



Lost and Found

Corrine

COMMUNION

1.

WE'VE LEFT SHORE SOMEHOW
BECOME THE FRIENDS
OF EARLY THEORY
CLOSE ENOUGH TO SPEAK
DESIRE AND PAIN OF ABSENCE
OF MISTAKES WE'D MAKE
GIVEN THE CHANCE.

EACH SMILE RETURNED
MAKES HARDER AVOIDING
DREAMS THAT SEE US
LYING IN EARLY EVENING
CURTAIN SHADOWS, SKIN
SAFE AGAINST SKIN.
BLOOM OF COMPASSION
RESPECT FOR MOMENTS
EYES LOCK TURNS
FOREVER INTO ONE MORE
VEIL THAT FALLS AWAY.

2.

THIS AFTER SEEING YOU
LAST NIGHT, FIRST TIME
SMELLING YOU WITH
PERMISSION: SHOULDERS TO
WONDER OPENLY AT
AS CAREFULLY KISSED
AS THOSE ARMS
WAITED IMPOSSIBLY ON.
THEY'VE HELD ME NOW
AND YOUR BREATH
DOWN MY BACK
SENT AWAY NIGHT AIR
THAT HAD ME SHAKING
IN THE UNLIT ANGLICAN
DOORWAY.

VIQGO MORTENSON

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Part I

Lost Loves

Chapter 1 – Getting the News

"I thought you should know
Daddy died today
He closed his eyes and he left here"
Poe
"intro: call to mother"

December, 2000

My father is dead.

Not my dad, the man that raised me from infancy and tucked me into bed at night. Not the one whom I still call Daddy and sometimes give butterfly kisses to in the warm sunshine after we've brought in hay from the field. No, not him.

Cormac Brennan, the man who gave me life. The man who was supposed to be indestructible... supposed to live forever... is dead.

For the first time this winter I finally feel the cold fingers of bleakness, the likes of which I have never known in my nearly twenty-one years. I feel so alone as I stand looking out the large picture window of my apartment, the city spread out below me as people bustle about in the fresh powder of the latest snowfall.

Winter in New England was usually a favorite season of mine. It always signified the quiet part of the year on the farm when my dad was able to spend more time with my mom and me. I remember sledding down the big hill behind the barn and building a family of snowmen out in the north pasture when I was five with Dad and Eliza. Now all I felt was an emptiness that I couldn't seem to shake.

It was less than a half an hour since the portal had closed behind Glenn and already I felt like climbing the walls as if I was locked away in a cell for life. The funeral had taken place two days ago and I was pretty sure that I didn't have any more tears left to shed, but my heart ached never the less. I'm finding it hard to put into words what I'm feeling right now, but I knew one thing for certain, my little apartment was beginning to feel like a tomb and its walls were closing in on me.

I was worried about Eliza, my birth mother and the closest friend I had ever known in the world. She had always been more like a sister than a mother to me and I didn't want it any other way. She understood me, always had, and I like to think that I understand her as well. Not as much as Mac did, of course, but I like to think that I was a part of her inner sanctuary and that one day she will stop thinking of me as a little girl and let me be the confidant to her that I had always wanted to be.

She was the one who would miss Mac the most. She was the one who had witnessed him die not just once, but twice. The first time was when he was mortal and they had been attacked by the vampires in Baltimore. They were hunters there and instead of killing Mac, they had been made one of them, losing his memories in the blood because he had thought her dead.

They had found each other again a little over a year ago and were managing to rebuild a life together. That is, until this last trip to Europe where Eliza had to watch him die all over again.

Tearing my eyes from the happenings outside, my gaze immediately went to the answering machine and the tiny red light that was blinking madly, signifying that multiple messages awaited me. I crossed to the small table that held the machine and the cordless phone and numbly pressed the button.

Beep. "Hey baby. Sam called me and let me know what happened. I'm so sorry about Cormac. Listen, if you want me to be there I will. Just call me and I'll drop everything. Call me Corrine. I love you."

Beep. "Hi Corrine, its Sam. I just wanted to see how you were doing. I know that you were staying with your grandparents for a few more days, but give me a call when you get home. AJ and I are both so sorry about Cormac. Talk to you when you get back."

Beep. "Corrine, its Jared. Call me. I'm worried about you."

Beep. "Corrine, I'm so sorry." Rachel Black, the priestess of the Black Rose Coven that I was a member of and my friend, Samantha's, teacher. "Samantha called me and I just wanted to call and let you know that we are all sending you the most positive energy we can. If you need anything call me. I know that Jared is concerned for you as well. Be sure to call him when you get home."

Beep. "Corrine... honey... " Brain's voice was quiet and as the message played I could see him sitting at his desk or looking out the window as he made the call. "... please call me. I haven't heard from you and I'm worried as hell. I love you. Call me."

Beep... there were various other calls from the other members of the Black Rose Coven. They all wanted to extend their condolences on my loss and to let me know that if I needed anything to call them. I was touched by their effort but right now there was nothing any of them could have done to help me. They couldn't make Eliza happy again by bringing Mac back to her. No one could play God to that degree.

I only half listened to the rest of the messages as I began to remove the dress pants and sweater I had put on that morning in the room Eliza and I had shared in my grandparents' house and exchanged them for a warm pair of flannel pajamas. I decided to ignore most of the messages for now but there were two calls that I couldn't disregard.

Mechanically, I hit speed dial as I sank down onto the couch. Brian answered in two rings. "Corrine?" he asked anxiously. "Honey, how are you?"

"I'm okay," I said, not bothering to make the effort to disguise my tired voice. "I just got in and I wanted to let you know I'm okay."

"Give me fifteen minutes and I'll be right there." He didn't give me a chance to argue, to say that I didn't feel like company right now, before he hung up. I sighed heavily as I glanced around the apartment, making sure that everything was tidy for my imminent visitor but I really didn't care. Other than a light covering of dust, everything was just as I left it. No surprises.

My eyes fell on the front door and instantly I remembered being awakened four nights ago by my aunt's knock at nearly midnight. I had been asleep. Not deeply, but enough to feel disoriented when the knock had come.

I remembered how I had fumbled with my robe as I made my way to the door, wondering who it could have been at the late hour. Brian had to be at the Boston store early that next

morning and he had told me that he didn't want to wake me when he got up, that's why he wasn't there with me. I didn't think it was him.

It couldn't have been Mac or Eliza either. They were out of the country on some kind of vampire business and didn't know when they would be back. They had called the night before to let me know that they were in Norway or something and that things were progressing as well as could be expected, whatever that meant. Besides, Eliza would have called if they were returning earlier than they thought.

Siofra was the last person I had expected to see when I looked through the peephole. My mind was still foggy from sleep so I didn't stop to think that something could be wrong as I undid the locks and opened the door. "Siofra? What are you doing here?"

She looked worn and drawn, like she had bad news of some kind. "Corrine, can I come in?" I moved aside instantly, trying to digest her appearance and the fact that her hands were tightly clasped in front of her. She stepped over the threshold and immediately moved to the couch, beckoning for me to sit next to her. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

I felt panic rise in my chest as I inched toward the couch and I stifled the need to beg her to tell me what had happened. Cormac's sister and I didn't have the best relationships. She had seemed like a nice enough woman when I had first met her but things changed. At first I felt reassured when I learned that she was a mage as well as my aunt but the fact that she and her husband, Glenn, used to hunt vampires hadn't set well with me.

The way I saw it, none of us have the right to be judge, jury and executioner to any group of people, regardless of what we thought of them. Kindred could be worked with, that much I had learned in the short amount of time I've been around them. The Tremere group had managed to keep Eliza on a short leash for many years because she was a dhampyr and they wanted to be able to use her as a spy. And she let them because they had promised to leave me alone and they paid her well for it. She didn't have to do that now and she was away from them. Hopefully forever.

I also didn't like the way Siofra had treated Eliza. Siofra didn't keep it a secret that she thought Eliza responsible for Mac's death the first time when he had been made a vampire. Eliza thought she responsible, too, and never defended herself against Siofra's indignation, thinking that she deserved it. I, on the other hand, didn't keep my mouth shut and things were rocky between me and my aunt and uncle, but getting better.

Through time hurt feelings had been mended and I had been able to establish a relationship with Siofra and Glenn and I'm sure we will all be okay eventually. I knew that if Siofra was at my door it had to be bad. Suddenly something clicked in my head. "Is Grandfather alright?"

"He's fine," she had been quick to reassure me as she reached over and took my hand, pulling me down to sit next to her. "Glenn got a call from Eddie Lane a few hours ago, Corrine," she stopped long enough to take a shaky breath before continuing. "I'm afraid that your father was killed tonight in Edinburgh."

The truth of what she was saying had shot into my chest like a semi truck going full speed into a brick wall. Mac dead? That couldn't be. It was impossible. He was a vampire. Only certain things could kill him now. I had trouble comprehending what she had been saying to me but her next statement shocked me further.

"I would have come sooner, but our first priority was to take care of Eliza. Glenn is with her right now, trying to help her get through the initial shock. She's taking it very hard."

Eliza? Oh, God I felt incredibly guilty because my first thought hadn't been of her. How was she coping? Of course it would be awful for her. Mac was the love of her life. I remember feeling the tears in my eyes and Siofra taking me in her arms. I cried for the man I had only known for a year. I cried for the pain my best friend was going through. I cried for my new found family who now had to suffer the loss of him all over again.

Most of all I cried for Mac. He had lived for nearly twenty years with no memory of who or what he had been but by finding Eliza he was regaining those memories. He was getting to know his family again. Now they had been ripped from him again as well, only this time there wouldn't be a second chance.

I let Siofra comfort me as we both shed tears of mourning. When I asked her how it had happened all she could tell me was that a demon that they had been hunting had killed him. Eliza was now in Nashville with Glenn and she was in bad shape. Siofra agreed to take me to her but first Grandmother and Grandfather had to be told. Did I want to go with her?

Of course I would go with her. I had quickly thrown clothes into a bag and called Jared to let him know I would be away for a while. Then we were off.

Thinking of Jared jarred my thoughts to the present. I didn't want to make the next call to my mentor but I knew I couldn't hold off any longer. I wanted nothing more than a few hours to myself but if Jared caught wind that I was back and hadn't contacted him, he would be angry and think that I was beginning to not trust him. Our relationship required complete trust in each other and I didn't want to endanger that bond.

"Hi," I said into the receiver when he answered. "I just wanted to let you know I'm back."

"How are you doing?" he asked. He had come to the funeral two days before and for that I was glad. He had even gone so far as to bring my friend, Samantha McLean, as well, knowing that I might need as much moral support as possible, which I had. Seeing the both of them had been like putting the ground underneath me again and I would be forever grateful for their presence.

"Okay." We talked for a few minutes and after I had assured him that I would be okay with time he said good-bye and I hung up. I had no sooner placed the phone back on the charger when there was a knock on the door.

Chapter 2 – Where Do We Go From Here?

"Don't cry,
There's always a way
Here in November in this house of leaves
We'll pray"

Poe
"Haunted"

"Corrine?" I heard Brian say from the other side on the door as I went to answer it. He pulled me into his strong embrace as soon as I closed the door behind him and I had to make my body relax into his. "Hey honey. God, I'm so sorry," he said, his face in my hair. "I wanted to be with you but you never called."

He pulled back and took my face in his hands so that he could look in my eyes. "How are you holding up? Sam told me that the funeral was small and that Eliza looks pretty beat up."

"We're okay," I said as I put my hands over his to feel his warmth. "I'm sorry that I didn't call but I just didn't think. Eliza was my first concern and she was who I had to concentrate on."

"That's okay," he said, leaning in to briefly kiss my lips. "Sam said that she tried to get a hold of me that morning but I was in Boston at the store. I wish they would find a permanent store manager so I didn't have to split my time between there and here." His blue eyes reminded me of a clear spring sky on the farm. So blue and sparkling and they promised so much love and protection. To bad I was beginning to realize that he couldn't protect me. Not the way he wanted to anyhow.

"It's okay," I told him, wishing that the questions he was about to ask wouldn't come. I didn't want to talk about what had happen to Mac. We had just gone through a nightmare in the past few days and I just wanted to forget about it for a minute. I wanted things to be as they were last week when I didn't feel like the rug had just been ripped out from under my world.

"What about Eliza?" he asked, his eyes darting behind us as if he were looking for her. "Did she come back with you?"

I shook my head. I didn't know how I was going to handle the subject of Eliza with my friends. Now that Mac's funeral was over, my mind was able to look at more mundane things like the fact that all of our lives were tightly meshed in the vampires of Salem.

Brain's cousin, Rafe, was married to one of Mac's clan mates, Brenda Brown, and they were all sure to be wondering where Eliza was now. She is a dhampyr, half human and half vampire; and they had invested a great deal of time and money into her existence. I got the feeling that they were a really powerful group of beings and wouldn't appreciate her disappearing act. I knew that in order to protect Brian there was no way that I could ever tell him where she was. I trusted that he wouldn't run back to them with the information, but vampires have ways of learning information even if you didn't want them too.

Worse than Brian's connection to the vampires was that Sam was Rafe's sister and even though he had been in New York for many years, they were still very close. I couldn't tell her where Eliza was either for the same reason.

Even Jared, my mentor and teacher, held strong ties to the vampires of the city. Brenda was an honorary member of the Black Rose Coven of which I was also a member and Jared was the high priest. Knowing that for the moment I needed to bide my time to see what would happen, I resigned myself to holding my tongue as to the whereabouts of Eliza from anyone here in Salem. I would never forgive myself if the vampires ever decided that getting her back was more important than the lives of my friends to do it.

"No, Eliza didn't come back with me," I told him as I pulled away and walked further into the apartment. "She won't be coming back to Salem."

Brian came up behind me and put his hands around me waist while his chin rested on my shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it?"

My initial response to say no almost jumped past my lips but thankfully I was able to stifle it in time before I could hurt his feelings. It wasn't Brian's fault that he had a hard time grasping the ins and outs of my life and that was something I had come to accept in our relationship. Brian held no ties to those who lived in my world other than the ones that held him to me. He wasn't a vampire or a werewolf. He wasn't a mage like me or his cousin. He was a man...living between the mundane world he had always known and the extraordinary one that was opened to him after we started dating.

He was my lover and friend but I wasn't sure that he was my confidant. Brian had made it well known that he was leery of my powers and that he didn't understand them or how they worked, nor had he really made an attempt to ask me about them. He was a man who liked to work with his hands and that is what he understood, what was in front of him. He restored historic homes in Salem and the surrounding areas in his spare time and he was extremely good at it. Being able to magically levitate a vase across the room didn't fit into the way he saw things.

I wanted to have an honest and caring relationship with Brian and that meant sharing with him what I could even if he did have his doubts. "They were in Europe hunting a demon," I started, glad that my back was pressed to him so that I wouldn't have to try to read his features and so that he wouldn't see mine as they contorted in revived anguish as the tears that I had thought all used up begin to form again.

"Its name was Marbas and from what Eliza told us, he wanted to block out the sun forever." As I continued to speak, my mind drifted back to just a few days before when the family had all sat in the living room of my grandparent's home in Galway and it was Eliza who had spoken the words that rung with such finality.

Mac and the others had tracked the demon to Edinburgh where they located a knife at the local Inquisition house that had been crafted specifically to kill it. They had cast a circle within a circle in an effort to hold the demon when they summoned it and Mac stood alone inside the inner one, not allowing anyone else to put themselves that close to the danger.

"Mac wanted to be in the circle the demon would show up in," I remembered Eliza saying as I sat beside her in my grandparents living room. It broke my heart to hear the sorrow in her voice and I remembered wishing I could take the pain for her even though I knew it was impossible. Too bad I didn't realize that I was already full myself. "He stabbed it, but I think he missed the heart. It screamed," she had gone on and I could almost imagine hearing the screams that must have gone through the room. "Then it threw him out of the circle."

I felt Brian's hands on my arms as he soothingly ran them up and down. They became an anchor in reality that kept me from sinking into the tale of horror that my birth mother had told just a few days ago. It was something that I had begun to dream about but that was a secret I had told no one.

"They kept shooting at it but it kept coming," I told him numbly. Even though I hadn't been there the scene played itself out in my mind. I could see Eliza fall when the demon swiped at her and I could see the feathers and blood from its demonic visage as they flew through the air, covering everything in sight. "Mac attacked again and managed to get it to the ground this time, but it was too strong and it plunged its claws in his chest."

Sometime during the tale Brian had turned me to face him, but I wouldn't allow him to pull my face to his chest because my body was too stiff with the emotion of the telling. "She had to sit in front of the family and tell the story," I told him, my eyes meeting his for the first time. "The whole time holding what was left of him in a Ziploc bag on her lap." I heard my voice break then as my knees buckled beneath me and Brian scooped me in his arms and gently put me down on the couch where he held me and told me in soft murmurs that it was going to be alright until once again my tears had ran themselves out.

"I held her hand the whole time," I choked out helplessly, my face still in his shirt. "There was nothing else I could do."

"Being there was enough I'm sure," Brian said quietly as he reached behind him to grab a box of tissues from the table next to the couch. I took one and wiped my face in quick strokes as he leaned forward to kiss my temple. "At least you weren't with them," he commented, his voice full of relief.

I looked up at him, not knowing how to take his last comment. I wondered what he would think if he knew that all I had wished for was the opportunity to be there at the time. I knew that both Mac and Eliza would have never allowed me to accompany them on the dangerous 'mission' they had gone on but I couldn't help thinking that there might have been something I could have done that just might have turned the tide enough, allowing Mac to still be with us.

"I'm not a child, Brian," I retorted a little harsher than I should have as I stood and moved to the kitchen area so that I could put the tea kettle on. "As much as everyone would like to think I am, I'm not."

"That's not what I'm getting at and you know it, Corrine," Brian replied as he got to his feet as well and followed me part way across the room. I glanced over my shoulder after I put the kettle on the burner and turned it on and I saw that his hands were in his pockets. A sure sign that he was preparing for a fight even though I hadn't yet figured why it was a sign.

"And just what are you getting at?" I asked as I leaned my hip against the counter and crossed my arms over my chest protectively, gathering my defenses as well.

His features were slightly twisted and he wouldn't meet my eyes. "I don't like the thought of you being in that much danger."

I felt my eyes as they narrowed and I watched him with a guarded expression. "Really? And just how much danger am I allowed to be around?" I asked as evenly as possible.

His hands came out of his pockets and he held them out so that his palms faced me. "Let's not do this Corrine," he said, the fight going out from him suddenly. "Your father has just been killed and I don't want to cause you any more pain."

"Well it's too late," I snapped back. "Brian, I thought you understood that I'm not studying magic to be able to perform parlor tricks at a seven year olds birthday party. There is war going on out there and I have to take my place in it."

He looked at me silently for a minute and just when I thought that he had nothing to say he cleared his throat then spoke. "Corrine, I know we've only been together a year, but I think you know how I feel about you. I want to share my life with you, to start a family, and grow old with you, but I don't know if we can do that, not the way things are now."

I was taken aback. Floored actually by his revelation. Granted, our relationship was still pretty new, and even though I had allowed Brian to get closer then anyone else since Tommy Baker, I hadn't even thought about anything beyond dating for the moment. There was so much that I wanted to do with my life to think about marriage right now. Sure, I enjoyed Brian's company and I was pretty sure that I loved him, but not enough for the seriousness that he was talking about. I was worried because he thought we were automatically headed for doom because of my abilities.

"How can you say that?" I asked him. "Look at Sam and AJ. They-"

"I have," Brian interrupted. "And I've seen how AJ worries about what Sam's gifts will bring to them and their family in the future. I don't know if I can do that Corrine."

I swallowed hard. I knew that things hadn't been ideal between the two of us but I wasn't ready to concede to defeat either. I took a deep breath. "Brian, what are you saying?"

He looked away for a moment and ran his hand through his closely cropped blonde hair. He didn't bother to look at me when he finally spoke. "I don't know for sure. Corrine, what would you say if I asked you to stop the magic?"

I would have less surprised if he would have struck me. "Give up magic," I repeated in outrage. "How can you ask me that?"

"That's what I'm asking," Brian countered, his features settling into stubborn lines. "But it's not going to get me anywhere, is it?"

"This is something that you've been thinking about for a while isn't it?" I asked, unwilling to believe it could be true.

"And what if I have?" he retorted, not backing down at all.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Did he seriously expect me to stop practicing magic now that it was suddenly coming together for me? Samantha and I had agreed to try learning each other's Tradition in the last few months. It meant doubling our work load and that meant we might need to quit school in order to keep up.

It wasn't a real big deal for me since I had the trust fund that Eliza had started for me with the money she received from working for the Tremere and it wasn't an impossible situation for Sam either, since AJ had a very lucrative writing career and wanted her to stay home with Brendan anyhow. How could I walk away from all that? More importantly, how could Brian think it was okay to ask me?

My temper was barely in check and I was taking deep breaths to keep it that way as the kettle began to whistle. I turned to shut off the burner but instead of facing Brian again I braced my hands on either side of the stove. "This conversation will only turn ugly if it continues," I told him with in tightly controlled voice. "I think it's best if we just leave it for the time being and think things over."

"Corrine, I-"

"No. I'd like you to leave Brian. Please."

He didn't move for a minute but when he saw that I wasn't going to budge, I heard him walk to the front door and quietly close it behind him.

Chapter 3 – Trying to Get Back to Normal

*"I need to get my bearings
I'm lost
And the shadows keep on changing"*
Poe
"Haunted"

The next couple of weeks were pretty strained ones for Brian and me. I was still trying to cope with the loss of Mac and the knowledge that I would never have the chance to get to know him better. Like a smack in the face, I had realized that I had taken my birth father for granted and that I was wrong to have thought we had all the time in the world to create our own special kind of relationship. Mac could have never replaced my dad or the unique bond that we had as daddy and daughter but now I would never know just how close we could have become. A demon had seen to that.

Brian's words the night of my return from Galway had taken a perverse effect on me. I began to doubt whether I was doing the right thing by carrying on my family's tradition in the world of the Dreamspeakers and I wondered what the future held for the two of us as a couple.

I found it continually harder to concentrate on anything. Finals were coming and I was determined to do well despite the circumstances, even though studying quickly became the hardest thing for me to do.

My magic lessons with Jared were suffering, too. "Just take a deep breath," he told me every time I said that I was sorry when I messed up on something really basic that I had been able to do with ease a few weeks before. I never let on to him that I was having doubts about my role in the world and I think that he took my fumbblings as recovery from losing Mac and never lost his temper with me.

The night after my return from Galway I found myself pulling out my set of Ogham sticks that had been a gift from my cousin, Stephen. He was the son of Mac's dead brother, Angus, and a part of the family I now had since finding out who my birth father was. I cast the sticks on the coffee table to see if there were any answers forthcoming and I was sadly let down when there weren't any revelations.

Brian and I continued to see each other almost every night in the next few weeks and many times he tried to bring up the subject of our argument the night I had returned home. Each time I would quickly cut him off, changing the topic of conversation to something neutral because I was too confused to really know what to do or say.

I also found a different topic when he asked about Eliza. A person would have to be blind to miss the way that his eyes clouded with hurt every time I avoided the two topics but how could I tell him the truth about either? It didn't seem fair to lie to him and I felt the gap between us widening with each passing day.

My worry for Eliza's new found freedom was escalated when Mac's childe, James Price, visited my apartment the night after I cast the Ogham sticks. He brought with him a bouquet of beautiful violet orchids and he told me how sorry he was about Mac.

"He was a good man," he said after taking a seat while I extinguished the candle that I had lit in a feeble attempt to meditate in order to get my mind off things. Brian had called twenty minutes before James' arrival to say that he was on his way back to Salem from closing the store in Boston so I was glad that I would have that excuse to cut off the discussion with Mac's childe when he arrived. I knew James fairly well and I knew that he was a nice guy, but he was Tremere and I had to be careful around him as much as the other's of Mac's old clan.

"Thank you," I said, taking a seat across from him and tucking my feet beneath me. "It was nice of the clan to send flowers to the service. My grandparents appreciated it greatly."

Something danced across his eyes at the mention of Mac's parents but I wasn't sure if it was fear or the reminder that I wasn't a mere mortal girl that he could push around with his vampiric methods. Mac had respected him enough to give him the blood that had allowed James to become like him but he wasn't fooling me into thinking that this was a casual visit.

Eliza had been absent from the clan for about two weeks now. I imagined that they were getting pretty anxious about having her back. Since they could truly dissect her now that Mac was gone, they might be getting really antsy, but they weren't going to get anything out of me. Using every ounce of will I had, I locked away all knowledge of my real mother to the deepest recesses of my mind so that their spy would get nothing from me.

"I'll be sure to pass that along," he said with a slight smile that didn't do much to mask his uneasiness. He only ended up staying for another ten minutes but in that time he had managed to bring up Eliza's name at least a half a dozen times. I didn't take his bait. I truthfully informed him that I hadn't seen Eliza since the funeral nor had I heard from her in that time. What I didn't tell him was that I knew she returned to Nashville with Glenn and Siofra until she could figure out what her next move would be.

Christmas was fast approaching but I couldn't seem to find the holiday spirit. I helped Brian decorate his house with a beautiful tree and lights outside that twinkled at night. One evening when I was studying for my last final before break, he mentioned doing the same in my apartment, but I declined.

"I just don't feel like it," I confessed, putting down the notes that I was only half studying as I glanced over to where he was sitting next to me on the couch. We were at his house and I was spending the night even though the obvious signs of holiday cheer only made me wonder how Eliza was doing in Nashville. No doubt Glenn and Siofra had decorated their house for Ian's first Christmas even if they too were feeling the loss of Mac's death. I found myself hoping for at least the twentieth time that day that she was alright.

Brian pulled me into his arms and kissed my hair. He held me for a long time as we watched the flames dance in the fireplace of his cozy living room and for that small instance I felt the first amount of peace since Mac's death. I knew that things between Brian and I still weren't perfect but being in his embrace helped to suppress the worst of the confusion and worry that was constantly running through my brain.

I spent Christmas day in Bar Harbor, where I found out from my parents that someone had been to see them out Eliza's whereabouts as well.

"Did you know who they were?" I asked, trying not to show the panic that had taken a hold of my heart. We were just finishing up dinner on Christmas Eve and Mom was in the kitchen putting leftovers away.

"Never saw them before," Dad said, eyeing me carefully but not saying anything. "Is she alright?"

I found myself looking down at the lace tablecloth that my grandma had made before I was born and wondered what to say. I hated lying to my parents but I still hadn't told them about being a mage or that I knew that Mac and Eliza were my birth parents. The best thing to do was to create a story of half truths until I had enough time to really explain everything that was going on.

"Not really," I told him, still looking at the table. I could already feel tears forming in my eyes and my voice nearly broke when I spoke. "Her boyfriend just died and-"

"Did you say someone died, honey?" Mom asked as she came back into the dining room with fresh apple pie for dessert. "Who was that?"

"Eliza's boyfriend, Martina," Dad told her as he reached over and placed his hand over mine for a quick squeeze. "I'm really sorry to hear that, Corrine. I was glad for her when you told us that she had found someone. How is she doing?"

"She's sad but I'm hoping that she'll come around eventually," I said as I wiped my eyes with my other hand. Mom quickly put the pie down on the table and came to put her hand on my shoulder.

"Well, you give her our best when you see her," she said as she hugged me to her. "That poor girl has always had a hard time of it. If she needs anything...a place to stay, a shoulder to cry on, anything...you tell her to give us a call."

I couldn't think of a time that I loved my mom more as I looked up at her and smiled. "Thanks, Mom, I will. I'm sure Eliza will appreciate it."

"Well, let's not let your mother's pie get any colder," Dad said as he too smiled at the both of us and put his hand over mine to give it a squeeze.

Mom moved away from my side again and back to where she had left the pie. "Of course, Gene."

As I watched my mom cut and dish out dessert I knew that I had nothing to fear for their safety. My parents didn't know where Eliza was and I knew that the clan wouldn't risk exposure trying to get blood from a turnip. But the fact that they had come to the farm annoyed me greatly. I had been hoping that they would have let Eliza go to deal with her grief in peace. Obviously I was wrong.

As I sat alone in my bedroom later that night, I remembered a conversation that I had with Eliza the day of Mac's funeral that made me wonder and hope that she would decide to never go back to them. I had discovered her standing alone in the bedroom that she had I had shared in my grandparents house with a piece of paper in her clenched hands. She looked so pretty in the black dress that I had gone to town to buy for her especially for the funeral. Too bad it had to be bought to bury Mac in.

I knew that the crowd had been getting to her and the bouquet of flowers that had arrived from the Tremere Clan had bore a note for her that I hadn't seen her read yet. When I opened the door I saw that she had taken her few minutes of solace to see what they had to tell her.

"What did they say?" I asked her as I closed the door firmly behind me.

I startled her, something I had never done before. "Who?" she asked, not realizing what I was talking about until she looked down at the note in her hand. "They're sending their condolences," she had replied dryly, almost coldly. "They don't want me to forget--" she had stopped then and crumpled the note into a tiny ball. "They offered to help if I needed it," she finished.

I moved to her side, not sure what she had meant. "Help you with what?"

I had known that she was Mac's ghoul but I had never been told exactly what that meant and I was beginning to think that there was more to their arrangement than I had first thought.

"Doesn't matter," she had told me with a shrug as she looked out the bedroom window. "The flowers were nice, though."

"Eliza," I had pressed, knowing there was more to the situation than what she was letting on. "You don't have to shelter me from them anymore. Are they ordering you to come back or something?"

"No, luv, not in so many words. More like a reminder of where they think I belong." She had opened her hand then and offered me the crumpled note to read for myself.

Eliza,

You have our deepest sympathies for your loss. Cormac was a valuable member of our family, and he will be missed. If there is anything we can do to help you during this difficult time, please don't hesitate to call. You are still a part of our family, and we will do our best to take care of your needs. You don't have to be alone, now or ever again.

Elvira Van Dorn

Ford Radek

I had finished reading the note then folded it neatly and as I watched she glanced in my direction over her shoulder. "Could you walk away if you wanted?" I asked after a minute.

"I could try." She had hugged her stomach then and looked back out the window and what she said next cut me to the bone. "I can't imagine they'd let me go real easy. There aren't many freaks like me out there. If I don't go back I'll be running for a long time."

"You aren't a freak," I had scolded her. "If you are then so am I and I don't feel like a freak." I went to her then and put my arms around her while she did the same. "I'm very lucky for the life I have and that is because of you."

I'll never forget how close she held me to her, her head on my shoulder. "You're human, luv, just like Mac was. I've done what I could to take care of you, to make sure you had the chance to live like he should have. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy, and safe."

"I am safe and I want you to be safe, too," I had told her then we both fell silent for a while. "I don't think you should go back."

"I don't know what I'll do yet," she had said softly. "I've got a lot to think about, I'm not ready to make any decisions yet."

I gave her an extra squeeze. "Well, always remember that I am here for you and whatever you decide I will back you on 100%."

"I know, sweetheart." She had pulled back then and had tried to smile. "I think I'm going to go to bed now. You don't have to stay with me unless you want to."

I smiled back. "I'll stay with you. I just want to go say goodnight to everyone."

I will never forget how the moonlight bounced our reflections off the window pane that night and how I had marveled at this woman who was more than twice my age but looked no older than my sister. I remember wondering if I could ever hold even the smallest percentage of her strength. I hoped that I would some day and I also hoped that one day she would know happiness for longer than a moment.

I traveled to Galway two days after Christmas via a portal that Jared opened for me when I came back from Bar Harbor. Being at home for a few days had been a relief of sorts even though I didn't see it that way at the time. During my visit I was able to escape the constant sadness that had filled my heart over Mac's abrupt death. I was also able to set aside some of my incessant worry about what would happen to Eliza now that he was gone.

Returning to Ireland brought all the emotions back three-fold that I had managed to suppress, especially when I saw the faces of my Grandmother and Grandfather. It was as if Grandfather had aged ten years in the past few weeks and I found myself praying to any God that would listen to help keep him healthy. I had no idea how old he was, but I knew that he couldn't take much more pain in his life and hope to survive.

I learned that Glenn had taken Eliza to Salem earlier in the day to get some of her things from the house that she and Mac had shared with James. They had only returned to Galway about an hour or so before I arrived and Eliza was still going through some stuff as she repacked it from the hurried mess that she and the others had thrown it together in.

"Did you get everything that you wanted?" I asked her from the chair I was sitting on in a corner of the room that we were once again sharing.

"If I didn't then I don't need it," she replied as she stopped to take a look at the clothes and other personal effects that were scattered on the bed.

"If you do think of something I don't want you to go back. It wouldn't be too obvious if I went in fo-"

"You won't go one foot toward that house," she told me as she whirled to face me. Her eyes were filled with a wild expression that said just how alarmed the thought of me going back to the house made her. "Do you hear me? If I didn't get it then I don't need it. Promise me."

I swallowed, slightly put out that she didn't think me capable of doing something as easy as sneaking into a house during the day while James slept. "Fine," I whispered, sinking back sulkily in the chair.

She crossed the room until she stood in front of me and dropped so that she was sitting on her heels as she took my hand. "Luv, I didn't mean to snap at you. I just know they're not going to be happy with the fact I'm not coming back, and I don't want them to try and use you as a bargaining chip for my obedience again. If I thought you'd listen, I'd tell you to get the hell out of Salem, but if you have to stay there, please promise me you'll at least try and stay out of their way."

I squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I have no reason to be near them now, so of course I'll stay out of their way. I won't leave Salem, though, and I appreciate the fact that you respect my wishes enough to not attempt to talk me into going. If I leave too, then that fuels their desire to find you. With me still close then they feel like they still have some control."

"Oh, and that makes me feel better," she replied sarcastically as she pushed herself to a standing position again and looked down at me. "I can see you've been lounging around too much. Time to get off your butt and help me pack."

"Okay, fine," I said with a smile as I stood as well and approached the bed. "What do you want me to do?"

Chapter 4 – What Was That About ‘All Good Things’...?

*"When you were here
I did not know just how I had embraced
All that you hid behind your face
Could not hide from me
'Cause it hid in me too"*

*Poe
"If You Were Here"*

January, 2001

In the beginning of January, three days before my birthday, I found out that Eliza was moving when she called and excitedly gave me the news. Apparently Glenn had managed to find a little house for sale on an island off the coast of Virginia and he bought it for her as a place where she could have some kind of life away from the influence of the Tremere. Silently I thanked him for hopefully making it so that Eliza could finally find some peace of mind.

I had visited her in Nashville a few times in the weeks between the funeral and Christmas, just to be sure that she was going to be okay. Getting over Mac's death wasn't something that she got over quickly, nor was it something anyone expected her to do in a short amount of time. I wanted her to know that I was there for her if she needed me.

During those visits, I was relieved by the knowledge that she no longer had any of the visible cuts and bruises that she had received in the fight with the demon. But she still looked very withdrawn and gaunt while we were in Ireland with the family and later when I came to Nashville. I also noticed during those weekend visits that she was jumpy; like she expected someone to come for her at any moment, but I didn't know how I could take that edginess from her.

When I had asked Glenn how she was doing and his answer hadn't settled well with me. He vaguely said something about how she felt that it was time for her move on. He tried to tell me that even Nashville held memories of Mac and that both he and Siofra thought that she would be better with a change of scenery. That was when he had begun to look for a place where she could go that was untouched by any of the nightwalkers.

The excitement in Eliza's voice was like an answered prayer as she told me about the house over the phone. She asked me if I wanted to come see it and to help her settle it.

"Of course I will," I told her, knowing that I still had over a week before the new term started and that I couldn't think of anything better than going to help her. Eliza told me that she would talk to Glenn and ask him to open a portal for me the next day and then we said our goodbyes.

I was in the middle of throwing some warm weather clothes in a bag for the trip the next day when a knock sounded on the door. I glanced at my watch and saw that I still had a half an hour before Glenn was scheduled to arrive so I went to the door, wondering who it could be and silently reminding myself to call Brian to let him know I was going away.

As if produced by my own thoughts, there he was when I looked out the peephole. "Surprise," Brian said when I opened the door. He was holding a basket loaded with food in one hand and a blanket in the other, obviously prepared for a picnic regardless of the fact that it was about twenty degrees outside.

"Isn't it a little cold for a picnic?" I asked with a smile as I stepped aside so he could enter.

"Not for an inside one," he replied, his brows wagging with his characteristic good humor as he stopped long enough to kiss me before continuing into the apartment as I shut the door behind him. "I thought I would surpri-" his voice dropped off and I knew that he had seen my half packed bag on the couch. I could tell by the way he was standing ramrod straight that he was angry but I wasn't sure how to avoid it.

"I was going to call you," I started as I slipped my hands in the back pockets of my jeans. "I have to go away for a few days."

"Again?" he asked, quizzically as he turned to face me, hurt and confusion plainly written on his features.

I cleared my throat as I wondered how best to respond. "Yes. I know it's really short notice and that you wanted me to go with you to see your parents this weekend, but-"

"But you have to jet off somewhere," he finished for me curtly as he dropped the basket on the coffee table with a thud and threw the blanket on top of it. When he turned to me again his features were set with determination as he crossed his arms across his chest. "And where is it this time Corrine? Ireland again? Nashville? Or is there some other secretive place that you will refuse to tell me about?"

"Brian," I began, as I pulled my determination together for another round with him. Our relationship had suffered a great deal since Mac's death and I would admit that it was mostly my fault. I had accepted that because of his relationship with Brenda, I couldn't tell Brian where Eliza was staying because there was no way to expect it to remain between the two of us. Not that I didn't trust him but I just couldn't take the chance of the knowledge slipping out during conversation or that Brenda might accidentally read it in his mind, or worse, do it under the direction of her clan. He wasn't happy that I refused to talk about Eliza and while I knew it wasn't fair to him, I also knew that I had to protect him and Eliza from the Tremere finding out where she was, no matter what the cost. I figured if he didn't know then he couldn't tell. End of story.

I had hoped that Brian would have taken the same position that Jared had. My mentor had asked about Eliza only once and had taken the fact that I said she was fine at face value and had never brought her up again. Even when I asked him to help me set up some wards around my apartment to guard against vampires he hadn't said anything, but I was sure he knew that I had asked to keep the Tremere out. There was no other excuse.

Brian had become a great deal more demanding on my time since Mac's death and had started making vague suggestions again that I should stop my magic studies and go back to a full class load. He really thought that my decision to cut back on the amount of classes that I was taking to study dual Traditions was a bad idea and he thought that Samantha wasn't spending enough time with Brendan. I ignored his comments for the most part because I had the feeling he was trying to pick a fight and I wasn't falling for it. Maybe he hoped that if he badgered me enough about magic that I would forget about it. He had another thought coming.

He also started to talk more about children and settling down. Before Mac died I would have welcomed the thought of marrying Brian and having lots of kids with him, but now I

wasn't so sure. Aside from that fact that I still felt like I was too young to think about marriage right now, I couldn't bear the thought that I might one day die like Mac had and leave Brian behind to pick up the pieces. I had witnessed first hand what Mac's violent death had done to Eliza and I didn't want Brian to go through that. And I definitely didn't want to worry about children and how they might be affected. For now it was better to not put myself in that kind of a situation until I felt more confident in my abilities.

I was beginning to doubt Brian's place in my life and I knew I had good reason to. He didn't belong in my world. He was human, mortal and fragile. I was being selfish to hold onto him but I didn't think that we would make it much longer anyhow. The decision might be taken out of my hands. Maybe tonight by the look in his eyes.

I watched as he silently crossed to the back of the apartment to put some space between us and so that he could look out the large window that faced downtown. "I can't do this anymore, Corrine," he said calmly and I felt my heart lurch. So it had begun.

I didn't know how to respond. "Brian..." What could I say? Listen, I know that you are being hurt but you just have to bear in mind that what I'm doing is for your best interest? Or what about this, I know you think I'm a bitch for lying to you and I'm sorry but...

"I need to know what our relationship means to you," he continued evenly, still looking out the window. "Where do you and I fit into your life, Corrine? Because I'm pretty sure there are other people more important to you than I am."

I crossed my arms over my chest and went to stand behind him. "Brian, you have to understand that there are going to be things that I can't tell you," I said, hating myself for the further pain I was causing him. "Not because I don't trust you, but because I don't want anything to happen to you."

He turned to face me and lifted his hands to put them on my shoulders. "Is that why you won't tell me where Eliza is? Is that why you always change the subject when I ask about her? Corrine, you have to know that I-"

"I know that you would never intentionally do anything to hurt me or Eliza," I interrupted. I decided to attempt to be partially honest with him to see if he could accept what I offered, then go from there. "But you have to understand that my silence is meant to protect you, not hurt you."

"Protect me?" he scoffed, his face contorting in disbelief. "Corrine, this is ridiculous. How would knowing where Eliza is put me in any danger?"

"It just would," I said as I pulled away from him.

I watched as all the fight drained out of his features. The blue eyes that were usually filled with happiness or a twinkle because of a surprise he had planned were now dull and sad and I knew that I was to blame for it. It hurt to know that I was doing this to him but I knew it was for the best. It wasn't the answer I was hoping for, but in the back of my mind I knew it was the one I was going to get in the end.

Brian lifted his hand halfway and let it linger in the air between us. "I can't do this anymore," he whispered again and I reached out to firmly clasp his hand in mine.

I knew that I had no right to fight for him anymore. The time had come to face the bed that had been made and to lie in it. "I am so sorry," I told him; tears of regret pooling in my eyes so that I couldn't see him anymore.

Without a word, Brian pulled me into his arms for what I knew would be the last time. I memorized the feel of him, knowing that when he walked out that door I would be alone and

that these last lingering moments would have to carry me forward, maybe for the rest of my life because I didn't know if I could become involved with anyone else ever again. His hands were warm and gentle as he moved them soothingly up and down my back, pulling me closer to him at the same time. I heard his voice as he told me that everything was going to be okay, but I heard it catch in the back of his throat and I pulled back to look at him.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," I choked, but he put a finger to my lips as his other hand moved to the back of my head.

"Shh, it's alright," he told me as he wiped the tears from my cheeks. "I think that we both need this. I love you Corrine, really I do. I just can't live like this. You are meant to do great things and me, I'm meant to be here and live a quiet life."

He looked deep in my eyes for a moment then said, "I don't know what life holds for either of us but promise me this. Promise me that you will be careful. Don't do anything stupid and never give up."

