voyage.”

 I took the pistol from him, not wanting to draw suspicion by refusing it. He was right. No mortal man should be on this voyage unprotected. Little did they know that they already had a monster among them.

Chapter 4

Bishop’s Rock 1680

 Four years had passed since I had seen my first mermaid. Four years since that golden-haired beauty on the rock had captivated me so. I had seen others since then, but never her. And it was her that I could not get out of my mind.

 It was because of her that I was here tonight. She was why I had once again ventured out by the rocks. Why else would I so foolishly come to this place alone and at night no less. While the rest of the crew was busy indulging in ale and the pleasures of women, I was out in the middle of the sea in the freezing cold aboard no more than a glorified row boat looking for a monster that would probably eat me if I did find her.

 I must be mad. I must have some inner hidden desire to die. For out here on the sea I was liable to die either by mermaids or the frigid wind that blew ceaselessly no matter how much I cursed it. I reached for my whiskey and pulled out the stopper. Lifting it to my lips I took a long swallow.

 It was insanity, being out here. I had previously made ten or more similar trips out here for the same purpose and never once had I seen her again. I would probably never see her again. Maybe that was a good thing, I decided closing up the whiskey bottle and tossing it aside.

 I lowered the oars into the water. It was time to head in and find some fun for myself. Before I could begin to row, I heard a splash a few meters from me. I froze trying to silence my breathing, listening carefully. A moment passed and I heard it again. I pulled in my oars and grabbed my light. Swinging the light wildly in every direction, I tried to see what had made the sound. Fear and excitement coursed through me.

 I tried to convince myself that it had only been the sound of the waves hitting the rocks. I dismissed the idea immediately. I had been hearing *that* sound for hours. This one sounded different. It sounded as if something was diving into the water. The sounds continued but I couldn’t catch a glimpse of what was causing it.

 A sweet, soft sound caught my ear and I froze again. It began low and increased in volume gradually. It was singing. It was most definitely a mermaid. My breath caught in my throat as I held my light with one hand and felt with my other hand for my pistol. Pistol secure in my hand, I swung my light towards the sound.

 A gasp escaped my lips as I laid eyes on her. I couldn’t believe it. After all of my searching, after all of the others I had come across, it was her. It was my mermaid. It was the one who had called to me before. Exhilaration nearly swallowed me.

 She was sitting on a rock not five meters from me, her long, wet hair spilling over her shoulder, her fin splashing in the water. She was looking at me and smiling. Without realizing what I was doing, I put down the pistol. The fear was leaving me. Was she doing that, I wondered? Was her singing luring me to her?

 At that moment I didn’t care. I picked up my oars and began rowing towards the rocks. If she had wanted to harm me surely she didn’t need to lure me to her. She could have overturned the boat easily enough. I knew my reasoning was thin but I didn’t care. I had waited for years for this chance.

 I reached the rocks where she sat. She reached out her hand to me, an offer of help. I grabbed the rope and tossed it to her. She caught it effortlessly and hitched it to a piece of jagged rock.

 I scampered out of the boat and onto the rocks. I was shaking so badly that I slipped, almost falling into the water. She grabbed my arm instinctively, pulling me back up. She released me as soon as I was securely on the rocks, scooting away from me. It was almost as if she were afraid of me. I was dumbfounded. The strength in the hands of the woman who had just grabbed hold of me was ten times that of any man I had ever met. What had she to fear from me? It was I who should be afraid. Yet fear had completely left me by this time.

 I sat on the edge of the rocks letting my feet dangle carelessly over the side. I glanced up at her where she had seated herself, higher up on the rocks. She watched me carefully, apprehension and curiosity in her eyes. Her knees were folded into her chest, her arms wrapped around them protectively.

 And they were knees too. I pondered this since she was a mermaid. When I had seen her just a moment before, she had had a tail from her waist down. I studied her closer. Her hair was almost dry where only minutes ago it had been wet. It now fell in soft, gold waves down the length of her slight frame, covering her most intimate parts.

 Seeming to notice my keen interest, she giggled and wiggled her toes at me. She slid closer to the water’s edge, reaching down to scoop up a handful of water. I watched with interest. She let the water splash onto her feet, wetting them. Scales appeared where the water had touched. I gasped in surprise as she giggled some more. It was magic. She was magic.

 She repeated the action and gestured at the water and then her feet. Was she trying to speak with me? “Water,?” I asked unsure. She nodded and then splashed water on her arm. “Wet?” I tried again, catching on. She nodded rapidly.

 “Wet” she repeated, seemingly satisfied.

 “You only have a tail when you are wet?” I asked having figured it out. She nodded again, smiling at me. I moved closer to her. She seemed more relaxed now and she let me sit beside her.

 “I’m Andrias,” I offered. “What is your name?”

 “My name,” she stammered, “is…, your language,” she shrugged, “has no sound.” I reasoned this for a moment not sure if she was saying I wouldn’t be able to hear the sound or whether or not she was saying there was no word for her name in Gaelic. Whichever it was, she could not tell me her name. Discouraged, I said nothing for a moment and then an idea came to me.

 “I’ll name you then,” I suggested. She smiled and nodded enthusiastically. I thought for a moment.

“Muireen,” I said finally. “Your name,” I said pointing at her, “can be Muireen. It means ‘of the sea’,” I explained. She laughed a tinkling laugh that reminded me of broken shards of glass falling to the floor. She clapped her hands happily.

 “Muireen,” she repeated. “I like it,” she said slowly. I couldn’t help but return her smile. She was so beautiful.

 She was nothing like the monsters I had watched tear a fellow sailor to shreds only weeks before. Nor was she like those I had heard so many horror stories about. She had softness, vulnerability, about her.

 But I knew that vulnerability could not be true. I had seen for myself what her kind could do. I had felt the strength in her hands. She had the potential to be deadly. This knowledge did nothing to diminish my desire for her.

 I was no stranger to women. I’d had my fair share. But I had never felt what I was feeling now. I had never wanted anyone the way I wanted this delicate creature before me now. The desire was so complete that it bordered on need. I felt the need to take her, to possess her, to make her mine. But that was ridiculous. She couldn’t be mine. She wasn’t even human. I knew nothing about her aside from the fact that she stirred feelings from deep inside me. Feelings I had never felt for anyone before.

 I had a thousand questions for her. None of which I thought she would be able to answer. Her grasp of my language was minimal. What was her language like? Did she have a family or was she on her own? Where did she live? Darker thoughts bombarded me as well. I wondered how many she had killed and yet I dreaded her answer. Maybe I didn’t really want to know.

 She was not human. What did this mean? What other creatures of myth stalked our world. Was she a killer? Was she no more than a monster guised as a beautiful woman? I shivered.

 It was difficult to convince myself of the danger. All I could do was stare at her beautiful face, into eyes the same color as the sea, to stare at this angel and pulse with desire. The attraction was near maddening. Was this her power, this allure? I found I didn’t care. I wanted her, needed her, as much as air itself.

 Leaning forward, I wrapped my arms around her. She didn’t pull away from me. In fact, she seemed to melt into my arms, welcoming the embrace. I found I needed to touch her, to feel her, to see if she *was* real or if I was dreaming. A thousand sparks of electricity ran through me as my skin touched hers. A wave of passion poured over me, so fierce that I was a prisoner to it.

 Pushing her roughly against the rocks, I straddled her body with mine. I kissed her and she kissed me back, matching my passion. My hands began to search her body, touching restlessly, desperately. She was perfection.

 Suddenly Muireen pushed away from me, straining against me to sit up. She froze for a moment, listening. She stood and rushed forward towards the edge of the rocks.

 “I’m sorry,” she said, pleading in her voice. “I cannot be with you,” she said sadly. “It is forbidden.” I stood, rushing to follow her to the edge.

 “By who?” I demanded. She did not answer. She continued down the rocks.

 “The others are coming,” she said, fear etched in her voice. “Get in your boat and go quickly”. I tried to reach her but could not. She dove into the water. Her tail splashed once in the water and then she was gone.

 Shaken, I quickly got into my boat. I presumed that by others she meant more of her kind. I had seen firsthand what mermaids could do. I was not naive enough to believe the others would be as gentle as she.

 I rowed frantically towards the shore. Relief filled me when the small boat finally skidded onto the shore. Jumping out, I pulled the boat more firmly aground. I let myself sag to the ground, panting. Scanning the dark waters as I tried to catch my breath, I looked for her but saw nothing. Knowing she couldn’t hear me but unable to resist the impulse, I called out her name.

Chapter 5

1681 Nordic Sea

 As I trudged towards the forecastle of the ship, my only thought was on reaching the crew’s quarters. Agitation and restlessness filled me. I was in no mood for making merry with the crew as I often did after my lookout shift had ended. I walked past the scuttlebutt without stopping. Several of the others stared as I passed and one called out to me but I ignored them.

 There was no need to share their pilfered spirits. My own stash was waiting for me down below. Descending the stairs by twos, I made my way below deck and headed for my room. Crossing the room quickly, I pulled back the threadbare rug next to my bed. My fingers fumbled with the chipped corner of wood plank the rug had hidden. Finally I managed to take hold of the corner and pried it upwards, revealing the hidey-hole where I keep my private jug of rum. I pulled it out and snapped the plank back into place, kicking the rug over it as I rose.

 Opening the rum, I inhaled the spicy scent deeply. It smelled like heaven. Flopping onto my bed, I kicked off my boots. I brought the bottle to my lips, taking a long swallow of the hot liquid as I leaned back against the wooden frame of the bed.

 This particular rum came from the Indies. It’s called Kil-Devil. It was aptly named. It was so potent it could kill the devil himself. If this didn’t make me forget about her, nothing could. I dipped the jug back again, taking another long drink from the bottle.

 My last encounter with Muireen had been a momentary touch of heaven. But since that night I had been in hell. I had been in a foul mood much of the time since that night and I was in a foul one now. No matter how much I tried to forget her, my mind kept returning to her beautiful face. The want for her was agony that filled my whole being. Misery had seeped into my very soul.

 I had spent many a night since our encounter looking for her. Hoping to see a flash of fin in the moonlight. Though I had traveled uncountable miles of sea since then, I had seen nary a glimpse.

 When not drowning my sorrows or gazing at the endless sea, I had given myself over to spending much of my free time ashore in the company of women. I had hoped that the comforts they offered would drive Muireen from my mind. And they had, momentarily. But when they were gone, my thoughts would return to my sweet sea angel. It was as if she had bewitched me. Was it her beauty, her seeming innocence or the magic of what she was that held me so enchanted?

 I was hopeless. I was desperate to have her off my mind, desperate to return to my normal state before I had ever encountered her. For certainly there was no point in being obsessed with a creature I could have no future with. I could not hope to marry or have a family with a mermaid! It was preposterous.

 From what I heard mermaids killed their offspring’s fathers immediately after conception. That didn’t sound like the kind of relationship that was healthy for a man. I was becoming desperate to be free of her memory.

 I had grown so desperate, in fact, that earlier in the week I had sought out Karl to speak with him. Karl was almost sixty years old and no more than a coxswain aboard the ship. He was dense and I often got the impression that the only reason the captain kept him around was out of pity. Although not the most intellectual of the crew, Karl had a gentle spirit and kind heart. Above all, Karl was considered to be an expert on sea creatures, especially the monsters.

 Wanting desperately for someone to tell me I hadn’t gone mad, I repeated the story in its entirety to Karl. He had hung on every word. Karl hadn’t any advice on how to get her off of my mind, only warnings. He had been amazed that I had gotten so close to a mermaid and lived to tell about it and even more amazed at Muireen’s obvious efforts to save me from the others. All the same he said I should be cautious as he had never in all of his years heard of a docile mermaid.

 He had asked me to give him a physical description of Muireen. From that description he had concluded that she was not yet fully mature and perhaps that is why she had not torn me to shreds. He cited that if she had been a full-grown mermaid her hair would have reached her ankles. I was sure that Muireen’s only reached her knees.

 “What might she have meant by ‘I cannot be with you, it is forbidden’,” I had asked Karl. He had shrugged and replied, “Perhaps it is forbidden for her to couple with a human male since she has not yet reached full maturity,” he suggested. He went on to recount to me a part of the legend I was already familiar with. He told me that coupling with a mermaid always resulted in a child and that I should count myself lucky we had not commenced the act. Laughing heartily he had added, “Legend has it the father doesn’t last long once the deed is complete.” I had already known this but let him know I appreciated his advice. It seemed that mermaids are known to be the preying mantises of the sea.

 I didn’t know how much of what Karl told me could be trusted. Not that I thought he might purposely lead me astray but he was prone to superstition. I was still struggling with the fact that these creatures existed much less the fact that I had almost mated with one.

 A year ago I would have said that mermaids were right up there with the Flying Dutchman and sea monsters, preposterous. But mermaids were sea monsters, were they not? Beautiful and alluring but monsters all the same.

 But not Muireen. Not sweet, gentle Muireen who had been so nervous when I first climbed upon the rock. She had sought to protect me from the others. She had been so human. Surely she was not a monster.

 A commotion above deck snapped me out of my thoughts. Shouts and gunfire echoed in the night. Rising hastily, I struggled to pull on my boots. My head spun from the rum I had drunk and I instantly regretted my attempt to drown my sorrows.

 There were sounds of battle. We must be being raided by another ship. I grabbed my sword, sheathing it to my hip. Grabbing my pistol as I passed the dresser, I hurried back upstairs.

 Above deck I saw another ship tethered to ours, all in black and without a flag. I didn’t recognize the vessel. A quick survey showed that the opposing crew only had four to five men in their numbers. How foolish for them to try to battle with our twenty-some men.

 I was just about to join the battle when I made an alarming discovery. Despite the raiding crew’s small numbers, our crew was quickly being slaughtered. My crew mate’s bodies littered the decks. I was in shock. How was it possible? The pillaging crew wasn’t even using swords or pistols. They were going up against my mates with bare hands.

 I watched as one of the marauders lifted Conner by his throat. He pulled him close and bit into his neck. Blood washed down the scoundrel’s chin. Had he bitten Connor? What kind of lunatics were these men? A soft whimper from under the mast stairs had me turning to stare. Karl was curled into the space like a scared child.

“Vampyres,” Karl whispered, pointing. I turned back to the gruesome scene before me. Vampires, my drunken mind repeated. I tried to string my jumbled thoughts together. Karl couldn’t possibly be right. These men couldn’t be the fabled creatures of lore. That was nonsense, wasn’t it? My mind whispered to me, ‘but you thought mermaids were nonsense too, didn’t you?’ I shook my head, trying to clear it.

 Without meaning to I found myself walking closer, into the chaos. A tall, dark figure appeared a few feet before me. He was six feet or so with thick black, curly hair. He wore a spotless white ruffled shirt that glowed in the moonlight. A red cape was tied carelessly around his throat. He looked to be a Spaniard but his skin was so pale it was hard to be sure.

 I stared at the man in awe. He had appeared so suddenly. Where had he come from? The man smiled broadly at me. I gasped. Fangs protruded from the man’s upper lip making his smile grotesque. The man motioned a finger at me, urging me to come closer. I shook my head. There was no way I was coming closer to this man. There was something off about him.

 My feet disobeyed my mind. Against my will, I stepped closer. On the outside I was completely calm but on the inside I was screaming with terror. This man, whatever he was, wasn’t natural. Drawing my pistol, I pointed it at the man, desperate to stop whatever was happening. The man laughed as I fired into his chest.

 I continued to walk closer to the man against my will. Somehow the man was controlling me. I stopped directly in front of him, no longer firing. I was out of bullets. His face was mere inches from mine. I could smell the rot of his breath and it smelled like death. I fought the urge to wretch. I would not show cowardice. If I was going to die then I would die as a man should.

 He reached forth his hand and slid his fingers through my hair, pulling me even closer. “You will make a fine addition,” the man said as he wretched my head aside and dipped his face to my neck. A stab of pain blossomed where the man bit me and an even bigger stab of fear began within me. Then everything went dark.

Chapter 6

1681 Somewhere near the Nordic Sea

Changing Tides

 I regained consciousness slowly. Darkness enveloped me. My limbs felt heavy and thick, foreign to me. I was lying atop of something hard, inside some kind of small enclosure, in some sort of box. Where was I? I fought to recall what had happened. Panic shot through me as my memory came back.

 Those monsters, whatever they were, had toen through my crew mates, my friends, like parchment. Then that man… he had bitten me. Was I dead? Was I in hell? I quickly dismissed those ideas. Hell probably didn’t resemble a box. And from what I was seeing I was in some sort of box.

 And I could see, despite the darkness. I marveled at this new ability. Making up my mind to listen for sounds outside the box I prepared myself to quiet my breathing. But I quickly noticed that I wasn’t breathing. And my heart wasn’t beating. Panic shot through me. Had they killed me? *Could* this be death?

 Frantically, I felt around me, pushing at the wood that enclosed me. It felt remarkably like a coffin. This thought intensified my efforts to escape my confinement.

 I pushed against the wood. My arms and legs felt heavy but they now possessed much greater strength than they had previously known. The wood around me began to splinter. Within seconds the wood gave way, crashing outwards into hundreds of pieces.

 I pushed myself clumsily out of the coffin and ended up tumbling onto the floor in my haste to be free from that cursed box. I lay sprawled on the floor, trembling. I fought to bring myself under control. If I were still alive, I needed to keep my wits to ensure I remained that way.

 Quickly I looked around me to see if I was alone. I was. I was in a small room. There appeared to be no doors in or out. A small window was apparent high in the corner of the room, allowing only minimal light in. By the deep orange light present it now, nightfall was coming quickly.

 I sat up, quieting myself and looking around again. There must be a door. The monsters had gotten me in here somehow and they obviously hadn’t used that tiny window to do it. My eye hung on the box I had been in. It had definitely been a coffin before I had splintered it to pieces. Those bastards had put me in a coffin. Had they thought me dead? Why hadn’t they simply disposed of my body at sea as other pirates would?

 Because they are not pirates, I thought wildly to myself. Karl had been right. Those beasts hadn’t captured our ship for booty. They had come to devour the men aboard. They had come for blood. They were Vampires, legends of old. I hadn’t wanted to believe it when Karl had whispered the word. I didn’t want to believe it now. No more than I had wanted to believe that mermaids existed. But alas, I knew that those too were real. What else in legend that I had thought false was indeed truth? I shuttered to think of it. The world had suddenly been turned upside down. My mind was whirling with questions.

 Wherever I was, I wasn’t dead. I was being held prisoner. Why hadn’t they killed me like the others? Their leader had said I would make a fine addition. What did that mean? Was I to be kept here to feed upon at whim? Another thought shot through the others. Had the monsters spared me in the only way they could? If I was alive and yet had no heartbeat or breath, was I still truly alive? Or was I now like them?

 Springing to my feet, I hastened to the wall. Running my hands along the stones I searched frantically. A door might not be obvious but one had to be present. I looked for a secret passage, feeling for a stone that felt out of place.

 I had almost made a full circuit around the room when I felt a jagged piece of stone. There was a slight difference in this one stone. I pulled hard at the stone. It felt loose but nothing happened. I tried pressing it in. It plunged halfway into the wall and then stopped. It seemed to be jammed.

 Determined to use all of my new strength, I began to press upon the stone once more. Suddenly the stones began to shift and the wall slid out. A doorway stood in front of me with a narrow stone staircase leading up towards freedom. And standing on that staircase directly in front of me was none other than the man who had sunk his fangs into my neck. He was not alone. Flanking him were four others. Rage filled me and I had decided to lunge at him when he spoke.

 “Ah…” he said sounding pleased, “an early riser. I like that. It is a good sign of your strength. A particularly good sign of the power you will one day come to wield” he added ominously. Before I could respond he grabbed hold of one of the men beside him and thrust him forward.

 The man tripped through the opening, falling into my arms. His scent accosted me immediately. It was the smell of life itself and I was drawn inexplicably to him. It was the smell of his blood and I needed it. Now. I grabbed the man and pulled him up to me. Shoving his head roughly aside, I exposed his neck. The man whimpered uselessly, resigned to dying. I bit into the man’s neck letting the blood pour down my throat. No twinges of guilt or moral outrage came to me as I fed. Nothing would stop me from this, this that I needed most. His blood I craved more than anything I had ever craved before in my life, even more than Muireen. I drank deeply, not stopping until his heart ceased to beat and the blood ceased to flow.

 I released my grip on the man. He slumped to the floor, dead. Numbly I stared at him. I was half in shock of what I had done and half in despair that the blood was now all gone. There was no longer any doubt. I had become a vampire.

Chapter 7

1681

Meet Your Maker

 The rum tasted bland. I set the glass down on table next to me. The table was unusual. It looked suspiciously as if it were made of bone. I shuddered.

 I had been given the chance to survey my new surroundings. Madras had taken me on a tour of the grounds. He had seemed to me as a salesman showing his wares. Perhaps he was using it as a ploy to get me off my guard. Madras was trying way too hard to win my trust. He was going out of his way to show me how fair and just a man he was. Why? No matter how hard I pondered this, I couldn’t figure it out. How could a new vampire like me, weak in power and unskilled, be useful to him? What did he want from me?

 The house appeared small from the outside. Only three rooms existed on ground level. The majority of the home was below ground. There, seven chambers existed. All were equipped with secret entryways like the one I had been kept in. Madras had said the secret entryways protected them during the daylight hours from possible trespassers. He had graciously invited me to dwell here in his home with him for as long as I wished.

 He was trying too hard to convince me of the benefits of staying with him. He had stressed the importance of learning how to use my powers. He had emphasized the fact that young equals weak among vampires. He had offered to be my mentor as was the duty of a maker to take care of their young. He had said it was my choice to stay or to go. And he was lying through his teeth. One thing my pirating years had taught me was how to spot a liar.

 There was no way Madras was going to let me go. This I knew no matter what his words. His words were manic. He was unstable. I knew to escape his clutches I was going to have to bid my time. Then, I would have to fight my way out.

 The fight wouldn’t be easy. Not only did they have the numbers and the increased power that came with age but the house was situated high in the snowy mountains. Madras had told me we were in the Alps. But I trusted him so little that even this I doubted. Madras could not be trusted. This was something I knew although how I knew it was uncertain.

 I looked at him now. He was staring blankly at the flickering fire before him, mesmerized by it. He was lost in his own thoughts, his own world. He appeared in no hurry for me to give him an answer on whether or not I would stay or if I would go. I was in no hurry to give it to him. I had not yet figured out how I would be able to make my escape.

 The first time I had seen him I had thought him to be of Spanish origin. I wasn’t so sure now. His bone structure was sharper, more in line with the Native tribes of Peru. He was handsome despite his slovenly hygienic habits. His long, dark hair curled past his shoulders and at the moment had flecks of drying blood in it. He was of average build and height and not overly frightening at first look. A bath and some clean clothes would do wonders for him.

 Looks were deceiving though. This man was extremely cunning even if he was insane. He also had more power than one could ever imagine. I had learned this quickly when I made the mistake of attacking him. Outraged that he had turned me into a monster, I had attacked him, or at least tried to. He had responded with a simple flick of his wrist that had sent me spinning into the wall with the force of a bullet coming out of a gun. Luckily I heal so quickly now or he would have killed me.

 Realizing the futility of fighting him, I had agreed to hear him out. He presented vampirism to me as a gift. He assured me that he only gave his blood to the strongest of mortal men. He chose only those he knew would grow to be strong vampires like him, vampires who would excel. According to him, turning me was a compliment of the highest kind. I chose to disagree, silently.

 I couldn’t deny that being a vampire was better than being dead like so many of my comrades now were. I also couldn’t deny that being a vampire opened many doors to me that had once been closed. Our increased speed would allow me to travel wherever I wished. I was now stronger than mortal men and able to take whatever I wanted from anyone. I would no longer have to live as a pirate, at sea most of the time. I would be able to create a new life for myself, a life full of adventure as I had always dreamt. But I wouldn’t find the life I longed for with Madras.

 Madras’ many years as a vampire had twisted him. He not only had no trace of humanity left in him but he also had no tact or decency about him. He was animalistic. He savored the fear in his victims. He laughed wildly as he set them free only to chase them down again. It wasn’t enough just to kill them. He tortured them. He killed them slowly, painfully. I would die before I became like him.

 I may now be a killer more surely now than I was before, but I did not need to be sadistic. I would kill out of need, not pleasure.

 My mind worked furiously trying to formulate a plot to escape. I knew I mustn’t let Madras know I had decided to leave. I mustn’t let him know I had reached a decision. I would need the element of surprise if I were to succeed. I had to buy time.

 My mind was sharper than it had been when I was human. My thoughts were more ordered and cohesive. I was able to spot flaws in my plans and adjust them as I went. I marveled at this. Being a vampire for me brought with it a greater intelligence but it was obvious from Madras’ companions that it wasn’t that way for all who turned.

 Even now that heightened intelligence had focused on a plan, a means of escape. It was risky. The possibility of failure was real but it was the only way of escape I could come up with. I would strike early the next night. Final death was more appealing to me than a life with Madras and so any risk was worth the chance of freedom.

Chapter 8

January 1, 1689

Paris

 It was a splendid evening. Seldom an evening do I remember when I felt happier, more at peace. I look at the Parisian Prince sitting there across the table from me, engaging the ladies in scandalous gossip. Meeting Zekias had been one of the best things that had ever happened to me.

 Zekias truly was a prince and he had been quite bored with life at court before I met him. Upon meeting we had immediately become friends and business partners soon after that. He was raucous and loud and pompous to boot. I adored him.

 Despite Zekias’ love of pomp and ceremony, he was shrewd and intelligent. He had great business acumen and knew all the right people. He was exactly the partner I needed to help get my shipping business off the ground.

 He was so shrewd in fact that I hadn’t been aware of how closely he watched me early in our partnership. He had taken notice of the strange hours I kept. It wasn’t long before he had caught me in an alley with my hands in the pockets of a noble woman and my fangs in her neck. It had been a foolish mistake on my part. I had sadly thought that I would have to kill Zekias. Zekias, however, had not reacted in the way I had expected.

 Instead of being disgusted with what I was or terrified, he had been curious and even excited. He was not aghast but intrigued. He told me at once that he had been a lover of the supernatural all of his life and had suspected what I was. It was I who had been surprised, not him.

 It didn’t take long for him to convince me to turn him. He was adamant that he wanted to become like me. At first I ignored him, insisting he did not want this life, but he persisted. I began to think on how nice it would be to have a partner like him throughout eternity. I would have someone to share my life with, someone I didn’t have to lie to.

 Now here we sit on New Year’s Eve with some of the wealthiest in Paris celebrating the success of our business. I reached for my glass, raising it towards to Zekias.

 “To good fortune” I toasted. Three glasses clinked with mine.

 Betty, or was it Betsy, twined her arm in mine. She was a whore and meant nothing to me and yet she was a very beautiful and rich whore. She was valuable to me. And despite my lack of strong emotion for her I was grateful she was by my side tonight. Despite the merriment of my mood I had emptiness deep down inside of me. The warmth of her body next to mine and the sound of her heartbeat comforted me somewhat.

 I had long ago learned to feed without death. I could make my bite pleasurable for my victims so that they were not really victims at all. I was able to indulge in the pleasures of sex and feeding simultaneously with her without having to fear I would kill her.

 In my years as a vampire I had been careful to never let a woman too close to me. She was no exception. It seemed that the only key to the yawning space within my chest belonged to one woman who was lost to me somewhere in the sea.

 I stood suddenly, excusing myself. Zekias looked at me, mildly concerned. He rose as if he would join me. I gave a small smile and motioned for him to stay. I wanted a few moments alone. I didn’t often let myself think of Muireen but when I did a great yearning overtook me. I would need a moment to compose myself.

 I walked to the back of the room and stood near the large fireplace. It was less crowded here. Orange and red glowed brightly in the growing night. The candles surrounding us had been lit and created a cozy ambiance amid the festivities. A waiter passed by, offering me a drink from his tray. I removed a glass of wine, nodding at the waiter as I did so. I took a sip of the wine and cursed myself for thinking of Muireen again. Looking into the fire I watched the flames dance, losing myself in thought.

 The conversation going on beside me caught my attention pulling me back into the present. I forced myself to focus on their conversation, desperate to drown out all thoughts of Muireen. Several women were gathered together at a nearby table engaging in their favorite pastime-gossip. Their men must have excused themselves to mingle, smoke and talk business. The women were huddled together and were unaware that anyone could hear their private conversation. They obviously hadn’t planned for a vampire to be among the guests tonight, for I heard every word clearly.

 From their conversation I learned that a certain Monsieur Franault was in a mental institution. He had been a wealthy businessman whose trade had been silver. He had been known as a stable and well-grounded man, which was why his sudden break from reality had come as such a surprise to his friends and family. A younger woman at the table asked what had caused his instability. The others informed her eagerly.

 I continued to listen and soon found myself truly engrossed in their conversation and the story of Monsieur Franault. It seems he was traveling to Ireland aboard a small vessel he had hired to transport some goods. Along the journey they had encountered rough seas and the vessel was overturned. All crew were lost save Monsieur Franault who was picked up later by another vessel, shaken and muttering insanely.

 He told the crew that picked him up that his vessel had been attacked by mermaids. Everyone had thought him mad. He was taken in for examination at which time a doctor informed his wife that the event had been so traumatic that Monsieur Franault’s mind had formulated the story in an effort to preserve him.

 It was of course rubbish that the man was a lunatic. I had no doubt that his story was true but was not surprised that others had thought him mad. At one time, I, myself, would have thought him mad. But I knew first hand that such creatures exist as do those like myself.

 He was currently being held in the Belfast Sanatorium. His family had temporarily moved to Belfast in hopes of helping him recover. The doctors were not so hopeful for him. It is rumored that he often frightened the nurses with his ranting of mermaids and how he had watched them tear the crew to pieces with their hideous fangs.

 I stood at the fireplace as if frozen there. Muireen’s image flooded my mind. I didn’t fight the onslaught of memory as I had the other times they had threatened to engulf me. I stayed them, thinking about the last words the ladies had recounted.

 “Are you all right?” Zekias asked, startling me. I had not heard him approach.

 I spun around quickly then caught what I had done.

Hopefully no one had noticed my unnatural speed. Zekias looked shocked that I had been so careless, as was I. I tried to steady myself. Seldom was I so flustered.

 “I’m fine,” I told him. “Something has come up,” I added. “I need to leave town for a couple of days.” His eyes widened in surprise and question. “I’m going to Belfast on business,” I explained. His brows arched even higher.

 “What business do you have in Belfast?” he asked. I didn’t answer. “Andrias,” he pleaded, “I thought we had decided to stay on here for a while.”

 “You stay on,” I told him. “I’ll return when I’m finished.”

 He took me by the elbow, urging me to follow him outside, away from the onlookers. We had drawn the attention of the gossiping women next to us.

 “What kind of business could you possibly have in Belfast that would take you away just now?” he asked again. I took a moment before answering. How could I explain the wave of emotions that were crashing down on me, the sudden revelations that were coming to me?

 I had shared all of my past with Zekias, all except for Muireen. She was mine in a way I could not explain. I kept her memory for myself as solace for the fear that I would never truly have her. But now…

 Maybe I could have her. Maybe now that I was a vampire we could be together. Weren’t we more alike now than ever? Could vampires and mermaids be kin of some kind? We both had fangs after all. We both needed blood to survive.

 When dry Muireen possessed legs. Why could she not come onto land? An excitement rushed over me. I could have her. I could have Muireen.

 “I need to tell you something” I began…

Chapter 9

January 2, 1689 Belfast

 It wouldn’t take us long to reach Belfast from Rouen. It was a relatively short distance. We boarded a small cargo vessel that had agreed to transport us for a minimal fee. It was not the stateliest accommodations but it would have to do. I was unwilling to wait another night to speak to Monsieur Franault. He may hold the key to finding Muireen.

 Zekias had taken Muireen’s existence with his usual ease. Having always been superstitious and a vampire himself, he had no trouble believing in mermaids. He had hung on my every word with keen interest. When I had finished with my tale, he had insisted on accompanying me to Belfast.

 “We’re partners,” he had told me. “Your quest is my quest.” It had nearly brought tears to my eyes, his devotion. I was thankful for such a loyal comrade. I had only been a vampire for eight years now and yet I already felt the darkness pressing in, seeking to devour me. Zekias brought light and love to that darkness. We had the kind of love that brother’s share, the kind of love that causes a man to die for another.