I couldn't speak. It was like he was seeing into the future and he knew something bad was going to happen. He was okay with us parting ways and he was giving one final gift before he took his leave of me.

Fresh tears coursed down my face as I nodded and leaned in to kiss him one last time. Our lips met and I felt the familiar softness that was Brian and I lingered there even though I knew it was wrong. His tongue pushed into my mouth and I welcomed it like food to a starving person. The kiss deepened and I found myself wishing that he would make love to me one last time.

I knew it wouldn't be healthy for either of us, but dear Gaia I wanted something to be right for once. To not have everything toppled over in a world that didn't seem to want to make sense anymore. A crazed world where people died before they were supposed to and when others were hunted for what they were. We lived in the twenty-first century for Gods sake, when were people going to understand the basic laws that were handed down to us from the loving nature of the eternal Mother? When would the hate and destruction stop?

It was Brian who pulled away first, as if sensing if this went on any longer something was going to happen between us. We stood there in each other's arms as we breathed deeply in an effort to calm our racing hearts. I was clinging to him but I knew he would eventually walk out the door and out of my life, perhaps forever.

"I gotta go," he said finally and when he pulled away it took all my strength to not clench my fingers on the sweater that he wore and beg him to stay.

I nodded mutely. There was nothing more I could do to make things right between us and he walked out, quietly closing the door behind him. He was gone.

Somehow I was able to move after about five minutes or so. I was prodded by the fact that Glenn would be there soon and I knew that I didn't want him to see me like I was. I went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face and pulled myself together enough to finish packing. I held on to the fact that soon I would be with Eliza and for the moment, that was where I belonged.

I knew that I should call Sam and tell her myself what had just happened between Brian and me but I didn't think I could keep my voice steady enough to talk to her. As I pulled closed the zipper on the case I took the coward's way out and told myself I would have to talk to her when I got back. I hated myself but I did it anyway.

Chapter 5 – Moving On

*"He sends his love
He wanted you to know
He isn't holding a grudge
And if you are you should let go"*
Poe
"intro: call to mother"

Eliza's new house was a cozy one. It was tucked into rolling hills with green grasses and shrubs growing lushly between it and the ocean. There are a few trees in the backyard, once you got a bit away from the water, whose branches blew gracefully in the warm breezes of the Atlantic like someone beckoning for you to play in the waves of their neighbor. The entire scene created an overall effect of isolation since you couldn't see any of the houses nearby, or the road for that matter, unless you were on the second floor of either the house or the apartment over the attached garage.

The house had two bedrooms, a kitchen, living room and bath on the main floor while the master bedroom, bath, and loft type area took up the second floor. The garage held a laundry area and the second floor had been converted into a small apartment with a bed/living room that overlooked the pool and had its own bath. It reminded me of my apartment in Salem but there was something more homey and 'tucked away' feeling when you stood inside it.

Everything was fully furnished, which was a good thing since Eliza had only brought personal effects with her from Salem and she didn't have much money if she would have needed to buy the necessary items herself.

I had agreed to spend five days with her on the island to help her settle in. I wanted to stay longer but I didn't want to be away from Salem for too long. I didn't want to attract the attention of the Tremere with my prolonged absences so they would dig around. I felt a little better because Siofra and Ian were staying as well and would be there a few days more after I returned.

I also wanted to check in with Brian as soon as possible to see how he was doing. I knew I was responsible for the hurt that he was going through and even though I didn't want to cause him anymore, I felt that I needed to lend him some comfort in what he was feeling as well. I had a delusional thought that we might be able to remain friends after all this, but in the back of my mind I knew that it might not happen. I already felt alone in Salem. I was hoping that I didn't have to lose him totally.

"I don't want the Tremere hassling you," Eliza said sadly as she showed me to the bedroom across the hall from hers where I would sleep. "Maybe you should stay away from me," she went on in an unconvincing tone.

I felt my face as it twisted slightly at her preposterous idea. "Are you crazy?" I scoffed at her good naturedly, as I put an arm around her shoulders and hugged her to me in a way that I hoped would assure her that the Tremere didn't scare me. "You can't keep me away so don't even try. I've told them that I don't know where you are and that's that. I'm not going to let them keep me from you and I don't want to hear another word about it."

A change in conversation was strongly needed at the moment and I remembered seeing Mac's laptop downstairs when I first arrived. "I see you grabbed the laptop. Want me to show you a few things?" I suggested.

She shrugged slightly. "If you want. I'm not sure why I took it; I don't know the first thing about computers."

We went downstairs then and after a couple of hours I was able to get Eliza a little more familiar with using the computer while Siofra played with Ian in the living room. Eliza was never big on technology because all her life had been geared toward the more physical things in life but it was different now. She had a fresh start and she would need a job and computer training could help her get one.

It was a grateful distraction to work with her and not think about Brian. I had managed to pull myself together before Glenn had arrived that morning and I was really afraid that Eliza would sense that something was wrong and ask about what was bothering me. It was a relief to be out of Salem for a few days, but I wasn't ready yet to talk about the break up.

We spent the rest of the evening just trying to be normal. I made dinner for the four of us and I couldn't believe how nice it was to see Eliza unwind finally. From recent conversations with her I had begun to suspect that something had happened in Nashville that had prompted this move that she hadn't told me. Part of me wanted to ask about it but I had to concede to the fact that my birth mother had been through too much in the past few months and deserved the time to start to get on with her life. So, even though it killed me not to ask, I didn't.

"How's Brian?" Eliza asked the following night. We had just sat down on the porch in the back of the house to think about what to do for dinner. We had spent the entire day cleaning and moving all the furniture in the house how Eliza wanted it and we were too tired to put anything together. Personally, I was voting for pizza until she decided to bring up Brian. Then I lost my appetite entirely.

I was pretty sure that I flinched at the mention of his name but luckily Siofra was inside giving Ian a bath and Eliza looking in my direction when she asked, so my discomfort went unnoticed. "Fine," I said noncommittally. "Busy."

She looked at me. "How is he dealing with you being gone so much?"

So my facial expression didn't betray me, I stood and went to the porch railing so that my back was to her. "He asks questions and so far I've been able to hold him off."

"Corrine you have to be careful," she warned. "He doesn't know what it's like to live in our world except by the exposure he gets from you. He isn't submerged in the bullshit like we are."

"You're right," I said quietly, guilt from the pain I had given Brian surfacing again, causing tears to effect my voice. "He can't know what it's like. I don't know if it's fair to keep him like this..."

"It's not fair to you either, luv." I felt her behind me even before she put her hands on my shoulders. "It's hard trying to live a normal life with people who don't know what's really out there. At least he knows that there are other things out there, you don't have to lie to him all the time."

I couldn't tell her the truth. I couldn't tell her that I had hurt him so much that it would have been better if I had lied to him from the beginning. I remember how defiant I had been

in the beginning that I hadn't wanted to start a relationship based on lies. I had fought with both Mac and Eliza that I would have that kind of relationship with Brian and that was final. It was a hard pill to swallow knowing how stupid I had been. I shouldn't have gotten involved with him to begin with.

I knew that I had to make up something to tell Eliza to cover the raw emotion that I knew could be heard in my voice when I spoke. "Part of me wants to stop this now before one of us gets hurt," I told her, knowing it was my guilty conscience that was actually talking. "But another part wonders what if... what if he's it... what if he's the one."

Eliza dropped her hands and I felt the cool night air replace the spot where she had stood as she moved away from me. "If he was you'd know it, luv," she told me very softly, her voice strained by her words. I heard what was now becoming a familiar sound of a lighter as she lit up a cigarette and then blew the smoke out. She had started smoking while living in Nashville with Glenn and Siofra and even though I knew it went against her nature to be so unhealthy, I also knew she was stressed and so I hadn't said anything about it. "For real now, if he was you wouldn't be wondering, and nothing would matter as long as you could be with him."

I looked over my shoulder at her and watched her back as she inhaled again before I spoke. "Remember when you took me to New York?" I asked, my hands still on the railing. "To that neighborhood where you lived as a girl? You said that if I ever found someone that I would have lived there, in that neighborhood with, that he was the one. Do you remember that?"

"I remember," she says in a tightly controlled voice as she looked to the floor of the porch.

I knew that the subject we were on was too close to mirroring the fact that Mac was gone and I silently cursed myself for not changing the subject before now. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt Eliza more and I gently probed her thoughts to make sure she was okay. She was still so sad, but that wasn't really anything new from what she had been experiencing since Mac's death. Knowing that he was the love of her life gave me new guilt to live with and I crossed to her and put my arms around her.

"Enough of this. Let's go for a walk on the beach. What do you say?" I knew that neither of us would be able to eat just yet and maybe physical exertion would bring back our appetites.

She hugged me back, keeping the cigarette away from me and trying to keep her face turned away until she could wipe her eyes before she spoke. "Finish what you were saying first, what about the trip we took to New York?"

I knew that I wouldn't get away until I answered but I didn't want to linger on the subject any longer than I had to. "I don't know. I think I'd live there with him but it's hard right now. But isn't that what relationships are all about? It isn't always easy."

My face was in the gentle curve of her neck and I felt Eliza rest her head against mine. "No, it's not always easy." She crushed out her cigarette and wiped her eyes before turning around to face me. "Walk on the beach then?"

I nodded. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to remind you of anything. I miss him, too."

She smiled but there was so much sadness in her expression that you could see it even if you didn't know her like I did. "Everything reminds me of him, Corrine, it wasn't anything you did. I thought it would be better here, but..." she looked off then, almost as if she was looking at something that I couldn't see even if I tried. "I know you miss him, luv, but it will get better. Your pain will heal."

"So will yours," I assured her. "We'll get through this...together."

It was a brave smile she put on, but it was enough for me. "Let's go. Maybe the fresh air will clear my head."

Conversation during our walk along the beach swiftly turned to the Tremere and whether I was safe in Salem or not. I was quick to tell her that everything was fine but she didn't believe me.

"I wish I could be there to make sure it stayed that way."

"I think they are convinced that I don't know where you are," I informed her. "No one has stopped by since James did the other night. I talked to Jared and he agreed to put some wards on my apartment. I come to you through a portal so they can't track me. Don't worry, please. You have so much to worry about without me adding to it."

She bent over to pick up a handful of pebbles and started to throw them one by one into the ocean as we walked. "I know. You've got other people to look after you now, but I still worry. I really thought about going back to Salem, Corrine, but I just don't think I could have done it."

I shook my head. "Don't worry about it. I can come to you. Soon I'll be able to come to you on my own and that will cut out Glenn and Siofra as middle men." Honestly I didn't know when I would be able to open the portals on my own but I didn't want to tell Eliza that and make her edgier than she already was. Glenn had talked about installing a magical 'swinging' door of sorts that would allow me to say a word and be able to travel to Nashville, Ireland and Eliza's new place here on the island. I had to admit that I liked the idea since I could go when I wanted and I wouldn't have to wait for someone to come 'pick me up'.

"I just—I want you to be careful, Corrine," Eliza said as she stopped and put a hand on my arm so that I would stop as well. "I don't want you in any danger. If I thought they'd hurt you..." she trailed off and looked out over the water. "I'd rather go back to the Tremere than see anything happen to you."

"If I thought I was in any danger believe me, I'd be out of there so fast I'd create a mini tornado," I assured her. "I could find a mentor anywhere. But if I did that would be like running away. Mac wouldn't want me to do that. I know it. I'm standing my ground and not budging an inch."

"Mac would want you to be safe, Corrine," she insisted fiercely. "I can't make sure they leave you alone, not anymore. Maybe you should go to Galway, the Brennan's would be able to teach you, and they'd be more than happy to have you come live with them."

I smiled at her, knowing that she was only trying to look out for me like she always had. "Let's just wait and see what happens, okay? I'm not really big with the whole sticking my neck out anymore than the next person but I have a good bond with Jared and I am learning from him. Besides that, Sam and I are learning each others Traditions. I don't want to make any rash decisions right now, okay. Trust me, I won't do anything stupid."

She studied me for a long moment, then smiled a little and turned to start walking down the beach again. "I could try to argue with you, but you'll just do what you want to anyway." She was out of pebbles now and the breeze coming off the water must have made her cold because she began to rub her bare arms as if to ward off the cool air. "Maybe they'll give up if I'm not seen for a while. Maybe then I can visit Nashville without worrying about them every time I leave the house."

"I'm sure they will," I said, hoping I was convincing as I quickened my pace to catch up. The time outside had done a great deal to invigorate me and now I felt like making a feast for

us. "No more talk about the Tremere, okay? Let's go to the market and splurge a little. How about lobster for dinner? What do you say?"

She smiled again and nodded. "Sounds good."

The next two days were beautiful. Eliza, Siofra and I took long walks everyday and sat on the beach long into the night with a fire to keep us warm after Ian went to sleep. Her house was really perfect for anyone who wanted quiet time to themselves. We met the neighbors and they all seemed to welcome Eliza openly, some of them even dropping off casseroles during my visit.

But something else happened. Late at night, when I was trying to fall asleep, I started to wonder about one of the things that Brian had said to me in my apartment that day. He had told me that I was meant to do great things and that he was meant to live a quiet life. The comment started turning over and over in my head in the blackness of night and for the first time since my Awakening I began to wonder about, and doubt, my magic.

Was I doing the right thing? Was following in the steps of my family going to mean that I would never find a relationship? Part of me knew that it wasn't true when both my grandparents and Glenn and Siofra seemed to be perfectly content together. What it did tell me though was that they were all mages and maybe that was the only combination where I could fit.

I tried to keep my mind from wondering if there was a mage or some other supernatural creature out there that I could be compatible with in a relationship. What if there wasn't? What if I never found him?

Following that were the doubts concerning how much talent I had or didn't have. I started to wonder if I had what it took to be useful in finding the ascension all my kind were looking for. Even though all these worries began to surface during the few days I spent with Eliza, I managed to keep them and my break up with Brian from her and made the best of our time together.

Aside from that it was a relaxing time to be with her, but I was also concerned about how Brian was doing. When I left to go back to Salem on Monday I felt that Eliza was doing okay and that she had made it through the worst of it. Now I had to be sure about Brian.

Life settled down finally after that. I started visiting Eliza every other weekend to make sure she was doing okay and to replenish my own peace of mind. In reality I knew that she would be lonely all alone on the island because I was pretty sure she wouldn't make friends very easy. To be honest, I was lonely in a way too and needed her as much as she needed me.

She got a job in a nursery the week after she moved in and I know that helped in making her feel more independent. She was using the name Beth Taylor now and she bought a golden retriever puppy to keep her company that she named Eddie. I thought it was odd that she would name her dog after Mac's other ghoul but she told me that she didn't want to forget how he had helped her out when she had really needed it. I had to agree that it was a nice gesture and the puppy seemed to be good for her.

Brian was doing okay after our break up, too. Our friendship was still intact and I was really glad for that. Thankfully, my relationship with Sam hadn't been affected because of it, either. I went to see her after I came back from Eliza's that first time and Sam was quick to assure me that she and AJ both harbored no ill feelings toward me. Apparently Brian had

explained most of what had happened in our relationship to them and had made it very clear that he was okay with it and that they should be as well.

Later, after AJ had taken Brendan upstairs to give him a bath, Sam and I had a chance to talk a little about Eliza. Like Brian, I had avoided talking about her with Sam, so I was a little alarmed when she brought her up out of the blue.

"I want you to know that I don't want to know where Eliza is," she said as she filled our tea cups. We were sitting at the kitchen table and had been catching up on things without the need to shout at each other to be heard over the busy six-month-old. "I also want you to know that if you need to talk about anything, I'm here. It won't go any further."

"What if Brenda asks?" I replied worriedly. "I don't want to be the cause of a breach in your family."

Sam smiled as she covered my hand with one of hers. "If you don't tell me where she is, there's not a problem, right?" she pointed out. "I can't tell anyone what I don't know. I just don't want you to feel like you can't talk to anyone."

I smiled at her in return and leaned over to give her a quick hug. "Thanks for understanding. I appreciate it."

I continued to avoid the subject of Eliza with Jared, too. There was a sense of loyalty in him to Glenn and Siofra because he had known them and Eliza in Baltimore but I still had to be careful that the Tremere might attempt to read his mind. He never pushed the issue and my studies with him and Rachel continue on as usual.

I guess that it was normal that Mac would haunt my dreams during the next few months. Some nights were worse than others and I found myself not able to fall back asleep. On those nights I would light the yellow candle that Eliza had given me to study my magic by and I would hold his book to my chest and cry until I had no tears left. Those were the longest nights and the ones that I wished someone were there to hold me and tell me everything was going to be alright.

Chapter 6 – Coming Home

*"But now no matter where I go
I always seem to return"*

Poe

"Spanish Doll"

March, 2001

Spring finally came to New England. Well, the first signs of spring anyhow. The days were getting warmer and the snow that had blanketed the city was making its last ditch attempt to hold on for another day. March had come in like a lion but by the looks of things it would become a lamb soon enough.

I had just taken my last final for the term and was looking forward to some time off of classes so that I could visit Eliza for longer than the weekends that I had been. I noticed the answering machine flashing like crazy when I entered my apartment, signaling the fact that I had multiple messages. I put my knapsack down on the floor next to the table where the phone and answering machine were and pushed play.

Most of them were the normal fare, Sam calling to see how my Psychology II final had gone. We had been up late the night before working on an effect that Rachel and Jared had given us to learn and I had arrived home just in time to take a shower and leave for my class in Boston. And Jared, who wanted to remind me that he expected me to be looking at the book he had given me the last time I had seen him. Normal, that is, until the first of three messages from my grandparents in Ireland.

My Grandfather was first. "Corrine, honey. Give us a call when you get home. It's important."

Next, my Grandmother's voice came over the speaker. "Corrine? Are you home? It's Gran." There was some kind of a scuffle in the background and she paused to scold whoever the offender was who dared interrupt her when she was making a call. "No, you'll not out of the blue say hello. Honestly." Then I heard her voice return to the receiver again. "Just call us when you get home, luv."

Finally my Grandfather called again and I smiled as I imagined him standing in the kitchen, talking on the wall phone that looked like it had hung there for many, many years. "It's just me again, Corrine. Don't want to alarm you, but give us a call when you get this."

The messages ended and I couldn't help but grin as I picked up my phone and dialed the now familiar Irish phone number. As the call connected I shed my coat and scarf and shouldered my knapsack again to transport it to the chair at my desk so I could unpack the contents when I was finished with my call.

My Grandfather answered and his gusto nearly knocked me over despite the fact that we were thousands of miles apart. "Corrine, we'd like you to come over right away," he blurted. "Bring enough of your things to stay a couple of days. I can open a gateway for you right now." He wasn't upset, in fact he sounded a great deal happier than I had heard him in a long while.

I tried to stifle my laughter since his obvious good mood was so contagious. "Grandfather, I don't understand. What's going on? Is everyone alright?" I wondered if Siofra were pregnant again or something. That would be good news for everyone.

"Everyone is fine, more than fine," he assured me. I could hear the smile in his voice and other voices in the background. It sounded like there was a party going on. "Just come to stay with us for a few days," he went on. "You'll understand everything when you get here. How long before you'll be ready?"

My other hand was buried in my hair in a baffled gesture because I was trying to figure out what the heck is going on. My Grandfather was acting really weird and not offering any explanation. "Um...give me twenty minutes I think and that should be enough time. Is Eliza there?" I asked in an afterthought as I pulled out a suitcase from the closet.

"Yes, she's here," he replied with a laugh. "Everyone's here. I'll open the gateway in twenty minutes then. Plan on staying through the weekend, all right?"

I laughed then at the absurdity of the situation. "All right," I told him. "I'll see you soon."

"Wonderful, we'll be ready for you." He hung up then and I returned the cordless phone to its base and started to throw clothes in the bag. I don't know how I managed, but I was able to pack, call Jared to tell him I was visiting my parents in Maine, and secure my apartment for the time I would be gone.

Right on time, a portal opened in the doorway to my bathroom. On the other side I could see my grandparent's kitchen and the two of them standing in the center, looking very excited. I could also hear lots of voices coming from what sounded like the living room and I assumed that maybe Glenn and Siofra were here as well. In actuality, when the portal closed I saw that Eliza was standing by the table, with a large gray wolf that I didn't recognize and Eddie sitting close to the doorway into the hall.

The wolf looked vaguely familiar to me, but there wasn't a blazing cross on his chest, so I knew that it wasn't my cousin, Stephen. There was something otherworldly about him, like he wasn't really a wolf at all. He didn't seem like a werewolf, he was almost more human in fact, or inhuman. He stood and walked over to me as Eliza did the same and gave me a hug. She looked really happy, the happiest I had seen her in a long time. She was almost glowing.

I hugged her back as I looked at my grandparents. "Okay, why is everyone grinning like they know some big secret? What's going on?"

Eliza glanced over her shoulder at my grandparents, and led me over to them where they stood by the table. The wolf sniffed at me as I walked by, and then turned to go to the living room where it sounded like a lively conversation was going on. Eddie followed him.

"Sit down, luv," Eliza said as she pulled out a chair. "I have something to tell you that I know you're going to have a hard time believing."

"Hopefully she won't faint," Siofra interjected with a smile as she entered the room, and I watched, baffled as Eliza blushed at her comment. "How are you doing, Corrine?" Siofra asked as she came over and kissed my cheek.

"Fine. Thank you," I replied with a smile as I put my hand on her shoulder companionably. "How about yourself?" She nodded as I sat in the chair Eliza had pulled out and I looked at all the beaming faces around me. "What is going on?" I asked, a laugh coming through my voice.

Everyone glanced in Eliza's direction expectantly, but it looked like she didn't know what to say. "Look, sometimes things just happen that we don't have an explanation for," she said finally. She was glowing in a way, but very serious as well. She reached out and took one of

my hands in both of hers. "Things that at first just don't seem possible, but for real now, they do happen. Do you understand what I'm saying?" She waited for some kind of acknowledgement or nod from me, but I didn't know where she was going with all this.

"Not really," I said slowly. "Why don't you just tell me what's happened?"

Eliza took a deep breath before she continued. "Siofra did something when she was younger that didn't exactly work the way she wanted it to. When Mac... died," her voice hesitated as she spoke, but the word doesn't seem to affect her the way it had been in the past few months, "the spell was triggered. Mac and Angus, well, they came back."

I looked up at the four of them in confusion and found that everyone was watching me closely, almost as if they expected me to faint or something. What I did notice was that the conversations that had been going on in the living room when I had first arrived seemed to have quieted.

"What do you mean they're back?" I asked, my eyes narrowed suspiciously and I was sure I was looking at every one of them like they were losing their minds. I found it hard to believe that any of them, Eliza especially, would joke about something like this. I knew that we could do magic but bringing someone back from the dead? Even that was stretching things.

"They're back," Eliza said softly, trying to convince me. "They're here. I wouldn't lie to you, Corrine, Mac is alive."

I knew that Eliza would have never lied to me about something like this. Suddenly the male voices that were coming from the living room made an odd sense. Without a word to any of them, I stood and quickly turned to move toward the doorway to the living room.

And there he was, larger than life. I froze in place, my hand still half in Eliza's as my eyes made contact with Mac from where he was standing in the doorway. The wolf was sitting at his feet. It was confusing to see him in the daylight since I had only known him in the shadows of night before this, but it was a good confused.

A man nudged Mac from behind until he pushed his way into the kitchen where he stood and crossed his arms over his chest. I recognized Uncle Angus from family pictures that Grandmother had shown to me during my stays with them, but to see him alive and grinning was like knowing him for the first time.

"Is this the wee one you've been hiding all these years?" he asked with a grin and a thick Irish brogue. "She's prettier than Stephen, isn't she?"

"That she is," Mac says softly, looking only at me for the moment. "Hello, Corrine."

I took a hesitant step toward him. "Mac?" I croaked out.

I watched in bewilderment as he crossed the room until he stood in front of me and I lifted my hand to my mouth so that I wouldn't say anything to embarrass myself. He reached out and put his hands on my upper arms. He seemed real enough, his hands felt cold at first through my shirt but they warmed as we looked at each other. "You're not going to faint, are you, luv?" he asked with a smile.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The hand at my mouth reached out to make contact with his shoulder as the other one went to first his chest, and then his cheek. "I don't understand..." I managed to choke out, tears of happiness beginning to form in my eyes.

Given the mind-boggling circumstances, I needed to be sure of what I was seeing. I reached out with Life and Spirit to see if I could recognize anything that would lead me to believe that it wasn't Mac standing there. There was a cold resonance coming from him,

almost as if it was a part of him now, but he wasn't possessed in any way. As far as I could tell it was him. Amazingly back from the dead.

The skin on his face was cool to the touch at first but the longer I touched him the warmer he became. It was the first time in my life that I had ever felt him this way and it was amazing to me. He was breathing. I was torn between the desire to walk into his arms and to just look at him forever. I was afraid he would leave again.

He pulled me to him and hugged me close. "I'm not sure I do either, but right now it doesn't matter. I'm here."

I let myself go limp against him, my arms winding around his waist to hold on for dear life as I buried my face in his neck. He smelled like the soap my grandmother always kept in the bathroom upstairs and his cheek was slightly rough from his growth of beard, something else I had never experienced with him.

I just let him hold me for as long as possible as my tears poured from my eyes. I allowed myself to forget the horror that the past few months had been and to let him be the strong one for a minute.

It was the first time that I felt like his little girl.

No one else in the room existed in those minutes while he held me and my tears subsided as he whispered that everything was all right and that he was sorry.

Finally I pulled away from him, wiping my eyes and laughing a little between sniffles. "I'm sorry to be such a big baby..." I told him.

Mac helped me wipe my eyes with a wide grin that lit up his face. "At least you didn't faint." He turned then to look at Angus and said, "Corrine, this sorry excuse of a werewolf is your Uncle Angus."

My uncle sauntered over then to pull me into a large hug. "Hello, Corrine Mackenzie."

"Uncle Angus," I said with a smile as I leaned back in his strong arms. "I'm so glad to meet you." He was a good head shorter than Mac, but what he lacked in height he made up for in strength by the look of him. His shoulders were broad and muscular under my hands and his eyes were blue and twinkled with a mischief that I knew he had been famous for before his death. His smile was wide and infectious and just being close to him pushed the last of my somber mood away.

I looked around. "Is Stephen here? Aunt Cara?"

In fact everyone had come home to welcome back the pair of brothers and we were all standing in the spacious kitchen, exchanging hugs and well wishes, everyone happy to see the brothers home. My Aunt Cara was glowing like Eliza was as she moved to stand next to her husband and put a protective arm around his waist.

"Everyone's here," my grandfather said proudly as he looked at both of his sons and the family that had gathered together. A blur of conversation began as nearly everyone started to talk at once and I sat back to watch them, a content smile on my lips. I watched as Glenn came over to Siofra with Ian in his arms and kissed her cheek. My Grandmother was putting on a full kettle for tea and checking the roast that she had been preparing all day for us. Mac and Angus seemed to be regarding the family closely as well. I watched as they shared private glances with one another over one joke or another from childhood stories and it was obvious that were content to be for the moment.

For the most part that first night I spent time with my Grandfather and Stephen, since I rarely saw him. I knew that Mac and Eliza needed to be together and that I would have a

chance to talk with him when the time was right. We all sat down at my Grandmother's large table to eat and I made sure that I was next to Grandfather so I could ask him how all this had come about.

He shot a half reproachful, half grateful look at Siofra. "It seems someone was determined not to loose her brothers," he answered and my aunt dropped her head a little and smiled covertly. "The spell was a little too advanced for her at the time, but I find I can't reprimand her for trying it, not when I've got my boys back." He beamed down the table at the two of them. "They showed up at the house here yesterday morning, a bit cold but none the worse for their trials, for the most part."

It didn't surprise me that Siofra would have been rebellious enough to attempt magic that others said was beyond her. She was a strong woman, as I was beginning to understand. Silently I thanked her for her work as well. Being the one responsible for bringing Mac back to Eliza helped her to again more points in my eyes. I was glad that we were becoming better acquainted.

The strange wolf stayed close to Mac during the evening as well. I asked Grandfather about the animal and Mac overheard me and answered himself. "He's here to guide me to my destiny, or some such," he said dryly as he looked down at the wolf. "Say hello to my daughter, Gwrhyr."

The wolf, who had seemed to eye me since I had arrived, came over to me and raised a paw. "Greetings, Corrine Mackenzie," I heard in my head. "I have heard tell of you."

To say that I was a little freaked out by the strange voice in my head was a small admission. But not totally something out of the blue. I slid out of my chair so that I knelt respectfully eye level with him and held out my hand to take his paw. "It is my pleasure to meet you, Gwrhyr. I'm sure that whatever Mac has told you about me is slightly biased given that he is my father," I said out loud as I looked across the table to where he was and he winked at me. "I look forward to not only getting to know you, but spending more time with him as well. Did you help bring him and Uncle Angus back to us?"

"It was not my privilege to do so," the wolf replied in my mind. "I have seen your life path written in the cliffs of the deep umbra." He tilted his head a little to eye me knowingly. "You have much to seek, and you will be sought much."

I felt my brow wrinkle slightly as I looked at him questioningly. "My life path? What do you mean I have much to seek?"

I heard Eliza lean close to Mac and say, "I take it she can hear it too?" Mac glanced over at her and smiled.

"It is not my function to guide you on your path," the wolf said in answer to my question. "Your Avatar is strong, and will guide you true." He turned his eyes toward Mac. "My purpose is to steer this one to his destiny. The spirits have seen that he needs aid if he is to fulfill his duty."

I changed tactics and asked my next question silently, "What is his duty? Can I be of some help to him?"

"His duty is his own, but aid you may be, in time, when the Cliffs of Garelan run red, when the seeker is found, when the seed has been sown." With that said he dropped his paw from my hand and went off to sit next to Mac again, doing his best to look like a normal wolf, but not quite making it. Eddie was following the wolf like a shadow and lay down next to Gwrhyr on his back, wanting to play. The wolf started to rough house with him gently until the puppy yipped in delight.

I made a mental note to jot down all that he had told me in my journal when I had the chance as I slid back into my chair. Gwrhyr had tweaked my curiosity about what he was so I felt out to him with Spirit in the hopes that I might sense something. I didn't get much. After about three minutes of feeling around him, all I could put together was that he felt like an Avatar of sorts, but not quite. Actually, he felt like this cat that I knew of that belonged to some mages in Salem, whatever that meant.

Dinner was winding down and talk quickly turned to going to the pub in town for drinks. I agreed to go as well but I needed time to clear my head in order to process all that I had learned in the past few hours. I decided to take Eddie with me and as I hooked his leash on, Eliza warned me to not be gone long since they would be leaving in a few hours. She and Stephen asked if I wanted company but I told them both no. I needed to be alone.

Some invisible force pulled me toward the cemetery. For some morbid reason I just had to see the place where Mac had lain up until the day before. I closed the gate of the white fence that surrounded the family graveyard and in the semidarkness I could just make out the disturbance in the snow. Fresh dirt was mixed with the white powder and the setting made me feel eerie. It was obvious that Mac had to dig himself out of the earth and my heart lurched with the knowledge.

I had visited Mac's grave many times after his death but this was the first time I was almost scared to be there. My eyes moved over toward Angus' grave and I saw that the disturbance there was larger than Mac's, leading me to believe that he had been in Crinos when he clawed his way out. Bare, male footprints led from Angus' grave to Mac's as if they stood and talked for a time before moving off toward the house.

I turned back as well. Seeing the graves had left me feeling a little creeped out and the knowledge that Mac and Uncle Angus had to fight their way out of them didn't sit well, either. What was important was that they were back and with us, their family. The nightmare was over.

Chapter 7 - A Little One on One with Uncle Angus

"Father:

Hello tiger, it's fun, talking with you. like this--in fact I'm going to do it more often"

Poe

"If You Were Here"

I stayed a week in Galway after Mac's return. I was really looking forward to getting a second chance with Mac and to get to know my uncle as well. The outlook of the entire family changed so much with Mac and Uncle Angus back in the fold that it was really hard to remember the wake and funeral that had taken place here just a few short months ago.

Eliza was like a new person. Gone were the lines of worry and sadness from her eyes and for the first time that I could remember, she looked like a young woman with the whole world in front of her. I loved to watch her and Mac interact with each other. It was like watching them for the first time. He was so much more laid back now and she was the happiest I had ever seen her, even though she didn't like to let him out of her sight.

The biggest thing that I noticed about Mac was that he never missed a sunrise. He spent a great deal of time with the wolf, too, which I guess didn't surprise me much since Gwrhyr was supposed to be helping him with his destiny and new powers.

I soon learned that Mac hadn't come back as a mage like he had been before he was made a vampire. When I asked Grandfather why, he told me that Mac's avatar had been shattered when he was made a vampire and there was no way that he could ever be a mage again, in this life or those to follow. So the powers-that-be had decided to send him back as what was called a sorcerer. I'm not quite sure what that exactly was but my Grandfather seemed really sad about it so I didn't want to question him further. Instead I accepted what he told me and made a note to ask Rachel or Jared what they were when I returned to Salem.

I'm not sure how it happened but one morning I came out of the back door and found Eliza and Uncle Angus fighting on the lawn. I was alarmed at first and wondered why no one around them moved to stop the two since Mac, Glenn and Siofra were all standing around watching them. I quickly realized that they weren't 'fighting' so much as 'sparring' as Eliza called it later.

Uncle Angus was in his human form and hit Eliza with a particularly fierce upper cut that made her stumble backward.

"Take it easy on me, all right?" she called out good-naturedly with a smile as she settled back into a fighting stance. "It's been about three months since I threw down."

"That's some kind of record for you, isn't it?" Mac shot out from the deck where he stood next to me.

Her smile widened slightly but she kept her eyes on Uncle Angus. "Yeah, it is."

"Have you been working out?" Uncle Angus asked, obviously getting winded from the match.

"Well, yeah, I gotta be prepared, you know?" she shot back.

He seemed a little surprised at her answer and lowered his hands slightly. "For what?"

"Fighting werewolves."

"Just don't hurt Angus," Mac told her sternly in a tone that made me smile. When Uncle Angus laughed out loud, his voice took on a harder note. "Don't hurt her either."

Eliza ended up sparring with Glenn, Cara and Stephen while I stood there watching. I was surprised though when Mac came forward and she begged off, saying she was tired and needed a drink. She didn't fool me, however, when Uncle Angus came forward, boasting how it was time for him to wipe the dirt with Mac's carcass again like he used to do when they were "wee bairns" as he put it. I saw how she watched the two of them fight with an anxious look in her eyes that said she was barely holding herself from stopping the two brothers all together. Even by using only his brawl and wits Mac managed to hold his own during the match and walked away with a few minor bruises and cuts.

I was really looking forward to getting to know my uncle. In the short amount of time that I had been able to spend with him I knew that he was very funny, incredibly good natured and usually called everyone by a nickname rather than by their given one. Siofra was Sprite and he usually called Mac, Macalister, and Aunt Cara was Cara Mia. Lass or Lassie was what he usually called me and I loved it when he and Aunt Cara would come in from their house and he would call out warm greetings for everyone.

One morning, about midway through the week I got my chance when my Grandmother asked me to go into town to the grocery store for her.

"With all the extra people around my pantry is nearly empty," she said as she handed me the list. Just then, Uncle Angus came into the kitchen as well to refill his tea cup. He and Aunt Cara and Stephen, who was staying the week in Galway as well, had arrived about an hour ago and the whole family was sitting on the back deck and sipping the secret blend of tea that my Grandmother had been making herself for the last twenty years. She claimed it helped give you long life. I didn't know whether to believe her or not

"Take Angus with you," Grandmother said, taking his cup from his outstretched hand as he was reaching toward the kettle that she always kept full of the tea now that her sons had returned.

"Take me where, Ma?" he asked as she took his cup to the sink and rinsed it out.

"I've asked Corrine Mackenzie to run into town for me," she informed him as she put the cup in the sink and turned to face us. "She'll need help and since you've finished your tea-"

"Of course I'll go with her," he said as he dropped a quick peck on her cheek and straightened again to look at me. "Come on then, lass," he said as he swept close to me and wrapped an arm around my waist so that he could grandly dance the both of us toward the front door. "An outing with your uncle, can you handle bein' seen with the likes of me, lass?"

"Be careful, son," Grandmother called out before I had a chance to respond. "Corrine isn't used to wild drivers the likes of you. Don't you be scarin' the girl."

"I won't Ma," he said as he looked at me and rolled his eyes, his grin widening.

In a matter of minutes we were in the car and on our way to town, my uncle humming along with the old Irish folksong that was playing on the radio. I looked at the opportunity as a way to pick his brain to see if I could get some answers.

"Do you know anything about this destiny that Mac has to fulfill?" I asked as I looked out the side window, trying to appear to be making conversation.

Uncle Angus shrugged, keeping his gaze on the road ahead. "I've heard what Glenn's ma said about him. Most people think he's fulfilled that one, so I don't know what they want with him now."

I thought that I remembered something about Glenn's mother being a mage but the particulars slipped my mind for a moment. "Glenn's mother?" I asked, looking over at him. "I don't know what you mean."

"They say she was a great seer, before the vampires killed her," Uncle Angus replied solemnly as he turned onto the main road that led to town. "I never met her, but she knew Da long before any of us was born. Sent Da home to Ireland to find Ma. I'm surprised you haven't heard the tale."

That's where I had heard of her before. Abrianna Landry was the renowned seer of her generation, just as my friend Samantha was of ours. She had been killed by vampires many years ago and it was because of it that Glenn had begun to hunt them in the first place before he had met Mac or Eliza. I also remembered the story of how she had met my Grandfather in the south of France some years ago and she sent him back to Ireland so he could meet my Grandmother. It was a romantic love story that I heard almost every time I came to Ireland to visit and one that never gets old over time.

I snapped my fingers, recognizing now who my uncle was talking about. "That's right. I'd forgotten that she was Glenn's mom. It's too bad...you know...the way she died." So she had seen something in Mac, huh? I wondered what it was but I didn't get a chance to ask as my uncle went on.

"Bloody vampires," he replied, continuing to watch the road. "Always mucking up things that aren't to their liking. Still, it was part of Mac's destiny, I suppose, so we can't be too hard on the fiends, seeing as how he was one. Glad I missed that bit of his life." He glanced over at me as he drove. "None of us really know what destiny's got in store for him now. The wolf's not real talkative when it comes to spilling the beans on that subject."

I studied him for a moment silently, and I suddenly realized how long he had been dead and what it must be like now for him to suddenly be thrust back into his life so abruptly. He was still the same, but everyone else had moved on. They had created a new life that didn't include him. "Do you remember anything from when you were gone?" I asked in a soft voice.

Dead silence permeated the inside of the car for a moment, and I wondered if I had asked the wrong thing. "Aye," he replied after a minute.

"I'm sorry," I said, gulping uncomfortably. "It's just that I've never known anyone who was... you know... except for maybe my Avatar, but I guess that's different. Sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

He glanced at me again. "Tis all right, lass. Death comes to us all, it's natural to be curious about it, but I'd hate to darken your day with tales of the other side. Its happiness ya should be considering now with me and your Da back among the living."

I smiled back at him, glad that he wasn't offended by my questions. "What was Mac like as a kid?"

Uncle Angus shook his head in mock sadness. "Always getting in trouble, that one. Running after the lasses and so sure of his own worth that he was always forgetting what he was supposed to be doing." He paused for a moment, and then grinned in my direction. "Or maybe that was me I'm thinking of."

His features turned serious and I could see that the question was taking him back in time to when he and Mac were children. "Macalister was a serious lad, always concerned with the 'right' thing to be doing. Never had a lick of fun unless I dragged him into it, kicking and wailing like a babe, for all he was older than me. Trying to keep Sprite wrapped in that pretty bubble she was living in when I kept telling him she had to face the hard realities some time."

I could tell from his half smile that this second story wasn't exactly the truth, but it was a whole lot closer than the first one and in that instant I think I loved him the most for the way he told it. When he was teasing a little and telling the truth at the same time. I mourned for the time I hadn't know Mac when I was a child so that I had learn about him know from my uncle rather than experiencing it all when it happened.

"I wish I could have known him then," I said, looking out the window. "I feel like a fool because I wasted the time that we had together before the demon. I figured we had all the time in the world and now it seems like I've been given a second chance to get to know him." I was taking a risk, being so honest with him, but it felt right as I looked back at him again. "I'm not sure how, though. He's not the same person that I met, not really. He isn't a vampire anymore."

I could almost see the inner workings of his mind grinding away as he expertly pulled into the grocery store and parked the car. "Aye, he's different than he was, but not as much as you might be thinking," he said as he turned off the car and turned to face me. "It's not easy being a father, and he didn't have much practice before you showed up, none that he remembered at any rate. Vampires are cold-blooded creatures; I'm sure he wasn't all warm and cozy, now was he? Didn't exactly fit the picture in your mind of your Da?"

I turned to face him as well and I could feel my features pull together slightly as I thought about how to respond. I had never thought about what I had ever expected out of Mac before. Part of me still felt a certain amount of loyalty to my parents, that no one could ever take their place in my life. Another part felt the familiarity I found in Mac and Eliza.

"Mac is nothing like my Dad. I guess I should say that he wasn't anything like my Dad. There was always something that he had to do...something that he needed to finish. I think he had a lot of responsibility in Salem with the vampires, but I'm not really sure. He tended to not say too much about it to me. I guess I was wrong for not speaking up and saying, 'Hey, can you take just a minute so I can talk to you about this...or that...or whatever.'"

"It wasn't your Da's choice to die that night in Baltimore, Corrine," he said, using my name for the first time. His face was set with the most solemn of expressions that made me understand clearly that he was being incredibly serious about what he was saying. "If he hadn't fallen to the undead, he would have been there to bandage your knees and your heart when you were a wee lass, you know that don't you? Perhaps you were too busy expecting Cormac to fail as a DA that you didn't give him a chance to compete with the man who raised you. Or is that man so big in your heart that you've no room for your own flesh and blood?"

"No, that's not it at all, Uncle," I was quick to respond. "I'll admit, I didn't know what to think when I found out that my real father was a... vampire of all things. Not that it fundamentally changed the way I looked at him or anything; it just took some getting used to is all, like the fact that I have the ability to do some pretty cool stuff myself. I like to think that Mac would have been a good father if given the chance. Maybe he and Eliza will have the opportunity for that now that he's mortal again...but that doesn't change the fact that he wasn't there. And Diana as my witness, I'm not holding that against him. He didn't have a choice and I know that."