 We now stood on the boat deck watching the vessel gently cutting through the water. Our keen vision cut through the darkness effortlessly. I searched the waters as I always did when at sea. I was always looking for some sign of her or her kind. That was why I now spent as little time as possible at sea. The searing hole looking for her created in my heart was unbearable.

 “A mermaid,” Zekias murmured. “It’s amazing to me,” he began. That you met and befriended a mermaid while still human,” he went on when I turned my eyes to him. I said nothing. I turned and looked towards the sea once more.

 “Are you in love with her?” he asked softly. I thought about his question before answering.

 “I don’t know,” I said finally. “I certainly became obsessed with her for a time, but that does not equate love,” I said avoiding his eyes. “I didn’t even really know her,” I continued. “How could I love her?” I looked quickly at Zekias. He looked as unconvinced as I felt. Zekias let the matter drop and we did not speak anymore until we reached Belfast.

 It was almost midnight when we came to shore. We made haste to get to the asylum. I did not intend to wait until tomorrow to speak to Franault. I would speak to him tonight.

 We entered the building to be greeted by a guard seated at a small desk just inside the entryway. He seemed surprised to see us at such an hour but recovered quickly. We were well dressed and obviously men of means and so he had no fear of us as he might of vagrants coming in.

 “Sorry gents” he said briskly, “no visitors allowed this time of night.” Zekias strode confidently over to the man smiling broadly. He locked gazes with the man.

 “You are going to take us to see Monsieur Franault,” Zekias told him. “Yes, yes of course,” the man answered dazedly, rising from his desk. “Sad case, that one,” the man continued grabbing his keys and gesturing for us to follow him.

 We followed him down a long, dimly lit corridor past sets of locked doors. He led us down a metal stairway into the bowels of the hospital. Howls reached our ears before we reached the end of the stairway. It was common to keep the more troublesome patients away from the rest. I wondered at the impact the mermaids had had on Monsieur Franault and instantly judged him as a man of weak character. I had seen similar things in my human years and never fell to pieces.

 Maybe that is why Madras had chosen me. Maybe he had sensed this hardness inside me. I didn’t scare very easily or at least I didn’t show it.

 The guard stopped in front of a small door. He fumbled with his keys. The small ring was littered with keys of various sizes. He found the one he was looking for and jammed it into the lock. I heard the lock click and the door slid open, hinges squeaking as it opened.

 A man was rambling on from within the room. The guard motioned for Zekias and me to enter. He seemed unwilling to enter himself. I pushed the door more fully open and stared at the man inside.

 Monsieur Franault was frail and sickly looking. The man sat on the floor beside his bed rocking softly and staring at the wall. His arms had been restrained to his sides, perhaps in order to prevent him from harming himself or perhaps others. He was talking to either himself or someone he imaged to be in the room with him. Whichever it was, his words were jumbled and his meaning incoherent. I pitied him.

 Zekias walked towards the man and the man stopped rocking and muttering. He sat motionless, not looking at Zekias but obviously aware of our presence.

 “Monsieur Franault?” Zekias asked him softly. The man did not answer. Zekias lowered himself onto the floor beside the man.

 “Monsieur Franault,” Zekias tried again. “We would like to speak with you.” Still the man said nothing.

 “We would like you to tell us what happened to you,” Zekias plied. “Let me start by saying that we believe your story,” Zekias continued. “My friend here has also seen the creatures that attacked you.” The man looked at Zekias nervously from the corner of his eye but still said nothing.

 “We may be able to help you,” Zekias offered.

 This was not working. This man was terrified and had truly been given over to insanity because of his ordeal. I walked over to the other side of the man and faced him directly. I placed my hands on either side of his face and forced him to look at me. He flinched and his eyes widened in terror.

 I locked gazes with the man and allowed my power to wash over him, easing his fear. I reached into his mind with mine, willing his memories of that night to come to the surface. I didn’t have to dig very far. They were already in the forefront of his mind.

 I let the images from his memories play for me now. They were discordant and jumbled. A storm of unnatural proportions battered a small vessel. The crew scurried uselessly around trying to regain control. One fired shots into the water at some unseen target.

 Hands gripped the side of the boat. A beautiful woman pulled herself up until she was eye to eye with the man firing the pistol. A melodious song was coming from her lips. She was a raven haired beauty but despite her beauty she looked ferocious.

 She continued her song as a mother trying to lull a young child to sleep would. The man dropped his pistol, mesmerized by her song. Her emerald green eyes flashed with triumph and she stopped singing. Her face contorted into a hideous countenance, all traces of beauty gone. Fangs erupted grotesquely from her mouth. Suddenly she flung her arm around the man’s neck and sunk her fangs into his neck, pulling him off of the boat and into the water as she fed.

 Screams erupted from the remaining crew. Shadows pressed in upon them from all sides. There was more singing and more blood and more men pulled down to their watery graves.

 Gasping in surprise, I saw another mermaid lunge at an unsuspecting sailor who was trying to escape another’s grasp only to be flung into hers. There was no mistaking the golden blonde hair or those sea green eyes. I only saw a flash of her before she had drug the man into the dark depths of the water but I was certain it was her.

 I struggled against Monsieur Franault’s memories which threatened to overtake me. I forced myself out of his mind and back into the present. Shock shook me. Muireen was in fact a murderer, a murderer like me.

 I shouldn’t be shocked. She was a monster. I had always known this no matter how many times I had tried to convince myself otherwise. She was a monster like me. She had to feed. She had no choice.

 Monsieur Franault’s trembling form beneath my hands brought me out of my own thoughts. He had relived the memories with me and they had been horrid. Pity tugged at me once more. Focusing on his eyes, I let my power wash over him again. There was no reason this poor man’s life should be shattered as it was.

 “Monsieur Franault,” I began, getting his attention. “What you just remembered did not really happen,” I told him lightly. “You boarded the vessel in Belfast and an unexpected storm blew up along your journey,” I instructed him. “The crew fell overboard and all perished except for you,” I told him. “There were no monsters. You will never think of them again,” I said firmly to the man. “You were in mourning over their loss and were in shock but now you are feeling better,” I continued. “You will sleep for tonight and in the morning you will be your old self again.”

 “You will not recall having any visitors nor will you have any memory of the mermaids,” I finished.

 Removing my hands from his face, I rose to stand, turning my back on him. I made great effort to control my own trembling. Turning towards the door, I exited the room quickly and did not look back. I knew Zekias would take care of the guard. For the moment I simply needed to be alone. I needed to get away from that man and his wretched memories.

Chapter 10

January 3, 1689 Belfast

 After our meeting with Monsieur Franault we went to ground n a nearby field, something I hadn’t done in many years. I disliked the feeling of the earth pressing against me as I went to my death sleep. I preferred the comforts of my own home or that of fine inns who could be counted on to follow the orders of their well paying guests.

 I brushed myself off for the hundredth time as Zekias and I made our way towards the dock. I did it despite the fact that not a speck of dirt remained on me. I imagined I could still feel the earth around me, covering me.

 Zekias had inquired for any boats for hire in the barroom of a local inn shortly after dusk. A man by the name of Sheldon introduced himself and offered his services. He had been surprised that we wanted to go out that very night since not many of his customers request last minute late night voyages.

 Insisting on knowing our purpose and where we intended to sail, Zekias had told the man that it was his desire to visit Bishop’s Rock. This created more questions but Zekias is a very charming and persuasive man. He told Sheldon that we were business partners with Monsieur Franault and that we wanted to investigate the incident he was involved in for ourselves.

 Most of the locals knew well who Monsieur Franault was by now since news like his travels very fast among seamen. Fishermen are a superstitious lot by nature and Mr. Sheldon was no different. He demanded three times his normal rate for such an unusual outing. Zekias gladly agreed to his outrageous sum.

 Zekias and I reach the dock where Sheldon has instructed us to meet him. A stout man with greasy black hair is hunched over a small vessel. We make our way over to him where Zekias introduces us. Sheldon grunts and holds out his hand. I reach out and shake his hand but it is not what he’s interested in. He wants us to pay him in advance.

 Stifling a laugh, I motion to Andrias to pay the man. It is obvious the man is not happy about the trip. Perhaps he wants to be paid in advance in case Andrias and I don’t make it back. Zekias pays the man his wage which he shoves into his coat pocket. Sheldon motions us to board and within moments we are out on the glossy dark sea.

 Zekias is unusually quiet tonight. He seems to sense the tension within me. Sheldon wasn’t much for conversation himself, which suited me just fine. I was in no mood for small talk. Anticipation and excitement had wound my gut into knots.

 Images of Muireen attacking the man from Franualt’s memories bombarded me. I did my best to push them away. I tried to visualize her as the sweet, innocent creature I had encountered years earlier, but it was no use. She would never seem wholly innocent to me again. She was a predator by nature, like me.

 What would happen if I did find her again? What would she think about me and what I have become? Would she feel as I did that we fit together more surely now than we had before? Would she still be drawn to me? Would I to her?

 Our vessel was slowing down. I looked back at Sheldon to see he had just lowered the sail. I gave him a questioning look.

 “Rocks, just ahead,” he said in way of explanation. “They’re hard to see at night. Best be careful goin’ around ‘em.” I nodded in understanding.

 I could see the rocks he was so worried about quite clearly. Then again, I wasn’t looking with human eyes. Something glinted near the base of one of the larger rocks. I leaned over the edge of the boat to have a better look. Several more flashes of reflected light caught my eye. Zekias saw them too for he looked excitedly at me and then quickly back to the water.

 To human eyes the flashes probably looked like no more than the waves splashing onto the rocks, but to vampire eyes there was a definite metallic glint to the movement. The water was being displaced by movement of something large beneath the surface as well.

 Certain I had just seen something dive below, I ordered the other sail to be lowered. We had found the mermaids. I was certain I had seen flashes of fin in colors that could belong only to one creature. Sheldon followed the order.

 “Why do you want to stop here?” Sheldon demanded suspiciously.

 “Because we have found what we were looking for,” Zekias explained excitedly.

 “But Bishop’s Rock is still meters away,” Sheldon protested.

 “Shhh!” I commanded. “Listen! Can’t you hear them?” Zekias and Sheldon moved closer to the edge of the boat, listening intently.

 “Blimey!” Sheldon hollered out in fear. “This is what you were looking for?” he demanded. “Are you crazy? You want to end up just like your friend? Cover your ears! Quick!”

 Sheldon ran to raise the sails while trying at the same time to cover his ears. I shook my head in disgust. Humans could be so…well, human.

 “Don’t touch that sail,” I ordered.

 “But they’ll kill us!” he argued. “They’ll devour us!”

He began to raise them once more.

 “I said not to touch them!” I said roughly. Zekias recognized my growing frustration with the man. He walked over to Sheldon and hit him hard on the back of the head. Sheldon slumped lifelessly on the deck.

 The man wasn’t dead, only knocked out, which is why Zekias probably chose to handle Sheldon himself. Zekias hadn’t trusted me not to kill the man and he hadn’t wanted to clean up the mess that indiscretion would have caused. I bit back my tongue. I didn’t need to get into an argument with Zekias right now over his sentimentality. We were edging closer to the rocks, pushed by the sea. The mermaids were more visible now.

 Their singing had begun and it was sweet and melodious but I noticed it did not have the same pull as it had when I was human. This would be extremely helpful in dealing with them but an awful disappointment to the beauties hoping to feast tonight.

 I scanned them as they splashed and dove, coming closer to the boat. None were Muireen. I called her name, hoping she would hear me. She did not answer, but another with locks the color of pure snow approached the boat, laughing in a mermaid’s melodious way. She began to sing to me. Now it was my turn to laugh.

 “That won’t work on me,” I told her sweetly. Abruptly she stopped singing. Her brows knitted together in frustration and perhaps concentration.

 I had definitely caught her off guard. Zekias chuckled softly. I offered her a small smile in an effort to appease her wounded pride. She didn’t know what I was. I flashed her my fangs and she pushed frantically away from the boat in terror. I retracted them immediately.

 “I mean you no harm,” I assured her, raising my arms in a sign of trust. She looked as if she was deciding to flee or not, so I rushed on.

 “I’m looking for one of your kind,” I told her. I quickly described Muireen’s tail to her. She looked at me with loathing. Perhaps she did not understand my language anymore than Muireen had.

 I held my head in frustration, biting back curses. Surrounded by mermaids and yet I was no closer to finding Muireen than I had been before.

 Frantically I tried to think of what to do next. A commotion caught my attention. The white haired beauty I had been speaking with only moments before had a hold of another mermaid and was trying to push her under the sea. I watched the struggle, trying to make sense of it all.

 A tail swept above the water before its owner rushed upward throwing her opponent off of her. My world seemed to stop. It was Muireen! I had found Muireen! I screamed her name and she turned to look at me. The same curiosity was in her eyes, but with it a kind of sadness.

 Cautiously Muireen approached the boat. I laughed with joy at the sight of her. As she drew closer she seemed to sniff the air between us. She hesitated for a moment, looking at me with evident confusion. She reached out her hands and held to the side of the boat, mere inches from me. Without even thinking I reached out to touch her face. She flinched at my initial touch but within moments she rested her cheek against my palm.

 “Andrias? You are not the same.” she said sadly. “What has happened to you?” I quickly noted how much easily she could communicate with me now than before. She had learned much of my language since our last encounter. I couldn’t help but wonder how.

 “Andrias?”

 I was just about to answer her when a guttural cry drew my attention to the other side of the boat. Sheldon was awake and he was rushing forward, straight for Muireen. What in the world was he intending to do? Muireen could easily tear him to pieces as well as I could. He was upon us before I noticed the pistol in his hand. He raised it to fire. I dove in front of Muireen to block her from harm but even my supernatural speed wasn’t enough to make up for my folly. A flurry of bullets flew at us. I had not seen Sheldon as a threat and that had been a mistake.

 Zekias was on Sheldon within seconds, ripping at his throat and ending the hail of gunfire. Turning, I looked into the water for Muireen. She was sinking slowly beneath the surface, blood pooled around her, her eyes vacant.

 “No!” I screamed. Agony such as I had never felt before threatened to tear me apart. I dove into the water after her. Grabbing her around her waist, I drug her back to the boat. Zekias was waiting by the side and easily lifted her in. I hoisted myself over the edge and knelt beside her on the deck..

 Muireen was bleeding badly from a wound in her neck. Zekias was trying to stop the flow of blood by pressing his hands to it but the effect did little to help. He looked at me helplessly. I didn’t have any ideas. How does one help a hurt mermaid? What could I do for her? Obviously her magic didn’t include super fast healing as vampires did or she would be healing already.

 Maybe she simply needed to feed. Hysterical, I drug Sheldon’s lifeless body to her, pressing his still bleeding neck to her mouth. She remained motionless despite the blood that poured into her mouth. I pushed the corpse roughly away from us.

 Quickly I unrolled my own sleeve and punctured my wrist with my fangs.

 “What are you doing?” Zekias asked, alarmed. “She’s not human,” he stammered as if I hadn’t already known that fact.

 “We don’t know what affect your blood could have on her,” he persisted.

 “She’s dying!” I screamed in frustration.

 “She’s magic!” he screamed back as I pushed him aside. “She was never human! You’re blood won’t make her like us! We have no idea what she will become,” he continued as I pressed my bleeding wrist to Muireen’s mouth.

 Deep inside I knew he right, knew this was folly. Despite all of my knowing, I simply couldn’t bring myself to let her die, not if there was even the slightest chance I could save her. Maybe I should have summoned one of the other mermaids. Maybe they would have known what to do, but they had fled when the gunfire had begun.

 I looked down at my wrist. The wound had already healed. I was prepared to open it again and continue the feeding when Zekias grabbed my arm, pointing at the wound in Muireen’s neck. It was healing. Great dry sobs racked my body as relief washed over me. My blood had worked! She would live.

 I pulled her to me like a small child, cradling her in my arms. I rocked her back and forth trying to regain control over my wild emotions. I felt her hand squeeze softly against my arm. I loosened my hold around her until I could see her face. Her eyes were open and she was staring at me with wonderment.

 “You saved me,” she said hoarsely. I could only stare at her in amazement. Of course I had saved her. What had she expected? Her face split into a huge grin.

 “I can feel you inside me, Andrias. We are one now, no?” she asked. I had no time to ponder this odd question. She raised her wrist towards my mouth.

 “Take from me now and we will truly be one,” she offered. Without even stopping to think about it I took her offered wrist and began to drink. I longed to taste her.

 I heard Zekias cursing softly beside us. He disapproved but he did nothing to try and stop me. He well knew he was not strong enough to stop me from anything once I had set my mind on it.

Chapter 11

January 16, 1689 Paris

 Muireen studied her reflection in the glass, touching it softly as if still not sure that the image she beheld was her own and not another’s whom she could touch. Since bringing her to land she hadn’t ceased to be amazed with all she saw. She had demonstrated herself to be fiercely intelligent. She need look at something only once and she could memorize every detail. She was learning at an alarming rate.

 Already her language skills had more than tripled. She was now able to speak both Gaelic and French with relative ease. Her improved use of language was making it much easier to pass her off as a noble woman which made our invented story of her being my sister much easier for others to believe. I have always been a private person and so few knew anything of my past and Muireen’s blonde hair and blue-green eyes made it easy for others to believe she was of Irish descent like myself.

 The only real difficulty we have had has been in her becoming accustomed to walking. Having lived in the ocean all of her life she had never needed to use her legs for walking. When we had arrived at the dock that first night she hadn’t even been able to stand. Zekias and I had held her up between us to prevent anyone who might see from thinking we had harmed some helpless woman in some way. She was learning quickly to control her legs though, as she has done with everything else.

 Zekias was wonderful with her, more wonderful than me. I had wanted her with what had bordered on need but now that I had her in my home, I didn’t know what to do with her. Her nature was almost childlike. She often came to sit upon my knee and rest her head upon my chest. She longed for comfort and perhaps more.

 When I had first met her I had been young, still human, and able to meet her on an almost equal level. Now…so much has changed. There was no longer anything childlike about me and the years had long erased my wonder with the world.

 Zekias was spoiling her, pampering her with fancy dresses, jewels and whatever caught her eye. He was teaching her how to read and play cards. He had taught her to ride and she now rode as any privileged young woman would.

 Muireen amazed me. She had my heart of that I had no doubt. What troubled me was her innocence. Was I corrupting her or helping her? I wasn’t sure but I had enough conscience left to wonder. She could sense my discontent. Often I could catch her looking at me, an ocean of sadness in her eyes.

 She trusted me too much. She shouldn’t have such trust in me. I didn’t myself. I glanced at her. She was still looking in the glass but no longer at her own reflection. She was looking at me. She was studying me with an intensity I have never seen in her before. She turned back to her own reflection and smoothed down the front of her dress. It was new, a gift from Zekias. She was very fetching in it but then again she was very fetching in everything.

 The dress was cornflower blue with ivory rosettes. The sleeves ended just below her elbow in tufts of ivory lace. It fit her perfectly, just slightly grazing the floor as it should. The first dress Zekias had bought for her had been absurdly long for her slight 5’2 frame and had her tripping at the hem. Since then he had been having her dresses specially made for her.

 Zekias bounded into the room, looking pretentious as always. Cuffs of fine white lace peeked from beneath his black velvet doublet. I often tease him about his obsession with clothing and yet I love him dearly. Unlike me, Zekias didn’t seem to carry any darkness in him despite the vampirism. He was always merry and quick to laugh.

 He danced towards Muireen and pulled her towards him. He twirled her around several times before kissing her cheek. Muireen’s tinkling laugh filled the room with music. I pushed back my jealousy of the growing affection between them. It was silly to feel jealous. They were the two I loved most in the entire world. I want them to be close. Zekias looked over at his shoulder towards me.

 “Are you ready?” he asked me. Muireen’s smile faded and she turned towards the glass once more, smoothing her plaited hair.

 “I’ve been ready,” I replied pointedly. Zekias was not bothered by my sarcasm. He spun around theatrically and offered Muireen his arm.

 “Shall we go then?” he asked lightly, heading for the door. I rose to follow and we entered the night.

 We headed out on foot. Our home was within walking distance of the main streets yet we did not go that way. We turned instead towards the outskirts of town where seedier prey laid waiting. It was our rule to never hunt those whom we dealt with day to day. Even though we did not kill our prey, merely relieved them of a little of their blood, it was likely to lead to trouble to feed upon our friends. We did not need trouble.

 Raucous singing accosted us as we neared the outskirts. This was where the lower class lived and it was far different than the heart of the city where the affluent played. Here heavy drinking and wild behavior was commonplace.

 Those who lived here did not reject us for our upper class appearance or the fact that we obviously did not belong. If any had thought to, they quickly changed their minds. This may be because we often bought their drinks or maybe because Zekias was quick to offer a little mental persuasion in our acceptance.

 Zekias lead us towards one of the smaller pubs tonight, away from the more boisterous crowds. I was thankful. I was not in the mood for merriment. I simply wanted to feed then return home.

 The pub had few patrons and dim lighting. Aside from its filthiness, it was perfect. We took a seat in the corner. Zekias brought us drinks from the bar and without a word we began to choose our prey. Muireen began to sing softly. Two couples sat nearby and they turned to stare at us.

 “That’s beautiful,” one of the men slurred. Muireen smiled and continued singing.

 “You’re beautiful,” the man said lovingly. The woman next to him pinched him. “Ow!” he yelped. The couple with them giggled nervously.

 “Come now,” Zekias cajoled, “you are very beautiful too Madame. Why don’t you join us,” he suggested.

 Zekias didn’t need to use his powers to persuade them. They came readily, already hooked by Muireen’s singing. They were unafraid of us and I couldn’t help but feel a little pity for them. They had no idea they were surrounded by death.

 The man who had spoken to Muireen went to sit beside her. He leaned over towards her and laid his head upon her chest like a child. She cradled him to her. Using my power I commanded the second man to sit quietly and he did so. The women sat happily upon Zekias and my laps.

 We wasted no time but began to feed at once. Muireen stopped singing and began to feed as well. Our victims made no sound other than the occasional soft moans of pleasure. Feeding was as pleasurable for humans as it was for vampires if the vampire wanted it to be. Even Muireen’s victim didn’t seem like much of a victim. He seemed to be in ecstasy. Mermaids and vampires are very similar indeed.

 Careful not to kill them, we finished quickly. Killing victims meant having to dispose of the bodies. Engaging in that behavior often enough would make it very difficult to live within society. I had met vampires over the years that enjoyed the kill so much that it made living on the fringes of society acceptable to them. I was not of a similar disposition.

 We finished feeding quickly. Using a drop or two of our own blood on their bite marks ensured there would be no trace of what had just occurred. Our blood would heal them rapidly, leaving no signs of our feeding. Zekias and I altered the couples’ memories, including Muireen’s.

 The ability of mind persuasion was outside of a mermaid’s capabilities. We had learned this the hard way. On our first hunting excursion Muireen’s meal had began screaming and attempted to flee. I unfortunately had to kill the man, breaking his neck to silence him before he could draw unwanted attention. Muireen had been most upset that evening. Satisfied we had covered our tracks, we rose to leave. We had just begun our walk towards home when Muireen abruptly stopped. She was gasping as if she was short on air. Taken aback Zekias and I stared at her bewildered. Suddenly she dashed behind one of the nearby businesses into the alleyway. We hurried to catch up to her. We found her bent double and retching horribly. Bloody vomit covered the ground in front of her.

 She forced herself upright and slumped against the wall for support, breathing heavily. Beads of sweat stood out on her forehead. Quickly I drew my handkerchief and handed it to her. She took it gratefully, wiping her mouth.

 I was deeply alarmed. Muireen appeared to be sick. I hadn’t even known mermaids could become ill. She began to retch again. Zekias looked as alarmed as I felt. We stood there helpless, not knowing what to do for her. Zekias reached forward his hand and touched her forehead.

 “She’s with fever,” he said excitedly. “We must get her home” he insisted. I knew that he was right and this put me to action. Wiping her mouth, I tried to stand her up but she was too weak. We would never be able to get her home by walking her. Lifting her into my arms, I headed off into the night using my vampire speed to get us home quickly.

 I lay her on the couch and examined her. She was no longer vomiting but she was still very feverish. A brush of air let me know that Zekias had joined us.

 “She needs a doctor,” he said with a note of hysteria.

 “What can a doctor do for a mermaid?” I asked with as much calm as I could muster.

 “More than not having one can,” Zekias replied sharply. He was scared. Vampires do not like to feel fear and so they chose anger instead. This I understood and so I let his harshness towards me go.

 “I’m going for one,” he said stubbornly and with another wisp of air, he was gone. I could not argue his logic in getting a doctor. Lord knows we didn’t know what to do for her. But a doctor might notice that Muireen is not human and that could be trouble.

 Zekias arrived back some twenty minutes later accompanied by a disheveled looking man I assumed to be the doctor. The man looked as if he had been literally pulled out of bed and dragged here. I was guessing that was exactly what Zekias had done. It was going to take a lot of vampire skill to erase his memories.

 Hopefully the man’s wife would not miss him while he was gone. Despite the fact that Zekias had just put us at great risk of discovery, I could not fault him. Muireen was in trouble and needed help. He was trying to help her the only way he knew how.

 Zekias used his powers on the doctor and the doctor went immediately to examining Muireen. After several minutes he turned towards us.

 “You say she was vomiting blood?” he asked. We nodded. I did not dare tell the doctor of the possibility that the blood she had been vomiting might not have been her own. The doctor stepped away from Muireen, a look of fear on his face.

 “She needs to be quarantined right away,” the doctor commanded. “You should not have brought me in contact with her!” he said indignantly.

 “What is wrong with her?” I demanded.

 “Disease of the blood,” the doctor gasped. “It will consume her! There is no hope, no hope!” he said manically. He made as if he would flee our home but Zekias stopped him easily enough.

 “You had to have known!” he said accusingly to Zekias. “She must have had symptoms before now!” the doctor continued. “She would have been having nosebleeds for weeks before it came to this! How could you put me in such great risk!” the doctor bellowed.

 Zekias grabbed the man’s face and forced him to make eye contact. He instructed the doctor to return home at once and to forget any of this had happened. If he was to meet anyone along the way he was to tell them he had been sleepwalking. Zekias opened the door and the man left, slightly dazed.

 Zekias turned to face me. “It was the man she fed upon” Zekias began. “I could smell the disease upon him,” Zekias confessed, “but I… I didn’t think…” he trailed off.

 “You smelled it on him and let her feed anyway?” I roared.

 “How was I to know!” he bellowed. “We don’t get sick! Why would I think she would? We’re immortal! She’s immortal! Shouldn’t she just have healed herself?”

 I wanted to be mad at him and yet I couldn’t. Deep down I knew I probably wouldn’t have stopped her either. Why hadn’t her body rejected the disease? I hung my head trying to think clearly, to regain control. Her blood had not cleansed her. Her blood could not….but maybe mine could. The idea came to me suddenly.

 I rushed towards Muireen. I would feed her my blood, all night if I had to. I would cleanse her system with my blood. After all, I had healed her of a gunshot wound with my blood. I could heal her of this too.

 Using a fingernail, I sliced open a vein at my wrist. I let the blood flow into her mouth. My blood had worked that night on the boat, it could work again. Zekias seemed to like my idea and he rushed to the other side of Muireen, ready to do the same is necessary.

 I tried not to look at her as I fed her. Her skin had such a ghastly gray look about it, like death. It made me tremble inside to see her like this. Her beautiful eyes now lacked luster. Dark hollows surrounded them and they appeared slightly shrunken in the sockets.

 As I fed her I played over in my mind how she could have come to this. The only logical explanation was that the disease had progressed so quickly because it had been directly ingested. I looked down to see that the wound in my wrist had healed. Zekias slashed open his own wrist and began feeding her again before I could re-open the wound on my own wrist. She lay, trance-like while the blood flowed into her.

 I covered my face and wept, unable to hold it back anymore. I could not lose her. I couldn’t bear it. I may not have showed her as I should have, but I love her. I love her dearly. Zekias laid a comforting hand upon my shoulder.

 “There, there Andrias” he said. “It’s working”. His words took me by surprise. I uncovered my face to look at Muireen at once. Her color was returning and her eyes no longer looked as ghastly as they had. Andrias’ wound had closed and so I opened my own wrist once more and began to feed her. Hope soared within me. She would be all right. Zekias chuckled at my obvious elation at her recovering.

 “Now you just need to show her how much you love her,” he said softly. I shook my head slowly.

 “It is not a matter of love Zekias,” I answered quietly. “I simply do not know how to have a more intimate relationship with her than the one I have now.” I looked at Zekias struggling for the words to explain. “Her innocence…” I began but Zekias interrupted me.

 “She is not so innocent,” he countered. “If you spoke with her more you would see that,” he added. “She only needs to familiarize herself with our world more” he continued. “Within a couple of months she will probably be no different than you and me,” Zekias chuckled.

 “That too troubles me,” I replied darkly.

Chapter 12

February, 1689 Paris

 “You’re taking that whore?” Muireen’s face was contorted with her unveiled disgust. I said nothing, trying to rein in my own temper. I continued to smooth my clothing thinking it was wise to keep my hands busy in an effort to overcome the sudden urge I had to strangle her pretty little neck.

 She was referring of course to Betsy, a young woman I saw casually. Betsy was a whore and a rich one at that but it was crude of Muireen to point it out. Her behavior was surprising me more and more often. She was full of sunshine for Zekias but I seemed to be on the receiving end of her venom. I tolerated it only because I could understand how our relationship might be confusing to her.

 It had been confusing enough before but now that she was feeding upon me it was even more stressful. After she had nearly died Zekias and I had made the decision that feeding from mortals was simply too risky for her. Zekias and I now alternated nightly who fed her.

 I tried to keep my distance during the feedings, offering only my wrist. It was strangely erotic despite my best efforts to make it not so. I had the distinct impression that Muireen made it purposefully so though I had no proof of how she was doing it. She sensed my discomfort and seemed to relish it.

 Zekias had no qualms about feeding her. He allowed her to curl up in his lap like a kitten and drink from his neck. I hated to watch her feed from him and hated it even more when they did so behind closed doors. Zekias swore to me that there was nothing more going on and I believed him and yet my jealousy continued to grow.

 Muireen no longer greeted me when I rose. She no longer curled up in my lap. She was testy with me lately and tonight she was especially ornery.

 “I am taking Betsy if that is who you are referring to,” I answered her finally, as calmly as I could I might add. She grunted. I turned to her and held out my hand, a peace offering.

 “Come, let’s hunt” I offered. She pulled away from my offered hand, a look of fury upon her beautiful face.

 “You go ahead,” she said bitterly. “You don’t need me to hunt.”

 I took a moment to compose myself. Not willing to be drawn into another argument I consented.

 “Fine” I told her, “Zekias can take you to the party.”

 “Zekias has already left to feed and then pick up his whore for the evening,” she said evenly. “Don’t worry about me,” she hurried on. “My escort should be here any moment.”

 “Your escort?” I asked in surprise. She nodded proudly.

 “Monsieur Brunoir has offered to escort me tonight and I have accepted,” she informed me as haughtily as if she were in fact a real princess. I glared hard at her.

 “Zekias approved,” she added, “not that I need either of your approvals,” she spat.

 I stared at her in disbelief. Monsieur Brunoir was a business associate, a very rich and attractive associate. Possessiveness I had no right to feel waged war inside me. Biting back my fury I said nothing further but simply turned to leave. She could wait alone for Monsieur Brunoir.

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 The party was a gallant affair. Nickolas Dupree’s wife, wealthy aristocrat and business associate, was throwing the ball in honor of his birthday. She had outdone herself as usual. I had never seen so many crystal sconces lit in one place. Obviously she was making an attempt to brighten the place despite the growing night.

 Upon arriving, Betsy and I were immediately greeted by Zekias who kissed Betsy’s check in warm welcome. He was ever the gentleman. Not to be out done, I placed a chaste kiss upon Zekias’ date, Cassandra’s, check as well.

 I surveyed the room. The women were dressed in their finest gowns; their breasts glittered with fine jewels. Everyone here wanted to make sure that everybody else knew that they had money and lots of it. I snorted in disgust. I had no real reason to be discontented with them. I too had money and enjoyed the privileges there of. I traveled in the best circles wherever I went and was well-respected. They adored me.

 Maybe that was the problem. They adored a lie. Even Betsy on my arm, smiling up at me, didn’t really like me for me. She didn’t even really know me. She adored the power and affluence that accompanied wealth.