I looked down at my hands, taking a moment to figure out how to word what I about to say. "I wasn't expecting Mac to fail as a father since I didn't know what to expect from him anyway. Does that make sense? I pretty much knew that I was adopted my whole life and I knew how blessed I was to have Mom and Dad as my parents. But they don't know anything about what I am or that I come from an entire family of mages...and werewolves," I added with a grin and Uncle Angus smiled at as well. "I'd like to keep it that way until I have a choice to tell them in my own way. I guess the trouble that I'm having is keeping the balance."

"So you haven't told them you found your Da's family at all?" he asked astonished.

"No. I didn't know how to explain to them that I had found my real father...and oh, by the way he's a vampire. Much less the fact that before he became one he was a mage...from a family of Mages...and werewolves." I wasn't trying to be a smart ass. I just wanted to express that I didn't know how to explain the whole story to my parents so it was best and easier to not say anything for now. But that was getting old, too.

"Of course, he's not a vampire anymore, so that's no longer an issue. Are you ashamed to tell them what you are?"

It was my turn to shake my head. "Not at all. I just don't know how to tell them. I also wondered if keeping it a secret wasn't the best thing anyhow. Did you know that the Tremere sent someone to the farm to ask about Eliza? I don't want them hurt, Uncle. And if I have to lie to them I will. I just don't know..."

Uncle Angus seemed sympathetic as he reached out to take my hand. "There's no need to tell them what you are, lass. As to telling them about us, it's not going to change the way they feel about you, is it? Or you about them? Telling them the truth about us, all or half of it, isn't going to put them in less or more danger."

I thought about what he said for a minute and had to admit that it did make sense, but I still wasn't totally convinced. "Do you really think so? I really hate not telling them. I mean, if you were me, would you just tell them that I found my family? What about the other stuff?"

He shrugged. "I suppose you could tell them the family's known for living long, drinking hard, and toasting the morning sun with a bit of whisky, but it might put them off," he joked with a grin. "Next to that, werewolves, dream walkers and half vampires don't sound too bad, does it?"

I laughed out loud at that one. "No, not really," I said, squeezing his hand. "Thank you for listening. Sorry to bog you down with all this."

"Don't be worryin' about it, lass. You're wee troubles are nothing compared to that monster of a shopping list your grandma gave us," he said in all seriousness as he looked down at the enormous list I held in my other hand. "Think we can handle it, or should we call in reinforcements?"

I tried to adopt his tone but the grin on my face gave me away. "Oh, I think it will be a stretch but we can manage."

Chapter 8 – Getting to Know You

"I will keep your secrets safe"

Poe

"Dear Johnny"

I was ready to have a real talk with Mac after my little outing with Uncle Angus. Later that afternoon I found him and Gwrhyr out on the Point, a secluded area on my grandparent's property that overlooked the Atlantic Ocean. It was a very tranquil spot and one that every member of the family came to at some point to connect with Gaia. I loved it here.

"Hey Mac, what are you doing?" I asked quietly as I approached them. I hoped that I wasn't interrupting anything important between the pair. Mac and the wolf had been practically inseparable since his return so I didn't want to intrude on what looked like could be a training session for them. Mac was sitting crossed legged on the cold ground and Gwrhyr was sitting across from him.

Mac looked up at me and smiled briefly and then returned his gaze to the wolf. "Could you please give us some privacy?" he asked the animal. Gwrhyr nodded in his half wolf, half man way at Mac's request, and then glanced up at me.

"Greetings, Corrinemacenzie," he said in my mind, a second before disappearing from my sight all together. Like he hadn't even been there at all.

I blinked in surprise but knew that I really shouldn't be. It only seemed natural that since he was Mac's guide that the wolf would have some kind of mystical abilities himself. So he could disappear with a thought? Okay, that's cool and handy if you really thought about it. My gaze went to Mac again and found that he was grinning at me now. "Nothing now," he said, finally answering my initial question as if it wasn't a big deal how the wolf had carried out his request. "What's up luv? You and that heap of your Uncle Angus finish the shopping."

I laughed outright at that his blasé attitude and sat down next to him. "Yes, we've finished," I informed him as I settled myself to closely mimic his position and glanced over at him. "Uncle Angus is a really good listener and his advice isn't too bad, either." I fell silent for a moment as I found myself just looking at him for the first time in a while. As if I needed to remind myself that he was really here. Really back from the dead. It was something that I had noticed the rest of the family doing as well with both Mac and Uncle Angus and I hoped I didn't make him uncomfortable. "I'm really glad you're back," I told him for what I was sure was the fiftieth time.

Mac reached over and put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close to him so he could kiss my temple. "I'm glad to be back," he said with a sigh before continuing in a tone that didn't reflect a happy mood. "I'll see what I can do about making it last a little longer."

He shook himself, as if he realized that he was being a party pooper, and attempted to perk up. "So, just out fer a wee trip around the property?"

I understood how intensely the emotions were plaguing him in that moment and I looked up at him as I tried to put on a bright face. "No. I was looking for you." I dropped my head to rest it on his shoulder as I looked out over the Point at the incredible beauty Gaia offered to us. "I was hoping we could get a few minutes together."

"Well child, here we are. What's on your mind?"

I rubbed my cheek against the soft flannel of his jacket sleeve and wondered how best to start as I slipped my arm around his waist. I could feel the cold that he now emanated all the time but I was used to the fact that he was cold to the touch so it didn't bother me. What was odd was that he now warmed after a while. "You're warm," I said after I felt it. I took a deep breath before I spoke again. "When you died I felt a hole in my life that I've never felt before. Of course my first concern was for Eliza...I had to be sure that she wouldn't do something to join you...I can't imagine what it was like for her to lose you twice and I don't ever want to find out."

I lifted my head then and looked up at him. "After the worst was over I realized how I had wasted our time together in Salem. I thought that we had all the time in the world to... you know... spend time together. Do you know what I mean?"

He didn't say anything as I talked; just having him listening and holding me was nice. "You didn't waste any time," he assured me, squeezing my shoulders slightly. "I wouldn't change a single moment of it." He paused. "How could you have known this would happen?"

"It shouldn't have mattered," I insisted. "I know that I'm eager to learn about magic and that I'm going to school, but that shouldn't have stopped me from getting to know you." I took a deep breath and said something I didn't think I ever had to him that I hoped he understood. "You're my father... and even though Mom and Dad are my mom and dad, that doesn't mean that I don't want a father/daughter relationship with you."

He grinned in my direction and squeezed me again. "I'm not planning on going anywhere for a long time, so we'll have a good long time to catch up. Where do you want to start?"

I hugged him back and laugh slightly. "That's good to know. I don't know... what exactly happens to you now? Everyone is talking about your destiny. What can I do to help?"

"Destiny," he snorted, letting me know that he hadn't changed in the amount of credit he gave the thought of his life being planned out already. "Ya do know I've never believed in it, don't ya? Never gave it a second thought. But... here I am. Back from the... well, back. Again."

He looked at the spot where Gwrhyr had sat and continued, "With a mystic wolfie guide and all. Somethin' out there must have a plan for me. As for you my little one," he said as he leaned over to kiss my cheek. "I think you're doing your part to help right now."

I reached up to move aside a lock of hair that had fallen onto his forehead. "Oh yeah? How's that? By being a royal pain?" I asked with a bright smile on my face.

He laughed and the sound filled my heart with love for him. "No, no. By just bein' yourself. If there is such a thing as Destiny, I damn well sure ain't looking for it! It'll have to find me if it wants me to do something."

I didn't want to put a damper on the moment, but I knew I wouldn't sleep well if I didn't ask. "Speaking of things looking for you, what about the Tremere?" I inquired in a low voice. "Are you guys going back to the island to live?"

The question didn't seem to faze him at all. "I'm sure I can come up with something to keep them out. But mostly I am hoping that if I don't get in their face, they won't get in mine."

I looked down to the leg of his faded jeans and ran a finger over the texture of the material that had softened with many washings. "James stopped by my apartment after the... um, funeral. He said he was there to give his condolences but he kept asking about Eliza." I knew that I had a worried look on my face but I also had an idea that Eliza wouldn't have told

him about the Tremere yet. She would have wanted to shelter him from the knowledge as long as possible but I didn't think he would appreciate it anymore than I would.

"They will only find out that you're back if one of us tells them and I really don't see that happening, but they are looking for Eliza. Someone was out at the farm asking, too. Do you think if I told someone that she was dead that they would believe it? That she was so grief stricken that she ended her life? They would have to let it go then, right?"

If it were possible he pulled me even closer to him. "It might be worth a try, but if the Clan wants something bad enough, they won't be dissuaded very easily." He chuckled slightly. "Hell, even death isn't permanent anymore."

"That's true, but I don't want you both to worry about them," I told him, trying to show him that I could be looked at as an equal in this situation. "I'm sure that Grandfather can help you with something. Think about my suggestion and let me know if you want me to drop the story in the right ear." I fell silent for a moment as I remembered something that I had overheard Mac and Grandfather talking about and wondered if I dared ask about it. "What's that 'belated' thing that you were talking to Grandfather about?" I asked, taking the plunge and holding my breath.

Mac sighed deeply and was silent, obviously thinking about how to answer. When he finally looked at me I could see the hurt in his eyes. "Can I tell you after we get it fixed?" he asked earnestly. "Just know it was done with good intentions. It is serious and if it happens..." he dropped off and shook his head slowly.

I could see that the subject really bothered him and I felt my features as they wrinkled slightly with concern as I regarded him thoughtfully. "Well, okay," I finally conceded, not really willing to wait but knowing that he wouldn't tell me if he wasn't ready. "But if there is anything I can do to help, I will. If it's involving Eliza, I'll do whatever I can. Goddess knows she's been there enough for me and I would do whatever I had to in order to make things right for her again."

In an attempt to once again lighten the mood between us, I gave him a slight shove in the ribs with my shoulder. "I'm sure that whatever it is, Grandfather can fix it," I told him.

"I'm worried about him too," I continued, not wanting to add to Mac's worries, but realizing that he would want to know about what had happened while he was gone. "Everything that's happened seems to have put a strain on him. How old is he anyway? I don't think anyone has ever said."

Mac sighed again. "Yea, even magic canna keep age at bay forever," he said with a slight grin. "Let's just say Da's seen over a century and leave it there." He leaned toward me like he was about to whisper a secret. "He dosena really like to be reminded."

Over a hundred years old? The idea made me laugh in disbelief as she leaned into him as well. "Are you serious? What about Grandmother?"

"Ma is an old fashioned lady, you never ask their age." He grinned again. "And if you do, watch yer back side for the wooden spoon. Only her and Da know for sure. All I do know for sure is that they looked this way when Sean was born." He lowered his voice before saying, "Though you'll do to not repeat his name."

"Who is Sean?" I had never heard of anyone in the family named Sean.

Mac took a deep breath as he pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. "Sean was me older brother. He was killed the year before I was born, in Germany."

I couldn't have been more surprised. "Older brother? Oh my god, I never knew." I glanced over the edge of the Point in astonishment. "What happened to him?"

"He joined the army in '39, and was killed in '43," Mac explained. "He's buried over there somewhere. He left 'cause him and Da got into some fight. Over what, I don't know."

I listened intently; wanting to know all I could about this mysterious uncle I had never known existed. "That doesn't sound like Grandfather, does it? It must have been something big, then. Grandmother must have been devastated."

"Neither of them will talk of 'im," Mac confessed, and then eyed me with a warning in his eyes. "And I'd advise you to let it be. I found a picture of the three of 'em once, when I was a lad, taken when Sean was a babe. And another of him about 13. I brought 'em down and asked Ma and Da who he was..." his mouth hung open, but nothing came out.

I waited for him to answer but when one isn't forthcoming I turned to face him more fully.

"Was he a hunter then?" I asked. "Like Glenn and you and Eliza were? Did he abuse his powers or something? I mean it would have to be something pretty bad if they won't even talk about him..."

I was talking more to myself than to Mac, trying to figure out the great mystery behind no one talking about Sean. I almost didn't hear Mac when he spoke.

Mac took a hit from the cigarette. "No, he was nothing. Normal."

I went still as his words sunk in, then looked at him in amazement. "Normal?" I asked surprisingly. "Nothing. Not a mage... or a werewolf?" I looked toward the ocean again. "Wow, I'd never thought of that. I guess I just took it for granted that everyone in the family was SOMETHING..." Which was true. At first I thought it was amazing to come from a family where you were either a mage, or a werewolf, or a dhampyr. But to be nothing... normal in every sense of the word... I could see where he might have had an issue with everyone else.

Mac looked a little uncomfortable. "I believe he was... something. Nothing supernatural or the like, but rather he was meant to teach a lesson." He paused for a moment. "I can but guess what that lesson was. Or still is."

He looked at me then and his grin was back in place. "Someday when yer heap Uncle has had his fill o' the pint, and starts singing sad songs, you may well get him to tell you more." He pulled me closer again. "Cause he knows more about such things than he lets on."

I looked up at him again and barely caught his wink before it was gone. "As do I, but we will not be alone for much longer. Your grandmother is heading this way." He tossed the cigarette off the cliff and wiped his hands on his jeans. "Was there anything else you wanted to talk about, luv?"

I thought for a moment as I lowered my cheek to his shoulder again. "Not really. I... I don't know. I'm just glad to have you back. I love you, Mac."

I heard him murmur that he loved me back and we sat in silence for the few moments of solitude that we had together. Soon Grandmother entered the clearing with Gwrhyr trotting beside her to tell us that dinner would be ready soon and that we should get back to the house to wash up.

Mac and I stood and headed back with her. I felt more confident that I was on my way to developing a stronger relationship with my father. There didn't seem to be any boundaries between us and I felt glad for that.

A small twinge of doubt entered my mind though as the three of us started down the path that led back to the house. A twinge that had nothing really to do with Mac and everything to

do with my Dad. It was guilt that began to nag in my chest, especially my heart. Guilt that I could and did share the truth of my life with Mac and Eliza, but not with my parents. Since there wasn't much I could do about it at the moment, I decided to push the guilt aside for now and think about it later, like after I returned to Salem. For now I had Mac back and the family was whole again. I would think about my parents, and what I might or might not tell them, later.

The following week was spent being with family and friends. My grandparents allowed word to leak out to selected people about what had happened, so usually there were close family friends as guests for dinner. Their faces I had only seen a couple of months earlier at Mac's funeral, but now they were filled with joy at the brother's return. My Grandfather was sure to tell each of them not to divulge that Mac and Angus were back from the dead and they were all quick to agree. No one wanted the Tremere to catch wind of the knowledge and come knocking on one of our doors.

I found out during that week that Gwrhyr could only talk to mages and werewolves, leaving Eliza out of the loop. Grandfather made a talisman for her to wear so she could communicate with him. I found it quite fascinating to find a mystical beastie in our midst but I refrained from asking too many questions and being rude. There was plenty of time for that and besides, he was Mac's guide, not mine.

I also learned that Mac hadn't come back as a mage, as he had been before his embrace. His avatar had been shattered when he had been turned into a vampire and never again, in this life or the next, would he have those abilities back. Now he was a sorcerer. I wasn't quite sure what that meant but I got the feeling that it was something not so great in mage society. I vowed not to care. Mac was back and that's all I cared about. That and the fact that Eliza wasn't sad anymore.

Dawn would find Mac out at the Point with the wolf, he never missed a sunrise in that first week to my knowledge and sometimes I was there with him as well, but most of the time it was Eliza whose hand he was holding as the sun rose over the land to greet the day.

Chapter 9 – Pizza, Beer and Dreaming Don't Mix

"Come here
Pretty please
Can you tell me where I am"
Poe
"Haunted"

I think it was the fact that I still felt my upset stomach that first tipped me off to the fact that I was dreaming. It was a vague awareness, but one that made me put my hand over the offending area for stability or something as I walked into the bar. It was O'Grady's, the pub in Galway where we had gone the previous evening for a celebration of pizza and beer before everyone went back home that next day. The same pizza that left me feeling like a lead weight had taken up residence in my gut and caused me to have this strange dream to begin with.

Inside the pub was packed full of people and they all seemed to be talking all at once. As I moved toward the back of the building through the crowd, I was no longer in the pub in Galway, but in some working class bar instead that I didn't recognize. The people stayed the same around me but as I continued to press my way in further, the bar kept changing and more frequently with each step I took. Some of the interiors I recognized, the pub flashed by a few times, the bar in Nashville that I had been to with Jared once when Eliza was worried her mother would come after me, and Jesters in Salem where the Black Rose Coven liked to hang out. Most of the places I didn't recognize and I held my stomach tighter as it rolled with all the spinning and swirling going on around me.

Finally, the noise started to lessen and I was able to pick out individual voices as I pushed my way even deeper into the press of bodies as if something were pulling me forward. I couldn't identify any of them but I was able to tell by body language and facial expressions that they weren't happy about something.

I saw someone a few feet away from me that looked like Bobby Lonetree, a werewolf and one of Glenn and Siofra's friends from Nashville. I tried to get his attention as he looked out over the crowd from the chair that he was standing on, but he never looked my way. I stumbled over my own feet a little and tried to catch myself on the shoulder of a man sitting at a table that I was passing, but my hand passed right through him.

It was then that I knew for sure that I was in someone else's dream. Jared had begun to take me through some low level training exercises in dream walking as part of my studies but I wasn't allowed to go out on my own yet. So I already knew that people and objects weren't always solid in a person's dream and if you were visiting them, nine chances out of ten said that you wouldn't be able touch anything. That was how I knew that I was dream walking, but in whose dreams I didn't know.

I had a feeling that I would find out who if I continued to follow the pull that was leading me toward the back of the building, so I pressed on. The yelling of the crowd picked up again and I recognized a group of people that were sitting at a nearby table. I knew them from pictures I had been shown at Glenn and Siofra's. They were friends of Glenn's that had been

killed during the time when Mac had first come to America and they all hunted vampires together.

"Traitor," I heard one of them yell in the direction I was heading as they raised fists to wave them in a threatening manner.

"Murderer," came from another as the group of them started to shout all at once again, making it impossible for me to decipher anything else. I craned my neck in order to see who they were talking about, but all I saw was the constant press of people and I kept on pushing my way through them.

Then I saw Jared off to one side. His face was awash with emotion and hatred like I had never seen in the time I have known him. He opened his mouth and vehemently shouted something in the same direction as the others but all I was able to hear was, "left us all to die."

At another table I saw Mac's vampire sister, Christina Kline, and her husband Jason sitting with an older gentleman who looked forlornly over one shoulder in the same direction that the others were shouting toward. Sadly, he turned his gaze back to the glass of blood sitting on the table in front of him. Christina had her hand on the man's shoulder as if she were attempting to comfort him, all the while glaring off at whatever was happening to make the man so sad. Jason, obviously upset by his wife's distress, stood and yelled, "He should have never given you the gift. You don't deserve it."

The next table held Glenn, Siofra, and Bobby, who had made his way to the table without me seeing him. They were angry and sad at the same time. I heard Siofra yell out, "How could you have allowed it to happen?" and I looked ahead of me but I still couldn't see who all the insults were being thrown at through the crowd.

Sitting together at another table was James Price and a man that I didn't know. He was young and good looking and dressed in a suit similar in design to the one that James was wearing but he didn't hold himself in the same manner as Mac's child. He looked strangely familiar to me and I realized that I had seen him following me a few times in Salem after Mac's death. I wondered who he was at the same moment that I remembered that Mac had taken on another ghoul just before he and Eliza left for that last trip Europe. I figured that had to be Eddie, the man that had helped Eliza escape.

Even from this distance I could see that James had his fangs dropped and that the other man was cleaning off an ornate dagger of some sort that he easily twisted in his deft fingers.

"He took my life from me," I heard James say to his companion as he adjusted his tie and sat back comfortably in the chair. "I could have done so much more."

"He left me masterless again," the other man countered with an unmanly pout. "Do you know how hard it is to find a good master?"

I was finally nearing the back wall of the bar when I saw my Grandparents, Uncle Angus, Aunt Cara, Stephen, and myself sitting at the next to last table. We were all facing the last two tables and I heard my Grandfather harshly say, "I didn't raise you to act this way boy! What were you thinking?"

My Grandmother was weeping openly so that she had to be supported by my Grandfather and Uncle Angus. "Look at what you've done!" Stephen roared as he jumped to his feet and pointed at Grandmother. "How could you do this to her?!"

I knew that the last table had to hold at least one of them but just the same, I was surprised to see Eliza sitting alone, with her back to me. I was scared when I saw that she

was bleeding profusely from many slashes on her arms and back. I rushed forward to stand by her side and saw more gashes on her chest, but none of them appeared to be fatal, just torturous. I wanted to touch her but I knew that my hand would only pass through her so I didn't.

"You left me alone," she said, looking straight ahead of her, completely oblivious of my presence next to her. "Not once, but twice. You left me with a baby and no way to take care of her, you bastard. Then you talked me into this..."

I didn't have to look to know that it was Mac sitting at the table by the wall, but I did anyhow. He sat there alone, facing the rest of the hate filled crowd and taking it all in without argument. He was weeping openly. Sometimes, when the light changed around him, the tears looked like blood and I wanted to go to him and sooth him.

I left Eliza and went to the table to sit next to him, knowing full well that he wouldn't be aware of my presence beside him, but feeling that I could help him anyhow. When I looked at Eliza again she was looking down at the table, her hair falling on either side of her face and blood dripping from her lips. She lifted her head suddenly and looked up; right at me it seemed, with sharp, vampiric fangs protruding from her open mouth that glistened with red blood that now dripped down her chin and onto the table and her shirt.

I screamed in terror at the sight of her in the form that I knew she would rather die than become, and I shot upright in bed, my heart thundering in my chest like a stampede of wild horses. I was fully awake now and scared out of my mind. I had no doubt that I had just been in Mac's dreams, but I was having a hard time understanding what had happened around me. The obvious conclusion was that the accusations voiced by his friends and family in the dream didn't show how any of us actually felt, instead they were voicing the arguments he must be having with himself.

I looked at the clock next to the bed and saw that it was almost four in the morning. There was no way in hell that I was going to be able to go back to sleep anytime soon, so I grabbed my robe and put it on as I crept downstairs, intending to make a cup of tea that I hoped would calm my nerves and stop my hands from shaking. I had a feeling that seeing Eliza like that was going to haunt me for a while and I wondered what her presence like that meant to Mac.

I skidded to a halt in the doorway to the kitchen when I saw Mac sitting at the table, looking out the large picture window with his back to me. If I hadn't been sure that the dream I had stepped into was his before, the way he was dejectedly sitting in the chair would have confirmed it for me. He was slouching in a way that I know Grandmother wouldn't have allowed at her table, one foot kicked out in front of him under the table and his right hand resting on the placemat before him.

"Hey," I whispered as I entered the room and he turned slightly to look at me over his shoulder, his lips tilting slightly in greeting. "What are you doing up so early?" I asked as I crossed the room to the stove where I turned on the burner under the kettle that my grandmother always kept full. I already had an idea why he was up, but I wanted to see if he would bring the subject up to me instead. After all, I shouldn't have been in his dream to begin with and it seemed rude to just bring it up. I kind of felt like a peeping Tom.

"Morning, luv," he replied as he fingered a frayed corner of one of the placemat on the table. "Just couldn't sleep anymore. What has you up at this hour?"

He was lying, but I chose to not confront him with it for the moment. I moved to his side and hesitantly touched his shoulder. "Weird dream. I couldn't go back to sleep. I thought I'd have a cup of Grandmother's tea."

He smiled as he gently covered my hand with his and squeezed it tenderly. "Yeah, I have weird dreams after eating pizza late too. Want to talk about it?"

I looked down at him and then dropped so that I was squatting beside him. The haunted look in his gaze was all the further confirmation I needed as I turned my hand in his so that our palms touched. "It was you, wasn't it?" I whispered.

He looked away quickly, shame and anguish visible in his hazel eyes. "What was me?" he asked.

Usually I thought that using magic against a friend or family member was wrong but I knew how stubborn Mac could be and how he didn't like to share what he was thinking about. I looked over at the flame on the stove and used it as a focus to change my thoughts to become one with his. I didn't want to read into his deepest recesses or anything. I just wanted to be there for him after having what I knew had to be a horrific dream for him. I could still see Eliza with fangs and the vision left a chill in my spine.

As I had suspected he was ashamed and embarrassed by the things he thought people had said to him in his subconscious. He was very shaken by the experience, but I could feel the love that he felt for me at being here with him. "I cannot speak for anyone else," I told him, trying to hold his gaze in mine, but his eyes moved downward, "I would never think, much less say those things to you. You know that, right?"

The pretences were gone as his gaze met mine and he spoke quietly. "Aye. But it was me thinking them. My own conscience." He turned his head away in shame.

I put my hand on the side of his face and turned it until he looked at me. "We are only human," she said, then rolled my eyes as I realized we weren't really, and continued, "in a sense, anyhow. We aren't perfect by any means and we shouldn't expect to be. You can't hang onto thoughts that you were wrong for any of your actions because you have always looked to make the right decisions. You've never let me down, Mac, or anyone else for that matter. Anything that has ever happened that may have hurt the people you love wasn't your fault. Bad things happen sometimes. It's what we do afterward that matters."

Mac pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly against him. We stayed that way for a time and as I felt his heart beat next to mine I knew that we were going to be okay. It had been less than a week. There were lots of things that everyone needed to adjust to now that Mac and Uncle Angus had returned.

He grinned when we finally pulled apart. "Ya do know its poor manners to be walkin' uninvited or with out good cause," he said, trying his best to imitate Grandfather's voice for his warning.

I smiled guiltily as my eyes met his. "I didn't mean it. Really. I've never done that on my own before. Jared has led me through some exercises before, but always with strict guidelines. I don't know how I ended up in your dream." Thankfully, before he had a chance to lecture me further, the teakettle started to whistle and I stood and touched his face with the tips of my fingers. "Do you want me to make you a cup of tea?"

He smiled, all traces of what he was about to say leaving him, but only on the surface. "Yes, luv. So, you've never done that before?"

"Not like that," I informed him in an excited, but low voice, so as to not wake anyone. I went to the cupboard and pulled out the tea things. "Jared has led me through some exercises, but he always makes sure that I promised not to try on my own. He and Rachel have been careful that Sam and I aren't pushing ourselves too much." Expertly, I made the tea and brought the two cups to the table then sat next to him.

Mac brought the cup to his lips and blew before taking a small sip. "So, how *are* your studies going?"

I smiled. "They're fine. It's a lot of work, but it's a good work, you know?" It was nice to talk to him about my magical studies and to see the pride in his eyes. It was something I wished I could share with my Dad because I knew I would see the same pleasure in his expression as well.

"Yeah, I remember." There was a hint of remorse in his voice that reminded me that he had once been and made himself, and that years ago he had gone through the same things I was going through now.

I didn't want to cause him to remember anything else that would trouble him further, so I reached over and put my hand over his. "How are you coming with Gwrhyr? Learning anything there?"

He shrugged. "I'm getting the basics good enough, but... I still have all the knowledge from all my other abilities bouncing around in me head. It's a little confusing at times."

I knew it was a huge admission for Mac to say this to me. I looked compassionately at him and squeezed his hand as I smiled reassuringly. "Do you remember everything from before you were a vampire now, too?"

"Aye," he replied softly. "Everything."

I sat quietly for a moment, allowing a comfortable silence to fall between us as we drank our tea. Finally I said, "I know that I've said this before, but if you ever want to talk about anything, I'm here. I know that Gwrhyr is supposed to be your guide, or whatever, but if you want me to do something... anything... I will."

He reached for my hand again. "I know you would luv. I know."

I glanced out the window and wondered how long it would be before the sun came up. "We should probably go back to sleep. I'm surprised that Grandmother hasn't heard us yet."

He smiled. "You go on; I think I'm up for the day."

I yawned widely and stretched before I stood and took my cup to the sink to rinse it. "Actually, a shower sounds wonderful right now. Why don't we meet back here in twenty minutes and go for a walk? I love Ireland in the spring and I want to soak in as much green as possible before I go back to Salem."

Mac smiled and nodded, his whole face agreeing to the idea. "Deal."

We met back in the kitchen about forty minutes later. Surprisingly enough, the house was still asleep and it felt like we had the world to ourselves for a time. We were heading out to the Point for a quick look when Gwrhyr joined us, his tongue lolling out of one side of his mouth in a way that was almost animal in nature compared to his usual human characteristics. He told us how he too loved the waking earth in spring and cajoled Mac and I until we raced the rest of the way to the Point, the wolf winning with his natural agility.

The morning was glorious. The sun was rising at our backs, causing the sea to reflect the orange and pink streaks of the new day sky and I felt the power of Gaia fill me as we stood in silence. As I held my father's hand, I thanked the Great Mother again for bringing him and

Uncle Angus back into our lives. I didn't know what the future held for us, but I did know one thing for certain, I wouldn't be seeing the haunted look in Eliza's gaze anymore and as long as that held I could deal with anything.

Chapter 10 – Ubla Dee Ubla Dah, Life Goes On...

*"Much better yet
Tell me something dangerous and true"*

Poe

"Not a Virgin"

Over the course of the next few months I spaced out my visits to the island more than I had before Mac's return. I had been going to see Eliza every over weekend, partly because I knew she wouldn't let herself get close to any of her neighbors she had met since she was laying low and partly because I myself was lonely in Salem and craved being with her. It was a need that I had always felt and one that I could never fully explain or understand. I remember how angry I had been with her when I was little when she had first gone off to work for the Tremere, leaving me behind with my parents on the farm. Of course I hadn't known the reason for her leaving then, all I knew was that I wasn't the same without her and that I hadn't wanted her to go in the first place. It seems silly and selfish to look back on it now, but I think it's because even then I knew I was linked to her and needed her in my life.

I wasn't taking a full class load since I was splitting my time between college and my magic studies. I had thought about quitting all together like Sam had, but part of me still loved psychology and I thought that maybe I could still get some use out of the degree, even if it took my longer to get it than I had intended. I could have easily kept up my studies in both and go to the island every other weekend, but I used my need to stay in Salem as an excuse to give Mac and Eliza more time to adjust to the new status quo. Neither of them had really changed since his return, but the demands of their relationship had change dramatically now that he was no longer a vampire and I knew they needed time to be alone and see how those changes affected them.

So I knocked my visits back to once a month or so. It was amazing to see the routine Eliza and Mac created for each other. A couple of weeks after they left Ireland, Mac became friends with the local sheriff, Cliff Hammond, and got a job with the small island police department as a result. He was now using the name Brendan McAllister and he and Eliza told their neighbors that they had been a couple before Eliza had moved. They had some troubles and she had gone there to get some space. After realizing how much he loved her, Mac followed and now they had made up and had decided that they both loved the island so much that they wanted to stay.

Mac was really different than the man I had first known. He was a great deal more tolerant now toward things. He had developed a 'live and let live' attitude and spent a great deal of time in meditation or silent discussion with Gwrhyr on how to use his new found abilities.

He also instituted some subtle, but major changes around the house. To an outsider, it looked as if some general improvements were being made to increase the value of the property. I knew better. He was tightening security in case the Tremere ever found them.

A dog door was added to the back door that was big enough for the wolf to use as well as Eddie. A better security system with motion and thermal sensors came next as well as a sturdier gate installed at the end of the driveway. A chain link fence was put up around the three land based sides of the property as well as a three and a half foot stone fence, complete

with spikes on top, between the outer fence and the house. A boardwalk was put in the sand between the beach and the house that completed a circle of stone and iron around the structure. A rock garden was added inside the stone fence with a range of rock sizes that would alert Mac or Eliza to any would be intruders who had to cross it to get to the house itself. Holly, roses and other thorny plants were added for their extra alert causing properties as well.

Mac also bought a twenty-five foot long boat that he named Daisy. The craft could make it to the mainland in all but the worst of storms and was parked in the boathouse near the house for easy access. Neither he nor Eliza ever said a word to me, but I knew it was in case they needed a quick get away if they were ever found and I really couldn't blame them for the precautions they were putting in place. I just hoped that they never needed them.

Glenn added a portal to their house like the one I used in my apartment so Mac and Eliza could travel freely between their home and Ireland, as well as to Nashville and my apartment in Salem, whenever they wanted.

I also noticed that Eliza became more tolerant of Mac, not letting herself get as angry at him as she used to. If she saw a fight coming, she would walk away before she lost her temper with him instead of going off heatedly and saying things she might regret later. As someone who watched them, I could see that she was still very vulnerable and it was a hard pill to swallow, seeing her that way. I was used to the raw and in your face Eliza. In the time since Mac's death she had shown all of us that she was breakable. That she was human in a sense and could take only so much, just like the rest of us.

The best news came when Mac finally asked her to marry him. I'll never forget the phone call from her and how calm she was when she told me the good news. Underneath, I could hear the happiness and excitement in her voice and I was really pleased for the both of them. They hadn't set a date yet, but just knowing it would finally happen was a great relief to the whole family.

The time when I was at the island was spent doing things as a family. There was a put-put golf course in town that we went to a couple of times. Ice cream cones always followed the fun filled contests of chasing around a little white ball from the stand next door to the course and the laughter that happened on those sunny, summer afternoons were a delight for all of us. We had picnics on the beach and played games at night after dinner.

I did stuff one on one with each of them, too. I was trying to teach Eliza how to cook, which she felt was a good thing since Mac needed to eat food now and she claimed that she didn't want to accidentally kill him. We started off with simple dishes that my Mom had taught me to make when I was young. Eliza didn't have a natural ability in the kitchen, but she was determined to learn and that was half the battle. There were many times when something, usually the main dish, was burned beyond recognition and had to be tossed in the garbage. Mac was always there to tease her just enough so that she didn't get too angry and was the one to suggest take out of some kind in the end.

I spent more time learning about natural security and how I could apply it with my magic to protect myself with Mac. He would take me to the shooting range that the members of the police department used so I could get more practice with the gun that he had given me back in Salem when he was still a vampire. I still didn't like the idea of using a gun, but I was convinced that it could be useful in slowing someone down enough so that I could get away if I had to. Mac taught me where to aim in order to accomplish the desired effect as well. A

bullet to the knee would incapacitate someone, even a vampire, long enough to give me a running start that could save my life.

I loved the nightly games we played at either the kitchen table or on the living room floor the best because it reminded me of similar times that Eliza and I had shared on cold winter nights on the farm with Mom and Dad. I always felt a tinge of guilt after those evenings, however. It reminded me of the time that I wasn't spending with my parents. It had become so easy to develop the close bond with Mac and Eliza because I knew that I could tell them everything and not have to worry about explaining what I was to them or that they might judge me for it.

Mac was always the one to give rational advice, like which classes to take or how far I should push myself when trying magic experiments on my own. Eliza had always been a natural nurturer, even though she never saw it that way. She was the protective one that always wanted to hold back and see what came at you before reacting.

Because of all my troubled thoughts, I was thinking more and more about telling my Mom and Dad what I was. At the very least I wanted to tell them that I knew Mac and Eliza were my parents, but I didn't know how I would explain everything. I was also thinking a lot about the conversation that I had with Uncle Angus and I knew that there was some truth to what he had said. One evening after dinner, while Eliza and I were doing dishes I decided to bring the subject up to her to see what she would say.

"I've been thinking about telling mom and dad the truth," I said as she dried a large mixing bowl. Mac was in the living room reading the paper so I thought I would approach Eliza alone first.

I watched as she visibly tensed at what I had said, her strokes with the towel becoming slightly jerky as she finished drying. "What were you thinking of saying?"

I shrugged as I took the bowl from her and put it away. "I'm not totally sure, but I think that they deserve to know the truth, don't you? I mean, they were honest with me the whole time I was growing up, right? About being adopted?" I turned to face Eliza again. "I guess I'm asking for your opinion. How do you think they will take it? The whole, unadulterated truth?"

She thought a moment. "Mac would say that 'Knowledge is Power'," she replied, clearly not liking it herself. "I'd have to ask if you're sure you want them to have that power over you. I'm not saying they couldn't handle it, just that it's a lot for anyone to handle. Remember what it was like when you found out?"

I leaned against the counter and thought about what he has said. "That's what's holding me back. Uncle Angus said that telling them about Mac and his family would be enough. That way they could at least know each other without being straight about the magic and the werewolves and all that. I'm asking for your opinion on what would be best. Make it a tell all? Or the bare minimum?"

"I don't know, Corrine. How are you going to explain that Mac came back? What if the Tremere go see them looking for me? I'd hate to have them find him again, Gaia only knows what they would do..."

I had never told Eliza about the strange visitors that my parents had after Mac's death. I hadn't wanted her to worry about them on top of everything else she was dealing with at the time. Then time had passed and I just never mentioned it. "The Tremere have already been to see them," I told her quietly. "Hopefully they are satisfied that they don't know anything. I don't know what else to do. Eventually they are going to get suspicious of something or I'm

going to slip and mess up the whole story. You know I don't lie very well and Dad said something last time I was home about not seeing me enough."

"You have to do what you think best, Corrine," she told me as she picked up a stack of plates and put them in the appropriate cabinet. "Maybe you should start out with 'here's my birth family' and see how it goes."

I folded the towel she had been using and hung it on the rack. "I'm sorry to put more on you," I said absently. "I'll think about it some more and we'll see what happens, okay? I don't want them in danger and Lord knows I don't need a repeat performance of how Brian took the truth. I'm going to my room to read, maybe meditate a little, okay?"

At the mention of Brian, Eliza came over and laid a comforting hand on my shoulder. I had finally told her and Mac about our break up on a previous visit and it had been really hard for me. They had both taken the admission very well, saying that if I was okay with it, then they were, too. "Oh, honey, I'm sure they wouldn't react the way that Brian did," she told me. "They love you, no matter what you do or what you are, they will always love you, just like I do, like Mac does." She pulled me into her arms then for a hug that made me feel much better.

"We'll see," I whispered into her hair.

"Luv, don't let your experience with Brian screw you up with everyone. Just because he couldn't handle it, doesn't mean no one will."

"I know. I just need to figure out what I'm going to do." I pulled back a little to look at her, and then kissed Eliza on the cheek. "I'm going to my room," I told her as I stepped away, giving her hand a squeeze before leaving the room and heading upstairs.

Once there I tried to meditate, but I couldn't seem to concentrate long enough to get anywhere. I knew that my best course of action was to talk to Mac about the situation but for some reason I hesitated. He always seemed to know exactly what was right way to go even if it was the path you were dreading, but I held back going to him. I think I was afraid of what he would say.

Part of me worried about what he would think of me wanting to let my parents know what was really going on in my life. He and Eliza and I shared this little world that was all our own. Of course my grandparents and aunts and uncles knew about all that had happened to all of us, but in the end it was the family bond that I shared with Mac and Eliza that the three of us 'came home' to here on the island. In the back of my mind I wondered if Mac would be jealous of my desire to be truthful with my parents. To be honest I think I was hesitant to pop the bubble on the family unit we shared and I was fighting myself in the need to be honest against the worry of changing our relationship.

Besides, Mac seemed preoccupied of late when he didn't think anyone was watching him. I noticed that he had a couple of long conversations on the phone with Grandfather and that he tried to keep it hush-hush. I didn't try to eavesdrop but I did over hear him say something about a Curse Belated and I was reminded of the conversation we had on the Point about it. Obviously he was working with Grandfather to do whatever it was to get rid of it, so I didn't want to add to his worries anymore than necessary.

In the end I decided to set aside the idea of telling my parents anything for the time being. When I felt the time was right I would talk to Mac, ask his opinion and go from there. I knew that I could talk to my grandparents as well, but I wanted to get Mac's take on it first so everything else would have to wait. There were more important things to think about anyhow,

namely the wedding and how to get the two of them to set a date. The rest could wait for now.

Chapter 11 – Left Out

"Time to gather up the splinters
Build a casket for my tears"

Poe

"Haunted"

October, 2001

Mac and Eliza got married on October 13, 2001, just down from the Point on the farm. Mac wore a white suit and Eliza looked surprisingly natural in a pretty pale dress that swirled around her ankles when she moved. Stephen's face was solemn as he stood before them, saying the vows the bound them together as man and wife, vows that Eliza had made sure didn't have 'obey' remotely located anywhere in them. Siofra and I stood by her side, while Uncle Angus and Glenn were next to Mac.

It was a small wedding, mostly family and a few friends. Bobby Lonetree, an old hunting friend of Mac and Eliza's, and his girlfriend, Jenna, and their son, Paul, were there as well as a few of my grandparent's friends, as we stood in the crisp fall air, the sun beaming brightly down on us.

After Stephen pronounced them man and wife, Glenn boomed, "About bloody time!" in a happy jibe that made everyone chuckle as they kissed.

It was a perfect day. No fights or arguments were had, even though some of the werewolves drank a little more than anticipated and my Grandmother had to quickly conjure up some ice to cool things off. Everyone had a great time, and all was happy.

My Grandfather's friends, a married couple and another man, stayed the night in the already cramped house and I got the feeling they were there for a reason other than the wedding but I didn't ask.

The next day started off just as bright as the one before. Mac and Eliza had decided to not go off somewhere for a honeymoon, but wanted to spend time with the family instead. I noticed that Eliza didn't eat anything at breakfast but didn't think much of it. She was a habitual early riser and since it was actually a brunch we were having because most of us had gotten up later than normal, I figured she had already eaten.

What I did find odd was that she wasn't drinking her usual coffee. For the most part we all drank tea while in Ireland with my grandparents but Eliza had never developed a taste for it. Grandmother kept a special store of coffee beans in the pantry for her new daughter-in-law but this morning Eliza was nursing a cup of tea that was offered only to her and one that she made a face for every time she took a sip.

She didn't eat anything at the late lunch my grandmother put out for us to help ourselves to when we felt hungry. My grandfather sat in a private huddle with his friends while Mac shared secret looks with Eliza, Glenn and Siofra. It was hard not to think something was going on but I knew better than to ask because I knew no one would tell me anything, using the old excuse that it was nothing for me to worry about. I decided to try my grandmother since she was the one who was usually the most open.

I found her in the kitchen making cookies. I strolled in, pretending to be casual, like I didn't have a motive for seeking her out.

"You leave those cookies be for a few minutes longer," she warned as she spooned dough onto a sheet. "They're still hot and I'll not hear you carry on when you burn your tongue."

"Okay," I told her with a smile as I reached into the cupboard for a cup for tea. "Chocolate chip?" I asked hopefully.

"Of course," she replied with a grin of her own. "Warm my cup as well, will you darlin'?"

I nodded and filled my cup and hers then returned the kettle to the stove. "What are Grandfather and his friends talking about?" I asked as I took her cup and set it next to her on the table.

"Alaster has been working on a very tricky spell, and the others are helping him out a little bit later," she said, quickly turning to put the full sheet in the oven. "Nothing to concern yourself with, dear."

"Does it have anything to do with that curse thing that Mac was talking to him about?" I asked, taking the plunge.

"Don't worry yourself over it, lass," she insisted, never quite meeting my eyes. "Braden and Alaster know what they're doing," she continued firmly as she pulled the next batch of baked cookies out of the oven. "Now why don't you go find Paul and Ian for me? I'm sure they'd like some of Grandma's cookies."

I knew a lost battle when I fought one. I turned to leave the room but stopped at the doorway and looked back at my grandmother. "If it involves Eliza then I am entitled to worry and I will no matter how much I'm told not to," I told her in a voice that was low, but respectful and full of sadness. "I'm supposed to be learning about Gaia and how she affects us but how can I when I'm sheltered from the real life matters that maybe I could help with." I left the kitchen and went to find the boys as I had been told and sent them in to the kitchen for their treat and I went for a walk to try to clear my head.

I was really beginning to hate this protective bubble that my family loved to put me in. The idea that I was twenty-one years old and treated like I couldn't handle reality was so ludicrous that made me mad most of the time. Now I felt slightly betrayed since they all thought so little of me that I had to be kept out of what was going on around me.

Eliza was my best friend, my mother, the most important person in my life. If something happened to her and I wasn't allowed to be there I would never forgive them. I didn't care if it left me completely alone in the world.

I had had enough but I wasn't sure what to do about it.

About two hours after my conversation with my Grandmother, Uncle Angus suggested that a bunch of us take a drive around the area to visit some nearby sites. He made it a point that those of us who weren't native to Ireland should come along with him and Aunt Cara for the outing since they knew the best places that you couldn't find in any of the tour books. So Bobby, Jenna, Paul and I got into our coats and assembled in the front of the house.

Siofra was going as well and asked if I would help her get Ian ready. I knew it was a diversionary tactic but I played along, knowing nothing I did would get me the knowledge I wanted.

It was obvious that my grandfather and his friends were about to start whatever spell they had put together and they didn't want the rest of us around when they did it. I was scared to leave, instinctively knowing that whatever was going on had something to do with Eliza and that I wasn't being allowed to be around to see what happened.

We piled in my uncle's van for the outing. I sat next to Siofra and Ian but I mostly looked out the window, preoccupied by what was happening back at the house. I was vaguely aware of Uncle Angus and Aunt Cara as they told us about the different places we drove by.

"What's wrong Corrine?" Siofra asked after a while. "You seem rather quiet."

I didn't want her to know that I was upset by whatever was happening to Eliza so I looked at her and hoped that the small smile I made my lips curl into was convincing enough. "Just tired, I guess," I lied. "It's been a busy day."

She looked at me then replied, "I suppose that it has been a busy past few days for all of us, hasn't it?"

I nodded at her comment. "Yes. But I'm in Ireland and that makes everything a little better. I love the green and the flowers. It reminds me of home on the farm."

Her expression turned serious. "Have you ever thought about staying here a while and studying with your grandparents?" she asked and the question surprised me. "I'm sure that they would love it. Glenn and I could help as well from time to time if you wanted."

I didn't know how to take her suggestion. Given the way the family tended to overprotect me, my first instinct was that the proposition was a set up to put me in a position where someone from the family would always be watching over me. Eliza and Mac no longer lived in Salem and couldn't keep an eye on me so it seemed like it was a ploy to put me under someone's attention. Eliza had mentioned once that I should leave Salem because of the Tremere threat but I wasn't about to leave Jared's tutelage and I had told her as much.

I looked at Siofra for a moment, not sure how to react. "Not that I wouldn't love to spend more time with them," I started, hesitantly, "but my life is in Salem now. Jared is my teacher and I would never disrespect him by leaving. Gaia led me to him and I can't question her wisdom." I reached over then and touched her arm. "Thank you for your support but I'm okay. Going home to Bar Harbor and coming here helps restore my need for nature. I'm okay."

I was afraid that she might be offended by my lack of enthusiasm at the idea but her reply made me think that her suggestion was just her way of trying to help make things easier for me. "Well you know that the offer still stands at anytime," she said with a smile, then looked at Ian to make sure he was comfortable.

"Thank you," I said, returning her smile then glancing down at my watch before turning to look out the window with a sigh. It was getting late and my anxiety over what was happening with Eliza came back as I watched the country side go by.

My uncle stopped at the bay and we all exited the van to watch the sun set over the water but I couldn't let myself appreciate the splendor of the sight. We lingered there for about a half an hour before continuing our tour but I was finding it harder and harder to concentrate on the places we went by or what my aunt and uncle told us about them.

As if on cue, Siofra piped up, saying that it was about time that we returned to the house and my Uncle Angus quickly turned to go back. It was dark by then and really hard to make out the landmarks we were passing by. When I glanced at her questioningly, she was quick to say something about the babies getting tired and that it was too dark to see anything anyway. The fact that they were all still pretending that nothing was happening made me angry but I refused to comment on it.

We were about twenty minutes from the house so it was nearly nine when we got there. Ian was asleep when Uncle Angus shut off the van and all I could think of doing was to get to the house to see if Eliza was alright. I offered to carry my sleeping cousin inside so that I

didn't make a fool of myself but it took everything in me to walk steadily up the steps and into the house with the boy in my arms.

Mac, Eliza, Glenn and my grandparents were all gathered around the table in the kitchen, Eliza had a large plate of beef stroganoff sitting in front of her that she seemed to be wolfing down, and had cheese and bread on the side as well. She looked tired, but fine as all of them looked up when we entered. Mac had a plate in front of him too but it was small compared to the portion Eliza was working on. I stopped near the table and waited for someone to speak.

"Hello," Mac said with a big grin as they all looked at us. "Buy anything good?"

I didn't reply, waiting for a response from Eliza instead. Her mouth was full, but she managed to smile at me and waved to Ian, unaware that he was fast asleep.

"We didn't buy anything," Siofra replied as she took off her coat and hung it on the back of one of the unoccupied chairs.

Suddenly the worry I had been feeling throughout the entire day seemed like too much to deal with. I was relieved that Eliza seemed to be okay even though whatever they had put her through had drained her enough to leave her ravenously hungry. I felt tears of frustration begin to build in my eyes that I was determined not to let anyone see. I looked toward Siofra, careful not to let her see my eyes, and said, "I'm going to take him up." I quickly left the room as I felt the tears as they threaten to spill down my cheeks.

Somehow I managed to make it up the stairs and put Ian to bed without letting the tears escape. I was doing my best to take all this in stride, to not let the fact that I wasn't looked at as an adult and an equal member of the family bother me but it was hard to act like the adult that I knew I had to be. I lingered upstairs for a few minutes and watched Ian sleep as I got a hold of myself, then went back downstairs.

Everyone but Glenn and Siofra were still gathered around the table when I came back to the kitchen. I took a seat next to Grandfather while they all made small talk but he soon stood, saying that he wanted to spend some time with his friends before they left the next day. Mac and Eliza had finished eating and Grandmother began to clear the table as Mac looked at me. "Let's take a wee walk, shall we?"

I nodded and stood, slipping back into the coat that I had brought back into the room with me.

"Shall we?" he asked, motioning toward the door. I nodded again and went over to the door to open it and stepped outside, waiting for Mac to join me.

To my surprise we didn't go in the direction of the Point. We walked in silence for what seemed like an eternity but was actually only a few minutes, before Mac stopped. He turned to face me and said, "Well luv, I promised you I'd tell you what the curse was, once it was lifted. I know you're not happy about not being included, but had it gone wrong, I needed to ensure you would be safe."

I couldn't possibly understand what kind of danger I would have been in by just being there, but I contained my anger and kept a calm face as I looked at him. I was sure that there had to be a perfect explanation as to why they hadn't wanted me there. That's what I kept telling myself anyway.

"There is a Tremere ritual that is called the Curse Belated that I performed on Eliza prior to our encounter with Marbas," he began as he watched me closely for my reaction. I stood looking up at him with my hands in the pockets of my coat, saying nothing and waiting for him to continue.

"It is a ritual that is designed to save a favored ghoul from death," he went on. "It bestows a contingency embrace, should anything happen that takes their life."

The expression on my face must have shown the confusion I felt about what he was saying because he stopped and glanced at the ground by his feet, then cleared his throat and continued, "The curse leaves blood from the vampire in the ghoul's system. If the ghoul dies by any means, that blood makes them a vampire, child to the person who performed the curse. We called forth some spirits and they had to remove the affected blood. Because of my blood line, Eliza would have come back a vampire with no memory of her life before her death."

That I understood all too well. "But she wouldn't have remembered any of us?" I asked.

"She would in time, if she met us. Remember how I was getting my memory back?" he asked. "It would be the same."

I felt a little put out that he had actually performed a ritual on Eliza that would have deliberately left her incapable of knowing any of us. I was silent for a moment as I stepped to my right, using the time to take in what he had just told me. It was easy to see that he had the best of intentions but I had to admit that I didn't like the prospect and was glad that he had removed it.

Even though it was no longer an issue, I still felt a need to know one thing. "Did you ever remember everything?" I asked. I was looking out ahead of me, my hands still in the pockets of the coat. I asked because I wanted to know if I would have ever had Eliza back if something had happened to her after Mac's death.

He chuckled slightly. "Not until this life. But I would have, in time. The only things left were from very long ago."

I nodded as I pulled my hands from my pockets and crossed my arms over my chest. It had been only a year since they had found each other and if in that time Mac had been able to remember most of his life from before his embrace, then I guess it didn't seem such a burden to be suffered through.

"It doesn't sound like that big of a deal, really," I said. "Eliza assured me that she wouldn't do anything to hurt herself after you were killed and now I see why. I can also see why you would want it removed now that you aren't a vampire anymore, but why all the secrecy?" I turned my head to look at him. "Why did you wait until now to tell me about it?"

He looked slightly uncomfortable. "If something had gone wrong, and she had turned... she would have tried to feed. And we would have had to contain her."

I frowned. "What do you mean 'contain'?"

His tone was very serious. "Magic, stake through the heart," he paused to look down at his feet. "And if we couldn't contain her..." he trailed off and fell silent.

I felt as if he had slapped me. My arms that had been crossed over my chest dropped to my sides as I took a couple of steps away from him. "You would kill her?" I asked in astonishment.

"As a last resort," he said lowly, "and only to prevent the deaths of others. Like your Grandfather or Uncle Glenn. Or your Grandfather's friends, who took part as strangers to Eliza as a favor to an old friend."

I felt slightly numb as I let what he just said sink in. After a minute I met his eyes and said, "And it's done now? It worked?"

"Yes."

Relief washed over me. It was over and done with now and it didn't matter what might have happened, only that we no longer had to worry about it. I looked at Mac again and took a deep breath. "Then I guess the rest doesn't matter right?"

He took a tentative step toward me and asked, "The rest?"

I closed my eyes as I turned away from him and took a couple of steps away. "I understand that you hoped to spare me from what could have happened to her and I thank you for that. Given the choice, I would have rather been there to be with her if for nothing else but what's done is done. She's okay now, right?" I looked over my shoulder at him hopefully.

"Yes, she's fine."

I felt a great deal better about the situation and I gave him a smile and took a deep, even breath. "I'm glad. Thank you for removing the curse."

"It was my fault the curse was laid in the first place," he said, his voice full of remorse and he wasn't looking at me.

I shook my head. "But with the best of intentions from the beginning, I'm sure."

"Yes, but intent only goes so far, luv. The fault is still my own."

It was odd for me to see him so full of remorse about something. Mac was a very strong and proud man and I had never seen apologize for anything. I met his gaze and smiled, and visibly relaxed a little. "At least no one can say that you aren't honorable," I told him with a tinge of dryness as I tried to lighten the mood. I moved closer to him, my hands slipping into the pockets of my coat because it was chilly. "You can only be faulted for loving her enough to want to take care of her. It's the same for all of us."

"I'm glad you understand and forgive me," he replied, his tone making it hard for me to determine if he was still blaming himself. The night was getting colder and even though he didn't seem affected, I was beginning to feel the chill and shivered slightly.

"It's not for me to forgive," I told him as I moved closer and put my head on his chest, my arms around his waist. "But thanks for explaining." I felt his arms go around me and soon I felt the warmth of him begin to push away the cool, autumn air. I lifted my head and looked up at him. "Let's go back to the house." We walked arm in arm and I hoped that this was the last secret that we had to deal with that lingered from his life as a vampire.

Of course the Tremere were still a very real threat but for now they didn't know where Eliza was and more importantly, they didn't know that Mac was back from the dead. These were two very important facts that couldn't be allowed to slip out when I was in Salem. Even one hint of the truth could leak back to the Kindred of the city and I knew enough about them to know that they wouldn't stop until they had my parents dancing in the palms of their hands again. We all had to be very careful.

Chapter 12 – My Next Seeking

"I must stay calm you know and I must be clear"

Poe

"Terrible Thought"

December, 2001

After the curse was removed I noticed that the family began to take a more active role in my training as a Dreamspeaker. I didn't get the impression that they thought Jared was teaching me incorrectly or that I wasn't applying myself so I welcomed the additional 'tips' that I started to receive from my Grandparents as well as from Glenn and Siofra. They seemed concerned about the fact that I had made the decision to split my studies between the Dreamspeaker and Verbenafilosophies, but since I seemed to be progressing fine in my studies, no one really came forward with any real issue with my choice.

It was almost like they wanted to make sure that I was learning the 'right' things, in the 'family' way if you will. It was like there had been some kind of understanding made by all of them, including Uncle Angus and Aunt Cara, that was pushing them to make sure I was well rounded or something in every way. My uncle began to take a more active role in teaching me how to fight with Mac and Eliza and I found myself sparing more and more on my visits to Ireland and the island. I found the sessions odd, fighting with different members of my family and trying to remember everything they were telling me and when to do it.

My aunt began to teach me what it meant to be Garou. She explained each of the different stages that the werewolves changed into and some of the more base gifts that they possessed. I knew that she didn't tell me any of the tribal secrets that would have offended the elders of her pack, but she did tell me stories about Gaia and how she interacted with the wolves so that I could interpret them with how she interacted in my own life. A great deal of what she told me reminded me of the lessons that Jared my Grandparents had already taught me about our traditions paradigm so it was easy to understand.

My grandparents suggested that it was time for my next Seeking at the beginning of December when the whole family was at the farm for a visit. I was excited about the prospect of looking inwardly for what the future held for me after the tumultuous past year, so I welcomed the idea wholeheartedly. I thought that the Seeking would be an opportunity to refocus on where my life was going and give me a chance to gain additional power that my lessons with Jared and Rachel were preparing me for.

I talked to Jared about it when I returned to Salem and he gave me his assurance that he believed I was ready as well. Soon preparations were underway for the Seeking to take place in Ireland, out on the Point, on winter solstice that would allow me some recovery time before I had to travel to Bar Harbor for Christmas with my Mom and Dad. I was really looking forward to it until a realization struck me.

Jared would be there, which wasn't a bad thing at all, but if he were there then what about Mac and Eliza? Jared still respected the fact that I hadn't divulged Eliza's whereabouts to him and had never pushed me to tell him anything that I didn't want to share with him. But another problem was that he didn't know that Mac was back from the dead, either. How could

I possibly have a Seeking without Mac or Eliza there? The thought was impossible to comprehend for me.

Eliza hadn't been at my first Seeking and I had felt her absence greatly. It wasn't the same to tell her about it over the phone after the fact and I had always regretted her not being there. She had been to almost every one of the major events of my life; I wanted her at the Seeking.

Mac hadn't been at my first Seeking, either, because he was no longer connected with the world of mages. But I really wanted him there this time, too. I wanted to be able to talk to him about what happened, not wait until I could go to him later, after I forgot half the things I wanted to ask about.

I called my Grandfather in a panic and explained to him my thoughts. "Is there anyway of making Mac look different so that he could be there, but look like someone else?" I implored. "We could say that he is a cousin or something."

Grandfather laughed. "Such an imagination," he chuckled on the other end of the phone. "Do not worry about Mac and Eliza. I will see to it that they are there. You have other things to think of. Leave this to me."

In the end it was determined that Eliza would knowingly attend the Seeking since it would seem odd if she did not. Jared knew that she was still alive and it would be good for him to see her for the short time he would be in Ireland since there was no way for him to track her if he wanted to anyhow. Mac on the hand would be placed in an umbral pocket where he could watch what happened and not have his presence known by Jared, thus protecting them both.

The day of the Seeking dawned bright and clear. Jared arrived about an hour before the ritual was scheduled to begin and most of us had breakfast together. Everyone moved out to the Point as a group and gathered in a circle around the small fire that Mac had started earlier, while we were eating. The Seeking got underway when Jared faced me on the other side of the fire where we both sat on mats to keep our butts dry. He then asked what I had learned on my last seeking.

"I learned the importance of strength," I replied after thinking for a moment. "I learned that I had the ability to fight for myself. Sometimes I can't always do everything on my own but I was kind of shaken by what had happened at Mother Abigail's that night. I had never had to worry about my own personal safety until that night and all of a sudden I was a victim, something I had only read about in newspapers or seen on the news before then. Having the chance to see and do that again helped me gain back the self confidence that I had lost that night.

"I also learned the importance of helping another," I continued. "Vengeance isn't the answer. I had the opportunity to kill the vampire that had attacked me that night. To make him pay for violating me so maliciously. But there was someone else who was in trouble, too, and helping her was more important than the extra bit of self gratification I would have received for killing the vampire."

I looked around at the faces of the people in the world that meant the most to me and I smiled. "I was also reminded about the importance of family. How just their presence can be reassuring and how the bonds of loved ones help to give me the strength that I had thought I lost."

Jared nodded as if my answer pleased him. "You did well on your last seeking, but this one will be more difficult," he explained as his eyes met mine over the flames. "Never assume that

there is any right action you must take, or a right answer you must give to the guardians you will see. Speak only what is in your heart, do only what your heart directs you to do." I nodded that I understood and he continued, "Close your eyes. Clear your mind of all distractions. Nothing exists now but the sound of my voice."

He then led me through some basic meditation steps that I had been studying since the beginning of my training that now felt like second nature at this point. "Open your eyes," he said in a low voice at the conclusion of the exercise.

The scene was unchanged, but now each person's animal totem stood with them. I smiled at each of the wolves who sat next to my Grandparents and Siofra and also to the family avatar wolf who sat to my left by the fire. The large gray wolf was looking across the flames to where my own animal guide, Blar Sidheach, sat who was smiling at me in her own happy way. A crow sat on Glenn's shoulder and a beaver was next to Jared, quizzically looking around him in a very animalistic way.

I nodded in the direction of the family wolf respectfully and smiled in greeting to Blar before looking at Jared again. He was meditating still and Blar stood and looked at me keenly. "You know what is expected of you, Corrinemackenzie," she told me. "No one is allowed to accompany you. Follow this path to your destiny." She indicated an opening in the trees that I hadn't noticed before, but I stood and moved toward it without question.

As I did so, I looked down and saw that I was once again wearing the white robe that I had worn when I departed for my first Seeking and the familiarity helped to settle the nerves that had been building in my stomach. Secured to the belt at my waist was my athame and pouch that I knew held the other foci that I needed to work my magic. The presence of these items were a comfort to me as well.

Blar was a comfort, though. She had become a valuable companion as I traveled through my magical studies and I was glad to have her by my side once again. Many times she had found me in my dreams over the time we've had together and she helped me learn things way beyond magic. She was my companion now in the lonely world I found myself in and she was a friend whose presence I felt even in a crowd where she couldn't be seen.

I was glad to know that she was once more at my side as I walked through the opening in the trees and I was glad to know that regardless of how this turned out, she would still be there for me, regardless of how bad I might screw it up. We walked through the woods for about five minutes until the path opened and we entered into the yard of Mother Abigail's house in Salem where my powers had first awakened. I had lifted the folds of the robe during the journey through the woods so that it didn't get caught by the brush, but as I stepped into the open yard that I was now so familiar with, I allowed the soft folds to once again brush the green grass at my feet as I stopped for a moment to look at the house where my entire life had changed. It was daylight, but as I peered toward the house I didn't expect to be able to see in any of the windows, and of course I couldn't. Blar climbed the porch steps and looked at the front door expectantly.

I climbed to the door as well and when I turned the handle the door swung open and I went through. The house was much the same as it had looked before the vampires attacked it that night that seemed so long ago now. The only exception was in the dining room where Akari was once again lying on the floor where I had seen him last, the stake still pierced through his heart.

I entered the room carefully and looked around slowly, fists in front of me like Eliza had shown me many times during our sparring matches. I was ready to make my stand against

anything that might come my way, but I was also ready to make the determination that it was necessary before I swung. The additional training that I had received in the past few months had left my senses honed and I was aware of all of my surroundings. I was quickly able to ascertain that there wasn't anyone else in the room and I found myself looking at the vampire who had threatened my life so brutally for the first time.

I felt sure that I was safe for the moment and I dropped down to my haunches to consider the sight of him. He was a large man, probably over six feet when he was alive, and I found it hard to believe that I had managed to hold him off my neck for as long as I had before Mac had been able to get to me. I dropped so that my butt was on the floor and held my knees to my chest as I continued to look at him as I contemplated where my life was and the part he played in my Awakening. The sight of his fangs flashed through my mind and I once again felt his hands on my shoulders as he tried to bring my neck to his mouth. A shiver ran down my spine with those memories and I hugged my knees closer.

Blar was just looking at me as I pondered the vampire. I knew he wouldn't hurt me and part of my mind was saying that it wasn't right to leave him staked like he was. I stood and straddled the body, then grabbed the stake in order to remove it. I looked at Blar to tell her to move back and found her on her feet and ready in case he decided I was dinner again.

I pulled the stake clear of his body and jumped back, holding the piece of wood like Eliza had shown me. Out of the place in his chest where the stake had pulled free came a blackness, a hole that opened up until it was large enough to walk through.

I stood with the stake in my hand, a little unsure about what was going to happen, but not yet making any movement toward or away from the opening. I couldn't sense any life from the other side of it so I pulled out a lighter from the pouch on my belt and concentrated on the flame as I reached out with Mind to sense any emotions or thoughts. I felt nothing from the other side of the opening, almost as if the gateway were blocking anything that could have been there.

I tucked the lighter back in the pouch and looked down at Blar as I gripped the stake tightly. "I'm going in," I told her in what I hope sounded like a sure voice, as I squared my shoulders and walked toward the blackness.

It was like all of my senses were taken away except for that of touch. I could feel the clothes that I had on, the stake in my hand, and Blar as she leaned against my right leg. I reached down to touch the white of her coat, once again finding comfort in her presence. I took a step forward, waiting to see that she followed, and together we made our way through the darkness. After a few minutes I realized that I could hear drums coming from somewhere in the distance on my right and I began to move in that direction.

I walked for a long time with the wolf at my side. Gradually the drums grew louder, and eventually I saw an archway into a cave ahead of me. Through the arch I could see that the cave was tall and deep, but comparatively a great deal narrower than where I was at the moment. There is water on the far end, and I could see that there was some sort of figures carved into the sides of the cave as I got closer.

I hesitantly moved into the opening and the drumming stopped as I looked around. The space was about five feet across and I could see that the figures were carved directly into the walls in sort of a relief, not being full statues. I could easily see the details of the first of them from where I stood, but they were about five feet apart so it was harder to make out the ones further away. There wasn't an obvious light source in the cave, but the light level was about that of a room lit only by a single 60 watt bulb so it was pretty dim.

I walked tentatively into the cave and looked around, stepping closer to the first of the carvings to get a better look. They were all placed on pedestals that put their feet at about my chest and I could see now that they were slightly larger than life. The first figure I approached looked like Eliza. It was a perfect likeness, right down to the jeans and tank top that she normally wore. I took another step closer to get a better look, and the figure opened her eyes looked down at me.

"Corrinemackenzie," the figure spoke in Eliza's voice, which made me jump slightly, but not with her cadence or in words she would choose. "Freely I gave you protection that you would grow strong and without fear. What would you take from me now?"

I swallowed a couple of times to get my heart back down into my chest and thought about what the figure asked. "I would have your love and your understanding," I replied, meeting the figure's gaze. "I would ask that you be my friend, as you always have, and that you would be there to help me stand after I have fallen."

I went silent for a second and wondered how honest I should be. There was something else that I wished for Eliza but I knew that I would never tell her about it because she would think it silly and tell me not to worry about her. I figured this would be my only chance to say it out loud. "If you are really a representation of Eliza, I would also ask that you take care of yourself now. That you enjoy what Gaia has given you, because you deserve rest now."

"Is this what you would give to me in return?" the figure asked.

"Yes," I replied with a smile.

The stone Eliza smiled down at me for a moment, and then the figure returned to a lifeless state. I heard my dad's voice from behind me say, "Freely I gave you protection that you would grow confident and secure in your sense of self. What would you take from me now?" Again the figure spoke in words that Dad wouldn't have used, but as I turned to face the stone representation of him, I found that like Eliza it was him in every detail.

I smiled at the figure of my Dad with a heavy heart. His presence here was a reminder of the lack of honesty that I had given him and the guilt of my actions bore down on me. When I spoke I could hear the evidence of tears in my voice. "I have not been honest with you," I confessed. "I have lied to you and I have not told you the truth about what is happening in my life. I don't know if telling you is right or not, but I do ask that when you learn the truth that you give me your understanding and that you continue to love me like you have all my life."

"What would you give to me in return?" the figure asked.

I pulled myself up and faced him with determination. "I will give you my protection and I will give you the truth, as soon as I figure out the best way to do it."

He smiled down at me for a moment, and then his face slackened to a lifeless state again. The figure down from him on the same side of the cave came to life next, speaking with my mom's voice, but like the others, not using her cadence or words. "Freely I gave you protection that you would not know hunger or cold. What would you take from me now?"

I moved down to her. "I would have your love and your ear that I might ask your advice. You are the rock, Mom. You stayed with me when I was sick and put up with a lot of teenage crap. I respect you for that and I thank you for it."

"What would you give to me in return?" she asked.

"I give you my respect and my love. I also give you the credit for your sacrifices that I didn't always give when I was younger. Thank you."

The figure smiled down at me for a moment, then returned to stone. The figure across the cave from Mom came to life, speaking with Mac's voice. "Freely I gave you protection that you would know the truth without fear. What would you take from me now?"

I turned to face the likeness of my birth father and even as the words formed in my mind I silently thanked the powers that be for allowing him to come back to us. "I would take from you your further guidance and advice. You know more of the world that I do and I hope that I might learn from your experience. I would also ask for a little of your time, so that I can know you better."

I eyes dropped to the floor because I wasn't sure if I should continue, but I took a deep breath and cleared my throat. "I would also ask that you make Eliza happy. She has known so much pain in her life, give her happiness now."

"What would you give to me in return?" the figure asked.

"I would give you my loyalty and my strength if you were to have need of it. I would also give you my undying love and compassion." I cleared my throat again and finished in a rush. "I would also give you my life if I needed to."

The figure of Mac smiled down at me, and then returned to a lifeless state. The figure down from him on the same side of the cave came to life and I saw Jared's face as he spoke. "Freely I gave you protection that you would learn your craft. What would you take from me now?"

I stepped down to stand in front of him. "I would take your compassion and patience as I continue to learn under you. I would also ask that you continue to challenge me in my studies and be honest where I am lacking."

"What would you give to me in return?" he asked.

"I will give to you all the hard work and dedication that I can give. I will also give you my assurance that I will hold all that you teach me in the strictest of confidences until the time that I might have a student of my own."

The figure of my mentor smiled down at me for a moment, and then his face returned to stone. The figure across the cave from Jared cave came to life next, speaking with Sam's voice, "Freely I gave you protection that you would know kinship on your path to enlightenment. What would you take from me now?"

I turned to her and said, "I would take your continued friendship and trust. You are incredibly dear to me and I am grateful for your presence. I would also ask that you watch over Brian." I hesitated slightly and had to swallow the lump that had suddenly formed in my throat. "I have hurt him badly and I hope that you would be a friendly ear to listen to his troubles."

"What would you give to me in return?"

"I would give to you the knowledge and kinship that you have given to me. I give to you a part of my heart so that we might be able to better know each other and I give you part of my mind so that we might better learn from each other."

My friend smiled down at me like the others before going still again. The figure down from her on the same side of the cave spoke with Rachael's voice, "Freely I gave you protection that you would learn the magic of others. What would you take from me now?"

"I would take the continued guidance that you have offered and I hope to develop a friendship with you as well."

"What would you give to me in return?" the figure asked.

"Like Jared, I give to you my hard work and the knowledge that I will keep the secrets that you have shared with me."

She smiled down at me, and then returned to a lifeless state. The figure across the cave from Rachael moved, speaking with Siofra's voice she asked, "Freely I gave you protection that you would seek no vengeance for wrong done to you. What would you take from me now?"

I was really startled by Siofra's presence and her words. "I ask that we each take the time to learn about each other," I said as I moved to face the likeness of my aunt. "I thank you for taking the time to understand Eliza and where she has come from."

"What would you give to me in return?" she asked.

"I give you my love as a member of my family and the acknowledgement that you have changed your life for the better."

She smiled down at me and then her face became stone again. The figure next to her on the same side of the cave spoke with Glenn's voice, "Freely I gave you protection that you would feel no hate toward those unlike yourself. What would you take from me now?"

"I take from you the knowledge that, hopefully, we understand each other a little better. I also partake in the love you now share with your new family."

"What would you give to me in return?" the figure asked.

I met the figure's stony gaze and replied with all the honesty I felt. "I give you a new start. Like Siofra you were invaluable to Eliza when she really needed you and for that you have my respect."

The figure of Glenn smiled down at me and then returned to a lifeless state. The figure across the cave from Glenn came to life and I heard my Grandmother's voice say, "Freely I gave you protection that you would know the traditions of your family. What would you take from me now?"

I faced her and smiled at the perfect reflection of her kind face. "I take from you the knowledge that you are the backbone of the family and a constant source of amazement to the next generation. I take from you the guidance that comes with experience and I also take from you the example of what quiet persuasion means."

"What would you give to me in return?" she asked.

"I give you my love and hope that I earn yours. I give to you my attention in matters where you know more and I promise that I will listen, even if I do not always heed, your advice."

My Grandmother smiled then went still again. The figure next to her came to life and spoke with my Grandfather's voice, "Freely I gave you protection that you would not learn too much, too soon. What would you take from me now?"

I reached up on tiptoes to touch his hand of stone lovingly with my fingertips. "I would ask that you never leave me, but I know that is too much to ask. So instead, I take from you the knowledge that you know best and I depend upon you to point me in the right direction. You are the heart of the family and you own my heart as only you could."

"What would you give to me in return?" he asked kindly.

"I give you my promise that I will try to remember that you know best and I promise that I will think before I leap. I give you my love and my utmost respect."

He smiled down at me for a moment then his face went still again like the others. The last figure across the cave from him came to life finally, but I didn't recognize the male voice.

When I turned to look, the features of the figure were unclear to me, almost as if he was not yet known to me. "Freely I would give you protection that you would know the love that you seek."

I crossed the room to where this figure stood to get a better look at him, half wondering if it were a likeness of Brian that stood there, but sure that it couldn't be. "Do I know you?" I asked, forgetting for a moment what I was doing.

Somehow I knew that it wasn't Brian. The stone figure of the man in front of me was taller, more muscular than Brian. He was wearing a robe type garment, and something that looked like it might be a sword hung from his belt. As I stood looking at him, the eyes got a little more detailed, and held an expression of kindness in them.

"You will know me. Aside from the love you seek, what will you take from me then?"

I leaned back, not sure what to say. I tried to collect myself but I could hear half sentences as they stammered out of my mouth in a rush of gibberish as I smoothed my palms over the material of my robe. Finally I just stopped myself and spoke with my eyes closed, "If this is true... if this is true, then all I ask is that you accept me for what I am. If you are to show me love then I ask that you do so openly and honestly." It was a hard confession for me to make and I opened my eyes again and looked around to be sure that I was alone with Blar still. "In the end I ask for no more than you are willing to give," I finished.

"What would you give to me in return?" the figure asked.

I took a deep breath. "I would give you all that I am," I said sadly, knowing how badly I had screwed up with Brian and not wanting to hurt anyone like that again. But I was also aware of how much I wanted to have someone in my life and I felt my heart yearn to know who this man was whose likeness was now before me.

The figure smiled down at me for a moment, then the eyes lost their detail and it returned to a lifeless state. Blar came up between me and the water at the end of the cave and as my gaze lingered on the last figure, she morphed into the image of the goddess Tara. She stood with her arms out, blocking my passage to the end of the cave where it opened up to three times the width of where I was now and descended into water.

Chapter 13 – The Fight for Knowledge

*"One more look at the ghost
Before I'm gonna make it leave"*

Poe

"Haunted"

"These people have protected you for many years, Corrinemackenzie," Tara began as she regarded me with an even gaze. "You have chafed against that protection, and fought for your freedom to make your own choices without full knowledge of the shards of danger that you wish to walk upon."

She turned slightly and gracefully swept her hand to indicate the water around her. "Before you lies an ancient lake, the depths of which conceal a deadly creature. To leave this place with the power you seek, you must enter the lake without knowing how to defeat the monster. You may take nothing with you but what you carry, and these people cannot help you. Do you agree to embark upon this journey?"

Her initial words annoyed me slightly but I knew that I would be forever treated like a child by my family unless I did balk at the protection that they forced upon me. Trying to at least appear somewhat browbeaten, I nodded my head and stepped forward. "I am ready," I replied steadily. The thought of some deadly creature didn't make me feel real courageous about the situation, but I knew that I had to try.

Tara moved back another step, opening the way for me to come forward into the water that had taken on a dark eeriness I had not noticed before. As I moved forward and waded into the warm substance that lapped at my ankles, the water appeared to darken even further until I couldn't see my feet.

When I was standing knee deep and next to Tara, I looked down into the water again and back up at her to asked, "Will I be able to breathe under there?"

She smiled kindly. "I can tell you nothing of what you will face beneath the water, Corrinemackenzie. I can only say that everything you need to survive is already within you."

I nodded solemnly, then closed my eyes and focused on a meditation that my Grandmother had taught me to help clear the mind and ready it for magic. I concentrated on remembering and feeling the objects and space around me so I 'knew' where I was. It was a simple exercise and one of the first effects that Jared had ever taught me.

It would allow me to use my senses as I attempted to detect the terrain under water. If I did well enough, I would be able to track myself as I went. I used Correspondence for this, but I also added Life in an attempt to perceive even hint of the creature that Tara had spoken of.

I was able to conclude that the cave opened to fifteen feet wide where it met the water. It slowly doubled again at its widest point, and then narrowed until it was about forty feet ahead of me where the cave ended. The ground beneath the water bowled in shape, as the ceiling did overhead. My senses told me that the water was about forty feet deep at the deepest point, which was about halfway across the lake. The far wall of the cave went beneath the water about thirty feet, then it fell away, and I perceived only water. I could feel that there

were what could have been stone up-croppings here and there on the floor of the lake, and that some of them were quite large, but I could sense no life from where I stood.

I gave Tara one last look before walking further out into the water as I reach in my pouch and pulled the large moonstone from it for protection during the journey. Once I was out far enough, I took a deep breath and dove under, ready to face the creature. The water was very warm, but dark, and I couldn't see at all but luckily the robe that I still wore didn't seem to be holding me up in anyway as I pushed myself further down in the water. There is an effect called Darksight that allows a mage to see in blackness that I tried to invoke, but for some reason I couldn't make it work. I think my fear of the unknown was holding back my ability to work it for the moment.

Since the water was too dark to see anything, I surfaced and began to swim toward the back wall, hoping to use the time to focus and clear my mind so that I could try the effect again. As I got closer to the back of the cave, I passed through much warmer spots in the water, but I didn't know where the source of the heat was coming from. When I was about five feet from the back wall, I felt something brush against my leg and I stilled for a moment, unsure what to do.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw that Tara was still standing in the water where I had left her, watching my progress. When another brush wasn't forthcoming, I continued toward the back wall, still holding the moonstone tightly in my hand as I made my way. I tried to call forth the Darksight again, took a deep breath, and ducked under once more.

This time it worked, but I couldn't see far in the dark water. I saw something move just out of the range of my sight but was too fast and I was unable to see what it was. It could have been a tentacle or it could have been a long fish, I didn't know so I tried not to get creeped out about it.

I had to try to maintain my composure again when I touched the back wall and found that it wasn't stone at all. Whatever it was it was warm, explaining the temperature variances of the water. I surfaced quickly to see if it moved when I touched it. It didn't. I looked again but the wall still appeared stone above the water level, it was only by touch that I could feel the difference.

I knew that I had to find out what this thing was that I found myself in the water with. I took a deep breath and dove under, pushing myself down as far as I could. The Darksight was still working, but the fact that I was wearing a robe and still holding the moonstone in my hand slowed me down a great deal as I worked. Somehow, though, I was able to swim downward quite quickly. About fifteen feet down, I saw that the tentacle was back again and coming at me from my left side rather quickly.

I dodged to the right, out of the way, trying to find a head or something that would help me identify the thing. I didn't locate one, but it was definitely a tentacle and seemed to be coming from below the creature and to my left.

I continued to push downward, following the tentacle as best as I could, but it disappeared into the darkness. The deeper I went, the warmer the water became and because of the effect I had done earlier to be aware of my surroundings, I was able to feel the edges of the cave wall fall away until all I felt around me was open water. I was at the edge of the breath I had taken, but I could 'feel' life below me in the water, pushing me down further still.

I thought my lungs were going to burst. Just when I was sure I was going to pass out, I called up Gaia to help me and with the most intense faith I had ever had, I took a big breath of air. To my amazement, I could breathe through the water, but water wasn't what it tasted

like at all. It was salty, thick, almost like a clear blood. I kept swimming, deeper and deeper, until it felt as if I had swam for miles. I kept pushing myself down until I felt something different enter my senses. Beneath me and to the right, I could 'feel' an island of sorts amidst all of this liquid. I turned in the water and headed in that direction, sure that it had to be my final destination.

The closer I got, the more I realized that what I thought was an island was exactly that and I could see it coming up fast as I approached it from the top. The island was about fifteen feet in diameter and there appeared to be a cage on it, and two life forms, one in the cage, one outside of it. They were standing on the surface of the island as if it were not in the 'water'.

As I continued my approach from above, I found that I couldn't see who it was but I could tell that they were both women and dressed very similar in what looked like male versions of medieval clothing. Both had hoods over their heads that obscured their faces so that I couldn't see their features, but their posture and physical attributes told me they were women.

When I finally was close enough, I saw that the island was in some sort of bubble and that was why I was approaching it from the top. I moved toward the barrier that separated the two places and tried to put my hand through it slowly. I watched as my hand pushed through to the other side with ease, reminding me of what happens when you lift your hand out from water into the air. The pull was similar.

Before pushing through totally, I hesitated and watched to see if I could identify either of the two women, but their faces were in shadow. I put my stone back in the pouch and moved both of my hands to the barrier to use them to 'push' myself through it and into the little bubble where the women and the island were contained.

In the blink of an eye I found myself stepping on the island as if stepping through a doorway. I was completely dry and the woman outside the cage lifted her head and looked at me. I still couldn't see her face, but her eyes shined like an animal's that had a headlight flashing into them through the opening of the hood. She pulled a knife from her belt and took up a fighting stance.

"You may not free the creature," she said. Her voice was oddly familiar to me, but I couldn't place it.

I held up one hand so that my palm was toward her in an effort to put her at ease. "I mean you no harm," I told her calmly. "I have come seeking knowledge. I am Corrinemackenzie. What is your name?"

"I have no name," she answered, obviously not interested in conversation. "This knowledge is beyond your ken. Be gone from this place."

The woman in the cage behind her lifted her hand toward me pleadingly, as if I were her only hope of escape. Maybe I was. I couldn't see her face to read her expression, but I got the feeling she was being held against her will.

"If I have been sent, then the knowledge is not beyond me," I told the guard calmly, making sure that my body stayed in a relaxed pose for the moment. "Why is this woman being held?"

"She is bound for your protection," the woman replied. "To loose her now would cause more harm than good." I tried to place why the voice was so familiar and where I had heard it before, but it didn't seem to remind me of anyone in particular. What it did remind me of was when you talked into a tape recorder and then listened to yourself after. It was kind of like that, like she sounded like me.

I started to weigh my options by taking a good look at the layout of my surroundings. The island was roughly fifteen feet in diameter; the cage itself was five feet across and in the center of the island. The guard was standing just outside the bars of the cage, about ten feet away from me. I moved closer to her in an attempt to win her trust but not to push her too far just yet.

"And why is she so dangerous?" I asked as I moved my head to the side to look around the guard and into the cage at the woman. "She doesn't look like much."

"She is bound for your protection," she repeated, stiffening the closer I got to her. "You need know no more."

I continued to inch my way closer but I also maintained that exterior posture that said I wasn't a threat.

"That isn't much of an answer," I replied with a shrug, maintaining eye contact with her. "Is she crazy? Mad?"

I knew when I got too close because she brought the knife up and stopped me dead in my tracks. "That's close enough, Corrinemackenzie." I knew that I would have to fight her to get any closer. "She is dangerous, that is all you need know."

I stood my ground and could feel myself begin to lose my temper at the same time. "This is ridiculous. I'm here seeking knowledge and I'm not about to take any of your vague warnings any longer." I pointed at the person in the cage. "Now why is she in a cage and why won't you tell me what's going on? And no more of this protection crap."

"I cannot tell you the answers you seek." She was more than ready for battle and the ball was in my court. "I know only that she is bound for your protection."

A grunt of frustration slipped past my lips as I punched the air by my side and stared the guard down. The tough reality was that she wasn't going to budge by me simply having a tantrum but I didn't want to fight her either. Something in the back of my mind was telling me that whatever I was after had something to do with the woman in the cage and that I had to free her.

I allowed my temper to cool off for a moment before I looked toward the sky and called out in a loud voice. "O Great Mother Gaia, hear your child. I am looking for the way I must go and I need your guidance. What is my true path? Am I being thrown to the side by what is before me or am I to learn from it?"