 For a brief moment I imagined how freeing it would be to snap her neck like a twig. Then perhaps, to move on to draining a few of her friends. How much would they adore me then? I shook my head to clear it and quickly excused myself. My thoughts had been too tempting. I felt an urge to follow through, to damn all of us. Zekias followed me.

 “Are you upset about Monsieur Brunoir?” he asked perplexed. I turned back to glare at him. Was that what I was upset about?

 “Surely you won’t spite her a suitor,” he said reasonably. “You have Betsy and I have Cassandra,” he continued, “surely she shouldn’t have to come alone.” I said nothing. There was nothing to say. He was right.

 “Andrias,” Zekias began sighing deeply, “I love you as a brother and Muireen as a sister.” He paused as if trying to find his words. “She is lonely,” he told me. “She is lonely for you…” he trailed off.

 I shook my head. I was unwilling to have this conversation with him again. Zekias nodded in understanding.

 “I understand if you do not wish that type of relationship with her,” he said firmly, “but then you cannot be jealous if she chooses to move on.” He gave me a hard look before continuing.

 “I have advised her to move on,” he told me evenly. “I’ve told her that you won’t change your mind. She is coming to accept that fact but if you continue to act like this you will only cause her more confusion and pain than you already have,” he finished with a hint of anger.

 He was right. I had caused her pain. This I knew and I hated it. “What am I to do?” I asked in exasperation.

 “Let her go,” he suggested gently. I shook my head and walked away. Let her go? I had searched for her, longed for her and now I was to let her go? I needed some air and some quiet to order my thoughts. I stepped out onto the balcony.

 I was replaying Zekias’ words in my mind. I knew his advice was sound. I knew his judgment was just but still… A tinkling laugh drew my attention below me. Raw shock hit me as I watched Muireen below with Monsieur Brunoir. Her fangs were stuck in his neck. She was feeding on a human! She was feeding in public! She was feeding on our friend and business associate! Was she out of her mind?

 I turned on my heel and hurried back inside. Rage coursed through my veins heating me to boiling. I found Zekias and grabbed his arm, dragging him after me. Now he would see what the little princess was up to. I pulled him outside without a word despite his many questions. I pointed to the scene below. Muireen had just finished feeding and was now speaking with Brunoir. Zekias looked as shocked as I felt.

 “I told you it wouldn’t hurt” she purred. He was panting like a dog. It was obvious that it hadn’t hurt. He pushed her roughly against the bricks and kissed her. Zekias and I hopped the balcony easily and landed silently on the ground. Brunoir was so consumed with Muireen he hadn’t even heard us approach. I grabbed the dog by his throat and tore him off of her.

 “What are you doing with my sister” I demanded roughly. I didn’t have to fake my outrage at how crudely he was treating her even if she wasn’t really my sister.

 “Your sister!” he laughed loudly. “We both know she is not really your sister Colburn. You have been keeping a naughty little secret” he teased. My eyebrows rose at this and I turned to look at Muireen. She didn’t seem to want to look at me.

 “Someone had been talking too much” I tsked at Muireen. “Now I will have to clean up your mess” I growled.

 “Don’t kill him!” Muireen burst out. “Zeke,” she pleaded, “please don’t let him kill him!”

 “I’m not going to kill him over you, you little fool” I seethed. This had much the effect as I had intended. It seemed to do more to wound her than me killing Brunoir ever would. It was petty but right now I felt betrayed beyond anything I had ever experienced and I wanted her to hurt as I did.

 What I hadn’t expected was for her to begin to cry. I had only seen her cry once before. It had been alarming to see that the legends about a mermaid’s tears were true. Their tears hardened into jewels, diamonds of the purest form.

 Muireen was sobbing now. Clinking tears hit the pavement we stood on. I turned from her numbly and took care of Brunoir’s memories. I could hear Zekias trying to comfort her but she refused to be calmed.

 I finished with Brunoir and he stumbled off to the party with no recollection of who he had been escorting tonight or what had just occurred. Muireen looked defeated as I have never seen her before. She turned away from us and headed towards the pier. Zekias hurried to clean up her tears. It would be odd for one to stumble upon a pile of diamonds lying on the street.

 “Where are you going?” I demanded of her. She did not answer me, merely kept walking. I caught up to her easily and forced her about to face me. She beat upon my chest with her small hands. Diamonds fell around us. “Why?” she demanded fiercely. “Why is it so wrong for me to want someone for myself?” she demanded. Zekias had caught up with us now.

 “It’s not wrong” Zekias offered. “You just can’t take risks like that” he told her. “You’ll expose us all”.

 “But I need someone who knows me,” she protested, “someone who really knows me”.

 “We know you” Zekias offered. I could tell that was not what she had meant and so I tried again.

 “You can have relationships like Zekias and I do” I offered. I didn’t really much like the idea but I felt we were losing her and in a panic I was willing to agree to almost anything. She stopped crying and looked at me. Her pretty little face was so contorted in rage that she looked like a snake about to strike. I had no misunderstanding about who her target was either.

 “I am not cold and empty like you and incapable of true feeling” she hissed. “I need more than just a warm body in my bed!” Feeling as though she had slapped me, I released her.

 I watched her turn and continue towards the water, stripping off her clothing as she went. I could see what her intentions were and yet I did not move to stop her. Zekias, however, ran forth at once, begging her to stop.

 “What are you doing?” he asked her stupidly. “Please Muireen,” he begged when she did not answer, “please!” Finally she turned to him.

 “I have to” she said shakily. “I love you Zekias, but I have to. I miss the water and I am so sad here. I don’t belong here!” she wailed. “I’m not human and I never was!” She turned and took the last few steps towards the water.

 Part of me thought that I should do something to stop her, but… I couldn’t.

 “Do something!” Zekias screamed at me. I didn’t move or speak. Muireen splashed into the water and then she was gone.

 “Now what?” demanded Zekias. I shrugged stiffly. “We do nothing?” he asked incredulously. “We do nothing” I agreed. Zekias seemed to recover himself slightly. “What should we do with her clothes?” he asked calmly. “We can’t leave them here for someone to stumble upon and yet if we take it with us she will have nothing to put on when she returns” he said. I pitied him.

 “You don’t think she will return?” he asked me, reading the expression on my face. I said nothing but turned and began the walk towards home. Zekias followed me, picking up her clothing as he went.

 “She’ll return” he insisted. “She’s angry right now but when she calms down she’ll see…she’ll come home” he insisted. As we walked home I brushed furiously at the wetness in my eyes, wishing I had Zekias’ faith.

Chapter 13

March, 1689 Paris

 The fire flickered lazily. I sat, sipping a glass of brandy. Zekias had already left to hunt. I had stayed behind to wait for her. He had told me this evening of her return but he needn’t have. I had sensed her when I returned shortly before dawn. Our blood exchange that fateful night I had sought her out had seen to that. Always I could feel her presence when she was near. She had been sleeping and so I had let her be. I had gone to my death sleep with a myriad of emotions battling within me.

 I smelled her before I heard her. I froze in anticipation.

 "Zekias welcomed me back last night” she informed me stiffly. “You were out” she added. "I hope it is all right that I have returned” she added when I did not respond. I heard her inhale deeply, no doubt bracing herself for a fight.

 I did not turn to look at her. I wanted to shake her violently for the anguish of the last weeks that she had brought upon Zekias and me. Another part of me was so flush with happiness and relief that she had returned that I was afraid to do anything for fear that it would be the wrong thing. I did not want her to leave again.

 Coming to a decision, I rose and went to her. Before she could protest I wrapped my arms around her, hugging her to me. At first she felt stiff in my arms but then she melted against me and released the breath she had been holding. We stood like that for several moments before I broke the silence.

 “Do you hunger” I asked her. I felt her nod her head against me. I pulled her back to look at her.

 “Yes” she said quietly. I led her to the fireside and sat again, pulling her onto my lap as I did so. She seemed surprised at my actions. I was surprised with them as well. I cradled her in my arms as one holds something precious. She was precious, precious to me. She was more precious than I had realized before she had left.

 Then I did something I had never done before. I drew her face towards my neck. She did not seem to realize what I was offering and so I tilted my head to the side to make it more obvious I was offering my throat. She leaned in hesitantly and nuzzled my throat, giving me time to change my mind. When I didn’t, she pierced my vein gently with her fangs.

 Emotion flooded me and to my surprise unbidden tears threatened. She had such an effect on me. It never ceased to shock me that I was able to feel such strong emotion with her.

 Her hand played across my chest as she fed. Eroticism engulfed me. I had no thoughts of her as a child at this moment in time. She finished feeding and, drowsy, she rested her head against my arm. She stared up into my face and traced her fingers along my jaw line. Her countenance was so filled with love and adoration towards me that I could scarcely stand to look at her. I didn’t deserve her love. I had treated her wretchedly and cruelly. Emotion I had never experienced with another, not even when I was human, choked me.

 She sensed that my walls had crashed down. For once I did not care about the self protection I had so carefully built around me. I had thought she was lost to me, lost forever. The last few weeks I had been truly dead.

 She pulled my face towards hers suddenly, surprising me. She kissed me softly. She tasted like bliss and I was taken back to the first time we had kissed when I had still been human. I kissed her back, harder then I meant to. Need was building inside me.

 She met my kiss with equal passion and desire. She wanted me, needed me as much as I did her. Why had I held back before?

 Following my heart, I stood, lifting her into my arms as I did. Still kissing her, I made my way towards my bedchamber. We had bound ourselves with blood the night I had saved her. Tonight I intended to bind us in the flesh as well.

Chapter 14

January, 1690 London

 Muireen stepped into her dress. It was the finest satin money could buy, pale pink in color. Fine lace and pearls adorned it. It was new and far fancier than her other dresses because of the many gathers. This dress had not been bought by Zekias like so many of her others. This one had been purchased by me.

 Muireen and I had married several months ago and since then I had been spoiling her as shamelessly as Zekias once had. It was difficult to be in the company of a woman such as Muireen and not wish to give her whatever she desired.

 When I had first asked Muireen to marry me I had feared we would have to do it in secret. We had told those who knew us she was my sister after all. Zekias had laughed when I had confessed as much to him. He had suggested it was only a simple matter of slightly adjusting our original story. We would tell others that she was my step sister, not of true blood.

 It had been a clever idea and yet I had still worried. Zekias understood the wealthy however. He had been sure that no one would even bat an eye at our announcement. He had been right. It seems that been overtly wealthy is incentive for others to look the other way no matter what you do. Besides, the monarchs have been breaking morality codes for centuries.

 After a small, private ceremony, we had purchased a house on the outskirts of London. Zekias had moved with us. Our new home was not large in of itself but the land accompanying was abundant offering much pasture for the horses Muireen had insisted on acquiring. Most importantly, it offered privacy and that was prized above all else.

 Religious fervor was still spreading across the land and one could never be too careful of appearances no matter how much money they had. It wouldn’t do to raise suspicions. Protestants and Catholics may hate one another but I had no doubt that they would happily unite to pursue and desiccate any supernaturals they crossed paths with if they knew of their existence.

 I had recently heard rumor from a vampire passing through town that he had encountered a group of Protestants that believed in vampires and had made it their mission to stamp out the existence of such evil. He had said that he had last known the group to be in the vicinity of Wales. He claims that he narrowly escaped them. I have no intention of giving anyone a reason to believe that Zekias, Muireen and I are anything more than wealthy business men.

 I watched as Muireen struggled to fasten her dress in back. I rose hastily to help her. Her hair brushed my hand as I fastened her up. Her long golden locks were pulled up high on her head. Ringlets escaped around her face, adorning her as a crown would. She smiled at me in the glass. Joy filled me. She was my queen and we had the world at our feet. She turned quickly and kissed me on my cheek.

 “Well?” she asked twirling around for me to admire her. “What do you think?” she asked playfully.

 “Need I say?” I replied, failing to hide my amusement. She giggled.

 “I should very much like to hear your opinion,” she said still giggling, “spoken out loud, if you please” she added. I could not help but to laugh too. She was incorrigible. I pulled her close to me.

 “You are a breathtaking beauty in everything you wear,” I whispered in her ear, “but tonight you are more beautiful then I have ever seen you” I finished, releasing her. She beamed at me. I had pleased her with my answer.

 “Good” she said triumphantly returning her gaze to the mirror. She tousled with her locks, taming what she imagined to be one that was out of place. “I want to look my best tonight since Lenora will be there” she confessed. I feigned hurt by holding my heart.

 “I thought you wanted to look your best for me but now I know you have done all of this for Lenora’s benefit” I said trying to sound hurt. She shot me a glance over her shoulder.

 Lenora was a vampire. We had met her and her friend Celeste last month and Muireen had been impossible ever since. Zekias had taken a liking to Celeste and thus the five of us had spent a considerable amount of time together lately.

 Muireen and Lenora were less than fond of each other. Muireen fancied that Lenora did not respect me as a married man and had designs of some sort upon me. This was preposterous. Lenora had been friendly towards me but not overtly. I did however sense that Lenora did not approve of marriage between supernatural creatures.

 I confronted Lenora with my suspicions once and she had admitted this freely to me. She had said that marriage was a human institution that had nothing to do with us. She felt we should not try to live as humans do on anything but the most superficial level possible for safety. Despite our differences of opinion she had continued to be a guest of ours frequently.

 She had questioned me at length about Muireen and I had been vague. “She is not a vampire as you have claimed” Lenora had accused. “I don’t know what she is but she is not like us” she had told me. Of course, she was quite right but I would not confess this to her nor would I tell her what Muireen was. Muireen’s safety was too important to risk it even in the name of friendship.

 I stepped towards Muireen, closing the distance between us.

“Let us be merry tonight” I pleaded. “I love you more than my own life” I told her honestly. “Her desires do not matter,” I assured her, “it is you who owns my heart”. Muireen melted against me. I spun her around to face me and kissed her quickly.

 “Come” I told her, taking her by the hand. “We must get going. Zekias is positively smitten with Celeste and if he is late it will be her wrath upon his head”. Muireen’s tinkling laugh floated behind us as we made our way towards the sitting room.

 Celeste’s hold over Zekias had become a joke of ours and while Celeste was gentle as far as vampires go, she was still not to be crossed. She insisted on being treated like a lady. Zekias had made the mistake of playfully slapping her bottom one night when he was full of spirits. She had returned the favor by slapping him in the face. Unfortunately for Zekias, a vampire woman’s slap was more potent than your average lady and he had smashed through the wall, ending up in the next chamber.

 Muireen and I hadn’t been able to contain our mirth. Zekias had looked positively shocked. I do not think anyone had dared to strike Zekias before this time. I had excpected this incident to cool the growing flame of desire Zekias felt for Celeste but I had been wrong. Instead of cooling it, it seemed to ignite it further.

 Muireen and I entered the sitting room to find Zekias waiting for us. He rose swiftly from his chair as we entered, a sour look upon his face. “About time” he complained softly. Muireen stifled a laugh as Zekias headed for the door and we followed.

 We were attending a party of supernaturals tonight and so chose to use our supernatural speed as a way of travel. I carried Muireen since she could not travel as swiftly as Zekias and me. We arrived at the party a few minutes later and I set Muireen on her feet. She fluffed her hair, grumbling as she did so about the wind.

 We made our way up the doorstep. The home belonged to an alpha werewolf named Luis. He had a small pack in the area and several members of his pack resided with him here. Luis greeted us at the door, a female werewolf by the name of Marie at his side. We exchanged pleasantries upon entering his dwelling. I surveyed the room cautiously as we entered. I wasn’t entirely comfortable attending a gathering of only supernaturals. It unnerved me slightly.

 Zekias spotted Celeste and Lenora chatting in a corner and quickly went to join them. Muireen spoke with Maria and some other members of the pack while I continued my surveillance.

 My eye fell upon a group of vamps sitting in the corner. They were foreign to me. I had never seen them before and I eyed them warily. I picked out the leader right away. His power was palpable. He was much older than his two companions. I would have to keep a close eye on them. Vampires could be very unpredictable.

 Muireen finished her conversation and we began to make a circuit of the room, mingling with the other guests. An hour or so had passed and I had forgotten all about the mysterious vampires when they approached us. Involuntarily I stiffened. In the past when I had encountered vampires of similar age and power it had always spelled trouble. I expected no different this time. I had a theory that as vampires came to realize the immensity of the eternity that lay in front of them that they lost their minds.

 “Who is your maker” the old one demanded with much authority. He was obviously used to others cowering to him. I cowered to no one. I looked at him coldly.

 “You show great disrespect to me in not coming to greet me when you first entered” he accused. “Did your maker not teach you to show respect towards those of great age and power?” he bit out. “Did he teach you no manners at all?” he added as I continued to stare. I cleared all emotion from my face and calmly addressed him as I steered Muireen comfortably behind me.

 “I did not mean any disrespect” I began. “I was with my maker only a short time before venturing out on my own” I confessed. “Since then I have lived mostly among humans” I continued. He snorted in disgust. I smiled apologetically. “My child, Zekias, my wife and myself live a quiet life” I offered.

 “You wife?” he said outraged. Do you think you are still human?” he accused. “You go around trying to blend in, disguise yourself as one of them, acting superior to all!” My face hardened with suppressed rage. He was determined to cause trouble. Our conversation had drawn considerable attention. I noticed that Celeste and Zekias had come to stand behind me as his henchman stood behind him.

 “I’ll ask again,” he spat, “who is your maker?” Unable to contain my anger any longer, I spat back, “that is between he and I”. It was the wrong thing to say. The vampire raised his hand towards me and within an instant his power had lashed out at me. It sent me crashing to the floor. Muireen screamed. “I will teach you manners since he did not” the vampire seethed. Pain seared through my hand and I held it in agony. I couldn’t stop the agonizing screams that leapt from my lips. Muireen rushed to my side begging the vampire to stop but he paid her no heed.

 Could a vampire die like this? If one could than I was certainly dying. I lay helpless on the floor, blood trickling from my nose. The pain in my head ceased only to be replaced by the ear-splitting screams of Muireen. Her screams were so high pitched that everyone was covering their ears trying to escape them. I raised an arm and shook her gently, desperate to have the horrific sound cease. But it was not until the windows began to shatter did she take notice of what she was doing and stop. She had stopped crying but now great sobs escaped her body. She was beginning to cry. Mermaids seldom cry and it is very unsafe for them to do so in public. Panicked I sat up quickly and tried to shield her from view by embracing her in my arms. Zekias rushed forward and tried to shield her from the eyes of the onlookers too but it was too late. Several nearby had watched her tears fall and turn to diamonds. I brushed her remaining tears aside, crushing them to dust before the diamonds could form.

 “What is she?” the vampire who had just tortured me asked woodenly. I looked up to see the crowd of astonished faces all wanting to know the same thing. The vampire went on, “Could she possibly be one of the fabled creatures from long ago whose tears turn to jewels?” he implored with awe. Lenora stood close by to him and the look on her face was one of complete astonishment. They knew what Muireen was. We were no longer safe. I pulled Muireen up by the arm suddenly and stood.

 “Leave us alone!” I said fiercely to the crowd. “We bother no one and want no trouble” I pleaded. The crowd was motionless. I began to push my way through them. I turned to Zekias, “We are leaving. You can stay if you’d like” I told him sharply. Zekias looked pleadingly at Celeste. “Go” she ordered softly. “I’ll be behind you” she promised him. He turned to follow us.

 The vampire made a move to stop us but Luis interfered. “You promised there wouldn’t be any trouble tonight Saul” Luis said.

 “You do not control me, Luis” Saul said coldly.

 “No, I don’t” Luis admitted. “But tonight you are in my home and my territory” Luis said threateningly. Werewolves surrounded them on all sides. The menace was clear. Saul chuckled and stepped aside letting us pass. I pulled Muireen quickly through the crowd and into the night. Sweeping her into my arms I rushed swiftly through the night.

Chapter 15

February, 1690 London

Andrias

 Almost a whole month had passed since our encounter with Saul. When we had returned from the party that night I had began hastily packing our bags. I had intended on fleeing with Muireen that very night. Zekias had begged me to reconsider and when Muireen joined him, I found I couldn’t win. They both said that I was rushing things. They wanted to wait and see what came of it. They had assured me that all would settle down again. They had been right. All had been quiet.

 Quiet or no, I couldn’t shake the feeling of danger around me. Saul had guessed at what Muireen was. He knew. Who he had shared that knowledge with was uncertain. Muireen’s ability to make wealth from her misery put a high price on her head. I wouldn’t rest until we were far from here.

 I hadn’t given up on the thought of leaving the city. In fact, I had converted much wealth into gold which traveled and spent easily. I had hidden a stash of necessities for Muireen and myself if it became necessary to leave hastily.

 We had had to answer many a question from Lenora when we next saw her. Her questioning had been brutal and I was about to lose my temper with her and her questions when Celeste had thankfully put an end to them. I had refused to answer many of Lenora’s questions and it was clear she was angry but it was no business of hers what Muireen was. She was no closer to knowing now than she was before and I wanted it to stay like that. The fewer people who knew what Muireen was, the better.

 I glanced down at Muireen who was still sleeping. I would go to any lengths necessary to keep her safe, even giving up our home here. In fact, that is why I had risen so early. I was going to meet with a man about purchasing a piece of land in the Indies. He owned a large sugar plantation already fully staffed and prosperous. He was looking to retire and I was interested in acquiring the property. The island where the property lay was private and few inhabitants were found. It would be the perfect place for Muireen and I to reside. Of course Zekias and Celeste, who were quite the couple now, were welcome to join us. Muireen and Zekias knew nothing of it. I planned to surprise Muireen with it as a gift. It was too dangerous for her to swim anywhere around here and she did miss the water so. There she would be free to swim as she pleased. I leaned over and placed a kiss on her cheek before quietly slipping out.

Lenora

 I waited for Andrias to leave before making my way to the door. An invitation was unnecessary since I had been invited in long ago. So confident that no one would dare trespass on their home that they hadn’t even bothered locking the door.

 I wasn’t afraid that I would encounter anyone. Zekias and Celeste were occupied at our home and probably would remain so for several more hours at least. I had watched Andrias leave to meet a friend of mine regarding his new home. Funny how he hadn’t mentioned the pending purchase to me. He wasn’t planning on asking me to join them, that I knew. But I was also quite confident that sometimes plans change, some very unexpectently. No, the new house was meant for him and his precious wife. Too bad she would never see it. But I would.

 It would take Andrias some time to get over his sweet little Muireen. I knew this. I wasn’t troubled by it. One thing I had plenty of was time. Andrias was a man worth waiting for. We would make an unstoppable team together. Muireen was holding him back from being the vampire he could be, the vampire he should be.

 Only one occupant remained in the house and she was the one I was interested in. I crept towards the bedroom. As I drew near I could hear her breathing softly. She was still sleeping and that was good. I didn’t want to draw unwanted attention to what I was doing with her shrieking.

 I slipped into the room. She didn’t stir. Loathing filled me as I looked down at her. I should just end her now and be done with her. But, no… If I did that then Andrias might be able to connect me to the crime. He would hate me. He might even end me in a fit of rage. No, I mustn’t be hasty. I must control my anger.

 Taking a moment to calm myself I went over the plan once more in my mind. I needn’t have bothered. The plan had been well-rehearsed. Reaching out to shake her arm, I called to her urgently.

“Muireen, you must wake up!” I commanded. “They have him! We must hurry!” This roused her and she sat up quickly, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. I overcame my overwhelming desire to break her into little pieces.

 “What? What are you doing here Lenora? Who’s got him and who is him?” She asked groggily.

 “Saul has taken Andrias” I lied to her driving fear into my voice as I spoke. I had her full attention now. She sprang from her bed and dressed quickly demanding to know where Andrias had been taken as she did so. I laughed quietly to myself. She was such a fool. This really was too easy. I told her that he was being held in an old building by the wharf. She didn’t doubt me at all.

 Using vampire speed I carried her with me to the wharf. There we walked to a nearby building. I had no desire to draw human eyes to myself. No one must know what had really happened. Muireen urgently hurried beside.

 “In here” I told her when we reached the building. She rushed past me and entered the abandoned building. I took a moment to savor the growing night before entering behind her. I was smiling. How could I not? All was going just as planned.

 “Where is he?” she demanded once she had checked the building and found it to be empty.

 “He’s not here” I told her, baring the door behind us. She looked at me with confusion mingled with anger. I had to fight the urge once more to end her now.

 “Then where is he? Why did you bring me here?” she raged. I shrugged nonchalantly.

 “I don’t know where he is, I lied.” I told her simply. “But you are exactly where I wanted you” I laughed.

 “Why?” she demanded roughly. I smiled coldly at her.

 “Because,” I said slowly, “I need you out of my way”. I rushed her before I had finished speaking. She hadn’t expected it. Using a board I had picked up on the way in, I swung it fiercely at her. She crumbled to the floor in a heap of flowery satin. I let the board fall to the ground.

 Grabbing her by her ankles, I quickly drug her to the back room I had prepared ahead of time. I strapped her to the bed and gagged her mouth. It wouldn’t do to have her screaming like she had at the party.

 I wasn’t sure how quickly she could heal and didn’t think I could afford to hit her in the head again without killing her. The board had left a deep gash on her head and she was bleeding badly. It was difficult to keep myself on task and stick to the plan. She smelled delicious and I longed to bleed her dry. Maybe when all was accomplished I would be allowed to do just that.

 It didn’t take her long to recover from the blow I had given her. I sat on the bed next her. She looked murderous despite her compromised condition. I stood up again. She had never seemed very powerful to me but I didn’t want to take any chances. I knew not what a mermaid was capable of. Caution was wise and had kept me alive for many years.

 “Andrias is dead” I told her with as much sadness and regret in my voice as I could muster. “Saul killed him and sent me to capture you” I continued. Her eyes widened in fear and then narrowed with suspicion. Yes, I had just lied her moments before. She wasn’t sure if she believed me and I had to give her some credit for that. She might not be as stupid as I had thought. Luckily for me I had prepared myself for her possible disbelief.

 I pulled a bloody handkerchief out of my coat pocket and showed it to her. I placed it under her nose to let her smell of it. It was Andrias’ blood and I hoped she wouldn’t notice the scent was several days old. It had been lucky for me when Andrias and Zekias had jokingly sparred the other day. Zekias had bloodied Andrias nose and he had used his handkerchief to clean his face. He had carelessly thrown it on a table and returned to sparring with Zekias. I had seen opportunity and taken it.

 She recognized the scent. That was good. The news of Andrias’ supposed death created the reaction I had been counting on. Muireen began to sob, her little fishy heart broken by the loss of her great love. How heartbreaking. How pathetic.

 Using a small purse, I began to pick up her fallen tears. It was amazing how quickly those liquid drops had turned to treasure. But I hadn’t any time to be marveling over that now. Andrias could already have discovered her missing. Surely he would move immediately to find her and it wouldn’t take him long to track her scent this nearby.

 I looked up from my gathering at Muireen. She had stopped crying. That explained why I no longer had any more jewels to collect. She looked horrified. I laughed, clapping my hands together in delight and then let the disgust I felt for her fill my face.

 “Yes” I told her simply. “I know what you are. Really not that impressive” I added. “In fact,” I continued cruelly, “it’s not surprising he turned to another woman”. It was easy to see she was still confused. I smiled sweetly.

 “Surely you suspected” I taunted. “Andrias and I have been together for months now” I went on. “You didn’t really think a vampire like Andrias would be content playing nursemaid to a mermaid, did you?” She began to cry again. I had hit upon her secret fear, a fear that Andrias was only with her out of guilt. I could only hope that it was true. That would make everything I had planned so much simpler. I gathered her tears as quickly as I could.

 I was just thinking how glad I would be to get rid of her when I sensed another vampire near. I sniffed the air and tested the power. It was Andrias! He had found us already. I must go before he figured out who the vampire he sensed was. I had to move her now. Pulling up a floorboard, I hit her on the head again. I was going to have to risk another head injury. I untied her as quickly as I could and using my vampire speed I took off in the opposite direction of the sound of Andrias’ voice calling out for her.

Chapter 16

February, 1690 London/Scandinavian Coast

Andrias

 Muireen had been missing for almost a week now. When I had come home from my meeting to find her gone I had immediately known something was wrong. Muireen would not have gone out on her own after dark. She would have waited for me to return before going anywhere. There were no signs of a struggle at our home, only evidence of a hasty departure.

 My first thought was of Saul. He was the only one that could have taken her. Zekias and Celeste had immediately asked around town after Saul but no one had seen him. Or at least no one admitted to knowing his whereabouts. Lenora has been surprisingly helpful. She has spent many an evening accompanying me as I searched nearby cities and towns for Muireen. She had suggested that perhaps Muireen had chosen to return to the sea. In no way did I believe this to be the case. Muireen would have never left me voluntarily. It was as if she had vanished. I was on the point of complete despair when word finally came to me.

 On a business errand, I ran into a man traveling on business who reported that there was a woman off the Scandinavian Coast who had been tried and found guilty of witchcraft. She was said to be exceedingly beautiful and a temptress. There were widespread reports that she could create storms and that her screams were so piercing she had to be gagged at all times.

 I had no doubt that this must be Muireen. I pressed the man for more details. What town was she in and when was the execution to take place?! When he began to question my keen interest I turned to my powers to find out what I needed to. There was no time to waste. I must get to Muireen before the execution. I had hurried home to tell Zekias.

 That had been just hours before dawn. Zekias, Celeste, Lenora and I had left hastily for the coast. Dawn was upon us by the time we arrived. There had been no time to search for Muireen. Daylight had forced us to take shelter. We went to ground near the place she was to be executed the next day. I would not be able to go to her until the sun set. Curse the daylight that had trapped me below ground!

 I had waited all day, hearing others above me as they passed. I had heard the workers setting up the pyre and I heard them place the stake in the ground. The stake they planned to burn my sweet Muireen on. Anger had seethed within me and it still did. I would destroy them all. Hours passed in torment as I waited for dusk to seek my revenge and free Muireen from their wretched clutches. I didn’t have very much longer to wait. Night was coming.

 Suddenly a muffled cry reached my ears from above. Many feet upon the ground could be heard. It was Muireen. They were bringing her out. Without even thinking, I made to break out of my earthen prison. Zekias’ hand latched onto my arm. A silent warning of the sun’s still burning rays. We still had thirty minutes time before the sun would set and dusk would fall. I trembled. Would thirty minutes be too late? I would take my chances yet I knew that I would be of no use to Muireen as a walking funeral pyre.

 A choked sob stuck in my throat. Never in all my years as a vampire had I ever felt so helpless. Not even when I had first been made and was at the whims of a monster. Lenora linked her arm through mine, squeezing it gently. No doubt she was trying to comfort me but no comfort could be found for me until I had Muireen safely in my arms once more.

 I forced myself to remain below as they read the charges against her. Twenty minutes had passed. I listened as they tied her to the stake. I heard her muffled sobs once more. Five more minutes to go. The blood thirsty crowd screamed out to kill her. I forced myself to remain where I was as they lit the fire. Muireen’s screams were shattering even with the gag in place. My body screamed in unison with her. I dug frantically at the ground, trying to free myself. The others did their best to hold me back, to make me wait the extra minutes for dusk. The sun was sinking rapidly but Muireen was burning. I couldn’t wait. I fought them savagely as Lenora screamed for me to wait. She pleaded with me that my blood could heal Muireen’s burns. I ignored her. That was my love burning.

 Shaking them off, I finally managed to break through the surface of the ground. I was only twenty feet from the pyre. Those closest to where I had busted from the ground fled in terror thinking me a demon come to rescue the witch. In a way they were right. The others closer to the pyre hadn’t even noticed me for the wind was howling furiously. Lightning flashed in the sky.

“Witch!” they chanted. “Let her burn!”

 I sped to Muireen. Once I reached her though I was uncertain what to do. She was a mass of flames. I looked around desperately. A man pointed to a barrel of water nearby. Why he would help me I knew not. Maybe he wasn’t as blood thirsty as all the rest. I grabbed it up and heaved the cold liquid onto Muireen praying it would be enough to quench the flames. All of the fire did not go out, but it was enough.

 I grabbed Muireen around the waist. She was groaning pitifully and still much of her was on fire. I pulled her off the stake, bringing pieces of it with us. The onlookers were too shocked and frightened to try to stop us. I was now on fire too and the flames were agony. Suddenly water covered us both. Someone had thrown another barrel of water on us.

 Momentary relief washed over me as the pain of the fire died away. A tearing sound could be heard. I looked down to see Muireen’s dress ripping from the bottom up. The water had caused her to transform. Her tail flopped to the ground as I lifted her into my arms. The crowd around us went wild with shock and surprise.