"Two paths have been laid before you. Both paths are true. You must choose which path you would follow."

The voice came from one of the two women but when I looked to see which of them spoke but I couldn't tell. "But what are the two paths?" I asked. "I don't want anyone to choose for me, but what is the question that will lead to me making it myself?"

As if a light came on in my head, I realized that I thought I finally understood what was going on in front of me. Both of the women were me. Trapped in the cage was the magic that I was seeking and the guard was the part of my subconscious that was afraid of the unknown, afraid of change. If I didn't take the knowledge then I would be more protected because I wouldn't advance. If I didn't advance then I am putting myself in the cage. That wasn't what I wanted at all.

"I will have her free," I cried out as I rushed forward, intending to push the guard away. I lunged, but she dodged out of the way and used my own momentum to throw me to the ground before quickly resuming her ready stance.

I got to my feet as quickly as I could in the robe and tried to remember some of the things that Eliza and the others had been teaching me as I went for her again. I didn't want to hurt her, just get her out of the way so that I could release what was in the cage.

I went after her again, and this time she threw me over her hip, and I landed on my back on the ground.

I staggered to my feet again and faced her. "I do not want to harm you but I must see her free," I panted, my eyes falling to the sand and seeing a large piece of driftwood near my feet.

It was obvious that she was a better fighter than I, so I decided to use magic in an attempt to find another way to deal with her. I drew on Spirit to sense if she was of the spirit realm. If she was I remembered something that Jared had told me once that I might be able to use, to make her move without hurting her. I had a great turn of luck, she was.

"I cannot allow you to pass," she replied, still standing between me and the cage.

I rushed her one more time, attempting to grab her by her upper arms to pull her away from the cage. She slipped through my hands and dropped to catch my feet in a leg sweep that dropped me firmly on my back at her feet.

I grabbed a handful of sand and quickly scrambled to my feet, then threw the sand into her face that was still hidden in the folds of the hood. She cried out slightly and I used the opportunity to grab the piece of driftwood and hold it out against her. Since she was of the spirit world, the only thing that I could use to push her away without harming her was to use something of her world that I enchanted with a spell called Manipulate Gauntlet. It was like using two opposing magnets to push one of them away.

I used the spell to push her aside enough to open the door to the cage. She was surprised by my action but backed off without further fight. It wasn't my intention to hurt her and this was the best thing I could think of for both of us. I wasn't the best fighter in the world and I didn't know if I was only allowed so much time to figure out what to do.

I reached out to grab the door of the cage to pull it open. When it didn't budge I took a step back and swung the piece of wood at the door with all my strength. I could feel the magic in the air around me as the door broke, shattered and disappeared on contact and the girl inside quickly stepped to the doorway.

"You have chosen to have knowledge despite my efforts to protect you," the girl who had stood guard said as she reached up and lifted the hood off her head, revealing my own face. "Know now that I can protect you no longer."

I straightened at her words and faced the identical version of myself. "Thank you for wanting to protect me. But in life change is a constant and I must grow. I appreciate your efforts." I then turned to the girl who was in the cage.

She removed her hood as well to reveal a second carbon copy of my face. "You have won here, but with your win comes the knowledge that not all knowledge is good, just as not all power is good. Accept your sister that you would know how to protect yourself from me." She gestured toward the other girl, who was standing quite close to me now. I turned to look at her and as I did, she took a step even closer, and stepped into my body, disappearing from view.

"Now, Corrinemackenzie, take what you have won." The remaining girl stepped toward then into me as the other girl had and I felt a rush of power fill my body. I found myself floating in the water once more, full of magic, more magic than I had ever felt before. The island was gone, and a light shone from above me like the sun shining down into the ocean.

I turned my face up to the source of light, imagining Gaia smiling down on me with her grace and power as I held my arms out to my sides and smiled back with love and joy in my heart.

I began to float upward, until the light is so bright that I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer. I closed them and when I did, I found myself sitting at the Point once more with my family all around me.

I looked at them and smiled as I stood and went to my Grandfather, wrapping my arms around his waist and hugging tight. "I did it," I told him.

"I knew you could darlin'," he said as he hugged me back and everyone rushed forward to congratulate me. "I knew you could."

We feasted and partied all day. Jared stayed the night in Ireland, leaving Mac and Eliza going to Uncle Angus' for the night to continue keeping Mac's existence secret. All in all it was a good day. I felt fortunate to be surrounded by family and friends. I still felt guilt about my Mom and Dad not knowing about this part of my life, but like I had been doing for nearly two years, I pushed those feelings away and concentrated on the moment.

Part 11

Finding Your Heart

Chapter 14 – Cliffs of Garelan

"Tell me what you've come for
Moving like a hunter through my back door"

Poe
"Wild"

April, 2002

In my dreams I found myself walking along the edge of an ancient forest, not far behind the small white wolf that was, Blar, the form my Avatar normally took when I saw her. I had learned a great deal with her help in our time together and I valued her experience as well as her presence as I made my way along the perimeter of the forest whose trees had trunks that were at least ten feet in diameter and stretched toward the sky like graceful ballet dancers standing forever captured in a single pose. They reminded me of the pictures I had seen of the great redwoods in California but something told me that I wasn't even in my own world, much less the west coast.

I could see the pink and orange hues on the horizon that signaled the coming of the dawn and I found delight in the feeling that everything was fresh and clean with the coming of the new day. I could see rabbits and squirrels playing from where I stood along the edge of the tree line and birds were greeting each other with merry calls in the treetops while others drifted toward the sea that was visible along the edge of the cliffs to my right.

I glanced down at myself and saw that I was wearing a long blue silk dress with delicate embroidery sprinkled on the fabric. Now, I have worn some nice things in my lifetime, especially after I was able to use my trust fund, but I have never worn anything as beautifully made as this. I spread my fingers along one sleeve and my eyes closed in delight at the touch of the soft fabric.

Time seemed to speed up as Blar and I walked along the edge of the forest until an hour passed in an instance. And the sky before us was the blazing red of sundown that stretched out over the large expanse of water that was visible over the cliffs. Then time seemed to stand still and the world grew quiet.

Without a word, Blar turned and moved toward the edge of the cliff that was some thirty feet away. I turned to follow her and as I did I heard the sound waves hitting the base of the cliffs in the distance. She stopped about ten feet from the edge, as did I when joined her there.

The sunset has colored the entire area so that the white stones beneath my feet appeared blood red. When I looked down at them, I realized that it was in fact not just the light making the stones appear red; because there was blood at my feet, and all along the edge of the cliff, stretching for yards in either direction and to the edge of the cliff itself. The wolf's little white feet were stained with the substance, as was the hem of my beautiful dress.

The perfection of the scene now destroyed, I lifted the skirt so that it no longer touched the ground as I looked down at Blar with concern in my eyes. "What has happened?" I asked as I looked about to see if anyone was around us. I could find no obvious source for the blood and all the animal sounds no longer populated the air around us.

"A battle will be fought here," she replied and as she did, the ghosted images of discarded weapons and bodies began to fade in and out on the stones before us. They never totally solidified in the misty evening light, but they were visible enough so that I could make out their twisted and bloody bodies as they lay discarded like dolls. They wore two distinct sets of uniforms, one red and the other black, that appeared to have come from the days of Arthur Pendragon. It looked like there was an even amount of both armies on the field and it was obvious that the death toll was high.

Swords, pikes and knives littered the ground around the bodies, symbolizing that the battle had fought with much violence and barbarism. They were medieval style weapons with gleaming blades that were covered in blood and hilts that showed wear that spoke of men who lived, and this time died, with their use.

"Will be fought here?" I asked dazedly as I looked around in confusion. "But it looks like the battle was fought long ago. I don't understand."

"In this place, in this time, many things are different from what you know," she said. "The battle for the cliffs of Garelan will be fought here, but you must not be. Come, we should go." She turned then and made back toward the forest, walking around and jumping over the bodies that come and go from sight as she did.

"Then why am I here now," I called out, not moving from where I stood. I was starting to become a little sick and tired of being told what I could and couldn't know, be part of, whatever, and I wasn't about to start taking this sort of treatment from Blar, as well. "Why am I not supposed to be here? And where are the cliffs of Garelan?" I demanded. "I've never heard of them."

Blar stopped and turned to look up at me over her shoulder. "If you are here, then they are dead."

I didn't understand. "The warriors? Of course they're dead, they're all around us." I waved my arms around for effect as I spoke.

Then, like a light bulb going on in my head, I remembered in a flash what Blar was referring to. Gwrhyn had said something about the Cliffs of Garelan when we were talking about Mac's destiny. We had been in the kitchen after I had arrived in Ireland, and he had talked like he was delivering a prophecy of some kind. I remembered thinking how odd his words were and not putting the references together. Now I was beginning to understand.

"Not them," Blar answered softly, "They will live or die as the gods will." She turned again and looked toward the trees. "Them."

I looked myself and in the depths of the forest I could just make out a circle of stones with a small group of people standing inside of them. Somehow I knew that I couldn't really see the circle from where I was standing now, but that the wolf was showing the circle of stones to me.

I began to whisper to myself as I started to walk toward the circle. "This has something to do with Mac, doesn't it?" I remembered again how Gwrhyn had mentioned something about the Cliffs of Garelan running red. "And the seeker... something about the seeker." I began to run toward the circle, determined to find some answers to questions I hadn't even begun to form in my mind yet. This had something to do with Mac and I was resolute to find out what.

I couldn't see what the people in the circle looked like or what they were wearing, they were too far away. I was able to discern that there were a couple of women, both wearing long gowns, but I couldn't see what the men are wearing.

As I ran, the vision through the trees faded away, leaving only darkness and tree trunks. Blar was running ahead of me, but when I caught up with her, she dropped her pace to stay even with me as I continued to run. As we moved closer to the forest I was again reminded of how large the trees were, but I could see that there wasn't much undergrowth beneath them.

Blar and I had run about a hundred feet and were just entering the forest when a man stepped from behind a tree as I ran by and grabbed me around the waist, pulling me back against his chest.

"Whoa, girl. Such haste is not wise here in the forest." His voice was deep, rough, yet kind. He was holding me gently against him, preventing me from running on even as I struggled to get to the circle. "There are evil things abroad tonight, even in dreams."

There was something about his tone that put me at ease. Something that was almost familiar, but I couldn't place from where I had heard it before. I could only think of getting to the people in the circle so I might learn something to help Mac. If he was supposed to be involved in a battle of some kind I was going to learn all I could to help him. It would kill Eliza if anything else happened to him and I was determined to not let that happen.

"Did you see them?" I asked, reaching out toward the spot where the circle and its inhabitants had been. I was still trying to pull away from him but I wasn't being very effective. "They might know something. I have to find them."

"They'll wait," he said. "They're not there just yet."

Blar had stopped when I did, and now she came forward to sniff at the man who held me, and then she looked up at him as if he was her new best friend. "Greetings, Worldwalker," she said, her tongue lolling out one side of her mouth with pleasure.

He spoke then to her, but it was in a language I didn't understand and I stopped trying to pull away. Apparently Blar did know the language and it was obvious by her reaction that she approved.

"Not there?" I asked myself absently responding to his last comment that I understood. I was hoping to get another glimpse of the people in the circle so I didn't take my eyes off the spot where the circle had been. "Do you know who they were?" I asked.

"It is not yet clear," he said as he slowly dropped his arms from around me and I turned to face him. "I expect the apprentice to be among them, and—" He stopped abruptly when his eyes fell on my face for the first time, and he took a sharply indrawn breath. "You, if the Fates are kind," he finished quietly; his features were gentle and filled with longing.

Now that I could actually see him I noticed that he was dressed in a long tunic with pants and boots that were all in browns so that he could easily blend into the forest. His hair was long, just past his shoulders, and brown as well and his eyes were a soft blue that reminded me of a clear stream that ran along the back of my dad's property where I used to fish as a kid. His eyes were beautiful and seemed to want to pull me into him. They were haunting in a sense and they seemed to hold his heart for me to view for its worthiness. I had to admit that I liked what I saw in spite of myself.

His cheeks were rough with what looked like a day or two's growth of beard and judging by the weapons that he carried, he was a walking medieval arsenal. A bow was slung over one shoulder and a heavy sword and dirk hung at his belt. I could see a full quiver of arrows poking out over his right shoulder and what looked like another long knife stuck out from the back of his belt.

"Me?" I asked, looking toward where the circle had been again. "I'm supposed to be with them?" He hadn't made any move to hurt me, so for the moment I decided that I would trust him and maybe I could learn something to tell Mac.

The circle was still gone from my sight and when I turned back to him again I found his hand lingering in the air between us, reaching for my face. He seemed to catch himself and let it fall again before he spoke. "I can but hope," he said in the low voice that left me feeling warm in my stomach.

The almost hungry way that he looked at me was beginning to make me a little excited and uncomfortable at the same time. "Who are you?" I asked in a whisper, my brow creasing with the question.

I found myself wondering what he thought about the blood on the hem of my dress and if my hair looked all right. I had never felt this kind of attraction to anyone so quickly and I didn't know if it was my true feelings or if I was being manipulated in some way. Actually I didn't care at the moment. The way he was looking at me felt nice and I didn't want the moment to end.

"I have been known by many names in many places." His voice was so deep and throaty that it was almost hard to hear him. He looked down at Blar with a smile. "Your guide calls me Worldwalker, but you may call me what you will."

"You must have a name," I replied insistently, my voice almost mirroring his in a whisper as I had eyes for him for the moment and I stepped closer to him. I wondered to myself if he was real and then I remembered how he had held me against him and I knew he must be. "Are you asleep as well or do you walk the dream world awake?"

"There are times I would walk the dream world awake, but for now I do so only in dreams." He smiled at me for the first time and it transformed his face, making him even more handsome. "Soon I will be free to go where I will once more."

I felt my brow crease slightly again in confusion. "Free? You are bound somewhere?"

"In a sense." He looked toward where the circle of stones had been visible through the trees. "But I will not be here much longer, if all goes well. I will return to my own world and my own destiny."

My eyes followed his as I stepped closer to him again. "Is that what they are doing? Setting you free? Will I help?" He seemed so familiar to me that I felt an instant desire to help him if I could. I lifted my hand and, as if on cue, he took it and laid it on his chest, covering it with his own battle scarred one with a tenderness that tugged my heart.

"What will happen is not yet clear, but I have hopes that all will go as the Fates have instructed," he said, his eyes moving over my face like a lover's caress, leaving goose bumps on my skin. "I know not if you will be here, when the seeker is found, when the seed is sown, when the Cliffs of Garelan run red." He stopped to frown. "I hope that you do not see the cliffs so. If you do, all will be lost."

"I saw them red before you found me, and no, I didn't like what I saw." I fell silent then, unsure of what to say as I looked at our hands as they still lay clasped on his chest. I could feel the energy between the two of us, but I couldn't explain it or what it meant. I knew that Eliza would think I was crazy for trusting this stranger so quickly and I had to admit that I wasn't entirely sure why I was. After the way I had hurt Brian, the last thing I wanted was another relationship, not like there could be one with this man in my dreams, no matter what kind of a connection I felt with him. Brian's face came to my mind and I knew that I couldn't allow myself to hurt anyone like I had him ever again. The guilt was too much.

"You saw a reflection of what will be," this mystery man said. His gaze was intense, as if he knew somehow everything about me, and that he wanted to know more.

I decided that what I needed to do was clear my head and try to think about information that Mac might need for the moment. "The cliffs, a seeker... it is exactly the same as Gwrhyr told me that day about Mac's destiny, but what does it all mean?" I asked. "I think I know the seeker, but what you said sounds like a prophecy and sometimes they aren't what they first appear to be."

I took another step closer to him and placed my hand over his. "If you are trapped somewhere I will do what I can to release you, but I need to know how to get here in the real world where I can bring others to help."

A smile touched his lips. "I am not trapped, Corrinemackenzie, but the apprentice must free me. He chafes at what the Fates have planned for him. He must follow them, as you must if you would find me. Seek the Fates. Sprite will know where to find them."

I found myself smiling at him wryly. "So this is all part of Mac's destiny, hmm? Oh, he hates putting stock in destiny, but he always does the right thing. And I will be with him when he does," I told him determinedly.

He lifted my hand to his mouth then and kissed my palm tenderly. "I will not fear your magic, *mo chroí*," he whispered. "Please do not fear me."

I knew Gaelic so I understood that he had called me 'my heart' and the personal meaning of his comment made me smile, blush maybe being the correct term. "I probably should fear you, but for some reason I don't," I told him. But there was something about what he had just said that made me think of Brian and the many arguments we had about my magic during our relationship. I stopped suddenly, his words about not being afraid of my magic striking an odd cord in the back of my mind. "Why did you say that?" I asked suspiciously.

His expression wasn't one of guilt, but he did seem a bit uncomfortable as his eyes met mine boldly. "Your beauty makes me forget once more that others cannot see the future as I do," he said as he dropped my hands and moved back. "I must go. It is not safe for us to be together, not yet." He looked again toward where the circle had been, and a sad look passed over his face. "I fear I have lost him to my own foolishness."

His eyes meet mine again imploringly. "Ask your father to forgive me. I but meant to show him the seriousness of hiding from his destiny."

I put up a hand to stop him. "Wait. You've talked to Mac? What happened? Why isn't it safe to be here? I don't understand."

"The seeker must be sought, the seed must be sown, and blood must gather in the gray circle. If he does not follow his destiny, he will lose all he holds dear." He looked at me sadly and said, "You must go, Corrine. She must not find you here."

"She? She who?" I reached for him again, gripping his arm tightly as I kept my voice light. "I'm not ready to leave just yet and besides, you still haven't given me your name."

He leaned very close and kissed my cheek near my ear, and whispered something I didn't understand. Then he stepped back again and looked at the wolf. "Blar Sidheach, take her home."

As if taking a queue, Blar threw her head back and howled, the sound waking me instantly so that I sat up in bed, and a single word echoing through my mind. *Joel*.

He had given me his name but he hadn't told me who the woman he had spoken of was. I punched the bed in frustration and looked at the clock to see what time it was. It was 2:37

a.m. Knowing it was late didn't change my intention as I got out of bed and went for the phone to call Mac and Eliza. Unless I missed my guess, Mac was meeting Joel tonight as well and so was Siofra.

Chapter 15 – Looking to Fate for Answers

*"But I can't find them anywhere
With you there's no easy answer"*

Poe

"Amazed"

The phone rang only once before Eliza answered, sounding only slightly sleepy. "Hello?" she said softly, making me think that she was already awake, but that she didn't want to disturb Mac.

"Sorry to call so late," I said, mimicking her low tone. "Is Mac asleep?"

"If you call it that," she replied wryly. "What's wrong?"

"Why do you say that?" I asked, referring to her first comment.

She sighed heavily. "Corrine, it's 2:30 in the morning. I don't think you called to chat." I heard her move and knew she was trying really hard not to wake him, which was probably a good thing since it probably meant he wasn't finished talking to Joel yet. "Besides, Mac's all restless, it's not like him. What's wrong?"

"I just had a really odd dream and I think Mac is, too."

"That would explain the thrashing about," she said dryly then her voice turned serious. "Is he in danger? Should I wake him?"

"No, don't wake him," I told her quickly. "Maybe he will learn more than I did. Did you have any strange dreams tonight?"

"No more than usual, not that I remember. Are you sure I shouldn't wake him?" she had become really protective of him lately, which of course seemed pretty normal considering the fact that he had died twice already.

"No he'll be alright. He's being looked after, as best as I can tell," I told her, remembering Joel and how warm his lips had been on my cheek. I blinked suddenly to bring myself back to the conversation I was supposed to be having and put all thoughts of a romantic nature aside. "Where's Gwrhyr? Whatever this is all about has something to do with Mac's destiny, I think, and since the wolf is supposed to be the teacher..."

I could hear a bit more movement. "He's here, sleeping next to Eddie." Then I heard a door shut softly, and Eliza started to talk a little louder. "What's going on, Corrine? What about his destiny?"

"I'm not totally sure what's going on," I started. "I was dreaming and I found myself on these cliffs that Blar said were the Cliffs of Garelan. I remembered Gwrhyr mentioning something about them when he was telling me about Mac's destiny so I'm thinking something is linked here. There were signs of a battle that may or may not have been fought there that kept flashing in and out.

"Anyway, in the forest near the cliffs we saw some people in a circle and they were performing some kind of ritual. By the time I got there they had disappeared and I ran into someone, a man. There was something about him that made me instinctually know that I could trust him. That he wouldn't do anything to hurt me. He said that he had talked to Mac,

and Siofra, too. I think he's being held somehow and that he's involved with Mac's destiny. I just want to talk to him and Siofra to see what they learned."

"Did he say what Mac is supposed to do? Or why you and Siofra would be involved?"

Even though she couldn't see me I shook my head in answer. "I'm not sure. He can see the future I think. Blar called him Worldwalker, whatever that means. Has Mac told you anything about what he's supposed to be doing?"

"I don't think he knows much. He's done a lot of reading but not come up with anything. Mostly cryptic stuff."

I knew that this news would only make her nervous for him so I tried to be as reassuring as possible. "All right. Just have him call me then in the morning, or whatever."

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You sound out of it."

"It was all just a little too real, and I'm just wondering what's going on, what's happening."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"Uh-uh," I assured her, a slight smile in my voice. "Do me a favor. When Mac wakes up, tell him that he apologizes if he offended him."

She hesitated. "I will."

"You know, Mac. If it's involving destiny, the hackles go up. I don't know exactly what happened, but he said that he may have offended him."

"I'll tell him, and I'll have him call you."

"Okay. Sorry I woke you."

"I was awake."

We said our goodbyes then and hung up. I was too worried about what had just happened to even think about going back to sleep. I went to my journal and wrote down everything that I could remember of the dream. I described the forest, the cliffs and sea, even the animals that I had seen and heard. I even described the beautiful dress that I had worn.

And Joel. I wrote down everything about him, too. What he had told me, how he had moved. What his clothes looked like, even how he smelled. I described how his lips had felt on first my palm and then later when he had kissed my cheek and I stopped long enough to lift my fingertips to my cheek and imagined that I could still feel them there.

I knew it was insane to think this way. That I shouldn't fall into what could easily be a trap sent to ensnare some or all of my family. But I couldn't help but think that there was reason to believe him. Reason to trust him. Reason to think what I had read in his eyes was truth. That he was an honest man and that he might need our help.

I knew that I couldn't settle my thoughts purely on Joel. I had to set my mind to think of things that might help us first get to him and then set him free. He had mentioned the Fates so I turned my thoughts to them and jotted down what I could remember learning of them. The most popular story of the Fates came from the Greeks. They were three women, much like the Maiden, Mother and Crone. One was the weaver, spinning the threads that were the lives of men and women. One was the arbitrator of how those lives turned out. And finally, the last of them was responsible for cutting the life threads at the correct time, with a pair of scissors that were dull with age.

I didn't know what the Fates could help us with, but I was sure that Siofra might have some answers. Joel had said that 'Sprite' would know how to find them and that was the name that Mac and Uncle Angus always called her since she had been a child. I picked up the phone again and took the chance that she would be awake after having her dream as well.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Siofra, its Corrine."

"Corrine, are you all right, it's-"

"I know it's late," I interrupted her. "I'm sorry, but there seems to be some dreaming going on tonight."

Her tone went dry and she replied, "Let me guess. Cryptic annoying guy?"

I had to smile. Even in the middle of the night she had the ability to come off sounding like a pampered princess. It was funny. "Well he was cryptic, but he wasn't annoying," I commented, pushing the memories of his lips on my skin to the back of my mind yet again.

"Was his name Worldwalker by any chance?" she asked.

"Yes."

I heard movement in the background and wondered if Glenn was awake as well. She wasn't talking in hushed tones like Eliza had been, so I figured either she wasn't in the bedroom with him in the first place, or that he was awake, too. Her response answered my question. "We both had a dream of him, too."

"You and Glenn both?"

"Yeah."

I went over to the couch and cuddled up in a corner with my feet tucked under me. "Looks like Mac did, too," I told her.

Her voice sounded surprised. "What did he say?"

"I don't know, I haven't talk to him yet, but when I called I talked to Eliza and he's in the middle of it now and he's thrashing around a lot. I don't want her to wake him. I figured we should let him have the dream and learn what he needs to learn from it. What do you guys have going on tomorrow?"

Siofra thought a moment. "I don't think anything."

"Should we meet on the island?"

"Let's see what Mac and Eliza have to say," she suggested, the idea making sense.

"I told her to have Mac call when he woke up," I went on. There really wasn't any sense on jumping on this too quickly since Mac was still in his dream. I had to remember to hold myself back when dealing with my family. Just because I was worried about a man that I had only seen for about ten minutes, and that in a dream, didn't mean that any of them would feel the same need that I felt to help Joel. If they knew that I felt so passionate about saving him, they would all think I had lost my mind.

"What did he say in yours?" Siofra asked, pulling my thoughts back to the conversation I was supposed to be having with her.

"He talked about the same things that Gwrhyr talked about shortly after Mac returned," I told her, Joel's face instantly coming to my mind again, "the Cliffs of Garelan being red with blood, something about seeking the seeker, and something about sowing the seeds. He said something about seeking the Fates."

"He said I'd know how to find them."

"Do you?" I asked, a littler more eager than I would have liked.

"I don't know, I'm gonna try something," she said, obviously thinking about something. "See what I can come up with. I have an idea, I'll see if it works."

"Has Mac said anything to you about this whole destiny thing?"

Her voice was thoughtful when she responded, but it wasn't to answer my question. "He kept talking about a 'she' who was also in the forest, and that she was more beautiful than he thought she would be. The seeker must be sought, the seed must be sown, and the captive must be set free. Then he said that if she was at the battle on the cliffs, all would be lost. He's in service to someone and he cannot leave that world and he cannot harm her. The other 'she' must be you," she finished as if she had just come up with the final Jeopardy answer.

Her half accusatory tone set off warning bells in my head and I tried to dodge her observation by saying, "I assume the captive is him." I would have to be a fool to try to deny the attraction that I had felt between Joel and myself, but I surly didn't want to discuss the idea with anyone just yet, especially Siofra. It was true that we had been getting along much better in the past year or so, but she wasn't the one I wanted to take on as a confidant, now or maybe never. That space was reserved for Eliza and no one would ever take her place in my life.

"I overheard him speaking to her before I talked to him," Siofra was saying. "I saw them." She went on to describe a woman with long dark hair and eyes to match, who wore a very fine dress. Disappointed that I hadn't seen her myself, I assumed that she must be the woman that Joel had spoken of who would have been so life threatening for me to meet. I found myself wondering what was so dangerous about her. What kind of powers did she have? What kind of hold did she have over him? Siofra's description didn't remind me of either of the women that I had briefly seen in the stone circle, but then again I didn't really see them long enough to get a good look anyhow.

"They were arguing," Siofra finished.

"Do you know how to contact the Fates?" I asked, eager to get some answers and ready to push the conversation in another direction so that she didn't start thinking about Joel talking about some beautiful girl again.

"I don't know," she replied. "I never tried."

"What about the Grandparents?" My Grandfather always had an answer to any question I had ever put to him. I felt sure that he would be able to help us.

Siofra thought a moment. "I don't know. I'm gonna try dream walking, maybe find their whereabouts."

"Can I meet you somewhere and go with you?" I asked her. Jared had always been very strict that I didn't dream walk by myself and I had followed that rule so far, with the exception of that night when I had unknowingly entered Mac's. But I was sure that it would be okay if I went with Siofra. She was a mage with much more training than I had, after all. And the family was making sure that I was doing things correctly. I didn't see where it would cause any harm to go with her.

She seemed to think about it for a minute, then relented. We arranged to meet at Glenn's cabin in the mountains as soon as we fell asleep and I began to once again shut off the lights that I had turned on when I had gotten up in preparation to sleep again. "We don't want to get in trouble," she said, as if she knew that this was something I wasn't yet allowed to do on my own.

"Oh, you're not going to get in trouble," I assured her, hoping that my voice didn't carry too much guilt when I said it.

"Are you sure about that Corrine?" she asked suspiciously.

I took a deep breath then answered, "Quite sure."

"Give me an hour," she said. We hung up and I went to my kitchen area to make a cup of chamomile tea that would help me fall back asleep, then went to bed.

About an hour later I found myself standing alone in the dream world version of Glenn's cabin. I was thinking of Joel again when Blar materialized by my side to look at me in disapproval at the thoughts going through my mind. I was half tempted to try to look for him again, but I didn't know if Jared would be out and about in the dream world tonight and I didn't want to get caught breaking one of his cardinal rules. The temptation was strong, however, and when I looked down at myself, I found that I was wearing the same dress I had on in my first dream, minus blood on the hem of course.

Siofra materialized before I had a chance to change what I wore, her wolf avatar, Princess, by her side. "What's up with the dress?" she asked, her nose wrinkling in dislike. She was dressed more appropriately, of course, in a pair of jeans and sweater and I was embarrassed that she had caught me like I was.

I looked down at myself and pretended to be startled by my appearance, fearing that she saw right through my act. "Sorry," I said as I changed my clothing to a pair of jeans and a shirt to match her attire. "Where to?"

I was relieved that she opted to not push the subject of my original appearance as she launched into an idea that she had. She thought that if we were to hold hands and state that we intentioned to look for the Fates, and concentrate, maybe we would be able to find them. She knew that there were many versions of the Fates from the different pantheons of the world, but maybe by being together we could find the right ones we needed.

I agreed that the idea was a sound one so we turned so that we were facing each other and clasped hands tightly. I closed my eyes and thought of what Joel had said, that the Fates would know how to find him. As I concentrated, I began to feel things shifting around me as we went to a different location in the dream world and I felt myself smile.

When I opened my eyes, I saw a large blue-green, doublewide trailer on concrete blocks that set up on a hill in a middle-sized yard. The driveway was taken up with an old Chevy truck that was up on cinder blocks as if it were waiting for someone to get around to fixing it. The yard was littered with toys and huge piles of dog poop of all things. A children's wading pool was in center of the yard and surprisingly untouched by the shabbiness that was so apparent in the rest of its surroundings. There was a satellite dish on the roof of the trailer and the property was bound on three sides by ancient sycamore trees that reached high into the sky like centurions on watch.

Close to the trailer was an immaculately kept herb garden that also looked out of place in the trashy yard. Rows of what looked like rosemary, sage and thyme were neatly laid out in a way that said whoever planted them also knew how to use them properly. I found myself wondering who could possibly live here as I looked around me in confusion.

"Do you think we go the right place?" Siofra asked, clearly as surprised as I was.

I looked at her with what I was sure to be the same amount of astonishment in my features. "Given that I don't go looking for the Fates every day... this isn't the cleanest of accommodations."

We started to move toward the house when Siofra put her hand on my arm to stop me suddenly. "Eeew, watch your step, you don't want to be taking that home."

I looked down at the ground and couldn't believe how big the pile of doggie doo-doo was that I was about to step in before she had stopped me. "That's gotta be one-"

"Big dog," Siofra finished in bewilderment. She looked at her wolf that had stayed close to her as we had begun to move toward the house and she commented wryly. "Princess will need a bath."

I stifled a giggle behind one hand and pointed toward the trailer with the other. "Okay, let's go knock on the door."

We started to make our way forward again and had just passed the wading pool when Siofra stopped to look into it and seemed to become mesmerized by what she saw.

"What is it?" I asked, eager to get to the house to see who lived there. When she didn't answer me, I went to look for myself and saw that a scene was being played out in the water of the pool. I saw a line of huge, ancient trees like the ones I had been standing among in my earlier dream and I ducked my head to get a better look. Then the view rushed along the edge of the cliffs as if a bird were flying by it quickly, until it came to a large stone castle that was perched on an outcropping of solid rock. The ground was red here too, but I saw no bodies or any other signs that a battle had been fought there.

Suddenly a ball hit the water, breaking the vision into a thousand rippling waves. I looked up and found an old lady standing not too far away, glaring at Siofra and myself, her face twisted as if she were peeved. She was old and gray, and wore clothes that might have been fashionable about fifty years ago, but were now looked at as Halloween customs. She stood with the aid of a walker, and was leaning on it heavily as she glowered at us.

"I've had about enough of this," she commented in a rather nasty voice.

Siofra looked slightly abased by the woman as she glanced at me quickly, then back at the other woman. "I'm sorry, I'm--"

"We're looking for the Fates," I said, maybe a little too quickly, but I didn't feel like waiting for her to spout off again and send us away. "Have we come to the right place?"

The old woman huffed. "The same as your father, you are. If you would seek us, come in the waking world."

Siofra spoke up. "Can you tell us how to find you in the real world, please?"

I glanced around for some kind of landmark that might be an indicator of where we were, where the Fates apparently lived. Next to the road I saw a mailbox that had a set of numbers and 'The Fates' written on it in large, white script on the black box.

The old woman cackled at her. "Use your noggin, girl. How would you find anyone in the waking world?"

I watched as Siofra crossed her arms over her chest and asked incredulously, "You're in the phone book?" My aunt only had so much patience and it was quickly running out by the looks of things. I only hoped that she held her temper long enough to get us a location.

"Try it and see," the old woman said. Then she turned her walker around and started to move toward the house again. "For now, be gone."

And just like that I was awake again and in bed, safe and sound. I found myself thinking silently that I was getting sick and tired of people shoving me out of my own dreams as I got up from bed again and went to find the phone book. I looked up 'Fates' in the white pages, but came up empty handed. I even went to the yellow pages and tried looking up anything related that I could think of. Physics, morticians, day care. I came up with nothing.

Finally the phone rang. I figured it was either Siofra or Mac.

It was Siofra. "I got the address," she gushed when I had the phone to my ear.

I was relieved. "I was gonna say I came up empty."

"Why don't we meet here tomorrow instead of at the island?" she suggested. "I'll call your dad now and have them come here."

I hesitated for a second. Even though Eliza had never told me anything, I had gotten the feeling that something had happened to her in Nashville during the time she was staying with Glenn and Siofra that provoked her to want to move from the city to begin with. I wasn't comfortable with her being in a place where she felt like she was on pins and needles, any more than I was comfortable with her coming here. But I knew that we would be safe as long as we stayed in the house so I didn't voice a concern. "Okay."

"Why don't you get some sleep and be here at eight?" Siofra said.

"I can do that," I confirmed.

"I'll see you when you get here," she said, and then hung up.

Chapter 16 – Going to See and Old Woman about My Fate

*"I'm haunted
By the lives that wove the web
Inside my haunted head"*

*Poe
"Haunted"*

Phone rang soon after I finished talking to Siofra and I figured through the process of elimination that this time it had to be Mac. "Hello?"

Mac answered pleasantly. "Good morning, luv. You called?"

I smiled at the sound of his voice. "Morning. How did you sleep?"

Mac laughed slightly. "A little restless, but I understand that runs in the family."

I laughed outright at that comment. "Yes. Siofra and I were able to locate the Fates. We all need to be in Nashville by eight. Can you and Eliza make it?"

"Morning or afternoon?" he asked. "What time is it?"

"Morning," I confirmed. "It's about 4:30 now."

"I think we probably can," he replied. I could already see the wheels in his mind turning as he processed everything I had said, plus I was sure what had happened in his dream as well. "Need to bring anything special?"

I thought a minute. "I'm not sure. I bet Siofra will have stuff for breakfast, but I have some cinnamon roll that I made here that I planned on bringing. I wouldn't worry about it."

He hesitated for a second, but when he spoke I heard the serious tone in his voice. "That's not quite what I meant, luv."

It took me a second to realize that he was talking about weapons instead of food and I instantly understood his questioning. "Oh," I replied, feeling like an idiot. "Whatever you think is best really."

"Would you like us to 'pick you up' or just meet you there?"

I shrugged. "Doesn't matter. You can come here earlier if you like. I'll have a pot of coffee ready. I'd like to talk to you first anyhow and I have a present for Ian that I could use some help carrying." I knew that I wouldn't try to sleep again and I doubted that Mac and Eliza would, either. I didn't actually have the cinnamon rolls that I had mentioned to him because I planned to make them fresh to take with me since I was wide awake anyhow.

"OK. We'll be there, say about sevenish. See you then."

"See you then," I confirmed, and then hung up. Feeling the need to not think about the goings on of the past few hours, I put myself on automatic pilot and started making a huge batch of cinnamon rolls that I knew wouldn't last long once Mac and Glenn got a hold of them. After I set the dough aside to rise, I put on a pot of coffee, and then pulled out a bag to pack a few things because I figured we would be in Nashville for a few days. With all the weekend visits I had been making to Ireland and Mac and Eliza's place on the island, I was getting really good at packing quickly and efficiently so the entire exercise didn't take very long.

The first batch of rolls was out of the oven when Mac and Eliza arrived around 6:30 with Eddie and Gwrhyr in tow. I had timed everything right so that I was showered and ready by

the time they got there and prepared to pour the first cups of coffee with a fresh smile on my face when they walked through the bathroom door where the gateway had been established.

I was quickly aware that they were ready for anything, as usual. Eliza carried a crossbow case with her suitcase and various stakes, knives, and guns were also visible on her person. Mac's weaponry was a little more discreet but I swore I could hear him 'clinking' a little as he sat down at the table. I offered to make them eggs if they wanted but they declined, saying that the rolls were fine.

"Coffee will be good," Eliza said as she also sat at the table with a big cup from 7-11 in one hand and a cinnamon roll in the other. She was looking a little paranoid for lack of a better word, and I think it was because they were in Salem. But I had been very careful in my preparations for their arrival. I had already checked all the wards and made sure that all the windows in the apartment were securely covered. The vampires may have been safely tucked away in their beds for the day, but their ghouls weren't and I didn't want to take any chances.

Even Eddie and Gwrhyn partook of the breakfast sweets. The wolf normally ate people food to begin with, so it didn't surprise me at all when Mac leaned to one side and fed the two animals from the plate of rolls I had put on the table. I put water down for them and hoped that the puppy didn't get sick on my floor from the sweets.

Eliza must have read my thoughts. "You're going to make him sick," she commented between sips of coffee.

Mac looked down at him and smiled. "It's all right," he assured her, and then reached over to squeeze her hand playfully.

"Just because you feed the wolf that-" Eliza started.

"He's a puppy," Mac interrupted with a wide grin that made me smile as well.

"He's a year old," she insisted, not about to be put off where Eddie's health was concerned.

"He's a growing puppy," Mac countered, amusement filling his gaze as he looked at her, open challenge in his gaze.

Eliza rolled her eyes and took another sip from her cup. "When he grows too big to get through the bedroom door, he'll sleep downstairs."

"He'll learn to teleport," Mac insisted and raised an eyebrow in her direction.

Rather than listen to the two of them go on, I went to pull a big box from the closet to the couch. It was a car set that I had bought for Ian a couple of weeks ago that I had planned on giving him when I saw him next. I knew that I spoiled him a little more than I should, but I couldn't help myself. I did the same thing with Sam's little boy, Brendan, and she always protested just as much as Siofra did. But I had plenty of money, thanks to Eliza, and who cares if I decided to buy the two little boys in my life everything they wanted? It made me happy and the smiles on their faces were rewards enough.

About an hour later we opened the portal to Nashville. Mac was carrying the large box that contained the car set and he led the way through. Siofra was waiting for us in her kitchen with a friendly smile. Everyone exchanged hugs and greetings and after I handed Siofra the cinnamon rolls, I led Ian over to his present.

To say that he liked it was putting it mildly. His little body almost burst with pleasure when he saw the cars and pieces of track that the box contained and I had to laugh at the spectacle he made. Glenn entered the room just in time to hear his son's shouts of delight and the look he gave me was one of mock thanks. It had become a constant source of teasing lately that

whoever brought the gift had to put it together, so that's what Ian and I did for the next half and hour while the other's had coffee and the cinnamon rolls.

"Has anyone talked to Grandmother and Grandfather, let them know what's going on?" I asked later. The track was together now and Ian was totally immersed in making car noises and running the vehicles around and around.

Siofra shook her head. "No."

"What *is* going on?" Mac asked.

We all looked at each other in silent wonder. It was true that we didn't have many answers to a long list of questions that clearly began with who Joel was. We weren't even sure what this was all about, but I for one was convinced that we had to do something. "Not one hundred percent sure," Siofra commented finally.

"Joel's in trouble, we need to help him," I comment, making sure that I wasn't looking at any of them.

"Who the hell is Joel?" Mac asked, his gaze swinging to me.

"Worldwalker." That from Siofra.

He rolled his eyes. "The seeker who must be sought."

Siofra's brows lifted in interest as I looked up at him as well. "So he's the seeker?" I asked. "I thought he was the Worldwalker." When Gwrhyr had first mentioned something about a seeker, my thoughts had automatically gone to Sam since that was what she was. She was the mage born into every generation that was destined to see visions. Glenn's mother had been the last one. I was beginning to see that Joel was pretty involved in this whole thing, whatever this thing was. I only hoped that we were able to free him.

Mac looked at Gwrhyr and seemed to be having one of his silent conversations with him. "I think he mentioned that," he commented dryly after a minute. "He's known by many names," he said when he caught his sister regarding him in confusion.

"We have to go see the Fates," Siofra said as she stood and grabbed a piece of paper off the counter. "I located them in the phone book."

Mac gave her the 'oh-no-you-did-not' look and she smiled at him. "Yeah, I did. I did the dream walking thing and she kinda shoved me out of it. Was kinda pissy because somebody else was there first."

"So we know where they live?" I asked, not wanting to sit around anymore. It was time to find some answers and it sounded like the Fates were our best stop.

But I was ignored as Mac asked, "Hmm, trailer? Let me guess, wading pool. I've seen it."

"What did you see in the pool?" Siofra asked him.

He described looking into the pool and seeing what sounded like the cliffs from my dreams, complete with white stones, overlooking an area where a river met a sea. He told of seeing images of bodies that faded in and out like I had and he described the details of their uniforms as red and black, just as those I had seen. The stones turned red from their blood and remained so even when the bodies had faded out of sight.

Then the view changed to show a line of trees, the huge, ancient ones like those I had walked through in the forest of my dream, only to change again to rush along the edge of the cliff until it stopped at a large stone castle perched on an outcropping. The ground was red here too, but he couldn't see any visible source for the color. The whole thing vision sounded a great deal like what I had seen when I looked in the Fate's pool, so as least it seemed like we were getting the same story, even if only bits of it.

Siofra agreed that she had seen about the same thing as Mac did when she looked in the pool. "One of the Fates said to find them the right way, so I found them," she said. "Now we need to go."

I stood. "Okay, road trip."

We all made ready to pile into Siofra's new Lincoln Navigator when Eliza spoke up, "You know, I don't think I should go."

Siofra looked at her and they seemed to have a silent conversation while the rest of us stood there. "Then you can stay with the baby," Siofra told her after a minute.

Eliza nodded. "Okay." The whole exchange seemed to reinforce my thoughts that something had indeed happened in Nashville, most likely involving the Kindred of the city, so I understood Eliza's hesitancy to leave the safety of the house. Glenn had the place rigged with so many wards that it made Alcatraz look like a playhouse.

Mac's brow furrowed. "Bullshit. Get in the car." Eliza opened her mouth to argue, then saw the look in his eyes and led the way to the door that went into the garage. And we all exited the house, including Gwrhyr, leaving Ian with one of the girls that lived in the brownstone with Glenn and Siofra. We were off to look for the Fates.

Glenn drove while Siofra told him where to go from the directions she had put together to get there. The trailer was in the hills far from town and the roads were very rough. Good thing we had the four-wheel drive or we wouldn't have been able to make it there.

It took about an hour and a half to get to where we were going. The blue-green, doublewide trailer looked exactly like it had in my dream, but with one exception. As we pulled up, I remembered not seeing the dog that had been responsible for the huge piles in the yard. Standing next to the neat and tidy herb garden was a big, mangy yellow dog that must have been the culprit and he was eyeing the car like someone inside was his next meal.

We got out of the vehicle, unsure about approaching the door. I was pretty antsy to get the show under way so when Siofra finally started to make her way cautiously across the yard to knock on the door, I was right behind her.

A young woman, whom we found out later was named Carlene, answered the door. She wore tight, hip-hugging jeans and a baby doll t-shirt that in no way hid the fact that she was at least six months pregnant. To say that she was voluptuous was being nice. To say that she was White Trash was more truthful. She had a pierced eyebrow and long dishwater blonde hair that at least looked like it had seen a brush that day. She grinned past us toward Mac and Glenn in what was almost like recognition. "'Bout time," she said as she stepped aside and motioned for us to enter. "Spected you sooner," she continued in her charming southern accent.

Siofra glanced back at the rest of us then turned to go inside. I filed in next, followed by the rest of the group. The house was a dazzling display of fake wood paneling, Formica and linoleum. The main living area housed the kitchen, dining and living rooms of the structure, a low dividing wall separating the carpeted living room from the linoleum covered floor of the kitchen.

Not a single chair in the house matched and every piece of furniture showed the kind of wear and tear that only children could put on it. The floor was littered with toys as well as a half a dozen children, ranging from the age of one to ten. They were either playing with the toys that were strewn everywhere or with the mangy yellow dog who had come in behind us. The only thing that made the house look like it was homey was that there were many things laying about that were handmade. There was a latch hook rug on the floor, knitted pillows on

the sofa, and doilies on every flat wood surface visible. The air smelled like a mixture between old lady, baby poop, dog, and hair dye. I thought I was going to be sick from the overpowering scents that were hitting me all at once.

"Come in," a middle-aged woman said from the kitchen area where she was cooking dinner. She had big hair that was going gray, and was wearing black polyester pants and a striped shirt that was too long for her and the sleeves were rolled up. By the looks of it, she was chain smoking and using whatever was at hand for an ashtray as she cooked. "We did expect you long before now, but you're welcome, come in."

The kitchen was a large area that was brightly lit and perfectly clean. A television was on in the living room and a young looking, Donahue type was talking to a teen mother about her child. A large comfy chair with a walker stood near the television and there was an end table on one side that held sewing notions and a stack of tabloids, like the Enquirer and the Globe, that were heavily annotated with pen marks and dog eared for some reason.

In the chair sat the old woman that Siofra and I had met in our dream. She was reading a copy of a King James Version bible that looked to be heavily annotated as well. She wore an outfit that might have been in fashion in the late forties and had big hair like the other woman in the kitchen and she looked up from the bible at our entrance. "Couldn't come before. Dead," she commented before taking a sip of her iced tea as she eyed Mac knowingly, prompting Eliza to move closer and Mac slipped an arm around her.

Siofra's gaze turned to Mac sadly as Carlene moved closer to us and eyed him hungrily. "What's that?" she asked.

"He was dead, remember?" the woman who was cooking replied as she moved into the dining area and motioned for us to join her and the other two women. "And they weren't ready."

Carlene looked at Mac like he was a piece of meat. "Looks mighty good for being dead," she commented. I was waiting for her to lick her lips.

If it were possible, Eliza moved even closer to Mac and I could see that she was doing her best to hold her temper while the other woman openly ogled him. I hoped she continued to hold it until we got whatever information we needed from them.

"I got better," Mac replied.

The woman who was cooking indicated the chairs around the table again. "Come in, sit down. I'm Lucy-Mae, that's Annabelle," she said as she pointed at the elderly woman from our dream. "And this piece of white trash here is Carlene."

Siofra was the only one who sat down at table and Lucy-Mae handed her a bowl of beans to snap while Carlene continued to eye the two men like they were her next meal, regardless of the fact that she was obviously well into her pregnancy or that they were both already married and their wives were in the room.

Thankfully, she didn't come into the kitchen, though. Instead she stood at the edge of where the carpet and linoleum met as she stared at them hungrily, almost as if she weren't allowed to come into that area of the house.

Lucy-Mae looked at the rest of us expectantly and Mac said, "We'll stand, thank you." She offered coffee next and Mac and Eliza accepted. I just want them to start talking already.

"Sure you don't want to sit down?" she asked when she handed them cups.

Mac shook his head. "No, thank you."

Glenn moved to sit down at the table as well, hoping to get away from Carlene's probing gaze. I think that he was hoping to establish further, the fact that he was married to Siofra without offending the other woman. I went to sit as well, while Gwrhyr loped over to Annabelle and have a silent 'conversation' with her.

"How is it that you can help us?" Siofra asked Lucy-Mae as the other woman lit a fresh cigarette with the remains of the old one and put the butt in one of the many ashtrays that occupied the counter in various places.

"She's a Brennan," Mac commented dryly as he tried to hide his grin at his sister's forwardness.

"What kind of help do you want?" Lucy-Mae asked. "We can help you in many ways."

"Worldwalker," Siofra said as she dropped a handful of bean pieces in the bowl, then turned to her with a pointed look.

"How can we find Joel?" I asked, the edginess getting to me and becoming visible in my voice.

Mac began to tell her about the dream that he had and she eyed him with a look of recognition. "So you've been having the dreams then?" she asked.

"Of course they've had the dreams, why would they be here if they weren't?" Charlene said from her spot near the wall. She leaned toward Mac and purred, "Tell me about your dreams..."

Mac shrugged. "Not much to tell. I met the Worldwalker, he threatened Eliza, I woke up."

"He was not very threatening in my dream," Siofra commented.

"He threatened Eliza?" I asked, horrified by the thought. Joel had been so familiar in my dream, like he knew me. It made me want to know him as well, but if he had threatened Eliza...

"Well, he didn't threaten her," Mac conceded, causing Siofra to look at him expectantly. "He threatened that they would," he finished, indicating Lucy-Mae.

"Things go much easier when you stop fighting your destiny," the older woman told him.

"Things go much easier when you stop threatening my wife," he countered, his voice tightly contained.

She looked at him levelly. "I don't remember threatening your wife, but there are consequences to your actions."

He eyed her just as levelly. "There are consequences to everyone's actions."

"Exactly," she said, her lips curving to a small smile.

Siofra interrupted them by asking, "All right, so how can you help us?"

Lucy-Mae turned to her. "You're looking for Joel?"

"Yes," Siofra told her.

Lucy-Mae studied her for a moment before answering, "We can show you how to find him."

"Can you tell us what else you know about this?"

"We know a lot of things about this, what do you want to know?" the older woman asked as she glanced around at all of us.

Siofra was the one to speak first. "There are four of us having these dreams, all similar, but different at the same time."

The older woman was silent for a moment, as if formulating how to put what she was about to say. "We can tell you many things, but the future is like moonlight on water. To touch the surface would be to change the reflection. It's not good to know too much of the future."

"You're doing that annoying thing that he did," Siofra said briskly, "talking in riddles."

"Where exactly is he?" I asked, trying not to sound too eager for the information, but wanting to at least get some of the facts out in the open. "Where are these Cliffs of Garelan?"

"On another world," Lucy-Mae replied simply.

"And how do we get there?" Siofra asked.

I spoke at the same time. "Is that what you're going to show us how to do?"

She looked between us then answered, "Yes."

My mind was thinking about a hundred different things, but I settled for one question to begin with. "What exactly is his situation there?"

She leaned back in her chair. "All will become clear in time," she replied cryptically, looking at me as if she knew a secret.

"It would be good if all became clear before we walked into this," I retorted in a huff as I crossed my arms over my chest in a defensive nature.

Mac spoke up then, causing Eliza to give him a dirty look. "Knowledge is power," he said. That was the way he tended to look at life and I had to admit that I agreed with him most of the time. This time especially.

Siofra added her two cents. "What is it that you can tell us before we go?"

"Is he in danger?" I asked, trying not to be too overt in my questioning.

Lucy-Mae smiled at me as if she knew where my thoughts were going, which she probably did given she was a Fate and all. "If he does not return to this world soon, he will never return to this world."

I didn't like that idea, but I tried to hide my dislike as best as I could.

"How much danger is there to us?" Siofra went on.

Lucy-Mae shrugged and waved her cigarette in the air. "There is danger in everything. Walking down the street is dangerous."

There was no doubt in my mind that I would at least go, even if I went by myself. I just wanted to know one thing at this point. "Will we be able to use our magic like we do here?"

"Yes," she answered.

"I was not able to," Siofra pointed out.

Lucy-Mae countered, "You were dreaming."

"But I've used it before dreaming."

The older woman shrugged. "It was not your dream."

I frowned. I had thought that meeting Joel had been my dream all along. Apparently I was skipping around in dreams again and I had to admit that the thought was slightly disturbing to me. It was odd to think that I would just bounce into someone's dream like I had and I had to admit that it didn't sound like a safe habit to continue. "Was it his dream that we were all in?" I asked.

"It looks as if some of you know the answers to that," she pointed out as she looked knowingly at Mac. "If you know the answers, why are you here?"

"We know the answer to *that* question," Mac added.

Siofra switched tactics, I think before we talked ourselves out of their help. "Why us?"

Lucy-Mae looked down to avoid eye contact with anyone. "Because of your tie with the one who seems to be avoiding his destiny," she said, moving to flick her long ash into a tray.

"That'd be you, Mac," Siofra said with a grin, as only a sister could.

He glared back at her. "Thanks, Sprite," he ground out.

She ignored his obvious displeasure and looked back to Lucy-Mae. "How do we get there?"

"Can we go now?" I added. I was worried about Joel and what was happening to him. I was trying to forget the way his lips had felt on my skin so I concentrated on the fact that he was somehow bound to that world, but it was really hard.

Siofra looked at me disapprovingly. "I'm not sure about going right now," she said slowly.

"Well, how do we go?" I pressed Lucy-Mae.

Mac tried to lighten the mood by saying, "Turn right at the north star, straight on until morning."

"Second star to the right," Eliza corrected.

Mac looked at his wife and squeezed her arm. "Of course, my bad."

Lucy-Mae shook her head in disapproval. "It's no wonder you get lost upon occasion," she observed.

He looked at her and his features turned to a teasing expression. "Is that why my destiny takes control?"

Attempting to avoid an argument, Siofra jumped in. "Directions, please?" she asked as she finished the last of the beans and dropped them in the bowl.

"Directions," Lucy-Mae repeated as she got to her feet and looked around the room at us. "Well, we need to go into the yard and do a little scrying in the pool."

Everyone who was sitting stood and as a group we moved toward the door of the trailer. Annabelle had apparently finished her conversation with the wolf because she reached for her walker and stood as well and Carlene's face showed utter happiness that the guys were now moving out of the kitchen, making it easier for her to get closer to them. Glenn was at a loss as to how to deal with her, but Mac kept Eliza between himself and the other woman as we moved to the door.

Gwrhyr walked next to Annabelle as we all made to exit and I went to help her out of the house. She thanked me in a distracted old lady way, but I didn't mind as long as we found out what we needed to know and found it out soon.

Chapter 17 – Looking Into the Matter

*"Day dreaming of our future
I painted such a pretty picture"*

Poe

"Lemon Meringue"

The water in the pool was clean like it had been when I had first seen it earlier that morning in my dream. Lucy-Mae called out to one of the older children that were outside playing to bring her a stick. The three women took turns stirring the water and soon a picture developed of a cave with a circle of twelve stones with a thirteenth one in the center. Mac and Siofra recognized it almost immediately as one of the caves that were under Shelby Park in town.

Five of the stones in the circle were highlighted in a pattern, then the center stone. Superimposed over it was an amulet of sort that was round, with words in an unfamiliar language around the edges, and a gryphon in the middle.

"What is that?" I asked from my place between Mac and Annabelle.

"It's a talisman," Lucy-Mae answered.

"What kind of talisman?" Siofra asked.

Lucy-Mae looked at her. "It's a gryphon."

"Where can we get it?" I pressed, eager to have all the answers I needed to get to Joel.

Annabelle carefully let go of her walker and reached under her shirt to pull out a tacky necklace that she handed to me. As soon as it passed into my hands, it changed so that it became the large silver and bronze medallion with delicate inlays of gold that seemed to form words in an unrecognizable language.

"So what do we have to do with this then?" I asked as I studied the markings closely. "We have to go there, obviously."

"Does that rock mean something?" Siofra added.

Lucy-Mae looked at us and said, "In a circle of stones touch each in turn."

"In the middle of all the wolf will cry," Annabelle chimed in.

Carlene finished, "The door will open for your goodbye."

Before I had a chance to forget the incantation, I pulled out a piece of paper and wrote down what the women had just told us. As I did so, the image in the pool faded away.

"Is there any help or advice you can give us before we go?" Siofra asked.

Carlene snickered. "Don't tarry."

Mac glanced at her then asked, "What sort of time line are we looking at?"

Lucy-Mae's brow creased slightly. "What do you mean?"

"You said if Joel doesn't return to this world soon he'll never be able to."

She nodded. "That kind of time line."

Annabelle hobbled a few steps closer to him. "It's not a date on a calendar."

"The wolf has been there before," Lucy-Mae told us indicating Gwrhyr. "He'll be able to help you somewhat, but you'll need to seek out a guide."

"One from there?" Siofra asked. The older woman nodded and Siofra was sullen for a moment. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." With that the three of them turned and headed back toward the trailer. I pulled the necklace over my head and tried to tuck it in but it was very wide and made my shirt stick out in odd angles but I left it there anyway. The others headed for the car but I had one last thing that I wanted to ask about without any of my family hearing.

"Can I help you child?" Lucy-Mae asked.

I hesitated for a minute, not sure how to begin. "Joel... he... he said some things... in the dream. Where they true, do you know?"

She smiled. "Many things are true; many things will not come to pass. What is it you ask?"

"He seemed to know me."

She nodded. "Yes."

I didn't know if she was telling me something or just agreeing with what I said. "Okay. Forget I asked."

"He knows you all, child," she told me.

I looked away embarrassed. "I'm being silly. Forget I said anything." And I turned to walk away, but her hand on my shoulder stopped me.

"All will be well," she whispered and winked at me.

I nodded silently then my eyes moved to the ground and I turned to walk back to the vehicle.

"And child," she called. I stopped to look back, but what she said puzzled me. "Remember that not all is as it seems at first glance." Then she turned and went to help Annabelle up the steps and into the trailer.

Eliza was waiting for me near the door to the backseat. She smiled at me reassuringly then we climbed in and Glenn started the drive back to town.

"Have you guys discussed your dreams with each other?" Eliza asked.

Siofra twisted in her seat to look back at us. "No."

Eliza looked around at us. "Don't you think you should?" She had been the only one to not have a dream so I bet she was feeling pretty out in left field in this whole thing but I had to concede that her suggestion was a good one even though I didn't really want to share all the details of my dream with them.

Siofra shrugged. "I guess." She thought a second, as if trying to remember where her dream had started. "I saw the chick," she began.

"Which chick?" Mac asked.

"Taeynd. I saw them arguing."

"Joel?" he interjected.

She nodded. "Yes and the girl. They were arguing. She's short, with long dark hair. He was telling her that he couldn't stay in her service much longer because he has a duty to fulfill and she said that his duty was to her alone. Jolesic, that's what she called him. He mentioned that 'they will come for me'. I'm assuming that's us. And his service to her was going to end. She mentioned the queen. Liosalfar. He mentioned his family, and destiny, and the Fates. I think at that point he noticed me, and left to walk through the trees.

"What did the trees look like?" I asked, wondering if she had been in the same forest that I had.

Siofra shrugged again. "Trees. Big trees. Like redwoods. He wasn't trying to lose me; he made sure I could follow him. I had on a blue embroidered long gown, and a knife. I've dreamt of him before. Somewhere in the middle of it I called out to him, and he stopped and waited for me. At the edge of the forest there's a cliff and stones that are chalk white. I've been dreaming of this since the last time you died," she finished sadly, looking at her brother.

Mac eyed her and smiled teasingly. "The first time or the second time?"

She tore her eyes away from him with a pained look that I knew we all still felt from time to time when we thought of the months when we had been without him. "The second time. He didn't really answer any of my questions; he just talked in riddles almost to an annoying degree. He called me Sprite, and told me that he knows me well, and we've spoken before. He can read destinies, and see into the future."

An idea came to her then and she her gaze met his again. "You know, he may be of some help to you. You know what? He said something that the Fates said. The future is like moonlight on water. To touch the surface would be to change the reflection. They said the same thing. What do you think of that?"

Mac made a face that was typical when the word destiny was brought up in his presence. "I think its prophetic bullshit," he scoffed.

Obviously Siofra didn't agree with him. "Maybe," was all she said.

Mac continued. "Because if you give it five seconds, you see the reflection as it was."

Like the rest of us, Siofra knew that there was no way to change his mind, so she changed the subject instead. "He says there's going to be a battle fought and we cannot be there to see it, and if *she* is there, all will be lost. I don't know who he means; he wouldn't tell me who it was, again with the riddles. *She's* beautiful though."

I knew, Joel had told me that he hoped that I didn't see the battle as it was fought next to the cliffs and my stomach dropped because Siofra was back on this subject. At hearing that he had told Siofra that I was beautiful, though, I felt my cheeks go hot and I looked out the window, hoping no one would notice my discomfort.

"You know what?" Siofra continued. "He said that she was in the forest the same night, he must have talked to her like he talked to me." I felt everyone's eyes turn toward me and I prayed to Gaia that I gave nothing of my thoughts away in my gaze. "Was he talking about you?" she asked me.

I looked at them hesitantly. I didn't want them to know about how I felt about a man that I hadn't even met yet and my mind raced as I figured what to tell them. "Blar said that if I was there, during the battle, that I shouldn't be, but I don't know what she meant by it, because I saw a mist of dead bodies."

I glanced around me at the others in the vehicle, afraid that they would see through my emotions at what I was hiding so I plowed ahead and told them what I saw in my dream to change the subject a little. "I was on the cliffs as well, outside the forest. I saw the same forest that you did. I saw the aftermath of battle. I saw many bodies lying on the field. They wore two different colors, two different armies that fought there."

"The white cliffs turned red," Siofra confirmed, but she wasn't about to let the subject die that I was the girl Joel had spoken of. "Do you think you are the '*she*' that he was talking about in my dreams?"

I shrugged uncomfortably, wishing that she would drop the subject and leave me the hell alone about it. "I don't know for sure. I mean, it kinda sounds that way, but I'm not really sure."

Siofra looked at her husband then, expectantly waiting for him to share what had happened in his dream next. "I was kinda woken up in the middle of mine," he informed us, looking sideways at his wife.

"Sorry," she replied guiltily as she reached over to touch his hand where it rested on his thigh.

He shifted their hands until their fingers were laced together and continued to watch the road. "I saw the stone circle in the woods, and the castle, and a large party of men in black uniforms riding from it. I did talk to Worldwalker, and he said something about the cliffs running red because the Gods will it so. He said that he must be gone from there soon or he will never leave. The seeker must be sought, the seed must be sown, and then someone woke me up."

"Did he tell us all the same thing?" Siofra asked, looking back at Eliza, Mac and myself.

"Sounds like its pretty close," Glenn commented. "Except for those of us who were woken up, and those who woke up of their own volition."

"Sorry," she said again. "You didn't have a sign up that said 'leave me alone, I'm dreaming'."

Mac cleared his throat. "I was told through my dream aspect of Gwrhyr that the seeker must be sought, the seed must be sown. I was talking with Eliza on the beach, I was drawn to the woods, I entered them, and there was the stone circle, big trees, Worldwalker. He knew Gwrhyr, greeted me, and then started in about destiny. He showed me Eliza dead in an alleyway, and that was about it."

"Okay," Siofra breathed out slowly.

"This was after I told him to shove destiny up his ass," Mac finished.

I fought the grin that threatened to spread across my lips and tried to keep the conversation going so Mac didn't continue his insistence that destiny meant nothing to him. "It sounded as if he has a destiny to fulfill of his own," I pointed out.

Siofra nodded, regarding her brother evenly. "Could be. Maybe he's meant to help you. Obviously you didn't get it right at some point in your life; maybe he's to guide you now."

Mac lifted his hand to point in my direction as he said adamantly, "She's here. I fulfilled my first destiny."

I felt my brow crease as I looked across the space at him. I didn't know what he was talking about. What did his destiny have to do with me? He was the one with things to accomplish, not me. I made a mental note to ask someone about it later, after we got Joel back. Not Mac, though, he made it perfectly clear what he thought about destiny and I was afraid he wouldn't want to tell me anything.

Siofra looked back at him and said, "Maybe there's another one. Maybe the destiny hasn't been completed."

"How many more times do I have to die?" he asked, barely controlling his voice as he did so.

She thought a moment, then eyed him with a grin and replied, "Once."

Mac couldn't help himself and grinned back. "Just once?" he asked sarcastically. "Thanks."

"Then you can come back as something else next time," she assured him with another grin.

"So is that how he threatened Eliza?" I asked, attempting to change the subject again. Eliza was visibly upset by the current topic of Mac dieing again and was now looking past me and out the window. "By showing her in an alleyway?"

"He made a comment as well," he said.

"Such as?" Siofra pressed.

"That if I didn't go after my destiny, she would die. 'The Fates may force you to follow them, Macalister, with your joyous rage or without her'."

Siofra regarded him crossly. "So you would put your destiny on the back burner and forget about it because you think it's a bunch of crap and put her life in danger?"

He looked at her just as crossly and demanded, "I'm here, aren't I?"

She frowned slightly. "Yeah, but you keep saying-"

"I don't believe in destiny," he interrupted.

"Well, it believes in you. Whether you believe in it or not, don't you think you should follow it, at least for Eliza's sake? "

His mouth thinned. "What do you think I'm doing, Sprite?"

"Being pissy about it," she countered.

"No, I'm playing along."

Siofra's eyes narrowed over the headrest. "You have to do more than just play along."

"I'm following my destiny," he said sarcastically.

She rolled her eyes then and turned to sit back in her seat. Uncomfortable silence followed.

"Joel said that he was afraid that he had lost you to his own foolishness, and he asked that I ask for your forgiveness," I said, hoping to get everyone talking again. "He only meant to show you the seriousness of what hiding from your destiny meant."

"We'll see if we can get him out first," was all he said.

"Eliza's had to live with you dying twice," Siofra said, still looking out the windshield. Her words prompted Eliza to pull out a cigarette and light it. "You know how she felt about it."

"Yes, she's watched me die twice; I've watched her die once. Same thing I told Joel, and he basically didn't give a flying fuck."

"He just showed you the possible outcome if you don't," she said, glancing over her shoulder again.

"He threatened her life," he pointed out.

"I'm sure there's something more at stake here than what we're assuming," I said, still trying to push the conversation to neutral territory.

"More people have things at stake in this than he does," she replied.

"Right, so we'll just do what we can." Letting the subject drop, I looked out the window and was quiet for the rest of the trip.

Chapter 18 – A World Away

"This trip is
All I thought
It would be
And we're not
Even 1/2 way yet."

Viggo Mortenson
"A Part"

We arrived back to house around noon. Siofra asked if anyone was hungry and fixed a light lunch, but it was obvious that some of us were too worried about what lie ahead for us to eat. Eliza went outside with a cup of coffee and Mac refused everything his sister offered.

I suggested that we should call Grandmother and Grandfather to let them know what was going on and that maybe they should keep Ian while we were gone. Siofra thought that it was a good idea and I was elected to make the initial call. Once they were each on their own extension, I told them about the dreams that everyone but Eliza had experienced the night before and what we intended to do about it. They were surprised when I was finished and expressed concern about our intentions, but I was the one that was really surprised to find out that they knew of Joel. They wouldn't tell me much about him, other than he had been missing for a few years and that he was from Northern Ireland. They said his family name, Fenian, but that it wasn't Joel's last name. Apparently his family had connections to the fey, but he wasn't one of them.

By the end of the conversation they agreed that it was good that we find him and that they would keep Ian and Eddie while we were about it. Siofra quickly put together some of Ian's things and I traveled through the portal with her to drop him off in Ireland. When we got back we started to make our own plans that involved putting together food and water for the trip since we didn't know where we would be able to readily find it once we were there. We all changed into comfortable clothes and shoes in case we had to walk a long way and I doubled checked to be sure that I had all my foci in my belt pouch that was securely fastened at my waist along with my boline. I was ready.

Siofra opened a gateway to the caves in Shelby Park about a half an hour later. It was dark in the caves, but everyone was prepared and had flashlights ready. It didn't take long to find the stone circle that looked just as it had in the vision from the Fates' pool. Eager to get our adventure underway, we touched the stones in turn as we had been instructed and put the necklace on Gwrhyr, who sat on the center stone.

In the blink of an eye we were mystically transported to the gray circle I had seen in my dream. The first thing I noted was that our clothing had changed dramatically. I was now wearing a long, silver dress with sturdy, knee-high riding boots and a cloak. Siofra also wore a long dress, but hers was burgundy. I saw that her boots were similar to mine as well when she lifted the hem of the dress and a cloak that was draped on her shoulders, too. Her hair was swept up in a pretty twist with wispy tendrils of hair brushing her neck.

I almost giggled out loud when I saw that Mac was wearing plate armor over a chain mail shirt that went to his knees. He wore an over tunic of blue that had a wolf's head embroidered

on the front. He looked like he had stepped out of the pages of a book of King Arthur stories and strangely enough, it looked natural on his muscular frame. I watched as he examined the armor and mail expertly to be sure that everything was situated properly.

Eliza looked like his page, complete with leather armor that went nearly to her knees with leather leggings underneath and knee boots. Glenn was dressed similarly, but his leather was a darker shade of brown compared to Eliza's. A closer look at everyone told me that we all wore a wolf like Mac's somewhere on our person with the exception of Glenn, who wore a raven on his shoulder.

A quick inspection of our surroundings showed that we seemed to be alone in the forest. The trees were thick; like I remembered from my dream but as far as I could tell we were the only ones in the area. There was a sense of foreboding in the air, however, and I couldn't stop myself from worrying about what awaited us.

All of our belongings had been changed as well into their medieval era equivalent. The most startling change was that my cell phone became a scroll with ink and a quill to go along with it. Our bottles of water became flasks and all the other plastic packaging on the food we had brought was now clean cloth. Our money had been changed to gold and silver coin that I had to assume was the type of currency used in this land. Credit cards became letters of credit from a bank that none of us had ever heard of.

Siofra eyed Mac closely. "Can you walk quietly in that?" she asked half serious as she pointed at the armor and mail.

Mac gave her the hairy eyeball in return. "Yeah."

Our weapons were converted to their medieval equivalent, too. Everything except the stakes, that is. Even the knives were similar but not constructed the same as they had been. The guns were archaic in fashion now and all the provisions needed for them, like powder and packing, was among our supplies.

"You've got to be joking," Siofra commented as she examined the gun she had pulled from her bag. "Do you know how to use this? I'm not sure I do."

Proving once again to be an unbelievable source of information, Mac came forward then and gave all of us a quick demonstration on medieval firearms; how he knew about them I'll never know. They were a great deal different from the modern day weapons that I only felt vaguely comfortable with. I was a little worried that I wouldn't be able to reload when I needed to so I just hoped that I wouldn't have to. Putting the weapon away, I decided that it was time to exercise my magic to see how well it was working by finding out if there was anyone near us in the forest. Reaching out with Life, I allowed my senses to spread out around me. All I felt was animals in the forest around us so that eased my nerves a great deal for the moment.

"Is this the circle you saw?" Mac was asking Glenn.

The other man looked around. "It appears to be yes, although it was dark in my dream and it's not now."

"Maybe we should take the trail," Siofra commented, indicating a small path that ran through the undergrowth that looked a game trail.

"All right Gwrhyr," Mac said and the wolf turned his head toward him. "You've been here before, now where do we go?" I noticed that he still wore the medallion that the Fates had given us so I went over to slip it off so he didn't lose it.

"I'd like to follow this trail," Siofra said as the wolf looked up at Mac innocently. As if taking a cue from her, he started off down the trail and we all fell into single file behind him. Mac took the lead, followed closely by Eliza, then myself, with Siofra and Glenn bringing up the rear.

I slipped the medallion over my head and was about to tuck it under my dress when I realized that it had shifted slightly. The animal on the pendant looked a little different but I figured that like everything else, it had adapted for this place and allowed it to drop between my breasts. I took the time to notice of my surroundings as we went by using magic to get my bearings and to sense what was around us. That way we could be prepared for what was to come and would be able to find our way back as well. For now I felt only the presence of trees, but at the far edges of my field of awareness, there was habitation.

The game trail was narrow and lined with many of trees. We walked for a long while until finding a better traveled path the led us south. After a while a thought occurred to me.

"What are we going to tell people?" I asked, looking in front of me where Eliza trudged with her crossbow case and another pack on her back.

"We're just passing through?" Siofra suggested from behind me. "We're traveling to meet old friends. We've come to seek a new existence... I don't know."

"A wandering freak show," I heard Mac put in from the head of the line sarcastically.

"Yeah, that'll go over real well," Eliza said, a grin evident in her voice.

Mac stopped and we gathered in a circle to discuss on the path. "Look at it this way, between all of us we can do enough to back it up," he said, attempting to sound convincing now.

"Are we going to charge money and admission?" Eliza asked, playing off his suggestion.

The mood sobered and we tossed around some ideas on potential stories to use and settled on one that said we were travelers whose horses and provisions had been stolen by bandits on the road to whatever city we were coming to. That established, we continued down the trail until we eventually came to a clearing on our right. It was a small one, where the big trees had roots that were just about the right height for sitting on comfortably. To everyone's surprise, on one of the roots sat a little girl, no older than ten or twelve.

She was a cute little thing with long dark hair and quick brown eyes that stood out even from the six to eight feet that separated us. She reminded me of a friend of mine that moved away when I was young and the likeness was remarkable. She sat there as if she were expecting us, but her demeanor said that she was saddened.

"She looks like the girl that ran away," Siofra commented to Glenn.

He shook his head. "I don't see the resemblance, but she reminds me of my mother."

Siofra left the path and walked up to the girl and said, "Hello." The girl appeared a little afraid at first, but I could see her face when she looked up at her shyly at my aunt. "Why are you out here in the middle of the woods all alone?"

"Where else would I be?" the child asked as if it should be perfectly evident. Her clothes were remarkably clean for someone who supposedly lived in the forest. They were well worn but the skirt displayed no evidence of dirt or tearing that one might expect.

"At home with your parents," Siofra suggested, causing the little girl's eyes to sadden as she looked down at her hands that were in her lap.

"I'm sorry," Siofra told her as she moved to sit down next to her on the root and the girl shifted away slightly in uncertainty.

Mac moved to edge of clearing where he could keep watch of the road and Eliza stuck close to him as Siofra made a heart felt attempt to befriend the girl. "Is there something I can help you with? Something I can do for you, you seem... lost."

The child bristled slightly, pulling her little shoulders up so that she appeared older. "I'm not lost, I know these woods."

Siofra had to stifle a smile as she watched her. "Would you like something to eat?" I could see the hunger in the little girl's eyes, but I also saw her resolve that said she wouldn't ask for anything, either. "I have lots of stuff in my bag if you'd like something," Siofra pressed.

She hesitated a minute more, and then nodded her head a little. Siofra opened her pack and offered many things from the selection of food that she had brought with her. It was obvious that the little girl didn't want to be greedy and in the end Siofra gave her an apple and some cheese that she tore into hungrily.

"Thank you," the child said, eyeing the rest of us as she ate.

"What are you doing out here alone?" Siofra asked her.

"I live out here," she answered matter of factly.

Siofra looked around the clearing. "Where?" she asked and the girl pointed toward the east. "Would you like us to take you back?"

The child shook her head as she swallowed. "No, I can find my way, thank you."

Siofra considered her for a moment. "Do you know a person named Joel?"

"Worldwalker?" Mac asked when the child shook her head.

She shook her head no again and took another bite.

"What was the woman's name?" I asked, moving a few steps closer to her.

She chewed carefully as she watched my approach. "Taeynd," Siofra answered, causing the child to look at her quickly with fright in her eyes.

"You know the lady?" she asked Siofra in disbelief.

Siofra shook her head. "No, I don't. I've seen her. She's the one that Joel is... I think he is friends with her."

"She doesn't have friends," the girl informed her.

"Well she seems to think he is her friend."

I moved forward then and squatted down in front of the girl. "My name is Corrine," I told her with a smile. "And this is my family." I looked around at the others then turned back to the child. She was looking at them as well as I introduced everyone. "This is Siofra," and she smiled at her benefactor who had given her a meal.

I quickly pointed out the others who all smiled warmly at the girl in turn. We were told that we would have need of a guide. Maybe she was our gift horse even if she was only a child. "What's your name?" I asked her after.

"Kenaz."

I nodded and smiled again. "Do you know where Taeynd lives?"

"She lives at Horsetower."

I studied her curiously. "Horsetower? Is that the name of her house, or the name of a town?"

"It's a castle. It's that way," she said, pointing toward the southwest.

"Is she a nice person, or kind of?" I asked, which caused the child to shake her head vigorously. "I didn't think so. Are people scared of her?"

Kenaz hesitated, and then nodded her head as Siofra put her hand on her small shoulder to sooth her fears.

I decided to take the chance that she might be our guide. "Do you think you could show us the way to this Horsetower?"

She was visibly frightened. "I don't want to go there."

"You don't have to," Siofra said, attempting to ease her fear.

Kenaz looked up at her. "I could show you where, but I don't want to go there."

"Ask her about the cliffs," Mac suggested.

I nodded. "Do you know if we're close to the Cliffs of Garelan?" Maybe we could just get some background information from the child to point us in the right direction, but I didn't feel right just leaving her out here by herself.

"Horsetower is on the cliffs," Kenaz answered.

I looked back at Mac and Eliza. "That must be the castle we saw." Then I turned back to the girl again. "Just out of curiosity, are there soldiers that work for this woman?"

She nodded. "A lot of them."

I wondered if her people were one of the armies on the field that faded in and out during my dream. "What color do they wear?" I asked.

"Black," she answered, confirming my thoughts.

I pressed forward to see if there was anything else that I might learn from her. "Do you know of an army that wears red?" I asked, hoping to get some kind of idea who our friend might be, but the child answered no.

"Do you know a man named Jolesic?" Siofra then asked.

She seemed to light up at the mention of that name. "Uh-huh," she told us.

Siofra smiled at her. "Do you know where he's at?"

"He's with the lady."

"Is he mean?"

Kenaz shrugged. "I don't know."

"Have you ever talked to him?" she pressed.

"Once," was the response.

Siofra and I continued to ask the girl various questions while she finished the cheese and apple and the others waited nearby. Kenaz was adamant that she didn't want to go to Horsetower, but she did consent to show us the way, which was a great help since we were unfamiliar with the lay of the land. She claimed to know the woods well so we agreed that taking her with us was a good idea until she had proven herself untrustworthy.

Chapter 19 - Grimhaven

"They wound up into the hills, knowing only that they were climbing away from the city's main drags. Past the stacks of well-tended and unattended residences; investments for some and must homes for others. Irrigated, orderly, protected.

*Viggo Mortenson
"Independence"*

We started down the trail again when Kenaz had finished with her meal, the child walking between Siofra and myself in the line we had formed during our earlier portion of the trek. We walked for a few hours until we came upon a hill at the edge of the forest and when we arrived at the top, we found ourselves looking down over a fortified town that was surrounded with cleared green fields. Since I had grown up on a farm, I knew right away that the small plants were just the right size for early spring so it was logical to guess that whatever this world was called at least followed the same time of year that ours did.

A tower stood a good distance beyond the fields; I guessed a couple of miles by the look of things. It was afternoon now, about three, and I was tired from the long walk that was hindered by the long dress that I was wearing.

"I think we should go into town first," Mac suggested as we all gathered together to discuss our next step. I was still eager to find Joel but I knew that we had to be careful or risk being caught ourselves so I stayed silent for the moment.

Siofra nodded in agreement. "Get lodgings for the evening."

Kenaz informed us that the town was called Grimhaven and the tower beyond was Horsetower, the same structure I had seen in the Fates' pool when I had dream walked with Siofra. That was where Joel was.

The town had a six-foot tall, wooden wall that encircled it. A shallow river divided to the east of the walls, and encircled them like a moat, coming together just past the walls to the west of the village. Only one bridge crossed the river on the side of the town where we stood, and guards in leather armor stood guard at the wooden gate. There were watchtowers at various points along the wall, and one on either side of the gate. The road we had been traveling all day led straight to the gate.

"We should buy horses and a wagon, more supplies," Mac said absently as we all studied the town and surrounding area from the top of the hill. "The women can go shopping for clothing, Glenn and I can buy the horses and equipment."

"I wouldn't suggest splitting up," his sister cautioned as she, too, systematically considered the view.

Mac shrugged, turning his head to the west and following the course of the river. "The town doesn't look that large. Let's get lodging, and discuss it from there."

We started down the hill along the path that now widen to look more like a road then it had in the forest. "I know of an inn that you can stay at," Kenaz told us.

Mac turned and looked over his shoulder at the girl, then at Siofra and me. "One outfit for her. We don't need to be picking up charity cases."

"I wasn't thinking about going overboard," I replied, stifling the thoughts of the cute outfits that I was sure we could find for the little urchin. I wouldn't dare admit that thinking of clothes we could get her was taking my mind of Joel and the fact that he was only a few miles away.

I saw that there were guards in the towers overlooking the road and fields on one on either side of the gate. They all wore leather armor and as we got closer, I was able to make out a patch visible on their shoulders that was black with a black snake embossed on it. They were equipped with swords, guns, and daggers and looked quite capable of using all of them as they watched people pass by them in a lazy way I had seen Mac do when he was covertly assessing someone. Mac donned his cloak to detract attention away from the fact that he was armored better than they were and we continued on.

Using magic, I felt out around us to get an idea of how many people there were in the town and surrounding areas. We could see the guards and the farmers in the fields, but I wanted to be sure that there weren't any large groups of people lurking in the thickets that lay between the forest and the walls of the town that could turn out to be potential antagonists.

Always know your surroundings, Cormac Brennan lesson 101. I didn't sense anything out of the obvious, so I continued on with the rest of the group in silence.

We had walked along the road for about ten minutes when the thunder of a large group of horses started to ring through the air. They were approaching us rather quickly, but Mac had made sure that everyone moved off the road by the time they came into view.

Fifty mounted soldiers in rows of three left the forest in a cloud of dust. They all appeared to be wearing as much armor as Mac as well as the black tunics over their armor that were similar to those of the guards of the town. On if their number carried a black banner that bore the same black snake that looked poised to strike. The same snake was on the middle of the tunics on their chest and back that I saw after they had sped past us. They were well armed, rifles visible sticking out from the saddles of their mounts. The riders were very well appointed, but dirty from riding.

Kenaz hid her face in Siofra's skirts and I moved closer to them to make sure the child was completely hidden from the soldiers. I kept my eyes downcast, as a woman of the times should, but also so in an effort to keep any of them from remembering me later.

The horses passed by in a roar, but one of the soldiers near the front separated himself and turned to gallop back a few paces while the others thundered past. He was looking our party over expertly, and as the end of the line reached him, he turned back again and urged his mount faster to catch back up to the front of the line. About that time, ten of the number broke off from the main group and headed toward the town while the rest continued on to Horsetower. They rode through the gate without question and disappeared from view.

"So how are we going to explain the no horses' thing?" Glenn asked from the end of the line as we got back on the road.

"We were robbed," I suggested.

"We lost them," Siofra put in.

I looked over my shoulder to glance back at her. "Someone stole them in the night."

Glenn ran ahead to catch up to Mac for a private conference as we continued toward the town. Mac must have said something that amused the other man, because he threw his head back and laughed heartily but neither shared the joke as we continued down the road.

When we were in visible sight of the town, Mac said something to Gwrhyr, who then disappeared in a blink. I assumed he sent the animal ahead to scout out the city.

"How far is the inn?" Siofra asked the child who had come up to walk beside her now.

"Not far from the gate," the girl replied.

Siofra looked down at her and smile. "Would you like to stay with us?"

"Why do you want me to stay with you?" Kenaz asked suspiciously.

I could almost see Siofra shrug behind me before she answered. "Because you have no place to stay."

"I live in the forest," was the firm answer.

Siofra, however, wasn't one to give in easily. "Wouldn't you be much warmer if we got you a new dress and some food and you stayed with us for a couple of days?"

The girl was silent for a few minutes the said, "I guess." I could hear the reluctance in her voice, but she had agreed.

"It's all right; you can stay in the room with myself or Corrine. You don't have to go back to the forest right now. We'll take care of you."

There was a bridge over the river where it forked near the town and Mac and Glenn rejoined us so that we approached the settlement in a group with him slightly in front of the rest of us, Eliza on one side and Glenn on the other.

The guards at the gate looked us up and down when we approached. "What business do you have in town?" one of them asked, his tone reminding me of old English in structure, but no yeh's and thee's.

Mac took point as leader and spoke for all of us. "We come for supplies and an evening's rest."