 We had to get out of there. Taking hold of Muireen more firmly, I made for the shore. She was limp in my arms and I was afraid. I needed to get her somewhere safe. Somewhere I could feed her.

 I eyed a small boat and went for it. Laying Muireen gently inside, I pushed off hard from the shore sending us into the deep water almost at once. I went to her side and gently removed the cotton from her mouth. She was badly burnt and she was moaning in pain. My heart was shattered. I was supposed to protect her and look what had happened to her!

 Muireen roused slightly. I took her hand in mine. Torrents of rain began coming down and the wind picked up once more. I pleaded with her to make it stop. I tried to comfort her but the storm worsened. She began to scream so violently that I had to cover my ears less they explode from the pain.

 A soft pounding against the small vessel began. It was as if something were beating against the boat. It took me a minute to realize the sound was fists pounding. I knew instantly what it was. We weren’t alone. The boat rocked furiously. I stumbled to the side trying to get my bearings. I had only managed to regain my footing when the boat suddenly was tossed to the other side. The mermaids were surrounding the boat now. Their mission was plain. They meant to flip the small vessel over with us inside it. Panic clutched at me. “No!” I cried out to them. “I’m trying to help her”. But they didn’t listen. The attack continued and finally the boat was tossed onto its side, spilling us out of it. I grabbed for Muireen but a mermaid reached her first and swept her away from me. I fought frantically for her but I was outnumbered. Suddenly the mermaids scattered and fled. The sea was peaceful around me once more. I searched for Muireen fruitlessly. Muireen was gone. They had taken her.

Chapter 17

London, 1699

Zekias

 The workmen loaded the last of the trunks onto the wagon. I spoke to the driver one more time to make sure he knew which steamer we would be traveling on before he left for the port. Assured he knew what he was supposed to do, I gave him the okay and he pulled away.

 I had finally managed to convince Andrias that it was time to move on from London. We had lived here for over ten years and in Paris before that. It was dangerous to remain in one place too long. People were beginning to notice that we didn’t age. I, myself, had overheard our partners commenting on the fact that Andrias seemed to be ageless. We needed to be careful in this age of religious fervor.

 Celeste and Lenora had gone ahead to the port to receive the wagons. Andrias and I would meet them there later. I turned to look at our now empty home. I would not miss this place. While it had held some happy memories for me, it had seemed haunted these last ten years. Andrias was like a ghost who came and went in shadow. He was so lost in the grief of losing his wife that he didn’t really live anymore. I loved him so. It was unbearable to see him suffer. The ten years since Muireen disappeared into the sea might as well have been ten days, so fresh did she prey upon Andrias’ mind.

 A smile played at my mouth as I thought of Muireen. Our sweet Muireen…so fascinated was she by everything she saw. She had been so gentle, so kind, and so joyful. Muireen had known how to live. I pushed back the tears that threatened. There was no sense in going through this again. We had done everything we could to save her. I liked to believe that perhaps we had saved her. Perhaps she now lives somewhere in the sea safe and happy once more.

 We had been wrong to think that we could keep her safe on land. We had been pompous and foolish to think we knew what was best for her. We had treated her like a vampire or perhaps a human. But she had never been human nor did she truly understand the human mind set. Perhaps our greatest folly had been not leaving the night Saul found out about her. If we had fled with her then perhaps things would have been different. But alas, even if we had escaped that night, another night would have eventually come upon us. Another night where she would have been in danger. We should have never taken her from the sea.

 Sorrow and regret choked me now. Yes, I would be glad to leave this place, to leave all the memories behind. To leave our wounded hearts full of such regret here. Andrias’ depression had caused great stress to us all. Celeste had been patient but I could see his moping was causing her strain. Even Lenora had seemed more on edge lately. She had so tried these last ten years to help heal Andrias’ heart but without success. Of late she had all but given up. Perhaps in our new home Andrias would be able to move on.

 I turned away from the home and went to collect Andrias. I didn’t have to look long for him. I had known where he would be. I found him on the rocky shoreline not far from the port. Since Muireen had disappeared he had taken to coming out here. At first he had come every night, not even bothering to feed. After much pressure he had began to feed first and then come to the shore.

 He would simply sit on the rocks and wait. So expectant was his waiting that you almost couldn’t help but believe along with him that Muireen would simply appear at any moment. But she had never appeared. Over time his visits to the shore had become less frequent and of late I thought that perhaps he avoided the spot all together.

 I knew he would not miss coming today however. I knew he must have his last farewell to his beloved. Andrias was starting to realize himself that it was time to move on.

 I stepped easily over the jumble of rocks as I made my way towards him. He turned almost at once and waved carelessly at me in greeting. He skipped a stone across the water as I approached. It skipped a dozen times across the glassy surface of the sea before being swallowed by the waves.

 “Are you ready?” I asked off-handedly, not wanting to rush him. He nodded and smiled at me. He looked more like himself today than I had seen him in ages. He tossed one more stone and then turned to head towards the port.

 I followed awkwardly behind him feeling almost intrusive with my presence. I wanted to say something to comfort him in some way. I knew it must be difficult for him. Leaving this place meant that if Muireen came back she might never find us. I wanted to unburden him of the guilt I knew he felt, guilt for not doing more to save her and guilt for moving on with his life. I wanted to help him but I didn’t know how. We had ceased to speak of her long ago. She had become a gulf that separated us.

 I longed to shake him until he believed me when I told him it wasn’t his fault. I longed for him to see the hope that she may still exist happily in the sea. Surely she had healed. She was a mermaid, not a mortal. Surely she had simply been so frightened after what had happened that she had seen the sense in remaining in the sea. A woman who shed diamond tears had no safe place among mankind! We had all known that. We had just simply chosen to ignore the truth of it and deceive ourselves into believing that we could protect her. No one could have protected her from the greed of man. Instead of telling him all of this I matched his pace and clapped him heartily on the back. He smiled at me as we continued to the port.

Chapter 18

West Indies, 1702

Lenora

 Enough was enough. I have had it! I refuse to waste anymore of my time on a man who will never love me. Hell, he hardly even looks at me, even when we were making love.

 I had thought that in time he would forget her, but he hasn’t. I thought I could wait an eternity for him. I found out I wasn’t quite as patient as that. I am done waiting. I am done trying futilely to win Andrias’ heart. I am done trying to act demure and sweet and every other quality I fancy he’d prize. I was simply done.

 I had wasted twelve years trying to win his affection. Twelve years I tried to erase her from his mind. It was useless. Once Andrias fixed his heart and mind upon something he was unmovable. Unfortunately both were fixed firmly on Muireen. It was a pity. Andrias had so much potential.

 At only twenty years as a vampire Andrias had already obtained great power. Some vampires could live 200 years and not gain as much power as he already had. It was unclear why some vampires could amass power quickly and become formidable while others stagnated. They simply did. I wasn’t obtaining power at the rate Andrias was but at least I was obtaining. I was only five years younger than Andrias as a vampire but it was obvious that I would never be as powerful as him.

 That is why I had wanted him so. I had seen him and knew he was a jewel. With his power and my ambition we would have made an unstoppable team. We could have ruled the world. We could have changed vampiric society forever. Instead of conquering the world he was wasting his power.

 I stuffed the rest of belongings into the trunk and slammed it closed. I was full of frustration and anger. Perhaps I would go on a feeding binge before I left. That would be a nice parting gift for Andrias. Maybe I’d leave him a mess to contend with. Maybe he would need to start over again too.

 The others were already out for the evening. I had not told them I was leaving. I felt no need to say goodbye and I certainly wasn’t worried that anyone would try to stop me. I didn’t fool myself into thinking I would be missed. I wasn’t even concerned about Celeste. I had only befriended her as a way to get closer to Andrias.

 I stepped out into the cool night air and motioned for the workman to begin loading the remaining trunks. I turned back inside and headed towards the back of the house, to Andrias’ private chambers. I entered his room as I had many times before and strode purposefully to the armoire in the corner. I opened the door and felt along the inside for the hidden compartment I knew was there. The compartment popped noisily as the panel slid open. I pulled out the large velvet purse. Inside were numerous gold coins and diamonds. I transferred some of both quickly into my own purse. Andrias had plenty of both to spare. He had bags just like this one hid all over the plantation. But this one was special. This one had not only diamonds in it; it had the diamonds created from Muireen’s tears. These diamonds were flawless, the best that money could buy. I seemed fitting that some should be mine. I deserved a parting gift as payment for all the years I had to suffer Andrias’ sullenness.

 Andrias may have eventually agreed to let me into his bed but that was as far as he would allow me. I never even came close to his heart though I doubt anyone could. It’s not like being in his bed had been a hardship though. He was a beautiful man, beautifully built. What had troubled me was wondering who he was thinking of when we were together. Anger burned inside me. No woman wanted to have to wonder about something like that. The indignity of it all caused me to pour a few more of Muireen’s fallen tears into my bag. I reclosed the panel carefully.

 I turned to go, returning to the waiting wagon with my stash. I might not be leaving empty handed but I was smart enough to not make my thieving obvious. Andrias may still pine away for Muireen deep inside but each day he was growing more ruthless. It wouldn’t do to cross him. He had made it clear on several occasions that he held no affection for me. Without his affections there was nothing to stop him from killing me if he caught me stealing from him. I was lucky to be leaving with my life.

 Climbing into the back of the coach, I recalled the time Andrias and I had come upon some mermaids when out to sea. It had been years ago. Andrias had questioned them almost feverishly about Muireen. They had told us that Muireen had died many years before. He had wept like a baby. I can still remember the disgust I had felt over him at that moment. What fascination had she held for him? I simply couldn’t imagine. I motioned for the driver to go and took one last look at the plantation as we pulled away. I was looking forward to a fresh start. Hopefully I would find someone out there who could appreciate my vision and talents.

Chapter 19

New York, 1804

Andrias

 The shop was small and severely cluttered. An old and musty smell hung about the place. The lighting was dim. The little light that may have trickled in from the small windows during the daytime was blocked by piles of artwork the owner imagined he had on display.

 It was just after dusk now and the shop was shadowy at best. It did not trouble me. I saw everything as clearly as I would have on a bright summer’s day. My vampiric eyesight allowed me to see even in complete darkness.

 The owner had been about to close up shop for the evening when I arrived. He made a hasty decision to remain open a little longer to allow me to browse. No doubt his decision was based largely on my attire. A man’s means could be easily deciphered with just a glance. The haves and have-nots were easily distinguished here. I was one of those who had.

 The shop owner was flurrying around me pointing out his treasures. He had the look in his eye a man gets when he feels he has come into great fortune. No doubt he believed he would make his own fortune off of me. At the moment he was trying vainly to get me to look at some gaudy object he believed would interest me. But a small painting caught my eye and it was that I moved closer to.

 The painting was done in front of the Sacre Coeur. It was poorly done and ill framed but I liked it. It made me think of Zekias. A smile played at my mouth. Zekias, my child…how sad it was that we had parted. I still missed him so. But Zekias and I could no longer roam the world together. Zekias was still filled with wonder and enthusiasm for this life. He lived and behaved almost as if he were human. I had long ago come to terms with the fact that we were not human. I also had come to believe that we should not try to live as they do; shutting out our primal urges and desires.

 It is not that I did not enjoy human comforts, I did. In fact, I owned several homes around the world that I lived at in various seasons of my immortality. I would live in one location for many years and then move on to somewhere new.

 I was still engaged in business and it was quite profitable to me, but I no longer did this as openly as I once had. I now had hired men who did my negotiating for me while I remained the financier behind the scenes. Seldom did I meet with anyone myself for business. The world was changing rapidly with all its modern wonders. There was no need for me to interact with humans as I once had.

 I turned from the painting and continued through the shop. I passed several atrocities of art. Several involved mounted animals of varying sort. It was interesting that if humans knew of the existence of vampires we would quickly be called monsters. All the while they displayed “art” of dead animals. Who were the real monsters I wondered. At least vampires didn’t display human heads on their walls. A small shudder passed through me. Well, I could think of one vampire who I had met that might do something like that but I didn’t like to think about him. I had escaped him long ago and he was better left to history.

 I wandered towards the back. A large painting on the back wall caught my eye. I brushed past the proprietor not even bothering to listen to his babbling as I passed. I could not believe what I was seeing. After not seeing her face for more than 100 years, there she was before me captured by some artist in oil and canvas.

 “Just in” the owner told me, noticing my interest.

 “Who is the artist?” I asked evenly.

 “Fine young man,” the owner said, “sad story,” he continued, “died only recently. The owner paused for a minute and then grinned grotesquely. “Makes his work more valuable though doesn’t it?” He laughed at his own joke. I ignored him and his crude attempt at humor.

 “What year was it painted?” I asked. The man stopped laughing. He stepped closer to the painting and squinted at something written among the sea grass in the painting. I spotted it before he did.

 “1709” the man answered. I did the calculations in my head. I had crossed paths with many mermaids since Muireen had been taken from me. They had told me she was dead. If she was dead, how could her portrait have been painted around the same time I had been inquiring about her? Something wasn’t right. I looked closer at the painting.

 The subject was Muireen, of that I had no doubt. But the background was off. The cliffs in the background looked like those of Ireland but the shoreline was like none seen in all of Ireland. I would know. I grew up there and knew every inch of it. I pondered where else it could have been painted.

 The foliage was wrong too. It was almost as if someone had painted Muireen and then later added the landscape around her. But why? It was strange. Muireen herself looked as if she had been posed for the painting.

 “Are there anymore like this one” I asked the owner who was wiping his nose on his dirty sleeves. He grunted and began digging behind some other portraits lying on the ground. He pulled out a significantly smaller painting covered with dust and presented it to me. The man pulled a dirty rag from his pocket and tried to wipe the dust away.

 “Don’t know why the painter would have bothered painting this one” he commented. “Such a beautiful creature but a terrible choice of background” the man added as I studied the portrait.

 Muireen was posed exactly as she had been in the larger painting but the scene around her was quite different. It was obvious by this painting that this had been the true background behind her when she was painted.

 Her surroundings in the smaller painting were difficult to make out. It was dark. There appeared to be stone walls around her that seemed almost wet. It gave one the impression of a dungeon. Perhaps it was a sea cave I pondered. But no, the walls were too uniform for that. It was definitely a man made room. Why would Muireen be somewhere like that, I wondered? My mind spun as I tried to make sense of the two paintings. A feeling of unease came over me.

 I threw a couple of gold pieces to the man. “I’ll take both of them” I told him. The man’s eyes lit up. I had definitely made it worth his while to stay open a little longer. “Have them sent to my hotel” I instructed, jotting down the name and room number. As I headed towards the door my eyes lit upon the Sacre Coeur miniature. “Give me that one too” I said pointing as I exited the shop.

Chapter 20

1815 The Expedition

 I stood on the deck enjoying the cool wind on my face. The clouds had hidden the moon from view and darkness enveloped our small vessel. Only a little light cut through the darkness from the lanterns being used to watch for obstructions in the water. All but one of the sails had been dropped, slowing us considerably. The captain was being cautious, not wanting to wreck upon these dark waters.

 I understood his caution. He was, after all, only seeing through human eyes. If he could see as I could he would never have slowed us as he did. There was nothing but open water ahead us. Of course, I could not tell him this. I could not let them know that I could see any more clearly than they could for no human could see tonight. It would have brought suspicion and there was more than enough of that already.

 It was of no matter. We were nearing our destination. The Faroe Islands were just ahead. We had spent two nights at sea, thankfully without incident. We had just entered the Norwegian Sea and would soon come upon the rocky outcrops and sea caves where Dr. Vargas and I suspected we might find mermaids. Perhaps the next night I would find the information I was seeking.

 The crew was already murmuring to themselves. They had thus far given me a wide berth. They seemed to sense that I was not like them. Whispers about the man who does not come out in the day and who is searching for mermaids drifted to me on the wind. To them our mission was insane. They wondered who would want to seek out creatures that could kill you and bring you willingly to them to do so. It was a good thing that we had paid them so well for their services or else there might have been mutiny onboard.

 Suddenly the boat jarred as though it had hit something. I peered over the rail to see if perhaps we had struck upon a rock after all. The crew hurried around the deck trying to discover the cause as well. I could see nothing but inky darkness in the water. There was no sign of anything that could have created the jarring of the vessel. As I was still looking the jarring came again, this time from the other side. I stayed where I was, eyes fixed on the sea.

 Dr. Vargas bounded up the deck stairs still in his night clothes. He had been sleeping and the jarring had awoken him.

 “What in the heavens was that?” he asked anxiously. I gave him a look and pointed in the water. He grabbed a lantern, hastily lighting it, and joined me at the rail. It didn’t take him long to see what I had been pointing at. His countenance was one of both fear and excitement. It was difficult to tell which held the greater sway over him.

 The crew was in full panic. They were running around foolishly. I was uncertain what they were trying to accomplish. Mermaids now surrounded our vessel. Some watched us curiously, others laughed scornfully and some continued to rock our boat. But they were not truly attacking us. If they had been then all would have been dead already.

 I scanned them, looking for Muireen. If she was with them, I could not see her. One stood out from the others. She did not splash and swim playfully. She bobbed in the water stoically, her gaze fixed firmly upon me. I returned her stare. Her hair was the color of flames and her skin as pale as snow. Her eyes glittered silver. There was no doubt for me, this one was in charge. The others looked expectantly at her as they played as if waiting for a signal of some kind.

 “Quiet” I shouted to the crew without taking my eyes off of her. The commotion began to die down at once. The crew feared me almost as much as they feared the mermaids.

 “I am seeking one of your kind” I said, speaking directly to the red haired beauty.

 “What have you and your kind have to do with us” came her reply?

 “She is a friend of mine” I explained.

 “Our kind do not make friends with those like you” she said icily.

 “We are alike, you and I” I offered.

 “We are nothing alike vampire” she spat. The crew shrank back even further from me. An onslaught of prayers bombarded my ears. If they were afraid before, they were now terrified, except Dr. Vargas. He seemed to take this news in stride and never moved from my side. I wondered if he had known all along.

 “Please,” I pleaded. “She has golden hair and eyes like the sea”.

 “She bore your mark, no?” the mermaid asked with disgust. “You used her and then returned her to us half dead” she accused.

 My mind flashed back to the night Muireen had almost been burned at the stake and then had been snatched from me by the mermaids. I seemed to recall seeing a flash of red amidst all of the chaos in the water. Could that have been this siren in front of me now? She seemed to know all about me and Muireen.

 “You were there?” I asked softly. She nodded. A lump formed in my throat.

 “How is she?” I asked. “She lived, did she not? She must have lived!” I went on desperately.

 “She lived,” the siren replied harshly, “only to be dragged off by another of your kind when she went looking for you” she finished accusingly. My mind raced. She had come looking for me? Another of my kind? Who had gotten to her? Where was she? A million questions flooded my mind. So distracted was I by my whirling mind that I hadn’t noticed Dr. Vargas had left my side. He was now on the aft side near the middle smiling dumbly at a beautiful siren in front of him. Her hands slid upon the rails closer to him.

 “No!” I screamed, running towards him. Even my vampire speed was not enough to stop the siren from pulling Dr. Vargas into the sea. He didn’t even fight her as she dragged him beneath the surface and out of sight. I stood dumbly, not able to believe what had just happened and thinking wildly that he had went to his grave happily.

 “We’ll all be killed” somebody screamed. Panic ensued once more. A shot echoed in the darkness. Someone had fired a gun. More shots rang out as a furious beating began upon the sides of the boat. The red-haired beauty had not moved.

 Thunder boomed and lighting lit up the sky, not five feet from our boat. The sky opened up and rain assaulted us. I had no doubt who was responsible for this storm. I was looking right at her. They meant to kill us. She wanted revenge for Muireen. I had survived my last fight with mermaids but I had no desire to try my luck again.

 Using my vampire speed I ran towards the stern and leapt into the water. Using all the speed I possessed, I swam north towards the shore. I did not blame the siren for wanting me dead. I had destroyed Muireen. Whether intentional or not was irrelevant.

Chapter 21

1851

Andrias

 Since that fateful night when my entire crew had perished as I fled for my life, I had not seen or heard anything of Muireen. I had not dared return to the sea to search for her. The red-haired beauty set on my destruction had said that one like me had taken her and they had not seen her since. It seemed to me that this was my best lead.

 I headed back to London; back to where it had all began. I was doubtful of what evidence I would find of who had taken Muireen after over a hundred and fifty years. I thought perhaps I might find some vampires living in the area who might have heard stories of mermaids. I was hoping I might find Saul or someone who knew where he was. He was still the most likely suspect after all these years. He was one of the few who had known what Muireen was.

 Vampires talked amongst themselves. Whoever took her was bound to have told someone. She was too much of a prize to be kept secret. Vampires had a tendency of bragging about their accomplishments. Plus, whoever took her would have needed help. Muireen may have looked sweet and tender but she was more powerful than most guessed. She would have been a handful had she been taken against her will.

 I hadn’t been in London in over fifty years and it had changed in many ways. It was more crowded now and it seemed dirtier than it ever had to me in the past. I had been tempted to see if the house Zekias, Muireen and I had lived in still stood but I had resisted the temptation. There was no reason to rip open old wounds.

 Evening was getting on when I reached High street near the shore. If things hadn’t changed too much I should be able to find some vampires hanging out a few blocks from here. It was a favorite hunting ground because of the numerous vagrants that existed in this area and the rift raft that often passed through. It was also a good way to find out news in the supernatural community.

 I was just about to turn down a side street when I heard someone call my name. It was an old man, gray and feeble. He was human and I didn’t recognize him. I paused and turned towards him. Using his cane he hobbled over to where I stood.

 “Mr. Colburn?” he asked. I looked hard at him, trying to place him.

 “Yes,” I replied, “that is me”.

 “Andrias Colburn?” he asked again seemingly confused. “But that’s impossible!” he exclaimed. “That was nigh over fifty years ago! You haven’t aged a day! Impossible!” he continued. I quickly realized that he must have had business dealings with me in the past.

 “You must have mistaken me for my father” I said smoothly. “His name was Andrias Colburn. I’m Andrew Colburn II” I explained.

 “You look exactly like your father” he went on. “I hadn’t known he had any children. He always told me that he hadn’t any interest in raising a family, said it would take away from his work” the old man continued. I had finally put together who he was, Timothy Schuster, an old business partner and one I had liked. I obviously had been too chatty with him in our dealings.

 “Well,” I laughed easily, “he must have changed his mind because here I am”. The old man chuckled. I was surprised at how much he had aged in just fifty years. I sometimes forgot how short a human’s life span really was.

 “Must have” he replied. “Remarkable how much you look like him”.

 “Well,” I answered, “I really must be going. I’m meeting some friends and they will wonder where I’ve gotten to if I don’t show up soon” I told him. For some reason seeing him again had made me dreadfully uncomfortable and I was anxious to get away. I turned to go.

 “Mr. Schuster,” I said waving as I went, “it was lovely meeting you”. I had already turned the corner when I heard him reply. “How did you know my name? I never told you my name” he called out to me.

 I silently cursed myself for my stupidity and kept walking like I hadn’t heard him. I thought about going back and wiping his memory but I was afraid I might do some lasting damage. He was old, really old. I laughed out loud at my foolishness. I was old. He was simply human and his body had begun doing what human bodies do as they age – decompose. I needn’t worry about it anyhow. No one would believe a feeble old man who told them he saw an old business partner who hadn’t aged in fifty years. People expected foolish talk from the elderly as their minds grew soft. I shook it off and continued on my way.

 I weaved my through the dilapidated buildings near the shore. I could sense others close by. The oldest was around my age but his power was lesser. Several others tasted of power that indicated they had been vampires for sixty years or less. One was newly turned, not even a year at my guess.

 As I drew nearer for them I felt the wave of power they sent out. They wanted to let me know that they knew I was coming. I laughed out loud. They were nervous. I had an enormous amount of power for my age; they had reason to be nervous. But I wasn’t foolish enough to be overconfident in my abilities. After all, they had the numbers despite the fact that I was more powerful than any. It would not be good to instigate a fight. Besides, I was here looking only for answers. I wasn’t here to take over their domain or subject them to me.

 I turned a final corner and faced them. I bowed low to show I was not here to start a fight. Usually a vampire of the highest power was bowed to. They didn’t bow themselves unless there was another more powerful vampire present. I had done it to show that I cared nothing for such formalities. In turn, each of them bowed to me. I approached cautiously.

 “My name is Andrias Colburn” I told them by way of introduction. The one my age looked Russian and was bulkily built. His companions likewise appeared to be of similar descent. He did not appear at all intimidated but his companions were definitely on their guard. The youngest was sneering at me. I hate the young ones. If Zekias had been like this kid I would have killed him myself all over again. It always took a while for the young ones to learn that just because they were now vampires, they were not invincible. They may be harder to kill but there are worse things than death. I had no doubt that someday soon this one would run into another of our kind who would gladly teach him his place. I only hoped it wouldn’t have to be me tonight. I was really in no mood for a brawl.

 Smiling genially at them, I got right down to business. “I am looking for some information and I was hoping you gentleman might be able to help me” I offered. The newborn snickered and spat on the ground.

 “We ain’t gentleman” he said roughly. I ground my teeth together. It was apparent that he was no gentleman. He was dressed roughly and smelled of sewage. I had only been trying to be polite since the others seemed at least somewhat more presentable then he. I kept these thoughts to myself and continued to grind my teeth.

 “Shut up Argos” the leader told him simply. “My apologies for him” the man began. “He is new and he is an idiot. My name is Anastas” he told me. I stifled a laugh. It was good to know he knew his men well.

 “Anastas,” I said, “I am searching for anyone who may have heard tales of mermaids. In particular if any have any knowledge of one coming to land to live”. Surprise shone on the faces of the others but Anastas’ face remained unmoved. It told me he knew something. Seconds ticked by before he answered.

 “I have never myself met with any of the mermaids” he told me. “I have heard rumors of them and their powers” he finished. I sensed he was holding back and I couldn’t help but wonder why. I decided to get directly to the point.

 “More specifically,” I said smiling broadly, “I’m looking for news of a vampire who might have kidnapped one and held her against her will”. Now this got a reaction, small, but a reaction still. Aragas seemed surprised. He studied me closely.

 “Why” he asked. “Why are you looking for this information?” Deciding not to waste any time, I told him the truth.

 “She was my wife” I admitted. “I thought that she had returned to the sea but now I have information that another of our kind captured her as she was at the shore”. This brought a wave of murmuring among the others. Marrying among vampires was rare and marrying someone of another species was unheard of. Anastas looked at me in wonder and with pity. I kept all emotion off of my face.

 “I heard a man once bragging that he had a pet mermaid” he told me. “He was crazy and I didn’t know how much I could believe of what he said. But then he produced the most beautiful diamond I had ever seen and told me it had come from her” he added pointedly.

 “Who was this man and when was this?” I asked.

 “He was a vampire named Dale. He told me this perhaps twenty years ago”. He must have seen the hope in my face for he warned me immediately.

 “You will not find him” he told me. “He has been dead for several years now”.

 “What happened to him?” I asked with much regret. I had wanted to kill him myself.

 “He was found on the shore one evening tore apart” he replied, eyeing my reaction. I gave none. “I’ve never seen anything like it” he confessed. “He was not a powerful vampire but strong enough”.

 “Perhaps another more powerful vampire took care of him” I suggested.

“No,” he protested, “another vampire did not kill him. He was ripped apart like an animal. All of his blood was gone and his flesh had been eaten.” I did my best not to show too much emotion. I didn’t know whether to be horrified or jubilant she had had her revenge.

 “Do you know where he had been keeping her?” I asked him. He shook his head and my spirits fell.

 “I know where he was found though” he told me. I lifted my eyes to his. “I was one who stumbled upon him that night.

 “Can you take me there?” I asked with forced calm. He nodded.

Chapter 22

1851, England

Andrias

 Anastas had sent the others to feed and bring food for him back to their lodgings. Unfortunately he had insisted that Argos join us. His decision was probably based on his desire to keep an eye on Argos or perhaps to keep the others from killing him.

 Our trek to Dover had been swift. With our vampire speed traveling great distances was easy. It was one of the things I liked about being a vampire. When we reached the coast we slowed down to give Anastas a chance to recall the exact location he had found the dead vampire.

 Anastas moved us from along the beach closer towards some rocky outcroppings. He turned to survey the surrounding area and then turned to us with surety.

 “I found him here” he told me. I didn’t bother to look for clues amidst the rocks. It had been many years since the vampire had been killed. It would be useless to look for evidence after all of this time. Instead I spied out the surrounding hillside in search of caves where Muireen might have been kept.

 The rocky outcropping we were standing at was actually the beginnings of a small series of hills. They were unimpressive in size but were very broken up, offering many possibilities for caves. Above us, some fifty meters seemed the most likely place to find one. I headed in that direction, Anastas following behind me.

 “You showed him where you found the man,” Argos complained, “can’t we go home now?”

 “Quiet” Anastas said, still following behind me.

 “But it’s only a few hours before dawn and I haven’t eaten yet” he said louder. “This has nothin’ to do with us” he said taking hold of Anastas’ arm and turning him to face him. “This is his problem, not ours” he went on. “We’ve done more than enough already. I don’t want to go on a hike!”

 Anastas moved before Argos had even noticed he had made a mistake. I paused to watch. Anastas sped behind Argos and grabbed him in a choke-hold, snapping his neck as he did so. “Now you don’t have to go with us” Anastas said quietly as he let Argos’ body slid to the rocky ground. “You can stay here and rest.” Anastas rejoined me and we began our climb.

 I fought the urge to laugh out loud. I pitied Anastas if Argos was his child as he seemed to be. Anastas must have the patience of a saint. I was fortunate that my child, Zekias, had been so much easier to deal with. Certainly Anastas wasn’t worried about Argos. A broken neck wouldn’t kill a vampire; only keep him down for a little bit. If it had been the first time Anastas had to discipline Argos I was sure it wouldn’t be the last. He was going to be a handful.

 We picked our way through the jagged rocks until we were some fifteen meters from the top. Here a series of cracks in the rock provided many small openings. We began to investigate each one.

 Most were only small openings that provided no real cave or room inside. Others had actual rooms but they were small and unsuitable to holding prisoners. We had explored every opening we saw and yet still had not found where Muireen had been kept.

 I would not give up however. I was certain that she had been kept somewhere close. The rocks from the original painting were very similar to those within the caves here. I paused in searching to look once more around us. I had to be missing something.

 If I were holding someone captive I wouldn’t want the entrance visible. I would keep it hidden. I looked closely at the rocks, looking for anything unusual. Frustration was beginning to set in when I noticed odd greenery around the rocks. There was an abundance of moss and shrub vegetation among the rocks around the other caves but in one area the vegetation appeared to be unusually lush.

 I headed up to this area, only a little further up than where we had been searching. The greenery was unnaturally thick here. It looked as though someone had actually planted it. I reached down and began to tear up pieces of it. Soon I revealed rock beneath. Only a small amount of soil lay between the rock and the vegetation. I ran my finger around the edge of a crack, following its course around. It was uniform in shape, a square, though not perfect. Anastas came to join me.

 Together we uncovered the rock until it revealed a stone door beneath. I pulled at the stone and felt it pull loose from the ground. Lifting it up, I placed it on the ground next to us. There was an opening below it leading into the depths of the earth. No mortal would have ever been able to enter this space for no man could have ever lifted that stone.

 The opening was small, wide enough for only one person at a time to enter through. I slid down the opening, feeling along the wall as I did. The wall was slanted and I clung to the sides as I shimmied down. Suddenly the ground was gone from below my feet. There was a drop. How great it was I did not know. Hoping for the best, I let go of the wall and let myself fall. About 2 meters down I hit bottom.

 “Are you still alive?” Anastas asked casually from above. I chuckled.

 “Yes” I called up. “There is a short drop is all”. I could hear Anastas making his way into the chamber. Seconds later he landed beside me. I laughed out loud. This man barely knew me and yet he was on this quest with me now it seemed. I understood well the excitement of something new for after many years among the living it was difficult to find something new. Adventure was more difficult to come by for vampires. There were few feats impossible for us and after many years the wonder of life seemed to seep out of you.

 Little light from the moon and stars crept into the cavern. And a cavern it was for I could see that two passages led off from the small room we had just entered. They were tall enough to allow us easy passage through. We decided to take the passage to the right.