The guard looked us over again, and then stepped aside to let us pass.

"Good day," Mac said and started through. As he did Siofra grabbed my arm and pulled me closer to her.

I smiled at the guards as we walked by to cover her sudden action, then glanced over at her questioningly, wondering what she was doing when her voice spoke in my head. "The one on left finds you extremely desirous."

I looked again just as we were passing them by and found that the man she indicated was leering at me as if he could already see me without clothes on. "Great," I thought, not sure that she was listening, as I looked down and quickened my pace to get past him.

"What's the name of the inn?" Siofra asked Kenaz and the child promptly gave it as well as directions to find it.

The village was a fairly clean town I found as we wound our way through the cobblestone streets, following the girls' instructions. There were trenches down the middle of each street to get rid of the waste that was thrown from the houses and businesses and to my great surprise; the air didn't smell too bad because of it.

I had taken a world civilization class in my freshman year of college that had described in great detail the workings of medieval style towns as well as the filthy conditions where disease had run rampant because of the unsanitary conditions. All in all it was pretty clean for a town of the time, visible improvements looked to have been made in the last few years and while it was obvious that not everyone was rich, no one was suffering, either.

We found the inn without problem and Mac made arrangements with the innkeeper for two connecting rooms with four beds on the second floor. Mac, Eliza and I would share one room while Glenn, Siofra and Kenaz took the other. The accommodations weren't big, but comfortable enough for our needs. The innkeeper left us to settle in after telling us what time dinner was served and tips on where to shop as well as some places to avoid.

"What's the plan now?" Siofra asked after the door was closed behind us.

Mac answered, "We supply a little bit."

"Are we going to stay together?"

Mac shrugged. "We can if you want, but we can cover more ground separately."

We went to the market area of town as a group, and then split up to locate the items from our various lists. Mac and Glenn made up one group that was looking to buy horses and tack, while the rest of us made up the other that would buy extra clothing and foodstuffs that we might need if we had to suddenly leave town. I'm pretty sure that Eliza wanted to stay with Mac, but he made her go with us for 'protection'.

It took most of the afternoon to do so, but Eliza, Siofra and myself managed to find everything on our list without trouble. We made sure that Kenaz had a couple of changes of clothing and undergarments, as well as a cloak that matched Siofra's and Glenn's so strangers would think that she belonged to them. We also bought her a doll. We had been treated nicely by the owners of the various shops we visited, even though Eliza got some strange looks that I attributed to her male looking attire and the fact that she looked like she was attack anyone who looked at us wrong.

"Take it down a notch, or fifteen," I told her in a whisper as we made our way back to the inn.

"The reason I came with you guys was to protect you," she said in defense.

I glanced at her, and then rolled my eyes at the fact that she still thought everyone but she was helpless. "Yes, and while I appreciate that, because I'm so helpless I can't possibly take care of myself..."

"I don't see you wearing leather," she pointed out as if that made all the difference in the world.

I knew this was an old argument and one that would get me nowhere if I continued to fight it. "So, look over here at this lovely window display," I said sarcastically to change the subject.

"She's Mac's daughter," she said to Siofra, who grinned at the comment and shook her head in merriment.

"Are you getting a dress?" I countered, deciding that if she was going to continue her protection racket that she was stuffing down my throat that I would make her squirm a little as well.

Eliza blinked like the idea was preposterous. "There's a dress in my pack. I'm buying men's clothes."

I pulled her into the next shop that sold women's garments and made her by a dress just to make her fidget uncomfortably while Siofra bought a set of clothes that she claimed was for her husband, but I knew they were really for her.

We met Mac and Glenn later on the street to find that they had purchased a wagon and four horses to pull it along with two more horses for riding. Inside the bed of the wagon was rope and cloth for lean-to's and the stakes to go with them along with bows and quivers of

arrows and various other provisions. Eliza, Siofra and I added our bundles to the rest and we returned to the inn for dinner.

When we arrived back at the inn, the first thing I noticed was the large warhorses that were standing in the stable yard. I was worried that maybe some of the soldiers that we had seen earlier in the day had somehow found out that we were staying at the inn and had come to question us. Worry clouded my brain as we gathered the clothing and food from the wagon and went inside, so I didn't listen to the conversation the others were having behind me as I made my way.

We headed upstairs to put our things in our rooms and met another guest who was on his way down at the same time. He was a handsome man with long, blonde hair and he looked at Kenaz pointedly as we passed him, then gave Eliza a strange look while he pretty much ignored the rest of us. I was relieved when we finally reached our rooms without being stopped and willed myself to quit worrying about the soldiers who were probably staying at the inn as well anyhow. I remembered seeing another inn in town while we had been shopping, but the one where we were staying was by far the larger and nicer of the two.

An interesting topic came up while we were getting ready for dinner. "I think Eliza should dress more appropriately," Siofra commented from the doorway to her room. I turned to look at her and she gave me a knowing smile that Mac didn't see.

"Yes," I agreed, "in a dress."

Eliza's brow shot up in surprise. "That's what you get for thinking," she commented.

"So we don't draw more attention to ourselves than we already do," Siofra insisted as she moved to fully stand in our room.

I agreed again, liking the idea. "Right. Unless you want to cut off your hair and bind your chest."

"Look," she started, but before she could get another word out Mac spoke up.

"Fine, I'll get out of my armor," he said as he reached for the straps that held part of the chest pieces together. Apparently he was of the opinion that if he weren't ready for an all out battle that she would feel the need to be as well.

Eliza looked horrified now and I had to fight the grin that was threatening to spread across my lips as she did. "Are you saying that I have to wear the dress?" she asked, clearly panicking at the thought.

He looked at her pointedly. "Yes." And like that, without another word in argument, she picked up the dress and went behind the screen to change into it.

"We've drawn enough attention to ourselves, we should lay low," Siofra said, openly smiling.

"You can carry a woobie knife," Mac told Eliza, who was muttering to herself behind the screen.

"I'll carry more than that, thank you," she informed him as her tunic was flopped over the top of the screen. "Is the sword going to fit on over this dress?"

"No," I told her.

"No one else appeared to be armed in the dining room, I think you'll be all right," Siofra added.

"He's the man," I said, meaning Mac.

She came out then and to my surprise had the dress on properly. "Can I just put my hair up and bind my chest?" she asked, appearing to be pained by the yards of material that now swished around her legs.

"No," I said again.

Siofra shook her head, too. "No. It won't hurt you, Eliza."

She grumbled about it, but didn't put up too much of a fight and we went downstairs to eat, sitting together at a big round table in an out of the way in the corner of the dining room. It was nearly twilight and there were candles lit on all the tables as well as the large chandeliers that hung from the ceiling. A great fire burned warmly in the grate, giving an effect that was comforting and inviting. Not too dark, but enough light where one could see in all the shadows of the room.

The guards, whose horses must have been the ones we saw earlier in the yard, were sitting at a table by the fireplace. Two more stood next to a rather arrogant looking nobleman who seemed like he was attempting to intimidate a dark haired woman who was dining with the man we saw coming down the stairs after we got back from shopping. Kenaz was frightened by all the soldiers in the room and did her best to hide behind Siofra, even after we were all seated.

The waitress soon came to our table to take our food order. After she left, the argument that was beginning between nobleman and the couple seemed to escalate slightly and I wove a stream of Forces that would bring their conversation easier to my ears so I could hear it. I pulled out a small piece of paper from my pouch so that I could write down their conversation.

"I am neither an elf, nor a witch," the woman at the table said calmly. I glanced over my shoulder as if I were looking for the waitress and saw that she had lifted her hair for some reason to show the man her ears. "I am a simple woman come to trade in Grimhaven."

"Simple women do not have Ishonmir's pet for companions," the nobleman barked. I didn't know what an Ishonmir was, but I figured it had to be something these people feared. Supernatural creature maybe?

"I am no pet," the other man growled in response, telling me that whatever it was, he was the one the other man was talking about.

The woman spoke again as if she were trying to sooth the nobleman at the same time. "I was not aware that Bloodmark forbade them. If that is the case, I can have him wait in the forest."

"She has not," the nobleman replied tightly. "Keep your pet on a short leash or I will pen him for you."

I heard the man growl again, but it was the woman who said, "As you wish, my lord."

"What are you doing?" Siofra asked as I capped the ink once more and passed the page around table, handing it to Eliza first since she sat next to me.

"Any idea what this Ishonmir's pet is?" I asked as she started to read my quickly scratched notes.

To which Siofra posed the question, "Do you remember seeing the flying cat?" When I looked at her with a surprised expression she continued, "While we were at the stables, there was a flying jaguar/dragon/cat thing overhead. I think the man may be Ishonmir's pet, if that's what that is."

I nodded in understanding; not knowing for sure if that was the case, but definitely thinking it was a likely possibility. Kenaz sat drinking her mulled wine, having relaxed a little

since our arrival, but not confirming or denying that our guess was right. In fact she appeared to be playing with Gwrhyr under the table, who looked like a puppy waiting for a playtime romp instead of the mystic wolfie we had come to think of him.

Suddenly, there was a great deal of movement behind me and I turned to watch as the nobleman and the soldiers stood and left the room together in a mass of leather and muscle, leaving the dining room much quieter in their wake. At the same time our waitress approached the table again with our meals. Mac waited for her to turn slightly to serve Glenn, who sat on his other side, then passed his plate down to Gwrhyr on the floor, after which pretending that the waitress hadn't brought him one.

"You forgot mine," he said with a quick grin that stayed in place while she regarded him with surprise then apologetically said that she would be back directly with his plate.

The food was decent, not my mom's or grandmother's cooking, but palatable as we all dug in hungrily. "Do you think we should maybe start to ask about Joel?" I asked the others at the table. "Maybe not by name, but should we come up with a story of a warrior of some sort that protects the area?"

Mac looked at Glenn and smiled. "I think one of us should go drinking."

"No," Siofra and Eliza replied together.

He looked between the two of them questioningly. "Yeah," he said with another grin.

Siofra shook her head, a look of disbelief on her face that he would even think about drinking in this strange place to get information, much less involve her husband in the scheme as well. "Really, no."

Mac's face took on the look that told me at least that he was losing his patience with the argument. "Really, yeah."

Unfortunately, he sister was just as stubborn as he was and didn't back down as quickly as others would. "Um, no," she countered again, this time leaning forward to meet his hardened gaze with one of her own.

Mac relented slightly and eased back in his chair. "Go find a tavern, hear some stories, where the soldiers are..."

"No," Siofra said again, Eliza looking panicked, like she wasn't sure how to talk him out of it.

"Okay," he said dismissively. "I'm going."

Siofra clapped her hand on the table beside her to show her frustration. "I think Eliza said no," she said, looking at the other woman for back up.

"I don't remember asking," Mac ground out through clenched teeth.

"You tell her what to do," Siofra countered.

"She's the one that listens."

"Then you should listen, too."

I was starting to get dizzy from the verbal tennis match they were having when Mac switched tactics. "We came here to gather information and supplies. We have the supplies, we need the information."

"I'll go with you," I volunteered.

"No, you won't," Mac and Eliza replied.

"Why not?"

Mac held up a finger. "A, ladies are not allowed in taverns," he pointed out, and then lifted another finger. "B, you're not allowed in taverns."

I felt my eyes narrow on him in disbelief. I loved the way he and the rest of the family had selective memory on the fact that I was twenty-one years old and an adult. I understood that they loved me and all, but I didn't want to be wrapped in tissue and put on a shelf somewhere, only be taken down when they wanted to look at me.

"Some ladies are," Siofra informed him.

"Those aren't ladies," was Mac's response. "Those are ladies of the night."

"What kind of information are you looking for?" a female voice asked from behind us.

Chapter 20 – It's All about the Prophecy

"But my prince he never got back to me"

Poe

"Lemon Meringue"

Everyone at the table turned to see who spoke and when we did we found the woman who had been talking earlier with the nobleman standing a few feet behind me.

"Are you in the habit of over listening to people's conversations?" Siofra asked, her defenses clearly slamming into place at the strangers approach.

The woman smiled prettily as she met Siofra's suspicious glance with level eyes. "At times," she replied, her tone suggesting that she wasn't entirely innocent from my aunt's charge.

I watched as Mac turned on his natural charm in the form of a natural smile while I opened my mind and probed the woman, hoping to learn something about her intentions in approaching us. We were strangers here and while everyone had been kind and eager to please thus far, we were still strangers and that meant untrustworthy most of the time. "We're looking for the useful kind, my lady," he said.

She smiled back when she turned to him, addressing her first comment. "All information is useful." My probe completed, I only felt good vibes coming from her and I allowed myself to relax slightly as I watched her.

Mac regarded her silently for a moment, as if assessing her himself, then said in a casual tone, "I had a companion once. We traveled and adventured together. I've since lost track of him, and wish to regain his company."

"Does he have a name?" she asked, tilting her head to one side as she did.

He hesitated again and I watched them both closely, hoping we didn't put Joel's safety in any further jeopardy by divulging his name to her. "Jolesic."

The woman nodded to herself as she pursed her lips prettily, then looked around the table at each of us and smiled, "May I join you?"

Mac nodded. "Certainly."

Since I was the closest to her, I moved my chair to my left to make room for her at the table. When I looked up again I saw that her companion was joining us as well and was bringing chairs for both of them.

"And what is your name?" Siofra asked as they settled into their chairs, the woman carefully arranging her skirts as she attempted to cover up the fact that she was trying to get a better look at Gwrhryr.

"I am Peorth," she said as she straightened and put a hand to her chest. She then gently laid the other on the arm of the man beside her. "And this is Os-tur," she added, looking at Siofra expectantly, as if she now awaited our names.

"I am Cormac," Mac said as he leaned back in his chair and crossed a leg over his knee. He then introduced each of us and indicated who we were with an informal point of his finger. "This is my sister Siofra, her husband Glenn, my wife Elizabeth." Eliza gave him a dirty look at the use of her given name and I had to stifle a giggle behind my hand as he came to me. "Her sister Corrine Mackenzie, and our companion, Kenaz."

"And the wolf?" Peorth asked, glancing under the table again.

"The wolf is mine, he is known as Gwrhyr."

Introductions out of the way, Peorth sat back and studied us. "The seeker, the lover, the mother, the dreamer, the dagger," she commented as she looked around the table. "What are you all doing in Grimhaven?"

Siofra's brow creased as she glanced around the table. "Why do you call us that?"

At the same time, Mac heaved a heavy sigh. "Seeking," he commented almost forlornly as he picked up his wine goblet and looked at Peorth with an almost smart aleck expression. "Fulfilling my bloody hell destiny," he continued to no one in particular, and then slammed the remaining liquid.

Since Mac's destiny and his lack of enthusiasm toward it was a joke among the family and everyone but Eliza either laughed outright or snickered at his reaction to Peorth's words. Eliza eyed him with concern.

"Why do you call us by those names?" Siofra asked again.

"A gathering of five will point the way," she answered cryptically. "It has been foretold."

Siofra eyed her with a guarded expression and when she spoke there was a touch of sarcasm in her voice. "Uh-huh. So have a lot of things. Do you want to be a little more specific?"

"You came here and you don't know why you're here?" Peorth countered, her brow lifting slightly in challenge.

"Seeking the seeker," Mac answered.

"We know," Siofra added, glancing between her brother and Peorth as if she thought Mac was giving away too much too soon.

Peorth looked at her quizzically. "Then why do you ask?"

Siofra was uncomfortable, not sure how to answer. "Well, because..."

"Because you seem to know as well," Cormac finished for her.

"You seem to know a little bit more," Siofra comment. "Because, well, don't recall hearing those terms for us before. The only one we've ever heard is the seeker."

Peorth's brow lifted in mirth. "You've never been called mother?"

"By my child," Siofra replied with a shrug. "I've been called a lot of things. I'm not referred to by them on a daily basis. Actually, my son can't say that word yet."

Peorth looked around the table again with a serious expression. "It was foretold that five would come, the seeker, the lover, the mother, the dreamer, the dagger."

Siofra crossed her arms and looked around at the rest of us as Peorth had. "And who is who?" she asked.

"Don't you know who you are?"

I watched as Siofra's brow lifted and her mouth twisted slightly as she regarded the other woman. "Obviously I'm the mother, who's everyone else? We obviously know my brother is the seeker."

Peorth smiled. "Well, he's not the mother."

"We've already discerned that I am," Siofra countered.

Peorth shrugged. "Perhaps you are, perhaps you're not. Any of you can be any of the names, except of course, the men and the mother."

Siofra sniffed. "Maybe."

Mac looked across the table at me. "I'm pretty sure Corrine's not the dagger," he said, his words causing me to go on the defensive. It was always so naturally assumed that I would never be able to amount to anything more than a child that would need everyone's protection and that knowledge caused a great sadness in my heart. Ever since Mac's return I had been really trying to step up my training in the physical fighting aspects that the others of the family could teach me. So far I had been able to hold my own in the sparring that I'd done with Mac and Uncle Angus and I hoped that they hadn't been holding back too much on my account. It hurt that Mac still thought I couldn't be a fighter like Eliza was.

Peorth's gaze moved to me as well. "Perhaps," was all that she said.

"You don't know her as well as you believe you do," he said.

Peorth met his gaze evenly. "I know none of you," she said simply.

"Where's Joel?" I asked, wanting to get the discussion off myself and my inability to defend my person.

She glanced at me again and smiled a little smile as if she understood my need to know. "He's in Horsetower."

"You seem to know us well enough to call us by those names," Siofra said going back to Peorth's description of us. "You know who's who, you know that we came, you know why we're here..."

"It's merely prophecy," Mac commented, picking up for his sister. "Glenn, myself... any of us could quote off an infinite number of them."

Peorth gestured to Os-tur, who immediately pulled out a sheet of rolled parchment paper from his vest and handed it to her. She pushed the sheet across the table to Mac and said, "Have you not seen the prophecy?"

As Mac picked up the paper and began to read, I wondered suddenly if Peorth had any idea what she was talking about. In order to find out I would have to use the skill of Entropy which required me to use my foci for that sphere, the Ogham sticks from Stephen. There was no way that I could cast the sticks covertly at the crowded table so I didn't even try to as I pulled a few out and dropped them on the table in front of me. Since she was sitting next to me, Peorth turned her head toward me as I quickly studied them before picking them up again and playing with them in what I hoped to be a nonchalant way. As far as I had been able to tell the prophecy was true, but I had no way of knowing if it the casting had anything to do with us specifically. In that time Mac had finished reading the paper that Peorth had given him and passed it over to Eliza, who began to read immediately. I couldn't tell how long the document was because the paper was so thick and the light in the room was so poor.

"So what does this all mean?" Siofra asked as she waited her turn to peruse the text.

"It means many things," the strange woman replied.

Siofra pressed. "Such as? Could you explain this a little bit better? It's all a bit vague."

Peorth nodded in understanding. "Prophecies usually are," she replied, still not giving an adequate answer.

"Do you know where Joel is?" Mac asked.

"Horsetower," his sister replied as if he hadn't been listening to the conversation so far.

Mac glanced at her annoyingly before looking back at Peorth. "More specifically."

She shrugged and glanced toward Os-tur. "With Taeynd."

"I told you that," Siofra scoffed. Eliza glanced up from the page with an unknowing look on her face as she passed it along to Os-tur who leaned across Peorth to hand it to me.

"No," Mac pointed out, his annoyance growing. "You said Horsetower."
Siofra crossed her arms in a huff. "I told you with Taeynd," she insisted.
Peorth leaned close to me. "Do they always argue like this?"

I smiled at her as the paper in my hands practically burned for me to read it. "They are brother and sister," I pointed out, bringing Mac's attention back to the stranger.

"We're all Brennans," he said dryly and I lowered my gaze to the parchment and began to read.

'These are the lines drawn across the stroke of time
The teacher must die that the dagger should live
The dagger must live that the seeker should seek
The seeker must seek that the seed will be sown
A seeker travels through a forest of danger
Known by many names, he shall fall to temptation
The snake shall rise before 7 days have passed
In the keep where music once graced its walls
The dagger may falter while the rivers yet remain
A house stands full of dreams safe and warm
Destiny yet calls to the lover reborn
A gathering of five will point the way
That the dreamer shall not be alone
Only ruin may open the traveler's cage I
While the dead sleep unaware
To be calm in the eye of the human storm
The teller of tales shall heed magic's call
When the smoke is gone and the wolf can see
The seeker through bloodshed will be saved
On the distant horizon the sun approaches
Garelan runs red as the gods will
When bloody bodies lay on the cliff heights
Blood gathers in the gray circle
As the distant bear rises a door will open
The dagger will carry new beginnings'
Where the distant masses stand on high
The wolf's cry will herald a new dawn'

"Could you be more specific about this prophecy?" I heard Siofra ask when I finished.
"We're obviously this party of five."

"There is much debate as to what the prophecy is. We're fairly certain that the snake is Bloodmark."

"Why?" Siofra continued.

Peorth seemed uncomfortable when she answered. "Because she took Horsetower in seven days."

She had my aunt's complete attention now. "From..."

Peorth eyed Siofra as if she should have understood her meaning immediately. "From the previous owner, Duke...", she said slowly.

"And where is he?"

Peorth answered quietly and seemed to glance around the room to see if anyone was openly listening to our conversation. "Dead now. And Horsetower is the 'keep', for it once was a place of music and happiness and is no longer."

"Why did she take it?" Siofra asked.

Peorth shrugged as she looked around the table. "Because she could?"

Siofra nodded. "Fair enough."

"It is easily defensible," Peorth explained. "No one knows her reasoning for certain."

Siofra shifted in her chair next to me and crossed her legs. "And how do we play into this? I'm sure we're not the first group of five to come through this area."

Now it was Peorth's turn to nod. "This is true, but there are other portents that said the group would come soon. Entrails, flights of birds."

"So what were you and the guardsman arguing about?" Mac asked. I think he was trying to throw her off and see how honest she would be at the same time.

"Whether or not I was an elf or a witch," she answered, without hesitation.

"And what are you?" Siofra asked.

"I'm neither," she answered, almost too innocently for my tastes.

The answer wasn't satisfactory enough for my aunt. "What are you then?"

"I am of those who watch," Peorth said.

Siofra laughed stiffly. "Wow, could you be more vague?"

Peorth looked around the room again. "I cannot be more specific in this place."

"Then what is he?" Mac asked, indicating the man next to her.

She glanced at her companion and smiled slightly. "That's Os-tur."

Siofra rolled her eyes and leaned forward in an attempt to drive her question home. "Uh-huh, and what is he?"

Mac was accepting her answer either. "I didn't ask who, rather what. Ishonmir's pet," he said, causing the man in question to growl like I had heard Stephan and Uncle Angus do during one of their sparring matches with each other.

"Is it he who we saw earlier?" Siofra asked, undaunted by Os-tur's attempt at warning us off the subject. He didn't know that she had grown up with a werewolf for a brother and wasn't easily put off on the matter.

"What did you see earlier?" Peorth asked, again pretending innocence and still doing a bad job of it.

Siofra thought a minute, "Well..."

"A flying creature," Mac finished for her.

Siofra glance at him in annoyance. "A flying cat, black."

Peorth drew in a deep breath. "He is an Im-ryn," she conceded finally.

"He's a shapeshifter," Siofra corrected.

Peorth nodded with a small smile and a raised brow. "Yes. And since we're being so forthright, what are you?"

Siofra smiled coyly at the question and I somehow knew she wouldn't answer truthfully. "A mother," she replied.

Peorth laughed slightly and turned her attention to me. "Are you a witch?" she asked casually, as if she wanted me to pass the salt.

"She is not a witch," Siofra was quick to answer for me. I looked at Eliza and saw that she was barely able to stop herself from reaching for the blade in her cleavage because of Peorth's inquiry. I thought that I should defuse the situation before it got ugly.

"Those around me like to remind me that I am but a novice only," I said, deciding that partial truth would help finally get some straight forward answers. "There are certain things that I have learned and that is all."

Siofra frowned at my answer and asked, "What else do you know about the prophecy?"

"I can but guess. You're here to return Jolesic to his world."

Siofra acknowledged her comment with a slight nod. "Okay, what part do you play in this?"

"I'll aid you if I can," Peorth told her.

Siofra frowned and glanced around the table. "Why? You don't even know us."

"But I know Taeynd," Peorth countered.

Unfortunately I didn't and I was worried about what had been done to Joel in the time that he had been here. "What kind of hold does she have over him?" I asked, carefully avoiding looking at any of my family members as I did. They wouldn't understand how important it was to me to get Joel out of here so I wanted to hide my intentions for now.

Peorth's expression turned quizzical at my question. "It's not clear. I met him on the road to Grimhaven and warned him not to come here, but he told me to trust in destiny, that those who came behind him would make sure all would be well."

"When did he come here?" I pressed as I saw Mac pull a pipe and tobacco from a pocket in his tunic across the table and filled it.

Peorth thought a moment then answered, "Several years ago."

"Have you seen him since?"

She nodded. "From a distance."

"You can't get close to him?" I continued. "Or you never tried?"

"It would not be prudent for me to get that close to Taeynd," she answered cryptically, glancing at Os-tur again which caused him to shift discreetly to rest his hand on the back of her chair protectively.

"Why?" Siofra wanted to know.

The other woman's gaze turned to her and she replied, "Let us say that she can see things that others cannot."

"Is *she* a witch?" I asked.

Peorth nodded. "Of a sort."

Now what kind of an answer was that? "What kind of sort?" I pressed.

"I'm guessing not the good kind," Siofra commented as she looked around the table at us for our opinions.

"Exactly," Peorth answered.

"The wicked witch of the east," Siofra added dryly.

Peorth frowned slightly. "Actually, this is the west, but I suppose she could be considered that."

"If one wished to get to him, how hard would it be?" I asked, attempting to find out as much as I could from the strange woman who couldn't seem to answer I direct question with any amount of truthfulness.

Peorth shook her head. "Depends on the day, the circumstances."

I frowned at her obtuseness. "What do you mean?"

"Taeynd holds court of sort one day a week."

"Are we close to that day?" Siofra asked.

"It is tomorrow," was the reply.

Siofra glanced around the table at all of us again. "Then we go tomorrow," she said, her head nodding as if the motion locked in her decision.

That was a given for me so I didn't feel the need to answer, but asked another question instead. "Is he always with her?"

"I have never seen him not with her," Peorth replied as she regarded my kindly. "That does not mean he is never without her."

Siofra turned to Mac and Glenn. "What do you think?"

"I think it's all prophetic bullshit," Mac answered her in Gaelic so Peorth wouldn't understand.

"So then we shall go home?" she asked, speaking Gaelic as well.

"Nay," I replied quickly, bringing their attention to the fact that I spoke the language as well. How could Siofra even suggest that?

Mac glanced at me quickly then said, "I don't think we can until we've rescued Joel."

"Aye," I added. Both of them fell silent for several moments then and I had the feeling that they were continuing the conversation in a way so that the rest of us couldn't hear them.

"Fine," Mac said finally. "We leave in the morning."

Glenn had been quiet for most of the encounter with Peorth and Os-tur, but now he spoke. "We need to be very careful not to get too close to Taeynd until we find out what it is that she can see that others cannot. It wouldn't do for all of us to end up in her dungeon," he informed us wisely.

Siofra nodded as she looked at her husband and Kenaz, whose eyes were heavy because of the late hour and she was leaning against my aunt's shoulder. "Should we all go, or only a couple?"

"I'm not sure we should split up," Glenn advised.

I didn't like the idea of splitting up at all and Siofra seemed to agree, too. "Well, I have much to do then, if we are to leave in the morning," she said as she glance down at Kenaz's bobbing head. "And she needs to get to bed."

"I'm all right," the girl said in protest as she righted herself again, but spoiled the proclamation with a wide yawn. Siofra stood and said goodnight as Glenn picked up the little girl and they made their way to the stairway. Kenaz said something as they passed that caused Os-tur to smile at her while Peorth regarded those of us still sitting.

"I am staying here at the inn, and if you want my help, I'm willing to give it," she told Mac.

"We will be going to Horsetower in the morning," Mac replied. He then asked for her room number, and said that we would get with her in the morning.

Glenn and Siofra joined us in our room after we came in for a discussion on what we had learned from talking to Peorth. Glenn was carrying a book that he had brought with him from our world that I had seen him with before. He told us that it contained most of the prophecies that his mother had made prior to her death and had come into his possession afterward. He showed us the entry that was very close to the one Peorth had given us in the parchment, but it wasn't word for word.

I didn't know what to make of the similarities. I wasn't like Mac and I didn't balk at what Destiny may or may not have in store for me, but knowing that a prophecy existed in two separate worlds that pointed in the same direction was kind of creepy when you thought about it. After looking it over, I sat back and waited to see what the others thought.

"This is a timeline prophecy," Mac said, the book still in his hands.

Glenn frowned as he moved to look over Mac's shoulder. "Yeah?" he asked as if he hadn't thought of the concept before.

Mac nodded as he reread the prophesy, using his finger to guide his progress. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

Siofra picked up the copy of the prophecy that Peorth had given us and reread it again. "Yeah," she replied after a moment. "It follows."

Glenn reached over Mac's shoulder and pointed at a line in the book. "If this snake rising before seven days has already happened..."

"This has already happened because I'm here," Mac pointed out. "Peorth said this when she walked up to us."

Siofra read aloud from the page. "'The dagger that carries new beginnings'. That's Eliza," she said matter of factly, gaining a blank look from the other woman. I had figured that the passage meant that Eliza would have a child, which was totally possible now that Mac was human again, but Siofra looked around at us and asked, "Will carry new beginnings?"

Mac reached out and patted Eliza's belly, earning yet another strange look from his wife for a split second, until her face showed that she got the meaning, causing her to glance down quickly in embarrassment. "But we're not there, let's worry about where we are," Mac said.

"But this is the future," Siofra insisted.

He thought a moment as he continued to look over the lines in the book and nodded. "The very near future, it appears."

"Why do you say that?" Eliza asked.

"Well, because we're here," he replied, pointing to the line that read, '*A gathering of five will point the way*'.

Eliza agreed hesitantly, looking uncomfortable at finding herself in the middle of a conversation that didn't involve kicking someone's ass. "Okay, but if this was however many years ago, this could be that many years in the future."

Siofra chimed in as she looked at her. "Yeah, but you're not getting any younger," she said with a sly smile, obviously liking the idea of Mac and Eliza having another child.

"She's not getting any older, either," Mac said dryly with a grin as he glanced at her.

"I'm not getting any older, either," Eliza said at the same time.

"Yeah, that's true," Siofra commented. "I guess. None of us are."

"Well, the wolf maybe," Eliza said. "And you know, it's only been a year since Mac came back. He could be getting older."

"Feel old yet?" Siofra teased her brother.

Mac rolled his eyes and shook the book that he still held. "Let's just worry about this, shall we?"

Siofra got serious again. "Yeah, but if you look up here, '*known by many names he shall fall to temptation*'... well, I guess if it's right before, Taeynd is taking over."

"Maybe he fell to her," Glenn said, meaning Joel.

Siofra nodded. "Instead of Corrine. Yeah, but this part up here, the beginning, talks about Mac, then we go into this, technically it could be her."

"Which would make it not a time line. Unless he fell to her before..." Glenn looked over at me and smiled good naturedly. "Have you been meeting guys and not telling anybody?" he teased.

I rolled my eyes at the jibe and replied in what I hoped sounded like a dead pan voice, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Glenn chuckled. "Well, if this is a time line, and you're this temptation, and it happened before the snake rose, then..."

I shook my head at the preposterous idea Glenn was proposing. "I don't think that I'm a temptation in any way," I told them, earning skeptical looks from everyone but Mac as I tried to look calm.

"Aren't the dead pretty much unaware anyway?" Glenn asked, moving on to another line of the prophecy.

"Yeah," answered Siofra.

"She's a necromancer," Mac suggested.

Glenn skimmed down a little further and commented on another line. "The wolf could be Gwrhyr, or one of the avatars, or a werewolf."

"Except that we don't have one with us," Siofra pointed out. "Not that there couldn't be one here."

"We have a werekitty," Glenn corrected, but not totally dismissing the fact that the prophecy might not include them, he added, "There could be a werewolf."

"'The seeker through bloodshed will be saved'," Siofra read. "Well..."

Glenn picked up for her. "We think that's Joel and that someone's going to have to die to get him out, which has already been said, I think, in someone's dream, that only harm could set him free, and he couldn't do harm or something like that."

"He can't harm her," Mac said in a way that made me frown at him, wondering what he was talking about.

"Taeynd?" Siofra asked him and Mac nodded.

"And why is that?" Glenn asked.

Mac shrugged as he kept his eyes on the book. "We'll ask him when we find him."

Glenn agreed. "Okay, let's do that. Sunrise somewhere, the battle, Garelan runs red. Is that the river or the cliffs?"

"The cliffs," Mac said.

"'The cliffs of Garelan will run red', or something like that," Siofra said.

"This is just Garelan," Glenn pointed out.

"I imagine the river would, too," Mac commented.

Glenn nodded. "Depends on the amount of blood, and when that happens, '*blood gathers in the gray circle*', which could be family... or could be an injury."

"Could be us returning home," Siofra suggested as well. "We're family."

Glenn agreed by nodding his head absently then moved on. "Not that we know what the bear is. Maybe it's a local thing."

"Here or home?" Siofra asked.

"Here, but could be home. We were in a cave, its possible there were bears there, though not likely in the middle of Nashville."

Siofra shook her head. "I haven't heard of any. I wonder if one of the Fates would have something to do with that. Avatar? Familiar? It's possible, they are odd."

"Especially Carlene," Glenn mentioned, the leeriness I had seen before in his eyes at the Fates house returning once again.

Siofra looked down at the prophecy again. "We don't know who '*the bear rising*' is. '*The dagger will carry new beginnings*', we already know that one."

"You think you know that one," Eliza corrected, obviously uncomfortable with everyone taking for granted that she was the one to have a 'new beginning' in the form of a baby.

"Yeah," Siofra said unconvinced as she continued to look over the prophesy.

Mac looked over at Siofra and me. "Could be any of you," he said, trying to cover the hesitation in his gaze when he looked at me as he tried to redirect his sister's teasing off Eliza. I might have been offended if I wasn't thinking about how all this would affect Joel when we got him away from Taeynd.

"Thank you," Eliza told him with a wifely smile.

Siofra turned to me then. "Could be you."

"What?" I said, rejoining the conversation.

"Haven't you been paying attention?" Siofra scolded.

"No," I admitted.

"She's thinking about Jolesic," Mac said.

"'*The dagger will carry new beginnings*'," Siofra sing-songed.

"I'm not a dagger," I said. "Mac already said that."

"He could be wrong," she said absently with a shrug.

"That was before I read the prophecy," he said.

"It is possible that it is you, Corrine," Siofra said seriously. "It is possible that it could be all three."

Glenn spoke up. "This could be Corrine up here where the dagger must live that the seeker should seek, because Mac saved you in Salem."

"Anyone could be the dagger," Siofra said while Mac stretched and yawned. Then she went back to the end of the prophecy again. "Someone will carry new beginnings. Plural. Could be twins."

"True," Glenn relied, trying not to look at Eliza, who was beginning to not like how often the subject was coming up during the conversation.

"Sorry for your luck," Siofra told her good naturedly with a laugh.

"Or yours," Mac told her.

Siofra shook her head. "No, I'm pretty sure it's gonna be yours, because you know..."

Mac stood and I could see him fighting back another yawn. "We have a long road ahead of us tomorrow," he said, suggesting that it was time for sleep.

"What about the rest of this?" Siofra asked, holding up the parchment page. "There are two lines left."

"*'Distant masses stand on high?'*" Glenn read. "Nashville?"

"Family?" Siofra suggested. "We have no idea how time passes here, if it's the same as home. It could go slower or faster."

Glenn thought about what she said and nodded. "There could be an army coming, distant masses."

"Come to help us return home?" she asked.

"Come to kill us before we get there?"

Siofra shook her head. "No, I like my idea much better," she said in her pampered way.

"*'The wolf's cry will herald a new dawn.'*"

Glenn nodded. "That could be, again, Gwrhyr, or a werewolf, or an avatar."

Siofra frowned. "Well, not yours," she pointed out. "Angus?"

Mac, who was still standing and regarding Siofra with an annoyed glare, had finally had enough. "Good night," he said with a clipped decisiveness.

"We weren't finished," his sister protested.

"I've been trying to kick you out of my room for ten minutes now," he countered.

"I thought you wanted to go over this?" she replied in a huff as she indicated the parchment in her hand.

Glenn leaned back and studied the other man. "He's not interested in destiny, remember?"

Siofra glanced at her husband quickly and then back to her brother. "This isn't destiny, this is a prophecy."

"Get out of my room," Mac said, pointing to the door that separated the two rooms.

Glenn stood and smiled. "Come on; let's leave him to his, ah, musings over his destiny."

Mac expression hardened. "I'm sleeping so I can keep your pampered arse alive."

"Pampered?" Siofra repeated in outrage.

Mac met her glare for glare. "Yeah, Princess."

Glenn took his wife's hand and tried not to laugh as he pulled her toward the door. "Let's go."

"You're all Dreamspeakers," Mac called out as they entered the other room, leaving the door ajar. "You've all read the prophecy. Go dream now."

"What shall I let you dream of?" Siofra taunted from the other room.

"The prophecy," Mac ground out through clenched teeth.

After securing the outside door to the room we quickly changed for bed and snuffed out the lights in the room. As I lay in my bed next to Mac and Eliza's, I found myself worrying about Joel and if he was okay. I was sure that we would be able to get him away from Taeynd, but what happened after that? Would we be able to find our way back home safely?

I decided to do something that I shouldn't and I hoped that Jared wasn't dreamwalking tonight, because I intended to break my promise to him by finding Joel. I had to be sure that he was alright and there was only one way to do that right now.

Chapter 21 – Late Night Meetings

*"Don't you mess with a little girl's dream
'Cause she's liable to grow up mean"*

Poe

"Control"

I fell into an easy sleep in no time at all. I concentrated on Joel as I did; using the techniques that Jared had drilled into me during my training and picturing Joel as I had seen him that first time. I just hoped that I didn't get busted for the little infraction I was about to commit and offered up a little prayer for help to Gaia. Soon enough I found myself in the familiar field of stars from my lessons where each peg of light represented a persons dream. I focused on Joel, thinking about him as hard as possible, and in a short amount of time I found myself drawn to a particular star.

I pushed myself that way and when I reached out to touch it, I found myself standing at the edge of the white cliffs of Garelan. The river was about forty feet down, and it ran fast and deep where it cut through the rock toward the sea. The opposite shore was about sixty feet across from me and the forest was twenty yards behind where I stood. In the distance to my right I could see top turrets of Horsetower where we were to travel the next day and I stayed still a moment and I took in the large structure. Ahead of me was a man walking toward the castle and I noticed for the first time that Blar was at my feet, looking up at me expectantly.

I looked down at her with a small smile as I started off toward the man at a brisk walk. "Is that him?" I asked the wolf who trotted beside me.

She glanced up at me, and in answer sped up her pace a little. Joel was walking slowly, almost as if he were enjoying this quiet time after a tedious day. I caught up to him fairly quickly, but Blar reached him first. When she came into his field of vision, he stopped and bent to pet her, seeming a bit confused by her sudden appearance.

"What are you doing here, girl?" he asked. As if the answer hit him suddenly, he turned to look at me about the same time that I reached him and he smiled. "Corrine."

I smiled back at him as I took a moment to catch my breath from the fast pace I had set to get to him. "We're here," I told him, clasping my hands in front of me because they were itching to reach out to touch him. "We are staying at an inn in the city. How do we get to you?"

He straightened from petting the wolf and looked down at me, his face serious. "You're in Grimhaven?" he asked expectantly. When I nodded he said, "Did—who came with you?" He was a little anxious about the question.

I smiled again, knowing that he was eager to learn if Mac was here since it appeared as if their destinies were intertwined. "We're all here. Glenn, Siofra, Eliza, Mac and myself. We were told that Taeynd will have open court tomorrow and we are coming."

He closed his eyes in relief for a second when I mentioned Mac's name, then frowned when I talked about coming to the castle. "You would walk into the viper's nest?" he asked, his voice warning me so that goose bumps jumped on my flesh.

I regarded him seriously for a moment with one of those 'hello' eyebrow lifts that expressed slight irritation. "It's not like you told any of us how to go about doing this once we got here," I told him with a smile, then I sobered. "What do we have to do to free you?"

"If I knew I'd have freed myself long ago," he replied with a sigh and paused. "That's not entirely true." He turned away from me and looked over the river, half angry, half regretful. "I know how to free myself, but I will not do it."

I moved around him so that I could see his face. "What do you mean?" I asked, nearly whispering the question.

He looked down into my eyes for a few precious seconds, then reached for my hand and tugged on it so that we began to walk along the edge of the cliffs, away from Horsetower. "What do you know of sorcerers, Corrine?" he asked as he looked ahead of us.

I glanced at him while we walked, unsure why he was asking. "I know that Mac came back as one and that for some reason mages look down on them. I'm guessing that it has something to do with the difference in power between the two groups. Personally I think the idea of looking down on someone is ridiculous. It's what is in your heart that makes you who you are. But I don't think that's what you are asking about."

We were walking hand in hand slowly along the cliff edge and I tried not to enjoy too much the secure feeling I had being at Joel's side. The ground was rocky and uncertain here and I found myself clutching at his hand at times as we moved along. But Joel's grip was strong and he guided me easily, making sure that I didn't stumble. "My family has always believed that Sorcerers receive their power from Great Spirits, either to fulfill a task for the spirits, or to repay a debt they owe to the person receiving the power," he explained. "Your father has a task to perform, or rather a series of them, some of which he has already completed."

"And is helping to free you so you can return to your family one of them?"

"In a way," he replied, glancing down at me with an emotion in his eyes that I didn't understand. "There are things I must teach him, things Gwrhyr cannot. I had planned to be in Galway when he returned, but..." He turned his head to look out over the water, his voice full of regret. "I thought fate could not touch me if I did not acknowledge it," he said almost absently.

I watched his features as best as I could while we continued to walk but my eyes narrowed at his last comment. "You sounded like Mac just then," I commented. "What made you change your mind? About fate?"

"A man can only run from his destiny for so long," he replied, still not meeting my eyes, keeping his face turned almost as if he were ashamed. "The Fates have ways of forcing one to their will." He finally looked down at me again, and smiled sadly. "I like to think I have learned my lesson. I bow to the wisdom of the Fates," at that he gave a short bow from the waist, "and give thanks for their mercy."