 There was little to see as we walked. The passage was void of evidence from people. There was no vegetation here for no light reached here. Cold rock surrounded the passage from both sides. Small pebbles crunched under our feet as we walked. It appeared that at some distant time in the past the place we were now walking had once been a river bed. Or perhaps at one time the sea had come up to this very point to beat against the rocks until they yielded this passageway to it.

 Suddenly the passage ended in a small room. Here the ceiling hung low. There was no outlet that we could see. We were walled in. We turned and went back from whence we came.

 When we arrived to the small room where we had entered the cavern again we headed off into the direction of the other passage. This passage was much like the other had been only it appeared to have been more traveled. The gravel was crushed finer, suggesting that many times before feet had traveled this pass. The passage was also shorter.

 When we dead ended into another small chamber I had at first feared it was void as the first had been. But upon further investigating I noticed evidence of dwelling here. The floor was swept clear of pebbles. Someone had purposely cleaned this area but other than its deliberate sweeping I saw no evidence of people having been here. Still, I felt we were on the right track.

 I examined the walls, remembering the time I had first been made. Then I had waked to find myself in a chamber of stone. There had been a hidden stone that when pulled out triggered the door to open and the stairway to be revealed. Perhaps the same was true here.

 Anastas caught on to what I was doing and began to search the opposite wall from me. I heard a clicking sound and turned.

 “Is this what you were looking for” Anastas said matter-of-factly, but I saw the excitement in his eyes despite his blasé tone. My face split into a grin and I hurried to him. The stone door only opened partially up. There was room for a woman or perhaps a tiny man to squeeze through. I wedged myself between the door, pushing myself through. Several cracks let me know I had broken several ribs getting through. Anastas joined me a moment later. He sounded as though he had broken all of his ribs for he was much larger than me. No matter, we would heal. What mattered was that we were in.

Chapter 23

1851 England

Andrias

 The room was very cold, but dry. Someone had definitely lived here at one time though now it was deserted. It appeared that the occupant had not been back in a long time. A bed lay in the chamber and I marveled at how one would have gotten it in here. I looked closer. More likely was that the bed had been made here by hand. The workmanship on the wood was crude and unskilled.

 The bed covering were thick with chalky dust. It was flowery and obviously designed for a woman. A night table as crude as the bed itself, stood next to the bed. A top of it were candles burned halfway down. Various dried flowers lay around the room. Someone had worked hard to make this earthen prison comfortable. Someone had done it for Muireen. Bile rose in my throat. Someone had kept my sweet Muireen here like a pretty specimen they had captured and tried to win her over despite imprisoning her.

 I walked over to the only other furniture in the room, a crude dresser. I pulled at the drawers roughly. Women’s clothing of common variety filled them. Anger built within me.

 “Andrias,” Anastas called to me, “Over here”. I turned to look at him. I was so immersed in my own hell of not having been able to stop Muireen from being hurt that I had forgotten he was there. Pulling myself together I went to join him in the corner of the chamber adjacent to the entrance. It only took a second to realize he had found something.

 A large stone was wedged between the others. He pulled it out and revealed the entrance to another chamber. This one was low to the ground and narrow. I peered inside. There was something there but I couldn’t make it out.

 Crawling on my belly I forced my way through the opening. Anastas followed. Inside was a long case upon a dais. It was completely encased with glass although the top could be removed. It strikingly resembled a coffin.

 Soft pillows, now rotting from age, were inside. A chair was placed close to the case. Empty barrels and pails littered the room. I turned a pail over, for there was lettering upon it. It was an ice bucket like those one might find at the butchers shop. Why on earth would it be here?

 A feeling of dread came over me. Surely Muireen had never been kept here. It was difficult enough to imagine her in the other chamber that such feeble attempts at being homely were made. I would go mad to imagine her here, trapped inside this coffin! She wouldn’t have been able to breathe! She would have been killed! What monster would do that to her?

 My head was spinning and nausea swamped me. Rage threatened to overtake me. I was losing focus and my teeth had elongated.

 “Andrias” Anastas called to me. I did not respond. I stood holding my head, trying to keep it from exploding. He shook me roughly.

 “Andrias!” he called again. I looked at him. “There is no sense in being here” he told me. “You have found what you sought! You can do no good here. She is gone! She has escaped. It is she who must have torn him to pieces. That should be solace enough for his monstrous actions”. I nodded wearily. He was right.

 Dawn was upon us. We would have to be hasty to get out and get to ground before its first light fell upon us. And there was the matter of Argos. Anastas needed to retrieve him lest he be burned in the light of day. We had no time to waste. I turned back towards the exit. My heel crushed upon something and I paused to see what it was. Anastas crawled through the small opening, retreating into the bedroom chamber. I looked beneath my heel. Crushed beneath it was a diamond. Anastas’ calling stopped me from slipping into madness and I hurried from the chamber. We rushed out of the caverns and into the last minutes of light.

 Chapter 24

1853

Andrias

 I spent many a miserable night among Anastas and his crew before moving on and making my way to Ireland. I had thought that I would be relieved that Muireen was alive, that I had found proof. Instead I felt sickened at how she had been treated and guilty for not being able to prevent it.

 Another thought came to me unbidden that added to my misery. She had killed the vampire who had held her captive years before. Why hadn’t she sought me? Surely she should have been able to find Zekias or myself or someone who would get to us. Had she simply returned to the sea to stay? Did she blame me for all that had happened?

 Coldness crept over my heart. I had clung to the hope that she was alive all of these years. I had buoyed myself on with the thought that when I found her we would again be together as we were before. But that was foolishness. Too many years had passed to simply return to how things had been.

 Perhaps she no longer loved me as she once had. Perhaps I no longer truly loved her. Perhaps I loved the memory of how we used to be. If I was honest with myself I would have to admit that I am not the same man she fell in love with. Would she be the same woman I fell in love with? Even if she were, could I love such a woman now?

 I had but few traces of humanity left in me. The darkness had edged in so gradually that I did not miss the light. I could not abide in the light as I once had. Life had taught me caution and ruthlessness.

 I did not mourn for my humanity. And though I knew my humanity had slipped away, I was not troubled by these thoughts. I did not long for mortal relationships of any kind. I took sex as I wanted it but no longer possessed the need for a warm body as I once had to make me feel more alive.

 I was never short on company if I were in the mood for it whether from humans or vampires. I indulged in every luxury and extravagance that money could buy. I was shrewd in business dealings and deadly to cross. And I was bored.

 I was bored with life and bored with pretending to be human. More and more often I consorted with my own kind rather than mortals. I was ready to embrace the monster that I was.

 Sometimes I was so full of the desire to expose myself that I would invite a human to my home and do just that. I loved trying to guess what their reaction would be. Would they scream? Or would they be filled with awe and excitement when I bared my fangs to them. It varied from human to human. Regardless of how they took the news of what I really was, I killed them. I was neither willing nor foolish enough to allow them to reveal what I really was to others. It was too great a risk.

 The games were getting old. I was tired of living in the shadows. I was tired of being afraid of being exposed. I was not alone.

 There were others who felt as I did. Many of my kind dreamed of a world where we no longer had to hide. The world was changing continuously and the possibility of our dream coming true was growing all the time.

 Religion no longer had the hold it once had. They were no longer by the dozens burning witches, or innocent humans as they often were,. Now those who spoke of demons in the night were thought to be superstitious fools or lunatic. Society had become more and more civilized and all the more blind as well.

 Many, like me, saw this rapid changing of humanity as a great opportunity to organize and prepare for the future. We knew the time was not yet ripe and we were willing to bid our time.

 But we were not idle. We began organizing. We set governors over our own kind by area. We chose the leaders based on age and power and intelligence. A governor needed to be able to hold and defend his area. He or she must be able to control the vampire populace in their district. By nature vampires did not like to be under the control of another but all this was necessary if we were to ever convince the public we could co-exist.

 We had few laws but those we had were vigorously enforced. We had no need of prisons or courts for judging. The governor and their officers were given leeway to make decisions for themselves. If a vampire had broken a law in their district they had every right to give them a final death.

 That is why I was at Lucita’s home tonight. She was governor over the area in which I now resided and I was one of her officers. I had only recently decided to return to my homeland. I bought a lovely, secluded place on Eris Head.

 Tonight we had exercised judgment against a young boy who had recently been turned. Our law states that you cannot turn anyone who will not be able to sustain themselves. Since this boy was only thirteen he fell under this rule. He would forever look like a boy although his mind, power and desires would grow. It was kinder to end him than make him live as an immortal. Many who are turned too young suffer from mental anguish and the boy had already shown signs of this.

 We hunted him down tonight and took care of what needed to be done. It was not difficult to end one so young. They were weak and unskilled in fighting others of their kind. Vampires were not truly immortal. If you cut out their hearts or burned them then they died the second death.

 We had just returned to the house from our mission and were having a drink and a bite to eat. Matthias approached me, “Andrias Colburn?” he asked politely, for we had never been formally introduced. I nodded slowly and eyed him carefully.

 “We’ve never been formally introduced but I’m…”

 “I know who you are” I said, interrupting him. Matthias was younger than most officers but strong and intelligent. He nodded.

 “A young woman was asking about you earlier” he told me. I raised an eyebrow at this news. He continued, “Very pretty woman…she wanted to know where she could find you. I wouldn’t give her your location but I agreed to pass along a message. She wasn’t human but she wouldn’t tell me what she was” he went on. “It was all very suspicious, so secretive was she”. He had my full attention now. Who could be searching for me?

 “I appreciate your caution” I told him. “Did you ask this woman her name?” He nodded. “Yes, she said her name was Muireen”. I stiffened involuntarily.

 I hadn’t expected that. I really hadn’t expected much of anything. I was only mildly interested in who could be looking for me. I hadn’t truly cared. To learn that someone calling herself Muireen was looking for me had come as a shock. Was it really Muireen after all of these years or was someone playing a game?

 I wasn’t sure what I felt, but I felt something. If it truly was her, I wasn’t sure I wanted to see her…that I should see her. Too much time had gone by. One hundred and fifty years couldn’t be turned back like a clock. Too much had changed. I had changed too much.

 When I had been with Muireen I had thought that I could fight the darkness. I had thought I would want to fight it. I had thought she would keep it at bay. I now knew that was impossible. I hadn’t seen the foolishness in a vampire marrying.

 Matthias watched me closely. I know he had noticed my hesitation. “Did she say anything else?” I asked smoothly.

 She said that if you wanted to see her she would be at the Meridian for the next two nights” he answered. The Meridian was a small inn not far from us. I nodded my head.

 “Thank you for the information,” I told him, draining my wine glass, “and your caution” I added. I turned to leave, not sure of my intentions but knowing I needed quiet to think.

 “What is she” he asked as I walked away. I did not turn to answer. That, I would not tell him.

Chapter 25

1853, Ireland

Andrias

 An hour later I found myself outside the Meridian. It was a nice establishment. Muireen must be doing well for herself if she was staying here. Why shouldn’t she be? Her own tears were worth a fortune.

 I stood across the street looking into the candlelit windows. I had not yet decided what I would do. Muireen was alive. I could feel it within me, perhaps through our ancient bond. I mulled over this information as unemotionally as I did a business offer.

 I had waited at our home for ten years for her to return. I had feared the worst and hoped for the best. She had not returned to me. I now knew that when she had tried to return she had been captured by another vampire. She had been imprisoned in that hellish cave I had discovered several years ago. She had killed her captor and escaped. Why hadn’t she looked for me then? Why does she come looking for me six years later?

 Had she blamed me? Had she stopped loving me? Did it matter? I no longer felt that I loved her…perhaps just a strange connection forged through our bond. Anger and bitterness swept through me. I turned away and headed home.

 The next night I returned. I had come to the conclusion that seeing her again was the best thing for both of us. We had loose ends to tie up –she and I- and I had something to return to her – her tears.

 I walked purposefully into the Meridian and approached the keeper. She was a middle-aged woman with graying hair and spreading hips. She looked at me from beneath her spectacles as I neared her desk.

 “I’m looking for someone” I told her. “She’s a young woman by the name of Muireen” I explained. The woman smiled.

 “Ah yes,” she said taking off her glasses. “She’s a very pretty one, that one. She checked out this morning I’m afraid, rather hurriedly too” she added. Dread filled me for some odd reason. I hadn’t even been sure I wanted to see and now the decision was no longer mine. I had missed her because of my indecision. Why had she told Matthias she was staying for two nights?

 “Did she leave her forwarding address?” I asked politely. The woman shook her head.

 “I’m afraid not dear” she said slowly. She seemed to have detected the growing rage within me. I looked into her eyes and filled her with my power. I wanted to make sure my next questions were answered honestly.

 “Was she with anyone?” I asked. She told me no. “Did she have any visitors while she was here?” I asked. Again, she responded in the negative. “Was there anything strange at all?” I asked, desperate for some clue. She hesitated and I repeated my question with more force.

 “She asked how she might travel to America” she answered. I thought it strange since she was obviously a woman of means and it was incredible to believe she would need to be told this. It seems the wealthy are flocking to America these days” she finished.

 “What did you tell her?” I asked.

 “I gave her instructions on how to board a steamer and she left” the woman told me. I was puzzled. I thanked the woman and left.

Chapter 26

1853, New York

Zekias

 With all of my many years, few things surprise me anymore. But tonight I was caught completely off guard. In no way had I expected to ever again see the woman standing in front of me. It was like seeing a ghost.

 When a knock had sounded at our door I had paid no mind to it. Celeste entertained many visitors at our home and I had assumed it was a friend of hers calling. Her scream of surprise had sent me quickly to the foyer thinking the worst. I had not been prepared for what I would find.

 Joy and disbelief filled me simultaneously at the sight of the phantom in front of me. So long I had thought her dead, resigned myself to what I had thought to be the awful truth. But here she stood and she was no phantom. She was real, flesh and blood.

 A thousand questions bombarded me but instead of asking them, I embraced her fiercely, weeping openly. How many tears had I cried for her? How much pain had I suffered over her loss and the eventual loss of Andrias?

 It took me a good deal of time to pull myself together. Once I had, I showed her to the parlor. Celeste hurried off to be the good hostess, bringing tea and stale cakes – the only human food we had in the house. She sat across from me now, sipping her tea and eyeing me carefully. Not being able to hold back my questions any longer, I spoke.

 “I must say,” I began tentatively, “we thought you dead Muireen”.

 “I hope you are not disappointed” she replied lightly. I was taken aback by her flippant response. Andrias and I had been through hell over her disappearance. I had parted ways with my maker because I had thought this woman in front of me to be dead while he refused to believe it. It had torn our lives apart. It was no laughing matter. Where had she been all these years? Why had she not come sooner when all could have been saved? I pushed back the bitterness growing inside me. I needed answers and I wouldn’t get them if I started a fight. I needed to keep an open mind and heart to what she had to say.

 “Why” I asked quietly? “Why did you not come sooner” I asked, voicing what my heart was crying out. She set her teacup carefully down on the table. I could see tears threatening from the corners of her eyes but she pushed them back bravely. She took a deep breath that seemed to steady her.

 “I could not” she said simply. “I wanted to but…it is a long story and perhaps it should be told from the beginning” she told me, meeting my eye. “You both deserve to hear it” she continued as Celeste came to sit by my side. I listened eagerly for the answers that had so long eluded me.

 “The night I went missing” she began, “Lenora came to the house”. Celeste seemed about to question her when she seemed to think better of interrupting and Muireen continued.

 “She told me that Saul had taken Andrias. I never questioned her. I was too full of fright to think clearly. I rushed off with her into the night hoping I could somehow save him”. She paused; bitterness and anger clear on her face.

 “She tricked me” she told us flatly. “When we arrived at the storehouse she had claimed he was being held at, she knocked me out with something”. Horror filled me. Why would Celeste do something like that? We had trusted her. She was part of our family.

 “She kept me there for only a short while. She said many cruel things to make me cry. She gathered my tears as they dried. She knew what I was”. Disgust and anger pummeled me within. Celeste buried her face in my arm. Celeste had been friends with Lenora. We both felt betrayed.

 “She moved me to a little town off the Scandinavian coast” Muireen continued. She looked at us gravely. “That is where you found me half dead and falsely accused. You already know what happened there. Andrias fled with me to a boat. My family knew I was hurt and so they took me from Andrias. I was in no shape to protest. I was weak and dying.” She paused as if remembering. We sat silent, waiting for her to continue.

 “My family took good care of me” she told us smiling. “I stayed in a little sea cave for a few months, recovering. I was badly burned and needed much blood to heal”. We nodded our understanding but still said nothing.

 “When I had recovered, I told them that I planned on returning to Andrias. They thought me foolish and begged me not to go. They knew what he was of course. They felt I was placing myself in terrible danger. I couldn’t argue. Danger had already come upon me once and I knew now the risks of mingling with the human world. I am considerably weaker on land than in the sea. I see that now. I am at the mercy of any fool who decides to throw a bucket of water on me” she said laughing, but I tasted the bitterness in her words. Pity moved me. She shook her head carelessly and continued her story.

 “So I returned to the Irish Coast to find Andrias against my family’s advice and against my own misgivings about returning to land. I could not stand the thought of never seeing him again and so I returned.” I froze waiting for her to continue. Most of what she had told us I had already known. This is what troubled me most. What had happened to her when she returned from the sea?

 “I chose a secluded spot where I would be able to dry off” she told us. “I came at night since I had no clothing and didn’t want to walk naked through the streets for all to see” she laughed. The tinkling of her laugh was like glass clinking together. I had forgotten how beautiful it sounded.

 “I was sitting on some rocks, waiting to dry off, when a strange vampire approached me” she said. “I made a leap for the water but he caught me easily. He had been waiting for me. How he had known he would find me there I did not understand but I knew he had been waiting for me.” Fear pounded through me as she spoke. Who was this strange vampire? What did he want with her? What had he done to her? She gave me a small smile as if to reassure me.

 “He was old” she told us. “He was old and very powerful. He forced me to drink his blood and the power of it made my head swim. He did this over and over again until the power was racing through me. The magic was too strong and I lost consciousness.” A sob escaped Celeste. Muireen looked as though she would comfort her but thought better of it. She remained where she was and continued.

 “When I awoke I was alone, trapped in an underground room of sorts. I looked frantically for a way of escape. Finally I found a hidden door. When I got it open I saw that it opened onto a staircase leading up. There were vampires posted on these stairs. They were there to guard me.

 “I would come to learn that the vampire that had kidnapped me was named Madras.” I locked eyes with her. I had heard that name before. It had been from Andrias. Madras was his maker. Andrias had said little about him. He was unwilling to talk about the days he spent with him. I knew only that Madras was cruel and unstable and that Andrias had been lucky to escape him.

 “Yes,” Muireen said, “it was Andrias’s maker. He is a sinister and twisted man. He promised to bring Andrias to me, that he would reunite us. But I knew that he told me lies, although sometimes he seemed to believe them himself.”

 “He let me feed only from vampires. Why he did this I don’t know. The blood was changing me. I could feel it though I couldn’t explain how. I no longer craved the flesh and blood of humans. I craved vampire blood and only vampire blood. The power I drew from the blood was intoxicating.”

 “As I feasted night after night upon vampire blood, the magic flowing within me, my own powers grew. I was glad of this for I hoped that I might grow strong enough to escape him” she told us.

 “When I wept, which was often at first, he gladly collected my tears. I was disgusted with him and with myself. Over time I learned to harden myself to grief. I stopped crying for him. I refused to let him profit off of my imprisonment, off of my misery”.

 “He kept me there for years like an exotic pet. I lost track of how long exactly. Day blurred into night and night into day.”

 “He furnished my room like a doting parent might furnish a beloved daughter’s room, except that most children don’t have pools built into their rooms. He bought me frilly dresses and dolls. He fixed my hair in girlish ringlets. He was mad” she told us thickly.

 I was disgusted with what she told me. That she had been in the clutches of the madman Andrias refused to even discuss terrorized me. She watched me, seeming to understand I had a question. But this question was so terrible I feared the answer I would receive. Finally I gathered m nerve.

 “Did he touch you” I finally managed?

 “No” she said. “He favors men. I was like his child to him. None of the others dare touch me either though they eyed me often as if they would like to. I could tell they were afraid of Madras.”

 “Madras brought several of his lovers to meet me” she continued. “He would make me strip down and enter the water so his lovers would be awed with my transformation.”

 “One, Torrance, was infatuated with me. It worked to my advantage. I befriended him in hopes of escape. Whenever we were alone together I would tell him how much I longed to see the outside world again. Eventually he relented to take me to a nearby town where he had my portrait painted.”

 I had expected he would return me to Madras’s house before dawn. I had thought that if I demonstrated to him that I would not flee he would take me out more often. I dared not try to escape that first night. He was on guard, not fully trusting me. He was almost as powerful as Madras and as unstable as well.”She took a long, shuddering breath.

 “He did not return me to the home” she told us. “Torrance fled with me. We traveled many miles together. By night we were on the move, by day he kept me locked in a metal box while he was in his death sleep.” She seemed to quake at the memory.

 “Eventually we came upon a Cliffside with a small cavern system within it. It is here that he built my new prison. It was nowhere near as luxuriant as the one Madras had kept me in.”

 “He spent months trying to woo me. I hated him. I hated him more than I did Madras, something I hadn’t thought possible only a short time before”.

 She took her tea from the table and drained it. I wasn’t sure but I thought perhaps she needed something stronger. I know I sure did. I stood and crossed the room. Grabbing glasses and an old bottle of wine, I returned to my seat. I had been saving the wine for a special occasion and I guessed that someone returning from the dead was as special as one could get. I only wished she had brought happier news with her.

 I poured wine for all of us. Muireen took her glass thankfully, draining it in one gulp. I refilled her glass, forcing myself not to do the same to mine.

 I thought with pity and with anger of all the years we had lost. I thought of Andrias. I thought of the hell Muireen had endured. It was our fault, Andrias’ and mine, that all of this befell her. Deep inside we always knew she didn’t belong with us. Muireen was too special, too inhuman, to be a part of our world. Sure she could look like any other woman, she could talk like them, she could learn to mimic their behaviors, but she was not, nor had she ever been, human.

 Chapter 27

1853, New York

Zekias

 For a long while we sat in silence drinking our wine. None of us really knew what to say. Muireen seemed to need to rest from telling her story before continuing.

 I still had many questions. How had she escaped? How long had she been held captive? These I knew she would answer in time and so I did not press her. The one question that troubled me most was why she had not yet asked about Andrias. I thought of asking her but stayed myself. She should finish her story before we got to matters at hand.

 “Muireen,” I said, “how did you escape?”

 “I didn’t for a long time” she replied. “I tried one night not long after he had taken me away. My powers were no match for his despite how much they had grown during my time with Madras. He easily subdued me. I became despondent after that. He didn’t even seem to notice. He was mad and in his madness he foolishly thought he would win me over. He did not” she told us.

 “He began working on entrance into an adjoining chamber. He worked on it during the day. He didn’t seem to need to go to his death sleep anymore. We were well underground so there was no chance of light assaulting him.

 When he completed it, he moved me in there. This chamber was worse than the first. The entrance was so tiny he could easily shut it up so I couldn’t get out. He did lock me in there by myself frequently. I could hear him coming and going from the other chamber, working on something” she told us.

 “He had planned it as a surprise for me I suppose” she said laughing. One night he came for me and brought me back into the first chamber. I was disgusted with what I saw. He had fashioned a bedroom set there. There were clothes in the wardrobe and linens on the bed. How he had done it all, I couldn’t imagine. He was proud of himself that I could tell. He looked expectantly at me. I imagined he wanted gratefulness for all he had done. It was clear the bedroom was meant for me. It was decorated very feminine like.

 I was prepared to give him that gratefulness. I was grateful the way prisoners are grateful for any small comfort they find. I turned to tell him so when he took me by surprise.

 He pushed me down onto the bed roughly. It took only seconds for me to realize his intentions. I was mad with fear and rage. I screamed and screamed. I screamed so loud that some rocks began to dislodge and tumble. Fearing the cavern would completely cave in, he leapt off of me. I stopped screaming. I did not want to be buried alive either but I would not tolerate him touching me. I would rather die than let him have me that way” she said.

 “He returned me to the back chamber. He began staying gone for days at a time. I would be half-starved when he would return. I had no choice but to feed from him no matter how much I detested doing so” she explained.

 “Once he was gone for over a week” she told us. “I really almost was dead when he returned that time. He had all sorts of odd things with him. He began assembling something in the back chamber with me but I had no idea what it was”.

 “When it was completed it looked like a large bath of sorts. I thought that perhaps that’s what it was. I hadn’t bathed in months at that point and was excited by thought of getting clean. He filled the container with water he had piped in through a rubber hose. He said he’d found a spring nearby. The water was freezing. I wasn’t sure I would be able to bath in it at all but I felt so filthy I was willing to try.”

 I entered the water willing at first. When I realized I would not be able to stand the cold of it I tried to get out. We struggled briefly as he tried to force me back into the water. Then all went dark. He had hit me with something. I fell into unconsciousness.”

 She paused but not as if the story was too hard for her. It was like she was trying to remember the details. I felt sickened. She didn’t seem very emotional at all. She relayed her story to us so matter-of-factly that I wanted to scream. I would kill Torrance when I found him. I would kill him slowly for what he had done to her. I would make his second death last years.

She had seemed lost in thought but now she began her story again. “When I awoke I was covered in ice and snow. I didn’t know where it had come from. From my neck down I was completely covered. How long I had been that way I didn’t know. My body was numb from the cold.”

 “I truly wept this time” she told us. “I wept for Andrias and I wept for you. I wept for my own foolishness. I don’t know how long I wept inside, though my tears dried up within an hour. Inside I was dying, dying as I had never imagined it.”

 “After some time I stopped feeling sorry for myself. I turned instead to planning, planning my revenge. I vowed to myself that I would get out of that tomb someday and when I did, I would kill Torrance” she said adamantly.

 “But just as I had strengthened my resolve” she added, “Torrance didn’t return. Weeks went by and then months. He did not return. I grew weaker and weaker from not feeding. Eventually I fell into complete darkness, darkness I had thought to be death.”

 “But it was not death” she told us. “I was sleeping, hibernating almost. I hadn’t even known that mermaids could do such a thing. Most would probably never want to try” she said laughing. I looked at her in horror.

 “A sound began to wake me one day. It was the sound of striking rock and footfalls. It was cave explorers who had stumbled upon me. They entered the cave. I must have been quite an unexpected sight for them. They looked alarmed” she laughed. I gritted my teeth. What was wrong with her? Why would she laugh? Her story was too horrible for me to bear and yet she was laughing!

 “I tried to move but found I couldn’t” she continued. “Over time rocks had fallen down around me. They dug frantically trying to free me from the rubble. They hadn’t expected the woman they had just saved to do what she did next” she told us.

 “As soon as I was freed I lunged at them. I regretted having to do it but I was starving. I needed blood and a lot of it. I drained all three of them. Even then I was still hungry. I tried to nibble their flesh as mermaids do but found I couldn’t stomach it. I stole some of their clothing and ventured out of my prison. I went looking for more blood”.

 “My first few months of freedom I spent living on the outskirts of town. I learned that I was in England and was thought it ironic that I would wind up here again. At first I was thankful for the coincidence because I felt being familiar with the place might give me an advantage. I hadn’t realized how long I had been asleep. So much had changed. Little was as I remembered it” she said sadly.

 “I pilfered what I needed from my victims. I could tolerate human blood but barely. I would often feel sick after feeding and knew I was gleaning very little power back from their blood. I longed for vampire blood but I didn’t dare approach one after all that had happened” she explained.

 “When I had recovered sufficiently I returned to our home. As I had thought it would be, Andrias nor you were there. I then decided to head west towards Ireland”. I looked up to meet her eyes. I found my answer in them. She had headed for Ireland in hopes of finding Andrias. She knew it was where he had been born. She gave me her sweetest smile.

 “On my way,” she said continuing her story, “I had a most unfortunate encounter. In a small Welsh village I passed by a vampire I recognized. He was one of Madras’ men. He had been a guard. I saw him and he saw me. He recognized me as I had him. I fled from him but he followed me. He failed to capture me. I discovered that despite the many years I had spent frozen in time, I was stronger than him. He turned and fled from me but I knew I should have killed him.”

 “He told Madras about seeing me and they have been trailing me ever since. No matter where I hide, they find me” she told us. “I’m tired of running” she said defiantly. “I need help” she pleaded. I looked at her beautiful face. I looked at the fear and sadness etched there but I saw something else too. I saw a hardess that had never been there before. In her eyes was a coldness I never knew.

 “I tried to go to Andrias” she told me, taking me by surprise. “He wouldn’t see me” she explained. “He came to the hotel but he did not enter. Before I could go out to him he had gone” she said. I had no time to track him down again. Madras and his friends are gaining on me!”

 “What do you need us to do?” Celeste asked, startling me. She had been so quiet I had almost forgotten she was there.

 “Yes, anything” I said. “Just tell us what you want us to do”. She seemed relieved.

 “Help me kill him” she said. “If several of us stand against him we can defeat him” she told us seeing my doubt. “I am outnumbered alone” she confessed.

 “Muireen,” I said, “Madras is an ancient vampire. He is so old that nobody even remembers how old he is” I told her. “We cannot defeat him!”

 “Then get Andrias” she seethed. “He is the reason all of this has happened anyways. It’s his mess” she accused. “He should clean it up. If he will not help me perhaps he will help his child” she suggested softer.

 I nodded, shocked at her outburst and her apparent anger towards Andrias. Did she really blame him for all that had happened or was she only hurt he had not seen her when she’d asked? Could Andrias have become so cold that he would turn his back on Muireen? I couldn’t believe it.

 I promised I would send word to Andrias right away. I would use our bond to let him know it was urgent. He would come if I asked. I was certain.

 I showed Muireen a room where she could rest for the day.

After instructing her not to leave the house or answer the door, I went to my own room. Madras could not walk in the day anymore than I could and yet I went to my death sleep clenched with fear.

Chapter 27

1853, New York

The Battle/Zekias

 I felt his approach. His power, like an icy wind, descended upon me. It was greater than I had ever imagined. I had never felt power that even came close to it. Muireen had been foolish to think we could stand against him. We were doomed.

 Muireen had sensed his approach too. She rushed down the stone steps of the cellar towards us. Celeste and I rose from our death sleep prematurely. I willed the sluggishness to leave my limbs.

 “He’s coming!” Muireen said.

 “I know” I told her. “I felt him. Let us run. We still have time” I suggested. Muireen shook her head furtively.

 “We can hide until Andrias can join us” I pleaded. Celeste trembled beside me. Muireen looked at me coldly.

 “You and Celeste can run if you like” she said. “I have run enough. It will be finished tonight. One of us will not see another dawn”. Muireen turned and hurried back up the stairs.

 “Muireen” I called after her. She couldn’t truly think she could stand against Madras alone. The woman was mad! She would get us all killed.

 Where was Andrias? I needed him now like I had never needed him before. We seldom used the telepathic connection between maker and child but I was desperate. Our connection had always been inexplicably weak. Andrias had thought it was because he had made me when he was still quite young in power. Whatever the reason, I needed it to work now. I thought to connect with his mind with all the urgency I had.

 I turned to Celeste and told her to stay downstairs. Of course she refused. She had never listened to me before when I ordered her about I don’t know what I had been expecting this time. I didn’t have time to argue. Madras was upon our doorstep. I could feel him and he was angry.

 I rushed upstairs. I couldn’t let Muireen face Madras alone. When I came to the foyer I saw Muireen standing rigidly, facing the closed door. She appeared to brace herself for what was to come. Celeste had joined me and now we too prepared for the fight, gathering our power.

 Suddenly the front door open, slamming against the wall. Madras stood just in front of the steps leading to the door. Muireen walked to the threshold. The stood facing each other. Muireen’s face was filled with hatred but Madras looked almost like a man who had just met an old friend. A small army of vampires stood behind him. He had come prepared for a fight.

 A strong wind blew around the two of them. It circled almost searchingly. I could feel their powers testing each other. Muireen’s was so different than I remembered it. Her power was stronger than that of most vampires and yet it was somehow different than vampiric power.

 “Ma Amore” Madras called to her. “Come home to me. Come home to your father”. Although Madras said these words softly, the menace beneath them was clear. He smiled widely at her but if his intention was to soften her, he failed. Chills ran through me. A manic vampire with this much power was deadly.

 Muireen threw him a look that would have sent a saner vampire running for the hills. Madras just remained where he was, smiling.

 “You are not my father” she said. “My father is dead, long ago dead. My mother ate him after conception as is tradition” she said flatly. Madras laughed, surprising me. But his laughter lasted only a short time. Within moments his face became steel again and his words held in them the edge of self-restraint.

 “You belong to Andrias. Andrias is my child, therefore you belong to me” he said. Madras was losing his battle with self-control. He was like a damn about to break.

 “I belong to no one” she replied.

 “I will not ask again Muireen” Madras told her. “Come, now!”

 “Never!” she screamed through the sudden rush of wind around her.

 “Then die!” Madras bellowed. Chaos erupted around us. Muireen flew towards Madras in rage. Her once sweet face contorted into pure fierceness. I didn’t know what to do. I looked helplessly at Celeste.

 “We’ve got to help her” Celeste said grabbing my arm and pulling me out of the house. I knew she was right. I knew we must do what we could to save Muireen yet I was afraid. I wasn’t afraid for myself. I wasn’t a coward. Death held no sway over me. It was for Celeste that I feared. I could not endure eternity without her.

 I tried vainly to draw Celeste back towards the house but it was too late. Madras’s men had come to play with us. It was six to two, the odds against us. Neither of us had much experience fighting. We found it unnecessary most of the time. But we were both vampires and strong for our age. We held our own against them.

 I tried to see what was happening between Muireen and Madras. I was too distracted by the vampire with the executioner’s axe to see anything too clearly. It appeared that Muireen was somehow holding her own.

 I almost paid with my life for the few seconds I had spent looking away from my opponent. He had almost taken my head. I needed to kill the bastards trying to kill me before I could even think about helping Muireen.

 The axe man came at me again, swinging wildly. I ducked but instead of falling away from him, I threw my weight against him, knocking us both to the ground. At least he couldn’t swing that damned axe at me again.

 I dug my fingers into his throat, like I was digging for treasure. I would take his head off piece by piece if I had to. The vampire reached up from where I had pinned him against the ground and began to do likewise to my chest. He was trying to reach my heart.

 I rolled over quickly, taking him by surprise and changing our positions. In the fraction of a second he was distracted, I forced by hands between his rib cage with all the strength I had. His eyes grew wide in surprise as I wrapped my hand around his heart. Then I ripped the cold dead thing from his chest. He slumped against me, still.

 Throwing him off of me I rose to face my next opponent. Before I could fully stand a sword flashed through the air. At that same moment lightning split the sky. The bolt hit the vampire trying to decapitate me. The sword flew through the air, unguided. The vampire that had wielded it only seconds before lay before me, a mass of flames.

 The storm grew around us. Muireen was trying to help us. I prayed she would leave the others to us. She had enough to worry about with Madras.

 I didn’t have much time to worry about her though. Another one of Madras’s henchmen was upon me. Seeing the executioner’s axe lying a few feet away, I leapt for it. I had reached the axe only seconds before the vampire was on me. I had just enough time to swing it around to face him. The axe cut neatly across the vampire’s throat. The look of surprise on his face was equal to my own. He crumbled to the ground, his head rolling slowly away from his body.

 I looked down at the axe with gratefulness it hadn’t hit me when its previous owner had wielded it. It was wickedly sharp, a deadly weapon. And now it was mine.

 I turned to see how Celeste was doing. She had managed to dispatch two vampires on her own already. That left us one. She was battling him now or more accurately, dodging his attack. He was the biggest vampire I had ever seen. He was at least seven feet tall and could easily weigh two-hundred and fifty pounds. It wasn’t fat either. He was solid muscle. I took a firmer grip on the axe and ran to help Celeste.

 Sensing my approach he turned on me before I could raise the axe. With the ease of swatting a fly he knocked the axe from my hands sending it scurrying a hundred yards or more away. The monster grabbed me by my throat, lifting me off of the ground.

 I was in trouble and I knew it. Celeste attacked him from behind but he knocked her off easily, sending her flying into the side of the house. Desperate I drew all the power from within and pushed it out to him. He barely rocked with the force. Cruel laughter fell from his lips as he thrust his hand into my chest. It turned manic as he wrapped his fingers around my heart, squeezing. I had seconds to come to terms with my second death before it visited me.

Chapter 28

1853, New York

Andrias

 As soon as dusk settled on the land, I took off again. I had been forced by the dawn to go to ground though I had tried to endure the burning rays. I had failed. When my skin began to smoke I knew I could go no further. I had been so close. I was only a stone’s through away by vampire standards. I had been forced down in the Caribbean and he was in New York…

 I had been at home when I had first received his distress signal. An immense sense of fear had bombarded me. So seldom had we ever communicated that way that it took me several minutes to discern what it was. I had left immediately upon realizing it was Zekias calling out for me.

I feared now that I was too late. I had not felt his distress call again. I had tried to call out to him telepathically, I had tried to tell him that I was on my way, but I had felt nothing in return. I didn’t want to admit it but since rising at dusk I had felt a deep loss within myself. It was as if a piece of my soul had fled in the day. I feared this missing piece may be Zekias. I prayed I was wrong.

 I flew on through the city, forsaking customary precautions. I did not care who might see me. I needed to get to Zekias’s home. I knew it was just outside the city. I had passed it before though I had never come to call there. I was rife with regret now. Why had I not seen Zekias in so long? Why had I chosen to part company?

 A mere twenty minutes passed and I arrived at his home. Even before I reached the ground I could see a great battle had taken place here. The stench of burning vampire flesh was in the air. What in the world had happened?

 Landing, I went quickly over to the first black spot I saw. That spot had once been a vampire, a vampire who had been unable to get out of the sun’s burning rays. The smell was horrific. All that remained of the vampire was thick goo like substance, black from burning. By the time the dawn’s light hit it again in the morning it would be nothing but soot. But there was still enough left for me to get an idea of who it had been.

 I leaned down towards the blackened mass and inhaled deeply. The vampire’s scent was sill upon his remains but it was foreign to me. I moved on to the next mass. This one too was not known to me.

 I made my way closer to the house, scenting the remains as I went. I didn’t bother going inside just yet. My senses told me there was nothing inside that still lived and no vampires lurking. There was much vampire blood on the ground nearer the house. I could discern it only because the sun had burned it into ash. I stooped to see if there was any scent left to it. I did this to several of the larger areas of blood. I did not like what I discovered.

 Most of the scents were unknown to me but several were very familiar. I scented that both Celeste and Zekias had been injured and lost a good deal of blood. I consoled myself that this didn’t mean they were dead.

 Continuing my search, I came upon a patch of blood on the south side of the house. This patch was unusual because it was not vampire blood. I knew this because like the other blood I had found that had been burnt to ash; this blood was a dark sticky red. I knelt by it.

 Bringing my face close to it, I inhaled the scent. I flicked my tongue out to taste it. The scent and taste was familiar. It was Muireen’s. She had been here. Whether or not she was still alive was uncertain.

 As I continued to investigate I came upon the remains of one that would have stopped my heart had it beat. My heart clenched stiffly in my chest. It couldn’t be. He could not be dead!

 I dug frantically through what little remained in the mess. When my hand closed upon a pocket watch, I began to weep. I wept as I had seldom wept before. Only one other time had I wept as I now did and that was when I feared Muireen was dead. I had been wrong about her but there was no denying that Zekias was truly gone. I was arm deep in all that remained of him. Wrenching the watch out, I tried frantically to clean it with my shirt. It was his. All hope was gone. The initials Z.A.L. belonged to my child.

 Staggering away from the pile of remains, I tried vainly to wipe the mess that once was my sweet child from my hands. I needn’t look anymore. The one I had come to save was past saving.

 How could this have happened? Who would have wanted to hurt Zekias? He was one of the least troublesome vampires I knew. He retained far too much of his humanity, as I had often criticized. He and Celeste never bothered anyone. Celeste…I couldn’t bear to look for her remains. They may lie among the others or not. I wasn’t sure. I only knew I did not have the strength or will to look.

 What had Muireen been doing here? Had she come to Zekias when I failed to meet her at her hotel in Ireland? Had Muireen been the catalyst for what had happened? My head swam with questions.

 I lay back on the ground, weeping once again. I hadn’t known I was still capable of such emotion and yet it spilled out of me, unstoppable. Never had I felt such hopelessness, such loss. Not even when I had lost Muireen had I felt like this. Lost in my grief, I lay there. How was I to deal with this new and raw state within me?

 In the end I did nothing. I lay there weeping until the first light of dawn approached. In my grief I thought wildly of ending it all, of meeting the second death. I tried to hold myself in the sun’s rays. I felt it begin to burn away at my flesh. The pain was agonizing, the smell nauseating.

 Against my will I began to dig into the ground. Self preservation was taking over. No matter how heartbroken I was, the monster inside me reused to die.

 Faster and faster I dug until I was completely buried by the cool earth. I had dug far deeper than I had ever done before. When I closed my eyes to receive my death sleep I was buried more than twenty feet below ground. It was a sleep from which I would not wake for over a hundred years.

Chapter 29

Present Day New York

Andrias

 A whirling noise caught my ear. It was repetitive and persistent. I tried to ignore it, to push it away but it only grew louder. The wretched noise was almost directly above me. I opened my eyes to see what it was.

 Astonishment pushed any thought of the noise from my mind. I was in the ground, deep underground. I couldn’t imagine how I had gotten here. I only went to my death sleep underground under the direst of circumstances. I hated the feel of the earth around me.

 It took a few moments for me to piece together why I was here. Then it came to me. Zekias was dead. I had hastily buried myself in the ground near his home to escape the dawn. My heart was heavy with remembering and yet it was so much more bearable then it had seemed the night before.

 I began to dig my way to the surface. My mind felt heavy and I was weak in a way I had never experienced before and I was…I was so thirsty.

Maybe the noise above was some clue to what had happened here. I cautiously punched through the surface, remembering well the scorch of the sun. I did not wish to incur that kind of pain again. Relief washed over me as I rose from the ground. It was night. I pulled myself onto the soft grass.

 Some unknown contraption sped by me. I hurried behind a large tree and peered at the iron monster. It was like a horseless carriage of some sort with wicked teeth at the front. The operator hadn’t even seemed to see me in the darkness. I looked on in wonder.

 As I looked around me, my confusion grew. Nothing looked as it had the night before. There was a large road nearby and many strange buildings. Zekias’s house was gone. Where it had stood was nothing but piles of dirt and more machines like the one that had almost run me over.

 I crept closer to the area. Human voices could be heard. The blood of these humans awoke the most primitive side of me. I was famished. I walked boldly towards the men. I needed to feed. As I drew closer I noticed they were surrounded by light. I paused momentarily, looking upwards for the source of the light. High above were what appeared to be tiny suns tied to the trees. The light hurt my eyes and I quickly looked away.

 Tentatively I stepped into a pool of light shed by one of these small suns. The rays did not burn me and I marveled. They were like candles without the flame. I began to wonder how long I had slept, surely not just one night. Too much had changed. Where had these innovations come from?

 I didn’t spend much time marveling. Hunger drove me to the men. They seemed to hold no fear of me as I approached though my clothing was matted with ancient dirt. One of them spoke to me but I did not reply. I went straight to feeding though I had many questions for them. Questions would have to wait. The monster inside was demanding to be fed.

 I fed on them one at a time. The others tried to beat me off the first but they were no more threat to me than buzzing flies. The first two men dropped to the ground and the third was held firmly in my grasp when the forth attempted to run. I seized him easily. I thought that perhaps I could hold him while I fed on the other but he was uncooperative. Regretfully, I snapped his neck. What a pity to waste blood when I was still so hungry. I drained the third fellow and let him slide to the ground.

 I was not full but I felt much better than I had. Already I felt my strength coming back to me and the sluggishness leaving me. I looked at the mess at my feet. I would have to clean this up. I wasn’t sure what year it was but I was sure that no matter how much might have changed, leaving dead bodies around would be a no-no.

 A pit had been dug not far from where I had slumbered. The machine that had startled me so at first was running nearby. I walked over and examined it. The best I could figure was that it was used to dig. I walked over to another like it on the other side of the pit. This one had what looked like a huge shovel on the end. That would make what I planned much easier.

 I began grabbing bodies and tossing them into the pit. One, I noticed, was about my size and height. I looked down at my matted and dirty clothes. Surely I would draw too much attention in my current attire. I quickly shed my old clothes and traded them for his. He wouldn’t need them anymore.

 I finished tossing the bodies in. Climbing inside the shovel machine, I looked over the controls. There was a key. I knew what to do with that. I turned it and the machine roared to life. It took me a few moments to figure out the rest of the controls but before long I managed to cover the pit where the bodies lay. I surveyed my work. It was sloppy but surely I had done the best I could.

 Feeling pleased with myself I headed towards the lights in the distance. Perhaps they were more tiny suns and I would find more humans. I needed two things from them. I needed information and I needed more blood.

Chapter 29

Present Day New York

Andrias

 I had spent the past week on the outskirts of the monstrous city. I was not comfortable staying among so many humans. I had learned much in the last week but there was still much I didn’t understand.

 I had learned that almost one-hundred and fifty years had passed since I had gone to ground. It had taken me some time to come to terms with the reality that I had lost so much time. It had never been my intention to sleep for so long. I had heard of others doing so purposely when they tired of life but never of it happening accidentally. Perhaps in my tormented state of mind I had wanted it.

 Regardless of how it had happened, it had. My grief was now more bearable so it had done me some good. However, I had much to learn about this new age.

 I had discovered that the tiny suns were actually electric light and the entire city was covered in them. Everything now seemed to run on electricity and fossil fuels. Cars were a welcome surprise. I was enamored with the genius of them.

 I was not so enamored with the swarms of people packed so tightly together. Nor did I like the hideous buildings that blotted out the sky. Everything seemed dirty and cluttered and the air itself was foul.

 I decided I would return to Ireland. I did not desire to remain here no matter how plenteous the opportunity to feed. I only hoped I would not find my beloved homeland as I found it here.

 I held little hope that my home on Erris Head still stood. Whether it still stood or not, I knew I would have no claim to it. To the world I was long dead. For that matter, all my wealth was gone as well. I would have to start over. It was regrettable but not disastrous. I would need some time to learn this new society but I was resourceful and was confident I would be back on my feet again in no time, though it would take years to amass the fortune I once enjoyed.

 I waited for an opportunity to approach a man of wealth unseen. The city was full of them. One thing that had not changed was the ability for one to discern the have and have-nots by sight. At first opportunity I compelled a well dressed man to follow me down an alleyway.

 I stole his clothing and his wallet. It was not something I was proud of but it was necessary. When I returned to Erris Head I needed to be able to present myself in acceptable fashion. I did this early evening and wasted no time in departing the city. I was anxious to get out of it.

 Now I stood in front of my old home. Surprisingly it still stood. It was also inhabited by humans. I stood outside deciding what to do. Part of me wanted to enter by force and take back what was mine. Another part of me reasoned that people of such wealth would be missed if I killed them. I would eventually have to answer for why I was there in a home the world would not believe to be mine.

 I didn’t have much time to decide. Dawn would be upon me within hours. I quickly prepared a story to present to the owners. I was hoping they would believe that my great, great grandfather once lived here and I wanted to see the place. I hoped they would be gracious enough to offer me a room for the day. I had been sleeping underground lately and was not pleased with it. If they did not offer me a room, I could always persuade them.

 I checked my clothes once more and smoothed my hair before stepping out of the shadows and onto the walk. I was almost at the door when a light flashed on. I blinked rapidly. I had not yet grown accustomed to the brightness of these new lights.

 A middle-aged woman with graying hair opened the door. She was in uniform of sorts. She appeared to be a servant. I smiled pleasantly at her and was about to introduce myself when she swung the door open widely for me to enter. Taken aback, I said nothing for a moment. Even in the eighteen hundreds people were not so trusting. From what I had seen in my short time in the city they had less reason to be so now. I hesitated and she spoke.

 “Mr. Colburn?” the woman said. “Are you going to come inside?” she asked. I was shocked. How had she known my name? I was also concerned I might not be able to enter without a more formal invitation? By her frown I could tell that my hesitation was beginning to worry her. Hesitantly I stepped over the threshold. Relief swamped me as I entered unhindered.

 I had been caught off-guard by her recognition of me. Suspicious, I scanned the house quickly for other supernaturals. The house seemed to be clean of any but me. I could only sense other humans in the house.

 As I looked around my home I became even more surprised. Much of the home was how I had left it all those years ago. I walked around the sitting room, tracing my hands over my furniture. It was not exactly the same. There had been some additions of odd furniture and décor. The house had apparently been fitted for electric light, a change I wasn’t particularly fond of. I had preferred the less caustic light of candles myself.

 Many questions ran through my mind but all came back to the same one. Why? Why had all been so well preserved? How had she known me? I decided I needed answers and I needed truth. I turned to her and put her under my power.

 “Who owns this home?” I asked her.

 “Why,” she answered, “you do of course, Mr. Colburn.” I wasn’t sure which emotion was greater in me at the moment: relief or amazement.

 “Ma’am,” I said, “we have never met. How did you know me and if I own this house and we have never met, who has been paying you?” I asked.

 “I recognized you from your portrait,” she told me pointing to a painting above the fireplace. It was a painting Muireen had insisted I have done when we were married. “Mrs. Colburn set up for the payment of staff to occur automatically” the woman continued.

 Mrs. Colburn? Who in the world was Mrs. Colburn? I had been married to Muireen at one time, but… It was impossible, wasn’t it? Why would Muireen maintain my home all of these years? It couldn’t be her. Grabbing the woman by the shoulders I strengthened my hold on her.

 “What is the MRS. Name, if you please,” I asked roughly.

 “Muireen” she told me calmly.

 I let go of her. So Muireen was still alive. She had lived while Zekias had died. Anger rocked me. My wife…Muireen. What has my sweet wife been up to all these years? I would wait for her. We had much to talk about. I would get answers on what had happened the night Zekias died. But for now I needed shelter from the sun.

 “Can you show me to a room, Mrs.…?”

 “Tandy” she supplied.

 “Mrs. Tandy, of course.”

 I followed her up the stairs. She showed me to the bedroom I had once occupied. It looked much the same as it had the last time I had seen it. The most obvious change was a barrier of sorts that had been placed over the windows.

 “What are these?” I asked her, pointing to the windows.

 “They are automatic blinds” she told me as if I should have known.

 “What are they for” I asked impatiently. I knew not what blinds even were and I was tired and overwhelmed. I wanted an answer, not to be treated like an idiot.

 “Mrs. Colburn had them installed to block out the daylight” she explained calmly.

 “Why would she do that?” I wondered out loud.

 “They are for your sun allergy” she answered looking concerned. “She told us that you had an allergy to the sun.” I gave her my most charming smile and nodded.

 “Thank you Mrs. Tandy” I said to her. “That will be all for tonight.” She turned to take leave but paused at the door and turned to speak.

 “Should I call Mrs. Colburn tonight or wait until the morning?” she asked.

 “How would you call her and why?” I questioned, wondering if she was somewhere in the house. She looked at me oddly.

 “I would use the telephone, of course,” she said politely. “She told us that you might return from your trip soon and if you did, we were to call her right away,” she explained.

 The telephone, yes, I remembered seeing many in New York. I hadn’t yet figured out exactly how they worked. A million emotions swept through me. Had Muireen known I was not dead? She must have if she had kept the house up and installed these bizarre window treatments. Had she searched for me? What had Muireen been up to all of these years, I wondered? Something was not right.

 “Do not call her at all” I commanded, using my powers to persuade her. “I will call her myself when I am ready,” I told her. I wanted time to think and take in all that had happened before I faced Muireen. I still didn’t know what role she had played in Zekias’s death although I could not imagine her ever harming him herself. Mrs. Tandy turned and left. I had a lot to think about as I went to my death sleep that night.

Chapter 30

Present Day Erris Head

Andrias

 Over the next six months I learned everything I could about this new age. There was far more to learn than I could have imagined when I set my goal upon it. There were gadgets and machines that did everything for you these days. Refrigerators kept food cold, sprinklers watered the grass, and blinds closed themselves minutes before dawn.

 There were two inventions that amazed me more than any other. One was the telephone. It was mind boggling how one could walk around wherever one wished while communicating with someone else who could be anywhere else in the world. It was one invention that I found quite useful.

 The other modern invention that amazed me was television. I had watched much over the last months, often delaying going to my death sleep for hours to watch it. One had been generously supplied in my bedroom. I cared not for many of the shows on it, though they did teach me much of how different people behaved in this day and age. What I found immensely useful about television was the news one could get on it.

 I used the news to catch me up on what was happening in the world. If I were going to be able to blend in with the local population, and become a rich business man once more, I needed to be learned.

 There were even stations that followed the stock markets. These I was fascinated with and I quickly began investing again. I had done quite well so far. I knew not what remained of my lost fortune although Mrs. Tandy had asked no questions regarding payment for anything I requested.

 I found being a vampire a huge advantage. Using my powers I was able to learn many things from the staff that would have seemed odd to ask them openly. I also was able to convince Mrs. Tandy that I had indeed spoken to Mrs. Colburn and that she was not to mention me if the Mrs. called.

 I rummaged through drawers and files enough to get a good idea of what Muireen had been up to. She appeared to have carried on my businesses without me. Some had been sold, some dissolved, while others still thrived. She had entered new markets and done quite well for herself. I often wondered if she had used my wealth to do it or her own tears to buy her way in. I was guessing it was a combination of both.

 My emotions were mixed about what and why Muireen had done the things she had. I spent many hours wondering why she would have told the staff I might return soon. Had she sensed my waking through our connection? It seemed unlikely since I could not feel her presence at all within me. Had she been hoping for my return or dreading it? The one question I had managed to answer was that of where she was living. From what I had discovered, she held several large properties in California and a business she ran herself.

 The business was a club by the name of Dark desires. I had no idea at first what a club was. With the help of Taylor, our handyman, I had managed to Google it. He had been shocked to see I had no idea how to use a computer and knew not what Google was. I had to wipe his mind after that.

 Taylor had even been able to pull up a picture of the club and all of its information on the computer. I had scribbled it all down on a piece of paper certain I would not be able to pull it up again. While I was impressed with the information the computer could provide, I did not like them. I learned the skills needed to do my research, but that was all.

 Despite knowing where she now lived and what occupied her time, I did not go to her. Nor did I use the telephone to call her, though I did have the staff pick me up my own cellular phone and had her number saved in it.

 No, I had a bad feeling about Muireen. All that she had done might have been out of hope for my return and it might not have been. Maybe she had not wanted to be contacted upon my return so she could run to my arms but rather so she could be warned. I could not shake the feeling that the later was right though I had no real evidence.

 Muireen had gone on splendidly without Zekias and me. I wondered if she ever had a moment of regret for all that had happened. I did. A small part of me hated her for being happy. I had seen her picture on the computer and she had looked the same though modernized. A wondrous smile had lit up her face. She appeared to have the world at her feet.

 That world should have been at my feet and it would have been if Zekias had lived. I had never intended to sleep for so long. Grief had driven me to it. Grief brought on by Muireen. She was somehow connected to what had happened to Zekias. She had been there. She had lived.

 I knew, the same way that I knew she had been up to no good, that Muireen had been the reason for the battle the night Zekias died his second death. I knew somehow that she had not mourned me. I was beginning to believe she hoped I would never return. More troubling, I often wondered if she had known I went to ground and if so where I had laid all those years. If so, she hadn’t come for me and that spoke volumes.

 Driven by my suspicions, I began to investigate. The first thing I did was see who now owned the property where Zekias’s house once stood. I was surprised, and yet not so, to learn that the property belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Colburn. So Muireen had bought the property after Zekias had died. Why?

 I also discovered something even more unsettling. A news report had been made on a mass murder. Four men had been brutally murdered and buried at a construction site for a new chain store. The men had been construction workers at the site. Their bodies had been found buried in a pit. Three had suffered extreme blood loss and one had a broken neck. Ooops… It appears I hadn’t done a very good job cleaning up that mess.

 That was a dead giveaway, so to speak, that I had raised if indeed Muireen had known where I lay. She had bought the property and since she had torn down the house and was building a chain store there, it probably wasn’t for sentimental reasons. If she had known where I lay why would she risk waking me by building there?

 It didn’t make sense. One thing was for certain, if she had seen the report she would know it was a vampire who had killed those men. The question was really, did she know which vampire it was? Could she, even now, know that I had returned to my home on Erris Head. Was she biding her time as I was mine? I needed to reconnect with other supernaturals. I had found out what was going on in the human world, now it was time to find out what was going on in my world.

Chapter 31

Present Day London

Andrias

 After making sure all was secure at home, I headed off to London. In my day, London had always been a great place to mingle with other supernaturals. I hoped it was still so.

 I checked into a hotel in the city. I didn’t have a reservation but the credit card given to me by the servants at home seemed to provide all the assurances the desk clerk needed. I was quickly ushered into a suite. The Colburn name was known well here. Muireen had been very busy it seemed. The staff was fumbling over themselves to make sure I was comfortable. It was unnerving.

 I had sent my bags ahead of me, choosing to travel by my powers. I had learned of airplanes and such but it seemed too time consuming to travel by them. My bags had not yet arrived.

 I checked myself in the washroom mirror. My hair was somewhat disheveled. I started to smooth it then stopped. Many of the men these days wore their hair in messy style. I decided to leave it. I straightened the collar of my suit and smoothed down the front. I still looked stuffy compared to the carefree hoards I’d observed. I unbuttoned the top two buttons of my shirt and lost the tie. That was better. Already the man looking back at me in the mirror looked more modern. I was catching on to the age.

 Pleased, I smiled and winked at myself. Despite that I was irked with Muireen, I was having fun. The game had begun whether she knew it yet or not. I was no one’s fool. She had been using my name and assets for herself over the years. If she had hoped I would come back then she will be very pleased. If not, she was in for a hell of a surprise.

 Chuckling, I turned from the mirror and walked to the door. I felt alive. I felt ready to meet this new world. My powers had not dimmed while I slept. No, they had grown and grown exponentially.

 I was ready to take my place in the world once more but Muireen would not be at my side. If I found that Muireen had betrayed me she would pay as all who cross me do. Even If she had not, she would not be allowed to continue on as my wife. We had parted company long ago and there was no going back. I no longer associated love with Muireen’s name. It now held only bitterness for me.

 I exited the hotel and headed on foot to the seedier edge of town. Vampires loved to feed upon criminals and sinners. I was sure to find plenty of both where I was headed. I would feed myself and then I would seek out the eldest of the vampires in the vicinity.

 As I walked I noticed how the city was a mixture of old and new, a mix of wealth and poverty. It had always been so and yet it seemed starker now. I breathed in the night air, searching for others. I caught several but they were all young. I would speak to them later if none older could be found.

 As I entered the heart of the seedier part of town I began to pick up the essence of power. There were several older ones around. None of them were as powerful as me. I headed in their direction and their power resonated within me almost like a welcome. They were not looking for a fight. That was good. I had no interest in vampire squabbles. I had a pretentious mermaid to deal with.

 As I drew closer to the source of the power, a vampire emerged from the shadows. He was a hulking man and he had been dead at least as long as I had. He stepped forward out of shadow. I laughed.

 “Old friend” I called to him. “How are you?” I closed the gap between us as I spoke.

 “Well Andrias,” Anastas replied. “How do you fare? We have not met in many a long year. When did you rise?” He asked. I smiled, composing myself before I answered. How had he known I had been at rest?

 “I rose several months ago” I said. “Talk with me Anastas” I implored. “It seems that all know more than I about what has happened to me.”

 “Yes,” he answered gravely. “There is much I need to catch you up on. Let us go somewhere private where we can talk,” he suggested.

 He motioned me to follow him and I did so. We entered a small building. On the outside it had looked dilapidated but on the inside it was pristine.

 “Have you fed yet” he asked as I looked around. There were several vampires and humans in the room and many more could be sensed throughout the place. The vampires were feeding openly and I marveled at their brazenness. Anastas noticed my interest.

 “It’s a feeding club,” he told me. I raised an eyebrow. “It’s a place where vampires can feed openly. No one is allowed to kill the human host,” he explained. “The humans know what we are and want us to feed from them so there is no need to wipe their minds,” he continued.

 I was puzzled. Why were humans now allowed to know what we were? Had our dreams of coming out into the open been realized?

 “Are there many of these clubs” I inquired. He nodded.

 “There are many spread throughout the world,” he told me, “but not all humans know what we are. Only a select group is allowed to know. They are a little like our test subjects” he explained. “So far, it has been a great success.” I nodded.

 How wonderful that such progress had been made. Perhaps those of us that had begun the movement years ago had not been fools after all. It seemed that the hosts were enjoying themselves and no fear was tasted in the air. This gave me great hope for the future.

 “So the movement to go public has not died out?” I asked.

 “Not at all,” he replied. “The movement is stronger than ever. We stand a good chance of going public in the next few years,” he continued. “That is why it was so vital that you wake now” he told me.

 I understood not what he meant by this and I looked at him questioningly.

 “Lenora will be here soon” he told me. “She will explain everything when she comes. She is a leading officer for VFF,” he told me.

 Lenora? I had not thought of her in forever. Was she here? I felt for her power and found it quickly. I turned towards the door. A tall brunette wearing leather pants and a low-cut black top strode in. Her hair was cut short but it was Lenora. She was attractive in a dangerous kind of way. I found myself happy to see her and anxious to learn what the VFF was.

Chapter 32

Present Day London

Andrias

 I stood as Lenora approached and a smile split my face. It was good to see her. She grinned back at me.

 “Lenora,” I greeted, embracing her, “it has been forever. You look well,” I told her.

 “As do you,” she said returning my embrace. “You have returned in the nick of time” she told me. Once more insinuations had been made that there was much I didn’t know. I was anxious to learn.

 “Follow me” she said. “I have a small office above. I don’t want to be overheard,” she added.

 I followed her up a short flight of steps into a dim room. There was a small desk with several folders upon it and scattered chairs about. She motioned for me to sit and I did so. Anastas sat beside me. I said nothing but waited for her to tell me all.

 “Look,” she began, “much has happened while you slept. It is difficult to know where to start” she said apologetically. “Let us start with Muireen” she suggested. I didn’t quite manage to hide the surprise on my face. I nodded my agreement.

 “Muireen wasted little time after Zekias’s death and your disappearance in setting up an empire” she told me. I didn’t know if I agreed with her estimate that what Muireen had built was an empire, but it was definitely the size of a small city. I was begrudgingly proud of Muireen for all that she had built. That pride would not stop me from snapping her neck if necessary when I next met her though. I bit my tongue and let Lenora continue.

 “No one knew where you had gone,” she said, “but we didn’t believe you had met your second death. We assumed that the grief of losing a child had driven you to ground as it does many who are as close as Zekias and you were.” She paused a moment, framing her words.

 “I asked Muireen several times if she knew what had happened to you but she denied any knowledge,” Lenora said. “I didn’t believe her,” she continued. “Something was off. She was hiding something but I wasn’t sure what.”

 My suspicions of Muireen were growing stronger. Had she wanted me out the way that badly? Why? Lenora continued.

 “She played the grief stricken widow for a while then began buying up property around the world. She made lucrative investments and hired teams of professionals to assist her in her business dealings.” Lenora looked squarely into my eyes. “It was like she stepped right into your shoes Andrias,” she told me.

 Lenora let me have a moment for this news to sink in. Muireen had always been a quick learner. She must have learned much about business just from the short time we were together. Again I could find no crime in what she had done other than to go on living without me. She and I had done that long before Zekias’s death. Lenora saw that I was not impressed with her news. I would have to work on masking what I was thinking. I had lost my touch it seemed.

 “She has changed,” Lenora told me forcefully. “She is not the sweet little innocent you remember” she snarled. I had come to this conclusion already but I remained silent and let Lenora continue. It was obvious that Lenora was still as jealous of Muireen as she had always been. It was probably best to keep that thought to myself.

 “She has power,” Lenora continued, “power you could not even imagine.” Lenora looked more envious than ever reporting this. Good for Muireen, I thought. But how much power could a mermaid really have out of the water?

 “She feeds only upon vampires and Weres,” she told me, seemingly reading my mind. “I believe she draws much of her power by taking it from others” she said.

 I leaned back in my chair and steepled my hands. Muireen’s need for vampire blood may be my fault. When we had discovered her vulnerability to human blood and her ineffectual healing outside of water, Zekias and I had begun feeding her ourselves. We had been aware that she derived strength from our blood but we hadn’t thought about the long term effects. It hadn’t mattered to us how powerful Muireen became because she was simply sweet little Muireen. It seemed that had changed.

“She is out of control,” Lenora accused. “She is attempting to control all the supernaturals around her,” she went on. “She has set herself up as queen among them and worse yet,” she seethed, “she is interfering in our attempts to go public”.

 I couldn’t help myself. I laughed out loud. Lenora was definitely envious. She was dripping with jealousy and I was embarrassed for her as I had often been before. She was on a witch hunt. I stood. I had no interest in her old feuds.

 “After all this time you still defend her,” she asked. I looked at her coldly. “She told everyone you were dead,” she continued. “She said she was rightful heir of all you had and she never looked for you a single day and yet you still love her” she accused.

 Anger boiled within me. Lenora was the same fool she had always been. She was spiteful and childish.

 “Love has nothing to do with it” I told her coldly. “I will deal with Muireen and what she may have or have not done on my own, in my own way” I said. “I thank you for your information and will bear all you have said in mind.” I turned to go.

 “They will kill her if she isn’t stopped” she told me. I turned to face her once more. I let my power lash out at her. She cowered behind the desk. Anastas didn’t move. He seemed unwilling to get involved in our debate. Truly he was a wise vampire.

 How dare Lenora threaten me or Muireen? She was a sniveling insect I could squash easily. If anyone was to kill Muireen it would be me if and when I decided to.

 “Muireen is my problem” I told her. “Mine,” I repeated. “She is neither yours nor the Movements to deal with. She is mine and I will handle it.”

 “It is no longer the Movement,” she informed me. “It has grown into a large and organized group known as *Vampires For Freedom*. The VFF has become the government for vampires,” she continued. “Governors are the lowest level now. The upper council deal personally with anyone they feel is a threat to our goals. The council is comprised of the most powerful vampires that live,” she boasted.

 “As I said,” I repeated, “I will handle her.”

 “Then you’d better handle her soon” she warned. “The VFF is afraid of her. They want her terminated” she confessed. “Andrias,” she pleaded, “we do not have to be at odds. We have similar goals in this world. Let us work together. I did after all find the witch to do the spell that waked you.”

 I turned back to look at her. I had assumed the noise of construction had waked me. Now I learn that a witch’s spell had done it. How out of control was Muireen that aged vampires feared her and would go to the trouble of using a witch to summon me from my sleep?

 “Thank you,” I told Lenora. “I appreciate the waking”. Her face softened. “Meet me at my hotel tomorrow evening” I suggested. “If you want to go with me to California than you may. We will decide tomorrow. For tonight I need to think on all that has been learned and I yet to feed,” I told her. With that I turned and left.

Chapter 33

Present Day California

Andrias

 I hadn’t really wanted Lenora to accompany me to California. In the end I had agreed to her joining me for two reasons. The first was that the Council liked the idea of me taking care of Muireen myself and they wanted Lenora to keep an eye on me. Second, Lenora knew her way around this present age and I knew she would be useful. At this moment, I was regretting my decision, no matter how logical it had first seemed.

 Lenora was admonishing me again. She wanted me to move right in and destroy Muireen. I had no intentions on doing that. I insisted that we spend a week getting to know Muireen’s routines and business dealings. Lenora had hated waiting but she had thought it a tactical move and so agreed. The week was up and she was impatient for me to act. She was right, it was time.

 Our observations had been useful. I had learned that Muireen was wealthier than I had imagined. She had always enjoyed living lavishly and it seemed she had not lost her taste for finer things. Her private residence was set within a complex which included the club she ran and a private swimming pool. Saltwater, it seemed.

 The complex also afforded housing for most of her staff. Staff consisted of various Were groups and vampires and even one I suspected of being Fey. She had spared no expense on anything and the results were breathtaking. She truly had built her own little world. Her complex was well fortified. No wonder the VFF was concerned.

 “Did you hear me?” Lenora broke in. I turned to look at her. She was standing in our small hotel room. She wore a short black skirt and bustier. She was sexy but vile. I hadn’t heard a single word she said and she knew it. I didn’t care. I turned back to the mirror and buttoned my shirt.

 “Are we going to make a move or not?” she asked. She didn’t bother to try and hide the agitation in her voice. She seldom did.

 “We will go tonight” I assured her. “But,” I said stemming her excitement, “I have no intentions on killing her.” Lenora looked crestfallen. I laughed. She was really out for blood. It was sad really.

 “I want to talk to her,” I told Lenora. “I want to hear what she has to say. After all,” I continued, “she was my rightful heir and I find no crime she has committed.”

 “She kills any vampire that opposes her,” Lenora accused. I shrugged, unimpressed with her argument.

 “As does any vampire with the power to do so,” I argued. “She has power and she is acting on it,” I continued. “That is not a crime, it is how we operate.” She seethed but said nothing. She knew I was right.

 “Perhaps if I speak with her she will consent to go along with the plans of the VFF,” I suggested. “Maybe we can come to an agreement if she is given a chance to tell why she opposes vampires going public with what they are.” Lenora looked doubtful and I smiled at her. She truly was a petulant woman.

 “Come,” I said, “let us head out. We have an old friend to meet up with tonight.”

 It didn’t take long to reach the complex. Our hotel was only blocks from it. We had chosen the hotel specifically because of its proximity.

 I avoided the public entrance which was guarded. That one was for those who had nothing to hide. I wanted to surprise Muireen. She had always loved surprises.

 I took hold of Lenora and levitated over the gate where a stand of trees offered cover from prying eyes. Lenora had not gained power enough over the years to do so herself.

 Unknown to me, the property was spelled and a silent alarm had triggered when we landed on the other side. Using trees for cover and our speed, we quickly made our way to Muireen’s private quarters.

 I had watched her enough over the last week to have learned her schedule. She would not be heading to the club for a few more hours. She would have just finished feeding and more lascivious acts with the young vampire that so often accompanied her.

 The vampire was attractive and well built, I could not deny, but weak. I had been surprised that Muireen would take one with so little power to her bed. Perhaps she had no desire for challenge. The first time I had seen them together I had the overwhelming desire to disembowel him. I had stifled the urge and admonished myself for jealous thoughts for a woman I had long ago chosen to let loose.

 A sliding door was open to her bedroom. Perhaps she had wanted some fresh air. For one who was so feared by vampires, she was careless. We slid in unhindered.

 The bedroom was decidedly feminine. Expensive perfume fragranced the air and soft candles burned in the dimmed light. The bed was enormous and at the moment it was disheveled as if someone had recently rolled out of it. Temper flared within me. Where was Muireen?

 I headed to the bathroom door which was closed, Lenora close behind me. She had been nagging me for the last week to pay Muireen a visit and now that we were here she was cowering behind me like a scared child.

 I turned the bathroom door handle silently, slowly pushing the door open. A small noise from the other side of the room caught my attention and I turned.

 “Looking for me?” Muireen asked, stepping from out of the shadows.

Chapter 34

California

Andrias

 “You look as though you’ve seen a ghost” she laughed. Chills ran down my spine. I had forgotten he sound of that laugh. She was stunning, as always she had been. She wore no more than a thin slip of a dress that hugged her curves beautifully. But I would not be distracted by her beauty. I had turned easily away from hundreds of beauties in the past.

 “Well, Andrias,” Muireen said, “I was expecting you but I must say you have surprised me with bringing this one with you.” Muireen had first seemed unbothered by my appearance but now that she noticed Lenora she was obviously miffed. It seemed Lenora’s dislike for Muireen was well matched by Muireen’s dislike of Lenora. The two women eyed each other venomously.

 “Your taste in women has obviously plummeted since we parted,” Muireen continued. Oooh, she was jealous, I thought. That was interesting.

 “Go to hell,” Lenora spat, faking bravado I could tell wasn’t genuine. Muireen laughed again.

 “Did you find the upgrades to our home in Erris Head to your liking?” Muireen asked, ignoring Lenora. She was taunting me but I wouldn’t let her win. She was baiting me. She wanted to find out my intentions. She had grown very smart.

 “Don’t you mean my home,” I corrected. “That house was bought long after you and I had parted,” I pointed out. She shrugged.

 “Yes, but that matters not. Today’s laws consider all property acquired by a spouse to be jointly owned regardless of whose name is on the deed,” she explained. “And oh,” she added, “it actually is my name on the deed now.” I laughed despite myself. She was having fun. If I had thought I would find joy or remorse from her I was wrong.

 “Yes,” I agreed, “you have done much with my wealth and yours” I conceded.

 “Well someone was going to get what belonged to you when you went to ground. Why shouldn’t it be me?” she asked. “I am your wife even though you seemed to have disregarded that long ago,” she accused.

 “My Wife?” I exclaimed. “Please do not pretend that you hold such value on marriage my dear. You chose not to find me all those years and you chose to let me rot in the ground for many more!” I was seething now. I fought to control myself.

 “Furthermore,” I continued, finding my calm, “you are hardly a faithful wife. I’ve seen your lover, quite handsome,” I smirked. She smiled viscously at me.

 “My lover is better than this filthy whore you’ve taken up with” she spat. Lenora lunged for Muireen but I held her back. Muireen hadn’t even flinched.

 “Did you tell him?” Muireen asked Lenora. “Did you tell him that you too bid to possess his belongings?” I looked at Lenora in question. What was Muireen talking about?

 “You didn’t, did you?” Muireen accused. Muireen turned towards me. “After you went to your death sleep many were eager for a piece of the wealth you created. I laid claim to it as your lawful wife but others such as Lenora claimed right to it too,” she told me.

 “What ground would she have to claim what was mine?” I asked.

 “Well, she was your lover for many years” Muireen said. “You were with her both before and after me,” she accused. “No worries, she hurried on, “in the end the Movement sided with me.”

 I frowned. Obviously Muireen knew that I had taken Lenora as my lover at one time but that had never been while we were together. Why would she think that?

 “Muireen,” I said softly, “no matter what has happened between us, I want you to know that never was I unfaithful to you.” I was hurt that she would even think such a thing. I had loved her back then. Muireen looked at me coldly.

 “Liar,” she accused. Her calm exterior was crumbling and I could see her fighting back her tears. I watched her turn the pain to anger.

 “Lenora told me when she captured me that the two of you had been together for months.”

 “What are you talking about?” I asked. I looked to Lenora. She looked anxious. What was going on?

 “When I disappeared,” Muireen screamed. “Lenora was the one who told me you were in danger! She lured me to the warehouse and then knocked me out!” Muireen began stalking towards Lenora. Lenora backed up until the wall met her back and she could not get away. I was too surprised by Muireen’s story to act.

 “She kept me captive, stealing my tears and then she gave me over to the witch hunters!” she ranted. “But now, oh now,” Muireen continued laughing; “now I’m at no one’s mercy. You, Lenora, are at mine.” Muireen was now inches from Lenora’s face, her hands on either side of Lenora’s head. The wind raged around us. Muireen was pissed.

 Defiantly Lenora met Muireen’s eyes. “If you touch me you will answer to the council,” Lenora said. Muireen laughed and laughed but it was not musical, it was maniacal. Suddenly she stopped. As I stood frozen by shock Muireen thrust her hand into Lenora’s chest. She pulled out her hand, bringing Lenora’s heart with her. She squeezed the organ between her hands, crushing it as Lenora slid lifeless to the ground.

 “I’ll take my chances.” Muireen said, dropping the heart and wiping her hands frantically on her dress. I grabbed a towel from the bathroom and wetted it. I handed it to Muireen. She took it gratefully.

 “You have quite a temper” I tried joking. She said nothing.

 “Muireen,” I said taking her gently by the shoulders. “I never knew any of what happened. If I had known all she had done, I would have killed her myself long ago.” Muireen seemed to soften for a moment but them her fence went up once more. She had built an ivory tower of protection around her. It was sad and yet I couldn’t feel too sorry for a woman who could so ruthlessly rip someone’s heart out. Muireen was a complicated woman.

 “I fear Lenora was right about one thing,” I continued, letting my hands fall from her shoulders. “The VFF is going to want an answer for what happened to Lenora.” She nodded wearily.

 The door opened suddenly and the vampire I had seen with Muireen on many occasions entered hurriedly. “Muireen” he cried out. “Are you alright?” Anger that he should concern himself with her boiled inside. She was with me, her husband. Why wouldn’t she be alright? A deep growl resonated within me.

 “I smelled blood” he went on unaware of the danger he was in.

 “It’s not mine” Muireen reassured him. He ran to her and embraced her, ignoring me completely.

 He felt he had a right to hold her. Could he really believe he could protect her? I watched him with his arms around her. She smoothed his hair, soothing him. The growl within me deepened. Muireen sensed the threat a moment too late. The vampire’s head rolled across the floor and blood splattered across Muireen’s face. She looked appalled.

 “Why did you do that?” she demanded. I shrugged nonchalantly. I had no explanation and I didn’t feel a need to explain myself to her.

 “I guess we’re even now” I said calmly. She looked surprised. “You killed a lover of mine and now I’ve killed one of yours.” I turned to get another towel from the bathroom leaving her to stare after me open-mouthed. Her bedroom was starting to look like a battlefield and we hadn’t even gotten to the hard questions yet. She still needed to answer for Zekias.

Chapter 35

California

Andrias

 Muireen insisted on washing up before we continued our discussion. She showered and changed. This time she put on a smart pantsuit. It seemed if she had been trying to seduce me before, she was done. We moved to a sitting room nearby while a couple of werewolves cleaned Muireen’s bedroom. She flung herself huffily into a chair. I sat opposite her.

 “I liked him” she sulked. I shrugged.

 “You don’t seem that upset,” I replied.

 “I didn’t say I loved him,” she retorted, “but I did care about him.” Was she telling this to me or herself?

 “You’ll get over it,” I told her. “We have other matters to discuss.”

 “Of course you don’t care,” she accused. “It’s not your problem where I feed.” She wasn’t going to let this drop. She was pouty. She must get her way a thousand times a day. The thought angered me. She was a petulant child.

 “I want to know what happened to Zekias” I said. She looked sharply to me.

 “I won’t talk about him with you” she seethed.

 “Yes,” you will” I demanded. “I want to know what happened to my child!”

 “If you were so worried about your child why didn’t you come to our aid when he called for you?” she demanded. I fought for control. She was blaming me?

 “He wouldn’t have needed aid if you hadn’t brought trouble to his doorstep” I accused. We were both on the edges of our seats now. Our power mingled, creating a wild scent about the room. We were both reaching dangerous levels.

 “Where else was I to go?” she asked. “You refused to see me in Ireland. I needed help.” I had touched a nerve. Perhaps she blamed herself.

 “What trouble did you bring?” I growled. She looked at me contemptuously. I wasn’t backing down. I had a right to know. “What trouble?” I repeated.

 “You want someone to blame?” she screamed. “Go look in the mirror! That’s the man to blame!” She rose from her chair angrily and I followed suit. I grabbed her by her shoulders willing to shake the answers out of her if necessary. Her power lashed out at me but I refused to let go. She seemed unwilling to hurt me and I used this to my advantage.

 “You want to know?” she railed. “The trouble was yours! It was Madras! He was after me because he couldn’t have you!” she spat. I dropped her shoulders and stepped back as if I had been slapped.

 Madras? I hadn’t thought of him for centuries. I tried to forget it was he who made me. Muireen slumped back into her chair. I stumbled back to mine. She was crying now and trying to hide it but the soft sounds of falling diamonds could not be hid from my ears.

 Madras had killed Zekias? I was horrified. I remembered I had smelled a familiar scent of vampire the night I had discovered Zekias dead but I hadn’t been able to place it. Now I knew without doubt that Muireen spoke the truth. I felt sick.

 A vampire and three werewolves burst through the door. Obviously the clean-up crew had heard us arguing and sent for reinforcements. She had a loyal following, I would give her that.

 “It’s all right” she assured them. “A simple disagreement is all,” she added. “You can go back to what you were doing.” They didn’t move. They continued to look from me to Muireen. Obviously they weren’t reassured.

 “Mrs. Colburn?” one said tentatively. At least this one seemed to know she was a married woman, I thought. Maybe I’d let him live. The vampire whispered to Muireen but of course I could hear every word. She seemed annoyed with him.

 “He’s very powerful” he told Muireen.

 “Yes, I know that Sam” she said.

 “I don’t feel good about leaving you alone with him” he told her. I chuckled. What was he going to do if he stayed? It’s not like he had a chance in hell of stopping me from doing anything. He may be loyal but he was also stupid. Maybe I wouldn’t let him live. Muireen took a calming breath and turned to me.

 “Mr. Colburn,” she began, smiling sweetly at me, “do you promise not to try and kill your wife if I sent these gentlemen away?” Her guard blanched. They hadn’t known who I was. I smiled back at her.

 “I promise not to try to kill you,” I began, “at least not without giving you some warning first” I promised. She made a noise between a snort and a grunt.

 “You see there,” she said looking to him again, “he’s promised not to kill me without warning. That will give me a fighting chance since we’re pretty evenly matched,” she said. “It’s probably the most we could ask for from a three hundred plus year vampire” she said mockingly.

 I couldn’t contain my laughter. Muireen had become quite the smart ass. The men left hesitantly with her waving them away like naughty puppies. She breathed a sigh of exasperation when they’d gone. I fell back into thought about Madras. She seemed content to sit in silence and I had not yet gathered my thoughts enough to speak.

 “How did he find you?” I finally managed.

 “He found me long before Zekias” she told me.

 “He caught me when I tried to return to find you after I’d healed from the burns” she explained.

 She went on to tell me the horrendous story of what she had gone through with Madras and then Torrance. Shame filled me. It had all been my fault. She had been right.

 Madras had been after her because of me. If ever I had thought he would come after me or those I loved, I would have found a way to kill him long ago. I finally gathered the nerve to ask her.

 “What happened to Madras?”

 “He fled that night when he saw he was losing our battle,” she told me. Zekias was already dead and Celeste had fled. I pursued him to the Scandinavian Mountains. He had almost reached home and reinforcements when I caught up with him,” she said.

 “What happened?” I asked. “You couldn’t have…”

 “Killed him?” she asked. “I thought I had for quite a while,” she admitted. “We fought savagely. I’d kept a stake on me since I had escaped Torrance,” she said. “I hadn’t planned on getting close enough to Madras to use it but when opportunity arose, I took my shot”.

 “Muireen,” I began, “you have gained great power but there is no way you could have overpowered Madras. You were right in telling your guards that our power is evenly matched and knowing this I am confused how you could have beat him in your battle”. She smiled sardonically at me.

 “One of the vampires killed at Zekias’s house must have been his child” she said. “He was greatly weakened by the deaths of the other vampires” She confessed. “I don’t know if one or all were his children but he fled when they began to fall. By the time we reached his homeland his power had ebbed considerably. That is how I was able to drive the stake through his heart,” she confessed.

 I sat thinking and nodding my head. I wondered if the weakness Madras had experienced from losing a child was what had happened to me after Zekias. Perhaps the bond was more than just emotion. Perhaps there was a physical connection as well.

 “You said you thought you killed him” I prompted. She nodded.

 “I staked him through his heart and I know I didn’t miss,” she began. “I left him there for the dawn to burn but someone must have saved him from the rays.”

 “His followers were loyal in an almost cult fashion” I told her remembering my short time spent with them. “He allowed them to live and act in brutal fashion. Most vampires would never accept that type of behavior from a child and yet he endorsed it. You said you were close to his home?”

 “Yes” we were within miles.”

 “It must have been someone at home who found him and rescued him,” I concluded. Muireen nodded again. She seemed tired and lost in thought.

 “Muireen,” I said, getting her attention, “if you ever get another shot at Madras, don’t stop at the heart.” I suggested. She gave me a half smile.

 “If I ever get another shot at Madras I will rip off his head, tear out his black heart and burn him to ashes,” she assured me. Her tone left no doubt that she was not joking. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know and yet I knew I must ask my next question.

 “How did you find out he was still alive?”

 “Didn’t you know Andrias,” she asked innocently. “I thought your little side-kick Lenora would have told you. Madras is heading up Vampires For Freedom.”

 “That’s impossible,” I said. “He’s a lunatic. He’s more likely to be the poster child for why vampires shouldn’t assimilate that for why they should!” She laughed but there was no joy in it.

 “Why do you think I oppose them?” she asked. “Why do you think I’ve built myself a fortress here? He wants my blood after what happened before.” She shook her head.

 “I don’t know what he is up to but I know him too well to believe he wants to live happily among humanity,” she said. “I’ve often wondered if he didn’t simply see assimilation as step one of his evil plan. I actually think he might believe that step two can be the complete subjugation of humans to the vampire race.”

 I looked at her thoughtfully. She may be right. That definitely sounded more like the Madras I knew than some softie who just wants all species to co-exist happily together. Madras needs to be destroyed once and for all.

 “Well, Mrs. Colburn,” I began, “you’re going to need to ready me a room,” I told her. Her face twisted in confusion. “I’m staying” I told her flatly letting her know there was no choice in the matter.

 “Madras will be coming for you and if he knows we’re together, he’ll be coming fast,” I said. “Already I’ve heard Lenora’s phone ringing and mine as well. Those calls can only go unanswered for so long. It will not take them long to grow suspicious if they are not already. They knew we were coming to see you tonight.” She leaned forward in her chair, hands clenched to the arms.

 “You told the VFF that you were coming to see me tonight?” she asked through clenched teeth. I nodded slowly seeing now how foolish it had been. I could not blame myself though. How was I to know Madras was running the VFF? I had assumed it was run by those like the Movement had been. Muireen closed her eyes and slumped back.

 “Yes Andrias,” she said, “they will be coming soon. “It is late tonight. We will have to come up with a plan tomorrow.”

 She rose and asked me to follow her. She led me to a room down the hall. It was not fancy but it was fitted with black out automatic blinds and would do. I offered to feed her but she declined. She turned to leave. I watched the soft swish of her hips as she left and a thought popped into my mind.

 “Muireen,” I said. She turned and looked at me from the doorway.

 “If you were so terrified of Madras, why didn’t you just return to the sea? He wouldn’t have been able to find you there,” I said. A sad smile spread across her face and then vanished.

 “I didn’t return to the sea because I cannot Andrias. I am no longer only a Mermaid” she confessed. “I am something more now. It was never meant to be for a Mermaid to drink the blood of vampires and now I am afraid there is no turning back. I have changed.” She finished. She turned and left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Chapter 36

California

Andrias

 I woke early the following night. We had no time to loose in formulating a plan. Muireen gathered her key personnel. They were supposed to be her strongest but I was very disappointed. None were of the age and power we would need to defeat Madras and his army. Most were werewolves and while they were good fighters, not all our combat would be hand to hand. Much of the battle would be in the mind and will of the fighters. The few vampires she did employ seemed to be there for decoration more than to be used as a fighting force. I voiced my concerns to her.

 “What did you expect?” she asked. “Few vampires of real power would agree to a Mermaid ruling over them.” She gave me a look that insinuated I was stupid. It was a look I did not appreciate. “You know how vampires are,” she continued. “They don’t like to be run by anyone. They want autonomy to do what they want. They certainly don’t appreciate the fact that I need their blood to survive.” She had a good point though I thought she could have made it without being so testy.

 “Why in the world is the VFF so afraid of you then?” I asked. “You are powerful certainly but they have greater numbers by far” I pointed out. She looked uncomfortable. At first I thought she may not answer.

 “I may make them think I have more powerful vampires on staff than I really do,” she confessed.

 “How do you do that?” I asked.

 “I have a witch,” she pointed to a small woman. “Her name is Sandra and she is very good. The perimeter of the property is spelled to give off very powerful vibrations.”

 I recalled how I too had believed that I might run into more obstacles than I had when entering her compound. Whatever the spell, it was ingenious. It had fooled me though I was reluctant to admit it. I looked at Muireen with new respect. She was very cunning and clever. I would do well to remember that.

 Despite how well Muireen had managed to deceive the vampire population at large thus far, imaginary vampires would not be able to stand against Madras. We were in trouble.

 “We need to begin recruiting at once” I decided.

 “Who is going to want to go up against Madras for us?” she asked.

 “That’s just it,” I told Muireen. “We don’t ask them to help us, we ask them to join in opposing Madras. We bring to light his instability and we sell them on the idea that Madras will ruin their chances of assimilation in the end.” Muireen seemed to like my idea.

 “So we get them to want to defeat him for themselves, not us?” she asked. I nodded.

 “That might work” she admitted. “I am still doubtful that vampires would join on my side. They know that I drink vampire blood and they detest being on the opposite end of the food chain.”

 “But they will join on mine” I told her. “Plus, we might be able to persuade them you are not a threat to them if you tone it down a bit.”

 “Tone it down how?” she asked looking insulted.

 “Well for one, you have set yourself up as queen here” I pointed out.

 “It is necessary that I have a safe place to live and food to eat” she argued. I winced.

 “Maybe you could start by not referring to vampires as being food” I suggested. She shrugged. An idea came to me.

 “Muireen,” I said, “we are married. While I dispute the legality of it after all these years…we could use that. We can show a united front now that I have returned. If I am vouching for you then they will at least feel that someone is in control of you.”

 She gave me the death look. This woman was not about to let anyone have control over her. I didn’t know if it infuriated me or made me want her. I had better choose infuriation. She was far more dangerous than I had remembered.

 “Of course it would be just for show,” I consoled. She was warming to the idea, I could tell.

 “There would be conditions though” I warned her. “I will not be made to look a fool. You will take no more lovers and you will feed only upon me as is fitting for a husband to provide for his wife.”

 She looked mutinous. She had not liked my suggestion. For our plan to work she would need to get over it. I could admit to myself that I was mildly enjoying her discomfort over the thought of having to feed from me again. What I would not admit was the joy I felt that she would no longer be taking lovers. She seemed to have thought of something and was now looking at me in a most gloating fashion.

 “That goes for you too then” she retorted. “You may not take any lovers and you have to feed only upon me.”

 She looked at me defiantly as if she dared me to argue. Just her look made me want to argue but I thought better of it. We would seem the more united and loving couple if we were monogamous in every way. I nodded. She seemed surprised that I had accepted her terms. Perhaps she had hoped I would not. Her shock made me feel better about having done so.

 “We need to begin tonight” I told her. “Let me go out alone at first and spread the word amongst my kind. Give them time to think things over before meeting the vampire of vampires.” I suggested.

 She opened her mouth as if to argue and but then shut it again. She nodded.

 “Now, before I go,” I said, catching her into my arms, “I believe my wife needs to feed.”

 At first I thought she might refuse. She looked murderous for a moment. Then seeming to come to a decision, she wrapped her arms around me, and without further discussion, she bit into my neck. I have no doubt that she poured every inch of power to make pleasure into that bite. I was swept away in ecstasy.

Chapter 37

California

Andrias

 I headed out into the night still reeling from Muireen’s bite. I was unfamiliar with the city but headed towards the highest density of light. No matter what city one was in, the areas brightest lit seemed to be where the largest populations of humans gathered. Where there was a large number of humans gathered, there vampires would be also.

 It didn’t take me long to find a small group standing openly together on a street corner. They were young and female. They were scantily clad and were no doubt employed in the world’s oldest profession. I actually felt sorry for their johns. No doubt the men were in for far more than they paid for.

 They made as if they would flee as I approached. I called to them to stop not relying solely on the hopes that I could persuade them but instead using my power to command them. They froze where they were. Certainly I hadn’t won points with them for this but I was in no mood to chase.

 “I apologize,” I began, speaking to them, “I only want some information. I mean you no harm,” I assured them, releasing them from my control. They looked relieved except one. She looked as though she might try to tear my throat out. I hoped she wouldn’t try. I had no desire to end them.

 “I would like to know who the governor or leaders are in the area. I have important news and I am not familiar with the area,” I told them. All remained silent. One squirmed as if she wanted to speak but did not. She was a tall skinny blonde. I focused my attention on her.

 “Please,” I implored, “there is trouble coming to your fair town and I must get the warning out.” The blonde opened her mouth to speak and a small brunette next her elbowed her roughly. She pushed the brunette away and stepped forward.

 “There are three governors over the city because L.A. is so large” she told me. “In this part of town Simone is in charge but she works closely with the other two: Charles and Anastas.”

 “Anastas?” I asked. “The Russian vampire? Very large, about my age?” She nodded. I had to make a decision quickly. Anastas and I had always gotten along and he was level headed. He hadn’t seemed to have much allegiance to Lenora. He certainly hadn’t offered to defend her.

 “Can you tell me where I might find them?” I asked. “I know Anastas so perhaps I could see him first and he could call the others if so desired” I suggested. The tall blonde nodded. The brunette hissed at her. She turned to the brunette.

 “It’s on my shoulders” she assured them. “You stay here. I’ll catch up with you later.”

 “I can take you to Anastas” she told me. “He’s in a small club down the street.” I voiced my appreciation and followed her down the street several blocks. She introduced herself as Kelly. Kelly was a very pretty woman and I couldn’t help hoping her profession was nothing more than a feeding ruse. It would be tragic if a vampire of her strength was actually pedaling her body for money. The idea was absurd to me.

 I let Kelly lead me through a small smoky building. The lights were very dim but did not hide from my eyes what was going on within. It was another feeding club. She led me up a short flight of stairs. There were guards posted outside the doors at the top of the stairs. They did not seem happy to see her and even less happy to see me. She spoke to them quickly telling them I was an old friend of Anastas’s.

 “Please let him know that Andrias Colburn is here to see him” I told them for myself. A vampire standing nearby who had been listening to our exchange hurried over.

 “It’s okay” he said speaking to the guards. “He was hoping Mr. Colburn would stop by,” he assured them. He turned to me.

 “I’m Nathaniel,” he told me. “Anastas said you might stop by. He’s been wanting to see you.” I nodded. I followed him through the doors. I sensed no immediate threat from Nathaniel. I thanked Kelly and she scurried off out of the club.

 The room we entered was spacious and tastefully decorated. Anastas was reclining in a chair by the window. He rose, a smile spreading across his face as we entered.

 “Andrias,” he said warmly. “I am glad to see you and in one piece” he told me. “We have been worried about you. What is the news?” I looked to Nathaniel who was still in the room with us. Seeming to notice my reluctance to speak in front of him, Anastas tried to assure me.

 “Nathaniel is my child” he told me. “He is loyal and trustworthy. All that you have to say to me is safe to say to him as well.” He gestured for me to sit opposite him and I did so. He offered me whiskey which I took gratefully. He sat watching me curiously.

 “All is not as you might think it is” I began. His eyebrows rose slightly. Not wanting to get ahead of myself I changed course.

 “The leader of the VFF, Madras, do you know him?” I asked.

 “I have not met him in person,” he confessed.

 “I have,” I told him, “though it has been years since I have seen him.” I had Anastas’s attention. “He is my maker.” Anastas’s face went blank. He was trying to mask his surprise but I saw it despite the façade.

 “That is very interesting Andrias,” he said smoothly. “I did not know that. I would venture to guess that none know it.”

 “Well let me tell you the entire story,” I offered. “I am sure it is one he has never told as well.”

 I went on to tell him the entire story. I told him how I was turned and the states of affairs at Madras’s home back then. I told him how I had fled. I told him how Muireen had been captured and kept like a prize. I told him how Madras had killed my child and how Muireen had thought she had killed him. It wasn’t difficult for him to put the rest of the pieces of the puzzle together for himself. Madras was out for revenge.

 Anastas sat quietly for a few moments after I had finished, tapping his glass on the edge of his desk.

 “That was a very informative story” he said slowly. “I see now why you have come. It is clear that Madras has a vendetta against you and Muireen but it does not change the fact that the mermaid is dangerous to us.”

 “You may change your mind about that as well before the night is through,” I said. “At least, I hope you will. She is very powerful and she can be emotional and rash,” I admitted, “but she is not truly dangerous to us.”

 I went on to explain how Muireen came to drink vampire blood and that it was no longer a choice for her but a need. I argued that the fortress she built was not an attempt to rule over them but an attempt to protect herself from Madras. I did not tell him about Muireen’s witch. I still wasn’t sure where Anastas would stand in the end.

 “If she was so afraid of Madras,” he said, “why did she not wake you from your sleep?” It was a question that still plagued me. I didn’t know how to answer. Anastas laughed heartily.

 “She is still mad at you, no?” he asked. “She blames you for all that has happened.” He continued to laugh. “A woman’s wrath is a dreadful thing,” he continued, “especially when one holds the power she does. Ah, your mermaid…does she still seem the treasure?”

 I was beginning to get angry but I stifled it. It would be foolish to start a fight with Anastas. What bothered most was that he was right. I had long come to the conclusion that it had been a foolish decision to seek Muireen out the way I did and bring her to land. There was nothing I could do about it now however. It was many years past the age of correcting.

 “I am sorry old fiend” he said suddenly. “I do not mean to laugh at you. It is only so ironic how we can crave something so much that ends up being bad for us, no? Like with humans,” he suggested,” love the chocolate and fast foods but ayh, they weigh in on the hips, no?” He laughed again. I couldn’t help but smile at the comparison between Muireen and junk food. It was a very good one. Anastas seemed to sober suddenly.

 “Why would Madras want to assimilate do you suppose?” I gave him our theory.

 “That would be bad” he agreed. “Well, old friend, what do you suggest?” he asked.

 I gave Anastas my plan to lure Madras to Muireen’s and defeat him. I stressed that the plans to assimilate need not end simply because Madras meets his second death. New leaders who truly want assimilation could be set in place. He considered all I said for a while.

 “I will have to speak to the others” he told me rising from his chair. Taking the hint that our meeting was over, I rose too. I gave him my number and he walked me to the door.

 “Where is Lenora anyways?” he asked as I left.

 “Dead” I said simply. He gestured to me. I shook my head.

 “No,” I said regretfully, “Muireen killed her. Old feud,” I added not wanting him to believe Muireen was a loose cannon. “Lenora is the one who kidnapped her from our home years ago” I told him. Anastas began laughing again.

 “Women,” he said as I left, “they hold a grudge, don’t they?” I nodded and headed out into the night.

Chapter 38

California

Andrias

 I paced Muireen’s sitting room. Anastas had promised to call tonight and the night was already getting late. I began to worry that I had made a mistake in going to him. If he didn’t agree to help us…if he stood in opposition…

 Muireen had left the room hours ago. She said she couldn’t bear to watch me destroy her beautiful rug with my endless pacing. She had tried to sound unconcerned but I knew she was afraid. If we failed to get support here we would be forced to flee. It was a fact I hadn’t been able to bring myself to tell Muireen yet. I knew she would resist.

 My cell phone rang. I jumped despite myself before grabbing it off the desk where it had been sitting. It was Anastas. I answered hurriedly.

 “Andrias,” he greeted. “The other governors and I would like to meet with you and Muireen” he told me.

 “Where?” I asked.

 “Somewhere neutral,” he suggested. “We could meet at one of the beaches. They are open and public and yet offer some privacy,” he said.

 I jotted down the name of the beach and time of our meeting. We were told to come alone. It didn’t matter. There was no one we could bring with us that could fight.

 I hung up with him and hurried out to find Muireen. I almost knocked her down in my haste. It seems she was heading to find me.

 I told her about the meeting. She seemed uncertain but when faced with the reality that we had few options, she had acquiesced. She had wanted time to change her clothes but I had refused her it. We were going to meet with vampires who would either agree to help us or who were planning to ambush us. Either way, our clothing would play little part in their decision as to which it would be.

 Anastas had given nothing away over the phone. I had not been able to discern which way the pendulum would swing. I went hopeful but ready to fight.

 Muireen led the way. She knew where the meeting point was. She had been content with their choice saying that it was as they said: private yet public. She also felt that being so near the ocean gave her great advantage should things turn sour. Outside Muireen was able to call upon the elements and the ocean itself if need be for aid.

 It mattered not to me where I fought if fight I must but I was comforted to know that Muireen could flee to the ocean if necessary. She had not been keen on this suggestion when I had made it to her. She would rather stay and fight but I had convinced her it was far better to flee for a moment if that meant she would live to fight another day. After all, it was not me that they wished to destroy.

 Muireen halted some yards before the beach. Using my power I felt for the vampires. They were shielding but they could not hide themselves from me. They were gathered by some low shrubs at the edge of the beach. I nodded and pointed them out to Muireen.

 I led the way towards them, Muireen several paces behind me. She was grumbling something about not needing protection. I could beg to differ with her on that point. She had earlier referred to me as dinner. I would have to break her of the habit of talking about my kind as food. That attitude was what made this meeting so perilous.

 I stopped several yards away, bowing low in respect. I pulled at Muireen, forcing her to do the same. They bowed in return. Anastas stepped forward.

 “Andrias,” he said, “and I presume this to be the formidable Muireen?” I nodded, keeping her slightly behind me.

 “This is Simone and Charles,” he said pointing in turn to them. “Together we run the L.A. area.”

 “Thank you for meeting with us” I said. “We appreciate you considering our matter.”

 “And what of Muireen,” Simone asked, “does she appreciate us as much?” I turned to Muireen, allowing her to answer for herself as they obviously wished. A feeling of dread passed through me of what she would say.

 “Yes,” she answered confidently, “I appreciate you hearing my side of the story and you consideration to help us. Andrias had thought he might be better received than me or I would have come to you,” she said. “I suppose it has been folly on my part to not reach out to the vampire community for assistance before now.”

 “Why did you not tell us your plight before?” Charles asked her.

 “Truthfully,” she began, “I did not think you would care. Why should any of you wish to help a mermaid?”

 “You would be right under normal circumstances” said Anastas. “However, since the vampire you are quarreling with happens to be the head of the VFF the matter is connected with us as well.”

 “We have decided that it would be folly on our part to let Madras remain in control of our movement” Simone said. “We did some investigation of him after the story Andrias told Anastas. It seems he has quite a reputation in his homeland and none of it good.”

 “We find it unlikely that a vampire who has lived so many years treating humans as animals could change his mind so easily and now desire peace and co-existence” Charles added.

 “We believe,” stated Anastas, “that he is using the VFF to accomplish more sinister plans as you have suggested Andrias.”

 Joy filled me. They were on our side. We would defeat Madras and destroy him. Anastas sensed my elation.

 “Our decision to work at removing Madras from control does not mean we intend to fight on your behalf,” Anastas cautioned. My spirits fell.

 “We have our positions and our people to think about,” he continued. “The VFF is very powerful and widespread. Madras heads up only the U.S. faction. There are others like him who are very powerful and might seek vengeance for his death. We have decided not to directly align ourselves with you.”

 Typical vampire bullshit. They were more interested in saving their own butts and their cushy positions. I glanced at Muireen. I could almost hear her thoughts. I had no doubt she was about to say something we would both regret.

 “Fine,” said Muireen, “don’t help us. Let us do the dirty work for you.” Anastas laughed.

 “Your reputation is justified,” Simone said. “We heard you were testy and quick-tempered. It seems to be true. Do not be so sure of yourself as to pick fights you may not be able to handle.”

 Muireen was on the verge of what would be another unwise retort when Anastas spoke before her.

 “We did not say we would not help,” he told her. “We mean only that we will not do so openly. We will speak to the VFF members we trust and tell them what we’ve learned. We will try to discredit Madras from within hoping that his support will dwindle. We will convince the VFF that Madras cannot be trusted.”

 Muireen did not seem appreciative of the offer. No doubt, she, as I, was thinking that political sabotage would do little to help us when Madras showed up on her front door.

 “We will send some of our people to help you” Charles assured us. “We will plant them into your club, Dark Desires, as workers but they will not live on your grounds.”

 “Why not?” Muireen asked. Charles smiled at her but it was not a nice smile.

 “We will not allow our people to feed you nor will we allow others to think they are.”

 “You have nothing to worry about there” I assured them. “Muireen and I have been reunited and I will feed my wife from now on.”

 Anastas laughed uncontrollably this time. His constant laughter at us was beginning to wear on me. I didn’t know how much longer my temper would hold.

 “She will feed from no one but me” I said again. Muireen nodded in agreement.

 “We have an agreement” she confessed. “We will feed each other. We have the same goals and we trust each other.” I didn’t quite manage to hide my frown. We trusted each other? I wouldn’t go that far and yet she seemed to believe it. Perhaps she was more worthy of my trust than I had thought. I wasn’t buying it wholesale, however. She had let me molder in the ground for over a hundred years.

 Thankfully Anastas had stopped laughing. He seemed to consider Muireen’s words.

 “She means what she says” Anastas said. “Does she not?” he asked looking to Charles.

 Charles looked so intensely into Muireen’s eyes that it seemed he saw straight to her soul. I wondered if perhaps he did. I had heard of vampires having various talents. Perhaps Charles had been chosen for his position based on an extra ability. He was not that powerful otherwise. However, the ability to be able to see other’s motives would be very valuable.

 Anastas lacked exceptional power as well, as did Simone. Why had they been chosen for their positions? Perhaps Anastas’ gift was that he could tell when someone was telling the truth or not. He had demonstrated an almost uncanny ability to know when I was being less than honest. Why then had Simone been chosen? I looked at the fierce woman before me. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know why she had been chosen.

 “She means what she says” Charles said. “They have an agreement. She will feed only from him and him from her.” Muireen looked astonished.

 “Keep it that way” Simone suggested. She seemed thoughtful. “If you are truly united and survive Madras we may be able to offer you a position. We are always in need of officers.”

 I wasn’t sure I appreciated her obvious doubt that we would survive Madras. I didn’t know how to respond to her possible future offer. Since rising from the dead I hadn’t given much thought as to do with my eternity. My main focus had been on revenging Zekias’s death. Since discovering Madras was the heart of all sorrow that had befell me, I had given myself over to thoughts of his destruction and none else.

 “Let’s not get the cart before the horse,” Anastas suggested. “Let us help make sure they survive first and that Madras is destroyed.” I was definitely on board with that suggestion.

Chapter 39

California

Andrias

 The next month was eerily quiet. We had expected Madras to come kicking in our door but that hadn’t happened. We hadn’t heard a word from him. Anastas, Charles and Simone had kept their word. They had sent a dozen well trained vampires of admirable power to work at Dark Desires. They were now employed as bartenders, waiters and bouncers. One was even given a management position because of his vast business acumen. But no word from Madras.

 The sentries, as Muireen liked to call the local governors, had been silent as well. They refused to have any direct contact with us. The news we received from the people they had planted here was scarce. It was always the same. They are working on things. I found it impossible to relax.

 Muireen and I were not idle during this time, however. We used it to gather our own small army. She made alliances with several werewolf packs in the vicinity and offered large sums of money to them if they agreed to fight when necessary. They were more than willing to accept the generous offer. They had no qualms about killing vampires.

 Muireen had also used her witch to make contact with others like her. It seems that witches, unlike vampires, felt aiding a mermaid to be a gift. They saw them as truly magical creatures and had an affinity for Muireen’s plight which they believed was created because of vampires. They were not fond of vampires. This did not take me long to learn. One had not appreciated what she had perceived to be my harsh treatment of Muireen and had my tongue frozen to the roof of my mouth for several hours. It had taken much persuasion on Muireen’s part to convince me not to kill that one.

 All in all, our eclectic army was becoming quite formidable. We had emergency procedures in place in the event we were attacked. Of great importance was to clear the club of any non-supernatural entity at once. The last thing vampires needed was to be outed before we were ready to be revealed to humanity at large.

 A body guard had been assigned to Muireen. The lack of action on Madras’s part had me worried that perhaps he would attempt to capture her rather than destroy her. As with most things, Muireen had argued. She had lost. We couldn’t afford to be careless.

 Tonight I was reclining at Dark Desires. I was impressed with the club. It was modern and edgy while still retaining an air of sophistication. The clientele was mostly twenty-somethings of means. Most of them were supernatural but humans frequented the club as well.

 The music was upbeat and fast. At the moment the dance floor was packed with young women looking to let off some steam and their male counterparts hoping the women will let them help. I was enjoying the entertainment and a fine whiskey.

 Muireen came into view from across the room. She was walking briskly and waving away all who sought her company. She scanned the room and her eyes met mine. She made a beeline for me, pausing only once to tell something to Horace behind the bar.

 “It’s happening” she said breathlessly when she reached me. It took me a moment to realize what she was talking about. I leapt to my feet. Sophie, a local witch, joined us.

 “Have you begun the spell?” Muireen asked her.

 “Yes,” Sophie replied, “the humans should begin leaving right away.”

 “Good” Muireen answered. Travis, our night manager, approached.

 “Everyone is getting into position as we speak.” He told us. Muireen hurried off, fielding a dozen questions on her way. The club was emptying at a rapid pace.

 “Do we know how many are coming and how far off they are?” I asked. He nodded.

 “There are roughly thirty vampires and they are at the doors already.”

 “Is Madras with them?” I asked.

 “I don’t think so,” he told me. “I cannot sense any single vampire that would be of the strength he is.” He told me.

 “He could be shielding,” I suggested.

 “He could be,” Travis admitted. “If he is, he is the best shielder I’ve ever encountered. Usually the more powerful a vampire is, the more difficult it is for him or her to contain the power within.” I nodded. He was right. Could Madras be that good or hadn’t he come? I guess I would find out soon enough.

 “All right Travis,” I said. “You know what to do. Get in position.” He hurried off to his post.

 I went to join Muireen at the front doors. All other entries into the club were guarded. The ones that would be more difficult an entry point had been spelled to repel vampires. We expected to be able to force the majority of opposition through the front. We had chosen our battlefield and that gave us an advantage.

 Muireen and I stood opposite each other, a line of fighters alongside us. Muireen readied a sword and I drew mine from where it had been concealed upon me. This was it.

 I felt the storm of power seconds before the doors crashed open. Chaos ensued as vampires rushed in. We met them with equal ferocity. The battle had begun.

 Swords flashed like multi-colored gems in the dance floor lighting. The room was a blur of movement. Teeth, claws and blood speeding by on every side. I could not see how we were fairing partly due to the bedlam; partly because I was too busy trying to keep my head.

 It seemed like hours that we battled but gradually the onslaught lessened. In reality the entire fight had taken less than forty minutes. Bodies littered the floor and blood covered almost every surface. Travis’s estimate of thirty vampires had been conservative.

 Once we were sure that there were no more masses ready to attack, we began taking inventory of the wounded and dead. Several of our witches and werewolves had died in the battle and many more were wounded. We tended to the wounded. We dressed the wounds of the werewolves as best we could until their bodies could begin healing on their own. Werewolves, like vampires, healed quickly. On the witches we dripped vampire blood into their open wounds to artificially give them speedier healing.

 Overall, casualties had been low. We had survived and that was saying something. Madras had not shown. I didn’t know if I was relieved or angry I hadn’t the opportunity to kill him. One thing was for certain, this wasn’t over.

 I walked towards Muireen who was tending a young witch named Marie. I pulled another female, a werewolf over to relieve Muireen. We needed to talk. I gathered up Travis, Sheldon, and Horace to join Muireen and me in the back office. The three vampires were our officers in charge of all the others Anastas and Company had sent to us.

 “We need to discuss what to do next,” I told them once we were all seated.

 “What else is there to do?” Sheldon asked. “We were placed here to fight if you were attacked and we’ve done so. We have won! We have defeated them!”

 “No Sheldon,” Travis said. “Madras was not with them. Surely he sent his weakest this time. Next time it will be far worse.”

 “Yes,” Horace agreed, “Surely he didn’t expect those sent tonight to be able to defeat us.”

 “But he wouldn’t have known we would have help,” Muireen pointed out. “Maybe he thought he didn’t need more than he sent.”

 “No,” I said shaking my head. “He may not have known that we would have additional help but the spell your witch cast over the grounds would have made him think you already had powerful vampires in place. Perhaps he knew we would defeat those he sent”

 “You think he sent his weakest on purpose so we would defeat them?” Muireen asked. “Why?”

 “Maybe he wants us to let our guard down,” Horace suggested.

 “No,” I said, “I don’t think he expects us to be foolish enough to do that.”

 “Then he is wearing us down” said Travis. “He’s trying to weaken us, dwindle our numbers. Maybe he is hoping that if even one of you falls the other will be much easier to handle.”

 “Perhaps,” I said considering. “Either way, we can be assured that this will not be the last attack. We mustn’t let our guard down. We must be more vigilant now than ever. For tonight,” I said rising, “we have much clean-up to do. We can’t re-open the club with it looking like this.”

Chapter 40

California

Andrias

 Two nights passed without further incidence. We disposed of the dead, returning the bodies of the witches and werewolves to their friends for proper burial. We cleaned the club and we re-opened the following night claiming a mechanical issue being the cause of our unexpected closure. Business was back to usual. At least it was until I received a phone call just before dawn.

 I had been sitting in the back office of Dark Desires fuming over the anxiety Madras was creating within me when my cell phone rang. I did not recognize the number. I answered. A smooth male voice, possibly eastern European descent, spoke.

 “Andrias Colburn?” the voice asked.

 “Yes,” I answered, “who is this?”

 “I am Victor Kranuziak,” he replied. “I am the assistant to the head of the VFF, European division. The head, Mr. Maginski, has asked me to call you with some important information.”

 I was intrigued. The VFF was calling me but not the North American division. Did they know that just a few nights ago their head of the North American division had attacked me?

 “Go on” I prompted.

 “Mr. Maginski and the other heads of the VFF would like to make you aware that Madras Sivurnikev has been relieved of his duties as head of the North American Division. We are aware that the two of you have a dispute.” Dispute was putting it mildly but I chose not to correct him.

 “That dispute is between your two parties and not us, “he continued. We would like to warn you formally against behaviors that might interfere with our goals.”

 I sat there holding the phone stunned. My mind raced. The VFF had fired Madras. Our governors had been very busy it seemed. It wasn’t difficult for me to discern what he meant by “behaviors that might interfere with their goals.”

 “Let me clarify,” I began, “you are warning me about getting into a fight with Madras?”

 “The fight will occur,” he said, “we know this. Madras was furious when we released him and he is heading to you now. What we are warning against is having human witnesses or involvement in the fight.”

 “Mr. Kranuziak,” I implored, “I will not purposely engage Madras in a manner that draws human eyes but I cannot control what he does. If you were so worried about what he might do, why didn’t you take care of him yourself?”

 “It is not for the VFF to decide to end another vampire unless he or she has broken our laws. Madras has done nothing yet that would warrant disciplinary action.”

 The VFF seemed very formal. They must be just as bureaucratic as human government. This was ridiculous. The vampire on the other end of the phone with me didn’t have to come out and say it for me to know they were hoping I’d take care of their little problem myself. I was getting irritated when suddenly I realized they were giving me permission to end Madras.

 “Are you saying I have your permission to send him to his second death as long as no humans are involved?” I asked.

 “Madras is no longer a member of the VFF so he is no different than any other vampire you may have a quarrel with” he told me.

 “Thank you very much,” I told him. “I will do my best to make sure the fight is not public.”

 “Good Mr. Colburn” he said and hung up.

 I hurried off to find Muireen. If Madras was already on his way then we needed to get ready. There was less than an hour before dawn so there was little chance of a fight tonight. Even Madras could not brave the sun. It would be foolish to engage us at such a late hour when he and his men could be trapped without protection from the dawn.

 His men, I had forgotten to ask if anyone was coming with Madras. I assumed that if any did accompany him they would not be members of the VFF. The VFF was distancing themselves from him. They would not give him men to pursue his personal agenda.

 Who then would Madras bring with him? I couldn’t imagine him coming alone despite his enormous power. It is difficult to gather vampires to fight for one unless they share a cause. No other vampire that I was aware had aught against me or Muireen. That left only one possibility. The only vampires who might be willing to accompany Madras into battle would be those bound by loyalty. If he was bringing an army, it would be his own children.

 He was a prolific maker from what I had discovered. The short time I had stayed with him during my transition I had seen that. Dozens of vampires had lived at his home. Muireen had told me that when Madras had attacked Zekias’s home, it had been his own children who fought with him. We could use that against him.

Chapter 41

The Final Battle

Andrias

 The following night we were ready for battle. We had learned our weak spots during the first battle which I had come to think of as our trial run. This would be no trial. This would be for real and if we failed, we might all die. I was hoping it wouldn’t come to that. I was beginning to enjoy this modern age.

 We chose to close the club for the night. We didn’t want to take any chances on human involvement. I had the distinct feeling that the VFF would impose stiff penalties if their directives weren’t followed. I had no desire to find out what those might be. There are worse things than death in life, especially for a vampire with the ability to heal rapidly.

 Hours had already gone by and all was quiet. There had been no word from Madras. Our scouts had sensed nothing out of the usual around the complex. We had even sent a couple into the surrounding city to see if the presence of a strong vampire could be sensed. All was peaceful there as well.

 The quiet is what bothered me. It seemed complete as if time was on a precipice. I feared the unnatural quiet was the calm before the storm. Our scouts had reported that normal vampire activity on the streets was limited as well. Perhaps even they could sense that the devil was on his way to our city.

 More hours went by and our small army began to get restless. Some began grumbling and all were wondering if we had been mistaken about the pending attack. I knew we weren’t. The VFF had warned us that Madras was on his way and he was not the type of vampire that believed in delayed gratification. He was coming.

 As dawn grew closer I did begin to have my doubts. It was risky to begin a battle so close to daybreak. Surely he wouldn’t put himself or his children in that type of jeopardy. But just when I was beginning to give up my wait, he struck.

 I felt him while he was still a good distance away. Something from within seemed to pull at me, wanting me to come out to meet him. I had a deep-seated primal urge to aid my maker. I knew it was him putting these thoughts within me. I shuddered and threw out my shields. Before I had figured out what was happening I had almost gone to him without even having decided to do so. I had to keep him out of my head.

 I alerted the others that he was coming. Because I had put up shield to block him I couldn’t discern how many others were with him. Travis said he believed there were only ten or so. Remembering how conservative Travis’s guess had been the last time I was willing to bet there were more than that. Whether ten or twenty, it made no difference. Madras was our biggest challenge. Even if he had come all by himself he would have been a formidable threat.

 Everyone took their positions. Muireen was visibly shaking. I knew not whether she was doing so from rage or fear. A little of both might help keep her alive tonight.

 There was no pretenses tonight, no hesitation. The doors thrust open violently from the force of Madras’s power. He entered the club and stood before Muireen and me as if he was there for nothing more than a visit. His men did not rush in and begin battling. They stood behind him as if waiting for instruction. Our men looked confused and some were afraid.

 “My children,” he said warmly, spreading his arms out before us. “It has been too long. I have missed you both greatly.”

 I moved closer to Muireen, not liking the distance between us. We had planned to take out as many of his children as possible to weaken him. We had thought that he would send them in first and then follow. His unexpected tactic to enter first demanded a change in our strategy.

 “What do you want Madras?” I asked him.

 “What do I want?” he answered. “I want what I have always wanted Andrias. I want my family together.”

 “We are not family” I told him.

 “Wrong, Andrias” he said. “We are family. I thought perhaps in time you would come to realize that but you did not. You ran off before the dawn like the ungrateful child you are.”

 “You had always said it was my choice to stay or leave” I countered.

 “I lied,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be like this” he offered. “We can be a family again. I can teach you everything I know.”

 “Never” I said. “Never will I submit to you or your way of doing things.” Madras appeared to have turned to stone.

 “You think the servant is greater than the master? You think you can best me? Even tonight you felt my pull, did you not? You wanted to come to me. I felt your desire. Tell me again we are not family.”

 In that moment the shields I had raised crashed down around me. He broke through them like they were nothing. Fear and rage tore through me before being replaced with his desires. Muireen looked on in terror, unaware of what was happening but knowing Madras had done something.

 She made as if she would fling herself at Madras. My hand shot out, grabbing her easily and holding her by the throat. I screamed at myself from within. Everything in me said to let her go and yet my body would not obey my mind. Our army stood paralyzed, not knowing what to do. They had been prepared to fight the enemy, not us.

 “Stop it Madras” I screamed as Muireen struggled in my grasp. He laughed cruelly at us.

 “No” he said. “I will not stop. I have given you far too much leeway for far too long. You will become an obedient child.” He said. “For that to happen, this one needs to be destroyed. She has too much of your heart and I cannot allow that.”

 My grip tightened on Muireen’s throat. She was gasping now, struggling for air.

 “Kill me!” I screamed to those around me. “Kill me!”

 Before our army had a chance to do anything, Madras stepped aside and let his people through. The battle had begun and all were too distracted with those engaging them to do anything to help Muireen.

 “Do something” I cried to Muireen. But she seemed too panicked by my unexpected attack to respond. Or so I thought. Suddenly a lightning bolt came through the open door, striking me neatly in the chest. The power threw me backwards, forcing me to release my hold on Muireen.

 I lay on the floor, dazed by the shock. Muireen had been thrown several feet away from me.

 “Take hold of her again” Madras ordered.

 “No!” I screamed. “Stay away from me Muireen” I ordered. I needn’t worried about that. By the look on her face she had no plans on coming within reaching distance of me again. Against my will, I began stalking towards her. As I passed the open door, another bolt of lightning hit me.

 “I’m sorry Andrias” Muireen screamed. “He’s trying to weaken us by dividing us! I can’t let him win! I won’t!” she screamed.

 A dozen more lightning bolts hit me. Through a daze I noticed the pelting rain blowing in from the door. It was like a hurricane outside. I rose to my feet, staggering towards Muireen once more but was suddenly stopped. A sharp pain blossomed in my chest. I looked down to see what it was. A huge limb from a tree protruded from just below my heart. It had only gone through the bottommost part of my heart, but it was enough. I slumped to the ground and all went dark.

 Chapter 42

The Battle Rages On

Muireen

 I watched Andrias fall to the ground. I hadn’t any choice but to take him out of the fight but the truth of it was cold comfort. I turned to face Madras just in time to see him charging at me in rage.

 I gathered the wind to hurl tables and chairs in his way giving me just enough time to elude his grasp. He was not happy about what I had done to Andrias. That was evident.

 I gathered my power to me and hurled it at Madras. The return jolt hit me with such ferocity that it brought me to my knees. I tried again and again but each time he volleyed more violently than before. I looked around desperately. I would soon exhaust. I had to end him now.

 Our people were doing well. They were destroying his people. They were over-powering them. Why then was Madras not growing weaker? It should be just as it had been at Zekias’s house all those years ago. I had counted on it. What was different?

 I took another blow from Madras. He was inching closer to me. I needed to get further away. If he got too close he would be able to use his vampire speed to grab me before I even knew it. I crawled further back into the room and hid behind some tables against the window. A strange shadow caught my eye from outside.

 I peered into the darkness. It was foolish to take my eyes away from Madras but I had seen something outside. I rose onto my knees to get a better look. There were people outside. No, not people, vampires. Then it hit me. The vampires inside weren’t Madras’s children. The vampires outside were his children. He was protecting them. He planned only to call them in if absolutely necessary, if he had began to lose.

 Hope swelled within me just as Madras’s hands grabbed me from around my waist and pulled me to my feet. His hands clenched at my head. He was going to remove it for me, no doubt. Frantic I gathered energy from the sky and threw it at the vampires outside. I threw it at his children.

 A bolt larger than any in nature lit up the sky, branching off into a dozen smaller bolts before reaching their target. The vampires dropped to the ground. Madras let go of me.

 “You little bitch!” he yelled. “You ruined everything! You always ruin everything!”

 Madras lunged at me but I pushed at him with my power. He was weakened and had little resistance. My power hit him, sending him across the room. It was a small victory. The vampires outside were not yet dead, only stunned. I had to work fast.

 I gathered the electricity once more from the sky. This time I added as much heat as possible to the mass. Lightning struck again, an almost exact copy of the multi-faceted bolt I had sent to the ground only moments ago. The only difference was that this time when it the vampires, they burst into flames.

 Madras’s let out a pitiful wail. As the vampires outside burned, he cowered on the floor screaming curses. It was time to finish this.

 I grabbed a chair and broke off one of the legs. The end wasn’t particularly sharp but it would do. I walked to Madras, and without hesitation, I drove the makeshift stake through his heart. It was now the second time I had managed to stake Madras but this time I wouldn’t be satisfied with that only. I remembered my promise to Andrias.

 I grabbed Andrias’s sword that had become dislodged from its sheath by his side. Emotion hit me at the sight of seeing him lying there. I turned with vengeance back to Madras.

 “This is for Andrias!” I screamed, slashing the sword downwards across his neck.

 “This is for Zekias!” I screamed again as I severed his legs from his body.

 “And this is from me!” I hollered, dismembering both arms as well. I stood back from the body lying in pieces now.

 A hush had fallen over the room. Breathing heavily I turned to look around me. Everyone had stopped fighting. They were looking at me. Even Madras’s men were no longer fighting.

 I dropped the sword to the ground. I fell down among the parts that had once been Madras. I was taking no chances in another resurrection. I drove my hand into his chest as the others watched and ripped his heart out. I crushed it in my hands till nothing remained but pulp.

 Still no one moved or spoke. The fighting seemed to be over. The spell finally seemed to break and Madras’s men fled into the now breaking dawn. Our vampires fled to our underground shelters for cover. Travis carried Andrias’s body down with him.

 The werewolves and witches began dragging the bodies of the fallen vampires outside to the sun. The sun would burn away all evidence of their existence. I would take care of Madras by myself.

 I gathered up as many pieces of him as I could carry. I took them outside and piled them up. I would not wait for the dawn to do its work. I was too ready to be rid of him once and for all. I summoned heat until a fireball appeared and I pushed it towards his remains. They burst into flame. The heat was so intense that within minutes only charred bits remained. Finally satisfied, I went back inside and collapsed, closing the door behind me and blocking out the light of day. I had survived.

 I don’t know how long I remained lying on the floor. No one approached me. One by one they all disappeared. I lay in a crumbled heap upon the floor and I wept. I wept for everything.

Epilogue

 “This again?” Muireen asked impatiently.

 “Yes, this again,” I fired back. “I should like to know just how you were certain that tree you fired at my heart wouldn’t kill me.”

 “Oh Andrias,” she said. “You are so dramatic. When did you become so dramatic? You sound like a whiny child” she complained.

 I didn’t appreciate her comparison nor was I whining. No matter how many times she’d told me she was sure I would survive, I didn’t believe her.

 It was especially difficult to be sure since the last time we had bickered over this same thing. She had argued that she had no choice but to stop me. While I couldn’t disagree that I had been trying to kill her at the time, I didn’t think that she had needed to stoop so low as to stake me. It’s not like I had meant to try to kill her. I had done my best to resist Madras’s commands but he was my maker. What could I possibly have done?

 “An answer please” I asked again.

 “I have answered you and answered you” she said. “You were trying to kill me.” I tried to correct her but she kept going despite my protests.

 “Madras was using you against me” she said. “The only way to defeat him was to break his hold over you.”

 “I understand that,” I countered. “What I don’t understand is how you could have known you wouldn’t kill me.”

 “I have very precise aim” she said.

 “Very precise aim?” I asked. “So you were aiming for my heart? You do know that staking a vampire through the heart is a sure way to end one, don’t you?”

 “Okay,” she said, “I admit it. My aim was a little higher than intended. I needed to at least strike your heart to stun you long enough to get you out of the way though.”

 Finally, the truth! The little vixen had aimed at my heart! She had tried to kill me! She had almost done so. It had taken me weeks to recover.”

 “Stop looking at me like that” she said. “I didn’t do anything you wouldn’t have done,” she countered. “He was winning. I had to do something!”

 I paced the room, furious. I had to remind myself of why it would be bad to kill her. If I killed her, than the VFF would be very upset with me. They had offered Muireen and I the opportunity to become officers but for some reason they had insisted we work together. I wasn’t sure if it was because they thought we made a great team or because they wanted me to keep an eye on her. Either way, it was a position that appealed to me. I wasn’t going to let her ruin it for me.

 “Andrias,” she said. “I was desperate. I figured if I just nicked your heart it would only stun you. I didn’t intend it to go as high as it did.”

 I gave her my full look. I wanted her to know I wouldn’t be so easily conciliated.

 “I was the one who nursed you back to health, wasn’t I?” she huffed. “If I had truly wanted you dead, I would have finished you off when we were cleaning up the dead!”

 Not if she had been afraid of the repercussions from killing me, I thought. If she had truly killed me the governors of our area would have wanted to know why. Anastas was a friend. He would not have appreciated her arguments, I was sure. There were no shortage of witnesses to let him know exactly what had happened either.

 “You can’t keep doing this” she insisted. “If we are going to work together than you will need to learn to trust me again” she said.

 She was right. I was going to have to get over it. I didn’t have to like it though. I would be keeping a very close eye on her from now on.

 “Yes Muireen, “I will have to let it go,” I agreed. “But do not think I will forget it. This makes twice now you have left me for dead. First you let me rot in the ground for over a hundred years and now you have staked me through the heart. You get one more strike, and you’re out,” I warned.

 She rolled her eyes at me. I wanted to choke her all over again. How us being in business together was ever going to work out, I had no idea. With Muireen it would undoubtedly be an adventure and probably dangerous as well.