I stopped and used our still joined hands to make him stop as well. "Did they put you here as a way of making you bow to their will?" I asked my voice low and showing that the idea was not an agreeable one to me. I lifted my other hand so that I could touch his cheek, "That's not fair."

"No," he said with that sad smile. "I came of my own free will, believing I could somehow elude their plans. Had I not run so hard from my destiny, I would not have fallen so deeply into their grasp. It was a hard lesson to learn, but learn it I did." His hand came up to cover mine and his smile lost some of its sadness. "And it is not always so difficult to follow the

Fates, sometimes their grasp is sweet as honey, and gentle as a flower bending in the summer breeze."

I nodded and looked down at the ground. "I don't know what to do. We read a prophecy that seems to tell about us coming here, but it doesn't say how we go about doing what needs to be done." My gaze met his again. "Will we see you tomorrow?"

"*'Only ruin may open the traveler's cage'*," he quoted part of the prophecy to me. "Only her death can free me," he looked away from me and toward the water again, "and I know that I should do it, but I cannot, must not." His voice was very low, almost urgent, and I could tell that the idea killing Taeynd really bothered him a great deal. It bothered me as well.

"Taeynd must die so that you can be free?" I asked in astonishment. Without realizing what I was doing, I took a step forward as if to move into his arms, but I caught myself and pulled back again. "I had hoped it wouldn't come to that. What kind of powers does she have? I get the feeling she isn't nice. Maybe there is a way to barter with her for your freedom or trick her."

He laughed almost harshly. "Don't you think I've tried?" he released his hold on me and turned to walk a few feet away toward the very edge of the cliffs. He was obviously agitated as he spoke, "I have no power here to escape except here in my dreams, and waking I have no power over my own mind. She has bound me to her with the power of blood so strong I cannot break free." He turned to face me. "One does not 'negotiate' with Taeynd, or trick her. She is the strongest creature I have ever known, and if you try, she will destroy you, as she has destroyed so many others. I'd not see your life end on your knees before her, nor your father's life, nor any of the others. Elizabeth is the only one she might spare, and then only for her own purposes."

I knew that he was very serious in his claims, but I wasn't about to stop now since we had come so far. "You said blood. Is she Kindred or something?"

He shook his head, his hair moving in waves around his face. "Not the way you mean, not the way Cormac was. I have felt the warmth of her skin, heard her heart beat. Vampires on our world lose their lives and keep their souls, Taeynd has kept her life, but her soul is gone. She feeds on others, but not of their blood; she feeds on their hearts, their magic, their souls." He turned again, as if he remembered something horrible that he had tried to forget. "She used our blood combined to bind me to her with a magic so strong I couldn't fight it, I still cannot."

Hearing the finality in his voice cemented in me the need to see him free of Taeynd. I went around him so that I could see his face and put my hands on his shoulders to hold him there. "I need to know how to break it," I said to him sternly. "Is killing her the only way? I relish the job no more than you, hell I don't even know if I could kill her, but I will do what is necessary to see you free from her." I made sure that he was looking into my eyes for my next statement. "You must help me do it. Tell me what I must do. You are the only one who can. We are not of this world and we don't know how everything works."

"I don't know how to break the spell," he replied as he rested his hands on my waist. "I can't use magic the way that you can, I can't see or feel what it was she did to know how to undo it. I know only that her death will break it and that only because she told me so, and gave me a knife to do the deed." He pulled me into his arms and the warmth of his chest against mine was almost like he was holding me in the waking world. "There are times when I wish I could have done it, but I cannot, dare not."

I pulled him closer, wrapping my arms around his neck. "We'll figure it out. Don't worry. Somehow we'll figure it out. Can she feel that we have power? Will she know it if we get too close? We need every advantage we can get by the sounds of it."

"She can smell magic if you use it in Horsetower," he warned, speaking into my hair. "Macalister may be able to use his brand of magic, I've managed to keep mine hidden from her the few times I've been able to use it."

"Okay, no magic until it's time." I pulled back enough to look in his eyes as I cupped his face with my hands. "Will she be able to tell where the magic came from? Or will she just know that it's there?" I was so worried that we might be too late; that maybe whatever hold Taeynd had over him was too strong to break.

Joel opened his mouth, but what he was about to say was lost when I heard Siofra call out to us urgently. Joel straightened and both of us turned to watch my aunt as she hurried across the white rocks. She was wearing jeans and a shirt and Princess was beside her.

"Siofra," I said in bewilderment as I pulled away from Joel to move toward her. Where had she come from? "What's wrong?" I called out.

She greeted us hurriedly then said, "I was just with Taeynd and I was able to fight her off, but I don't know how long it will last." She looked at Joel and went on, "She knows that we are here to rescue you and she is going to kill you. We have to hurry."

I felt the blood drain from my face. I couldn't process what she was saying. "What have you done?" she asked quietly, in disbelief. I felt the numbness as it crept into my soul at the thought of Siofra seeking the woman out. What had she been thinking? How could she have told the woman that we were here and meant to free Joel? It was like signing his death warrant.

I glanced at Joel, who paled a bit, but gave us a wry smile. "She won't kill me, Sprite, but she'll make me regret your visit to her."

"What's done is done," Siofra said to me as if she were speaking to a child whose favorite toy had just broken by her own hand. "There isn't much time. We need to wake Mac and Eliza and come up with a plan." She turned to Joel then. "I am sorry for what she may do to you. If there is anyway that I can fix it I would. Please be careful and avoid her if you can. We must go, now," she said to me.

I felt Joel's hand as he placed it on my shoulder. "Take care, I'd not have you lose your life for mine," he told me as his gaze moved to Siofra. "Any of you."

I turned to him and not knowing what else to do, touched his face. "Will you remember this when you awaken?"

He nodded. "Perhaps. You, I find hard to forget."

I swallowed hard then spoke. "Then remember this, we will get to you and we will get you away from her."

Siofra was eager to be gone, but at the moment I didn't care. "I'm sure that he will, Corrine. Now we must hurry." She grabbed my hand, and with a last regretful look, Joel let me go. I awoke back in bed, but I hadn't forgotten the danger Siofra had deliberately put Joel in and I could feel my temper begin to rise uncontrollably.

Chapter 22 - Refusals

*"A terrible thought has moved into my mind
Like an unwanted room-mate drunk on wine
It feeds on my happiness won't pay the rent
I must take proper measures to evict it"*

Poe

"Terrible Thought"

"Goddamnit," I shouted out in frustration as I threw back the covers, causing Eliza to wake from a sound sleep to sit upright with a jerk, a knife in hand.

"What is it?" she said, looking around for the nonexistent intruder. I didn't answer her as I lit the candles around the room with magic and started looking for clothes to dress. "What is it?" she repeated.

"Siofra fucking pissed off Taeynd and now she's probably gonna kill Joel. We have to get to the castle now," I told her, pulling my dress on over my head.

Eliza reached over to wake up Mac, but he didn't move. "Can you explain that a little more rationally?" she asked as she shook him again.

I stopped to look at her and I knew my voice sounded harsh but I was terrified for Joel. "I don't know what happened. All I know is that she came into my dream and pulled me out and said we have to go, she pissed her off in some way."

"I didn't piss her off," came Siofra's voice from the other room. I hoped that she didn't come into the room just then because I was sure that I couldn't be held responsible for what I would do when I saw her. I was scared to death. I couldn't believe that Siofra had done something as stupid as to piss off the woman who was holding Joel and not expect there to be consequences. We didn't know enough about her yet to be so irrational. I had to clasp my hands together to keep them from shaking as I looked for my boots.

Eliza rose from the bed and walked to the door that separated the two rooms and opened it a little to talk to Siofra while I continued to dress. "Rational thought processes? What did you do?"

"What did I do?" I heard Siofra ask. "That's a really good question. I kind of um, the opposite of an exorcism, I put the bad ghost into her. It wasn't a ghost, now that I think about it."

"What was it?" Eliza asked.

Siofra giggled a little and said, "Remember the big cat with wings? Bigger." I watched as Eliza shuddered then turned back to the bed to try to wake Mac again. I was sure that he would agree with me that getting to the castle as soon as possible was what we had to do.

"Mac, you have to wake up," she said and he stirred slightly as he turned his head toward her and smiled.

"Hello, luv."

"Your sister's freaking out Taeynd with big kitty demon spirit things," she told him, the knife now dangling slightly in her fingers.

"Glenn helped," she called out from the other room.

"And you're smiling about it," Eliza called back in frustration as she looked down at him. "Good dream?"

Mac stretched and looked around the room for the first time. "What are the lights doing on?" Eliza looked at me in answer, prompting him to look my way to where I was now standing fully dressed. "Where is she going?"

"I don't know," Eliza answered, looking at me as well over her shoulder.

The lights started to extinguish then and I assumed it was Mac's doing. "What is going on?" he asked sleepily.

Eliza sat down next to him on the bed. "She woke up cursing, I have no idea."

It really pissed me off how they always talked about me like I wasn't even in the room. "We have to get to the castle," I insisted, preparing to light the candles once more as I took a few steps toward their bed. "She's probably going to kill Joel."

To my utter frustration Mac replied with a yawn, "We're going there tomorrow."

I blinked in disbelief. "No, we have to go now," I insisted, narrowly stopping myself from stomping my foot.

Mac looked at me with one of his expressions that he normally reserved for someone who pissed him off and when he spoke it was deliberate and harsh. "No we don't. We're not going to flee off in the middle of the night on some half-assed adventure. We stick to the plan. Go back to sleep, you need your strength."

His tone did nothing to calm me down, in fact if anything, he stoked my temper. Joel was in danger, that much I knew for sure and frankly that was all I was thinking about at the moment. I didn't know what Siofra had done to Taeynd, but I knew that if she was concerned enough to come find me that it had to be bad. I crossed my arms stubbornly as I looked at Mac and Eliza as she laid down next to him again, slipping the knife under her pillow once more. "So why do you suddenly think she's going to harm Jolesic?" Mac asked as he turned to his side to better see me.

"Siofra busted into my dream and she said that she had just been with Taeynd and she was able to fight her off or something." Why was he asking all these questions instead of getting ready to go stop her?

Mac spoke in what I was sure was supposed to be a reassuring voice, but I was too upset to really let it effect me. "I was just with Taeynd and I fought her off, too."

"She said that she knows now that we're here to rescue Joel, and she's going to kill him," I insisted.

He lifted a head off the pillow and looked at Eliza. "And no one smells trap on that one?"

"She told Siofra that she was going to kill Joel," I said, racking my brain to remember everything my aunt had said before dragging me off. "That's what Siofra said to me anyhow."

"If she said she was the queen of England would you believe her?"

"I don't know anything about this woman," I replied.

He lowered his head to the pillow again. "She's arrogant."

"Joel's in danger," I cried, my voice sounding desperate.

Mac hesitated a moment and took a deep breath. "Joel's not in danger. She's arrogant, that is her weakness."

"She's holding him here against his will."

"And that is why we are here, and we will stick to the plan we have formulated to get him free of her bond."

I was ready to say the hell with it and go on my own. "I can't believe you're just going to sit here and not do anything about it."

Mac lifted his head again. "I am going to do something about it; I'm going to get some sleep. We need all of our strength and our wits about us when we go. Tomorrow."

Eliza stood then and came to stand in front of me. "Corrine?"

I looked at her. "Yes?"

"Go to bed."

And for some reason I wanted to do what she said. I felt my temper calm slightly and even though I was still really mad that they weren't being gung ho about getting to Joel, I found myself climbing back into bed, still fully dressed.

"Next time calm her down first," Mac said as I heard Eliza slip under the covers again.

"At least she's in bed," she retorted.

"She's laying there fuming."

"She'll get over it."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," I told them through clenched teeth, wondering why I had done what Eliza had wanted so easily.

"What did Joel say before you were rudely interrupted?" Mac asked.

I hesitated a moment, still angry that he appeared so indifferent toward Joel and his safety one minute, then ply me for information about him the next. "We won't be able to use magic in the castle because she'll know that it's being used," I told him finally. "Like she doesn't know who we are now anyway."

"She'll know *your* magic. She won't know ours."

"She'll know magic," I said again.

"She won't know our magic, she does not recognize it. She'll recognize it as magic, but she cannot place ours. She's never seen mine, nor Eliza's. She'll recognize yours as it is true magic, but not ours."

I hated the fact that I could never be right to either of them. I doused the remaining candles and pulled the covers over my head, wondering how long I would have to wait until they were asleep again so I could sneak out of the room. It was becoming obvious that Eliza had done something with her vampire related abilities to cause me to calm down and I didn't appreciate that knowledge at all. I was very conscious of abusing my powers and had never used them on anyone in the family without having their best interest at heart.

"Worse than a damn clapper," I heard Eliza comment as I heard her adjust the covers over her.

"What else did he say?" Mac asked in the darkened room.

Because I felt like they were once again treating me like a child, I decided to act like one and said, "He ran from his destiny too, and look where it got him."

"Would you like first watch or second?" he asked Eliza after a slight hesitation, crushing my hopes of getting out of the room without them stopping me again. It was obvious that they could read me like a book and would resort to imprisonment to 'protect' me.

"I'm awake now," Eliza told him.

"Wake me in a few hours. Make sure she doesn't leave the room."

"Not a problem."

Sleep wasn't as quick in coming the second time around, but I finally did as I listened to Mac's breath even in the darkened room. Part of me wanted to seek out Joel in my dreams again, but I was afraid of what I might find. Actually, I was afraid that I wouldn't find him and that was what actually stopped me.

Chapter 23 – Madness of Dreams

"It's gonna take a hundred thoughts to make this one disappear"

Poe

"Terrible Thought"

Mac woke Eliza and me at first light. As soon as my sleepy mind registered where I was, I quickly remembered what had happened the night before and I scrambled out of bed to finish getting ready for the day with nervous hands as I worried about Joel. Since I had changed in the middle of the night when I thought we were going to help him and had gone to bed still dressed, I only had to quickly pull a comb through my hair and make sure that I had everything I needed to go.

Mac, who was already dressed, had gone next door to wake Glenn and Siofra while Eliza pulled on her leather tunic and leggings. I watched in surprised when he came back into our room a minute later to pick up a pitcher of water that had been brought up for bathing and disappeared through the door again. I was just finishing a check of my belt pouch to be sure that everything was still in place when I realized what Mac was intending, which was a split second before I heard Siofra's outraged scream from the next room. I was moving to stand next to the door to the hallway when Mac blinked back into our room, a satisfied smile on his face.

"Breakfast first," he said as he replaced the pitcher and picked up his gloves from the bed. I looked at him disappointedly, hoping that we would go directly to the castle as soon as everyone was ready. You know, do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. Sorry, not happening.

"Are you that hungry?" Eliza asked when she glanced up and saw me waiting by the door anxiously. I crossed my arms over my chest and didn't answer her, remembering the fact that she had used some of her abilities on me to get me to go back to bed. I knew I was acting childish, but I didn't really give a crap. If they were going to treat me like one, than I was damn sure going to act the part. "How did you sleep?" she asked as if nothing was wrong, Mac right behind her.

"I'm not talking to you right now," I said, avoiding making eye contact with her as I turned to open the door to the hall so we could go downstairs. No one said a word as we made our way downstairs until Glenn, Siofra and Kenaz met us in the dining room a few minutes later. During the meal that I only pretended to eat, we watched to see if Peorth and Os-tur would make an appearance. When they didn't, Mac suggested that we go back to our rooms to wait out of sight while he went to see if he could find them.

I was antsy to get underway to the castle, but I managed to sit on the bed after Mac left us. I tried to keep my mind from drifting to different possible torture scenarios that Taeynd would be putting Joel through, but it was no use. We had to get to him and quick were the only thoughts going through my head that made sense at the moment.

Soon there was a knock on our door and I bolted to my feet to answer. It was Os-tur, looking as if he had dressed rather hastily. "Your lord wants you to come quickly," he said in a rush, as if he were frightened about something.

I was aware that Siofra was just entering the room to see who had come to call as I took a step forward to go with him. "Let's go," I said. If Mac had sent the other man for us, then it had to be important. He might need help and my mind slipped from worrying about Joel to Mac without considering anything else.

"What are you doing?" I heard Siofra call out, but I was already starting to shut the door behind me.

"I'm going," I said, determined to get to Mac as soon as possible. The other's quickly followed and when Os-tur and I arrived at his room, I saw that Peorth was still in bed and Mac was kneeling beside her, his hand on her forehead. The room was cold like it always was when Mac was using his new found abilities and I watched as he became aware of our presence and held his hand out to us.

Siofra quickly stepped forward and took his hand; Glenn followed and laid his hand on her shoulder while I took hold of his other hand. Even though he never really discussed his abilities with me, I had come to assume that Mac could in some ways enter the dreams of others, much like Joel had been doing during our first meeting. We were linking our powers together so that Mac, who was obviously in Peorth's dream, could help her escape whatever it was that was holding her there. I closed my eyes and opened myself to the power of Mother Earth to make the magic available to him.

Behind my closed lids, light came from everywhere all at once, but not from any one source. I opened my eyes again and could see Peorth's form as she was free falling in a tunnel that was lined all around with rock and seemed to have no end. What I couldn't see, however, was myself when I looked down at where my hand should have been joined with Glenn's, which threw me. I couldn't see Glenn either, or Siofra, who should have been on his other side. I could still feel his warm fingers where they held mine, but there wasn't any sign of either of them visibly.

"Where are we?" I heard Siofra ask from where I had last spotted her in front of Glenn.

"Peorth's dream," came Mac's voice.

"Why?"

"Taeynd is punishing her because she gave me information. We need to stop her from falling, bring her out of it."

Siofra continued. "Okay. What do you want us to do?"

"I'm going to try to stop her. Either back me up with power or do it yourself." Since I had no idea how to stop the falling woman myself, I manipulated the magic within me so that it in turn coursed through the line of Glenn and Siofra and into Mac. I felt the magic as it flowed around me and after a moment the other woman slowed and finally came to a stop. She looked around her in surprise, unsure of what was happening around her.

"You have to change your surroundings," I told her, knowing that she wouldn't be aware of where my voice was coming from.

Peorth looked around her jerkily. "Who's there?"

I felt power surge through the connection between the four of us and I had a feeling that Mac was attempting to make us visible to Peorth so that she would trust us enough to listen to what we were saying so she could free herself of the dream she had been trapped in. He succeeded in making Siofra, Glenn and I totally visible, but he still remained semi transparent so that he looked like a ghost. Peorth jumped slightly as we came into view, but she quickly

realized that we weren't a part of the nightmare that Taeynd had created for her and relief was evident in her expression.

"You need to do something to change the dream," Siofra told the other woman.

"Can we do it?" I asked. There was no telling how long Peorth had been falling in her dream state and I was afraid that she didn't have the strength left to pull herself out of it.

Glenn seemed to agree. "Maybe we should decide what to change it to before we do it," he advised.

"The common room of the inn," Mac instructed Peorth. "The table."

"The table we were sitting at last night," Siofra added.

The well around us wavered slightly as Peorth's body turned so that she was no longer in her free falling position, but standing instead. The walls of the common room in the inn took the wells place and soon we found ourselves standing near the table where Peorth and Os-tur had introduced themselves the previous night.

Peorth glanced around in confusion as she took a minute to re-acclimate herself. "By Ishmonir, what is going on?" she asked.

"Taeynd was controlling you," Siofra informed her. The four of us were all still linked together physically and no one made a move to break contact. I didn't know what would happen if we did.

Mac nodded. "She stuck you in a nightmare."

Peorth frowned as her eyes rested on him. "How did you end up in my nightmare?"

Mac looked back and Siofra, Glenn and myself, then returned his gaze to the other woman. "We came in. This is all still a dream."

"You're lying in bed in your room," Siofra added.

Peorth thought a moment and by her expression, accepted what we were telling her as truth and she began to nod her head slowly. "I see. So we wake up and everything is fine?"

"We're already awake," Siofra confessed.

"We need to figure out how to get *you* awake," Mac said.

Peorth looked around the room and crossed her arms in front of her, looking like she had no idea what to do next. "Does this happen often in your world?"

The grin was apparent in his voice when Mac spoke and glanced at us again. "Yes."

That coaxed a slight smile from Peorth. "Any ideas on how to wake up? Maybe some cold water?"

Siofra sniffed, not doubt remembering her rude awaking not long ago as she glared at Mac nastily. The last thing we needed was for the two of them to start sniping at each other so I quickly described some simple methods to Peorth on how to wake up that Jared had taught me. Within minutes we were all back in the waking world once again. Os-tur quickly came forward to check on Peorth and Eliza, who was standing by the door to the room, ran a worried glance over Mac and me to be sure that we were both okay as well.

We left the inn for Horsetower within the hour, making a quick stop at one of the shops in town so that Mac could buy oil and wicks that he deposited in the back of the wagon. Peorth also wanted to stop for a new cloak that she claimed would allow her to enter the castle.

So she wouldn't be recognized, Siofra had changed her appearance before we left the inn so that she now looked like Heather Locklear because she had such an up close and personal

talk with Taeynd. She was also wearing the male clothing that she had purchased the day before and rode one of the horses with Mac and our new friends, while Glenn drove the wagon that contained Eliza, Kenaz and I.

"What are you going to use lamp oil and wicks for?" Eliza asked Mac as we made our way north.

"Lamp oil is highly flammable," Mac explained. "If we have to seize the castle, we need some kind of ammunition."

Eliza blinked at him in surprised. "You're going to make Molotov cocktails?"

When he nodded I felt me eyes bulge slightly at the thought of blowing things up but I was sure that Mac would only let that happen if there was no other solution to the situation. Regardless, I was a little worried about how things were going to turn out. I was still really scared about Joel and what Taeynd was doing to him. Since we still had a while before we would get to the castle, I pulled out my Ogham sticks and cast them on the floor of the wagon. All the signs pointed out that the plan would work so I felt a little better as I put them away again and faced the looming structure of the castle.

Kenaz asked hesitantly where we were going as we moved closer and closer to the castle. She had made it very clear that she would help us get to the town, but she had been very adamant that she would not go to Horsetower. Her body language said that she was upset and I understood that her young mind had probably heard all kinds of horrible stories about Taeynd but there was no way that we could leave her to her own devices when so many had seen her with us the day before. I didn't want to be responsible for Taeynd harming the girl because of our actions.

I looked at her kindly and said, "We're going to save Joel."

"But where are we going?" she pressed.

I took a deep breath and prepared to deal with her outburst as I answered, "We're going to Horsetower."

Fear clouded her young eyes and she shook her head. "I don't want to go there."

I didn't have a whole lot of experience with children so I tried an aversion tactic that I hoped would keep her mind off thinking about where we were headed. "Why?" I asked her, trying to move my body so that she could no longer see the castle as we continued to move toward it.

"Because I don't want to go there. She said I didn't have to go there," she almost whined as she pointed toward Siofra who was ahead of us, riding on horseback next to Mac.

"Well, why?"

The distraction technique was failing miserably as Kenaz started to get to her feet by holding onto the side of the wagon. "Because I don't want to go there, she said I didn't have to. Stop the wagon, I want to get out. I wanna go home."

I glanced up to the front of the wagon as I reached over to take a hold of Kenaz's arm. "Glenn? Stop the wagon."

"What's going on?" Glenn asked over his shoulder from the wagon seat where Eliza was looking back at us as well.

I caught her gaze and tried to implore to her without words. "Eliza, tell her that she's not going to get hurt at Horsetower, that she's gonna be okay."

Her brow lifted in surprise. "So you want me to lie to her?" she asked, obviously missing the fact that I was trying to calm Kenaz down, instead the girl renewed her efforts to pull away from me and to get over the side.

I tightened my hold to keep the struggling girl in the wagon and glared at my birth mother. "No, I want you to just tell her that everything's going to be okay. You know, like you did last night with me," I said pointedly, trying to tell her without words to do to Kenaz whatever she had done to make me go back to bed without further fight.

Eliza rolled her eyes and glanced ahead of us to where Mac and Siofra were riding. "Where the hell is your father at?" she asked under her breath as she twisted on the seat and tried to catch Kenaz's eye, but the girl wouldn't look at her. She was adamant about getting out of the wagon and getting louder about it.

"Here," I said to Eliza, holding out my hand, "I'll hold the crossbow; you come back here and deal with this."

"Can't you deal with it?" was her reply. "Do something?"

"Like what, tell her its okay? Been there, done that."

"You've got spooky boo things, can't you use it? Give her a good paddling, maybe that will work."

I wasn't about to spank the poor girl for being frightened. Kenaz pulled free of my grasp and started to climb over the side again. I caught her by the arm and pulled her around so that she was looking at me then. I covered her mouth with my hand to quiet her and said, "Look, there's a man's life that hangs in the balance here. You need to calm down, and you need to shut up, because if you draw attention to us and cause him harm, I'm not responsible." The girl screamed beneath my hand and sobbed inconsolably and I pulled her onto my lap. "I understand that you're scared, but if you can tell me why then I can help you."

Kenaz started to cry and became partially limp in my arms and I pulled her to my chest to sooth her. She was sobbing that she was convinced she would die if she went to Horsetower, that no one would be able to stop it.

I let her cry for a few minutes, understanding that she had fears that obviously were very real to her. When she had calmed down a little I took her head in my hands. "Look at me," I urged as I used my thumbs to wipe the tears from her face. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. Why do you think that?"

"Because everybody dies who goes to Horsetower," she told me, her breath still shaky.

"Joel's at Horsetower and he's not dead," I replied, needing to believe it myself. "And he's not going to die."

The girl shook her head in disagreement. "My mother was taken to Horsetower, and she died. My dad went to Horsetower, and he died. Everyone who goes to Horsetower dies."

Kenaz's admissions shed a new light on why she had the fears she did concerning the castle. My heart went out to the girl for seeing such horrible things come to pass in the few short years of her life. The fact remain, however, that we had to go to the castle and it was too late for us to do anything with her but take her with us. "They might not have had the gifts that we have," I told her, hoping to ease her fears. New tears gathered in her young eyes and I found myself saying, "I swear to you that nothing will happen to you. Something will have to happen to me first, and nothing is going to happen to me." I pulled her to my chest again to comfort her and I stroked her hair like my own mother had many a times when I was a child. "You will stay with me; nothing is going to happen to you."

She calmed eventually and when we neared the bridge that crossed the great river, Siofra traded spots with Glenn, who lagged behind the wagon to bring up the rear. We were within two hundreds yards of the castle after we crossed the bridge and it was easier to get a better idea of its size and how big it really was.

Horsetower sat on a hill. Its walls were high, and the keep at the center looked much older than the rest of the out buildings. The guards at the gate and on the walls were alert in their chain and plate mail, and quite a few of the general population of the city was moving toward the castle with us for court. The guards were questioning everyone pretty closely by the look of things as we got in line and I could see that they carried both pistols and swords. They performed random searches on a few people, dragging some off for reasons that seemed to be random.

Mac turned to Peorth and Os-tur and asked them to move toward the back of wagon.

"Why?" Peorth asked, sounding slightly offended.

Mac glanced at her, then to the guards as if he were judging if we were being watched as he used his thumb to indicate Os-tur. "Because you are highly known to Taeynd and he's a flying kitty."

Peorth smiled slightly. "There's lots of flying kitties, and that's what the cloak is for."

Mac eyed her suspiciously. "You don't think you're going to get recognized?"

"No."

Mac shrugged and turned forward again. "Okay." Peorth must have thought there was something to what Mac had said because she looked at Os-tur knowingly and the two of them fell to back of wagon near Glenn without another word.

I rose to my knees and positioned myself behind Eliza and Siofra where they sat on the wagon seat. Kenaz joined me, clutching at my cloak with her little hands. I put an arm around her and leaned down to whisper that she should look at things like she had never seen them before. I did the same, but it was easier for me since I hadn't in fact ever seen the castle. I was eyeing the men on the wall closely in preparation to help with magic if they decide to shoot at Mac, or any of us.

By what I was able to hear, the guards were asking the same series of questions as each new group of people approached them. What's your name, origin? What's your business in Horsetower? They asked the men if they were looking for work, saying they were looking for guard and soldiers to employ at the castle. The better dressed women were asked if they were looking for work as well, the reason being that the Lady Taeynd was looking for ladies-in-waiting.

They seemed pretty standard questions I guessed. One thing I found odd was that they were looking at the ears of people with dark hair. That seemed odd to me, but I said nothing as our turn neared. I reached into my pouch and took out my sapphire and moonstone for magic defense and protection respectively and held them in one hand. I didn't know if they would do me any good, but I figured that it couldn't hurt to have them out either. Their presence in my hand was a familiar one that warmed me somewhat.

Finally we got to the front of the line. The guard who was doing the questioning looked fairly intimidating, but Mac was his usual sure self. He gave the name Macalister when asked and when the guard inquired about his business in coming to Horsetower he replied, "We're here seeking the lady of the keep's ear for a moment. I seek employment."

"And the other members of your party?" the guard asked, looking up at Eliza and Siofra and myself.

"Are members of my party," Mac told him.

"Are they looking for employment as well?"

"They are in my employ."

The guard looked back at Mac. "Where are you from?"

Mac adjusted himself in his saddle. "Around, I'm a traveler."

"Where are you from originally?"

Mac took a deep breath then laid into a story that would have made any natural storyteller jealous of. "Thirty winters ago I was born on the road, discovered by....."

The guard let him go on for a minute or two, and then waved for him to stop, asking if there were any elves in our party.

"No."

The guard looked us over again then gave Mac a name and time to report to the armory. "We need people like you, you're obviously trustworthy," he told Mac, who was smiling at him slightly.

Chapter 24 – Horsetower

*"I have to keep a hold of myself
Is that really you or is it someone else
I swear it looks just like him
I wonder can he see what a state I'm in"*

Poe

"Could've Gone Mad"

We passed into the courtyard of the castle and moved into a 'parking' area of sorts where the other visitors with horses were leaving their mounts with young men in Taeynd's black livery. We entered the great hall of the keep as a group and I quickly saw that the visitors were split down the middle so that the commoners were on the left, nobility to the right. I glanced around the room behind the others to get a better idea of how things were laid out as Kenaz clutched my hand tightly.

At far end of hall was a dais and chair that stood empty for the moment, but I noticed that no one pressed very close to the area, making me wonder if all the nobility feared Taeynd as much as the common folk did. Each of the four corners of the hall housed a set of spiral stairs that seemed to go both up to the higher levels, and down to what I hoped weren't the dungeons. Bathrooms were on either side of the hall under the balconies that made up the second floor hall. Guards were posted at each stairway, as well as among the people. I guessed to keep things in order once Taeynd appeared.

A man who looked as if he were an official approached Mac, asking what we were here for. After a curt but polite answer from Mac, he directed us to the right side of the room where the nobility were gathered around tables where wine was being served by more of the castle's staff.

Hoping to come up with a valid story that would keep us from being imprisoned, I turned to Peorth and asked for the name of a town that was part of the country we were in, but obscure, far away. She gave me a name and I filed it away in order to use it if I was approached by someone and they asked where I had come from.

Mac turned so that we formed a rough circle. "What is our goal?" he asked quietly, so that only we could hear him as he looked around the group of us. "Do we just want to get Joel out? Or do we want to kill Taeynd?"

"We don't want to kill Taeynd," I told him, keeping my voice as low as possible. He was all I cared about.

"We just want to get Joel out?" Mac repeated as he looked around again.

I glanced around the group as well, not sure how anyone else felt, but I knew that if there was a chance of getting Joel away without death, the whole situation would be a better one for all of us. "We don't want to kill anybody. We can bring her down." That would remove her from power and get Joel away from her at the same time.

"We can kill her," Siofra said.

"We can't kill anybody," I retorted quickly, my voice rising slightly so that I quickly looked around to see if I had been overheard.

"Why don't we just get Joel out and go home," Mac suggested, looking between Siofra and myself.

"This woman obviously has a hold over these people, and that's not good," I said, not sure if I could live with myself if we allowed Taeynd to maintain control of this land, meaning others would suffer after we had gone.

Mac's gaze met mine. "We came here to get Joel," he said, his tone saying that he had made the decision and we weren't to question him about it. "We'll get him and go home," he finished with another sweeping look around the group of us, and then he turned to look over the crowd again.

I was torn. I knew that if possible, we should help the people rid themselves of Taeynd's oppressive dictatorship over the country, but I knew that my first concern was to get Joel out of here. His safety was the priority for us at the moment and what we needed to concentrate on. Mac needed him to learn more about his new powers and to gain whatever he needed to in order to fulfill his destiny.

I tried not to think about my developing feelings for him because I hadn't really had time to explore them in my own head yet. I figured there would be time for that after we got Joel back home as I pushed the mental picture of him from behind my eyes. I took Kenaz by the hand and kept her at my side as I began to mill through the crowd, thinking that I needed to my use of my time until Taeynd and Joel showed up to learn all that I could about the strange place that Joel had unwillingly found himself bound in.

As Mac and the others wandered about to see what they could learn as well, I chatted with a few people in the hopes of finding out more about Taeynd. I ended up talking to a woman in her early fifties, whom I quickly determined was nothing more than a gossip looking for her next piece of news. Since I was looking for information, I was more than happy to let her chat on about her husband, who was an ambassador from the capital who was here to visit 'Bloodmark' as Taeynd was called.

Part way through the conversation I bent down to Kenaz to whisper to her. "I'm talking with this woman so look out for people looking at us strangely. I want you to tug on my skirt if that happens." The girl nodded that she understood and I felt her little hand move from mine to my skirt where she held on just as tightly as she had my hand.

"Is Bloodmark married?" I asked her. "Does she have a family?"

The other woman nodded. "She has a consort, but I don't think they're married."

"Really?" I replied, trying not to show too much interest as a knot of dread suddenly formed in my lower abdomen. "Who is this consort?"

Her answer caused my heart to stop for a moment, but totally explained the sudden tightness in my gut. "Jolesic."

I swallowed as I tried to cover my surprise and smiled widely at the woman to keep my jaw from dropping. "What is he like? Have you met him?"

"He's a very gracious man" she gushed with a knowing smile that made my stomach lurch sickly as I crossed my arms in front of me and clutched at the sleeves of my dress desperately. "He seems to dote on her," the other woman confided.

I had to clamp my teeth on my bottom lip to not scream, and then tried to sound nonchalant as I spoke. "Amazing. Sounds like a match made in heaven to be sure."

She looked to either side of us, and then leaned forward to confide in a loud whisper, "I did hear a rumor that they are to be married, but I can't seem to get it confirmed."

I blinked in what I hoped was surprise and not repulsion. "How long ago was this?" I asked.

"Just a few weeks ago," she commented as she took a sip from the pewter goblet she held. "I heard about a wedding dress."

I cleared my throat. "Where is this Jolesic from? Around here?" How could he have acted the way he had toward me the other night in my dream if he was planning to marry her? It didn't make sense. Was that why he hadn't wanted her to see me?

Her eyes gleamed as if I'd asked the million-dollar question and she leaned toward me again. "No one knows. He showed up one day and Taeynd fell for him. Some of the more common folk fear Bloodmark, but they don't understand what it means to be a ruler. One must keep an iron grip on things or the peasants will over run you."

I looked around the room to see where Mac and the others were and found that most of them hadn't gone far. I didn't see Siofra. "How long will she make us wait before she comes down?"

The other woman shrugged. "She's a busy woman, she'll come down when the time is right, she just seems to sense these things."

All this talk of Joel marrying Taeynd was leaving a horrible taste in my mouth. I knew that I needed to change the subject fast, before I gave myself away. "I heard she's looking for ladies in waiting. How does one become a lady in waiting?"

She looked over her shoulder and pointed out the person, but I was saved from continuing my conversation with her because at that moment horns sounded in the hall and everyone was turning to face the dais. My eyes moved there as well and I found that Joel and Taeynd seemed to have just appeared before everyone, several guards surrounding them and looking the audience over for possible attackers. Taeynd's hand was lightly resting on Joel's arm as they stood smiling at the crowd and he seemed to have eyes only for her as everyone welcomed their 'lady'.

I didn't think of her for a moment as I looked Joel over carefully. He was wearing a royal blue tunic, trimmed in black with Taeynd's snake emblems embroidered along the bottom hem and at the shoulders. His black, knee-high boots were polished until they gleamed and his black pants fit him like a glove as they hugged his legs tightly. He didn't seem to be hurt in anyway, but I got the impression that Taeynd had the ability to hurt people in ways that wouldn't always show readily.

Convinced that he was okay for the moment, I moved my gaze to Taeynd and was overwhelmed by how beautiful she was. Her dark hair was pulled back away from her face in a gentle cascade of fat curls, some having been allowed to spill from their pins so that they caressed her neck and partially exposed chest and shoulders. Her gown was pale pink and looked like a cloud as she moved to sit on the throne in the middle of the dais, Joel helping her adjust the pillows so that she was comfortable after she was seated.

Out of nowhere I felt a sudden need to be closer to her that I couldn't understand. I found myself wondering why I have ever thought anything bad about her as she looked out over the mass of subjects before her with a radiant smile.

I must have taken a few steps forward because I felt Eliza move closer to me and she put a hand on my arm. "Corrine, honey," I heard her say, but I couldn't take my eyes off Taeynd. She was so beautiful.

"Isn't she awfully pretty?" I whispered as I stared at her, awestruck.

"Corrine, honey," Eliza repeated, shaking me slightly.

"But look at her, isn't she pretty?" I insisted.

Eliza took my shoulders and turned me so that I finally faced her. "Her presence does not affect you," she told me when my eyes met hers, and just like that her words sunk in and I instantly knew that Taeynd had done something with magic to make me forget why we were here. For once I was glad that Eliza had used her own brand of mind control on me to break the spell Taeynd had caused.

My eyes moved back at the woman on the dais and I knew that my gaze was filled with malicious intent that if spotted would have given me away to any of the guards in the room. "That bitch," I ground out through clenched teeth as I tried to take a deep breath to steady my anger.

"Why don't you come back here with us," Eliza suggested as she slipped her arm around my waist and practically had to pull me back to where Mac, Glenn and Kenaz were waiting for us with Peorth and Os-tur.

"She's pretty," Kenaz told me, her eyes looking soft and dreamy and I winced as I wondered if I had looked the same way just a moment ago.

I took her hand loosely in mine. "Honey, she's mean, she's not pretty."

"Are you sure?" she asked in her innocent, childlike way and I nodded in answer.

Taeynd was thanking everyone for their attendance as Joel stood next to her and her guards moved between her and the crowd on either side of the throne. She sounded very gracious, her voice full of sweetness that made my upper lip curl in distaste because I knew that she was manipulating all of them. She then called for the judgments to begin, starting with the peasant class then working up to nobility.

Mac motioned for us to move closer to one of the bathrooms, but he didn't give an indication as to why. Once there we stood and listened for a while to the proceedings. Taeynd was harsh in her judgments, but everyone around us appeared to approve of her decisions.

Glenn leaned over to Mac and whispered, "Siofra found this woman who was crying that she's going to help get out of the castle because her daughter's a bitch."

Mac glanced at him in disbelief then shook his head. "No, we're getting Joel and getting out. No more strays."

Glenn was silent for a moment and I figured that he was talking to his wife in his mind. "She's not listening," he told his brother-in-law after a moment.

Mac shook his head again and eyed Glenn in a way that said loud and clear that he expected Glenn to be able to control his wife a little better. This time it was Mac who was quiet for a few more minutes, as if he were locking in the last few pieces to a puzzle that he was working on in his head, and then he turned to Eliza and said, "Get Corrine and the kid out to the wagon."

"Are you sure that's such a good idea?" she asked as she eyed him wearily; obviously not ready to leave the castle without him.

"Yes," he answered.

"Are you sure that's such a good idea?" she repeated, really not liking the idea. I didn't like it either, but I knew Mac. Not as well as Eliza did, but I knew him well enough to know that he had a plan and it didn't include us being there.

"What are you going to do?" I asked, my eyes quickly darting to where Joel still stood next to Taeynd. He hadn't taken his eyes off her since they had appeared on the dais and that

scared me. I had hoped that he would have seen me, or at least one of us, so that he could have been reassured that we were here to help him. That everything was going to be okay. I still wasn't sure what was going on between he and Taeynd but part of me hoped that what the other woman had told me was somehow wrong.

"I can't be in both places," Eliza was telling Mac. "I can't protect you both."

"You need to protect her," he replied, looking pointedly at me.

"And who's going to protect you?" she countered, her voice taking on the slight edge of panic that she was trying to control.

"Glenn," was his answer.

"Are you sure that's such a good idea?" she asked a third time, obviously stalling.

Mac grinned and dropped a discreet kiss on her cheek. "Well, I have a heartbeat, so Glenn isn't going to stake me anymore. Go, but give me your cloak."

Eliza quickly shed the garment and handed it to him, but worry was permanently stuck in her gaze. "Okay, but if you die, I'm going to kill you."

Mac's grin widened to a full smile. "Fair enough."

"Ditto," I added, unable to think of another funeral for him.

His face set seriously again as he regarded the two of us. "Go get ready, with the gunpowder and the oil. Be ready."

We turned and discreetly made our way toward the exit as Taeynd continued to listen to the petitions that were being presented to her. As we left I found myself looking over my shoulder for one last lingering glimpse at Joel. I was still secretly hoping that he would look at me but he never did.

Disappointment took a hold of my heart as Eliza and I went to the wagon and I determinedly did as Mac had asked by readying the oil and gunpowder and instructing Kenaz to get down in the bed of the wagon and be prepared to hold on tightly. Siofra appeared a few minutes later with an older woman who climbed into the back of the wagon with her as Eliza grabbed the reins and looked toward the keep, her features full of concern.

No sooner had Siofra and the other woman settled themselves in the wagon, than a gateway opened a few yards away from us. Mac and Joel stepped through with an unconscious Glenn between them. Siofra bolted from the wagon to her husband and helped the two men get him in the bed as we all scooted around to make room for him.

"Corrine, give me your hand," Siofra commanded in a tightly controlled voice as she reached for me. Knowing that she intended to heal him, I clasped her hand tightly and opened myself to the magic that I knew would work to restore him. As the power flowed from me and into my aunt, I watched as Mac and Joel quickly mounted our horses. Peorth, who had followed slightly behind Eliza and I in leaving the castle, followed with the reins to Os-tur's horse in hand. The man nowhere in sight.

I felt the wagon lurch beneath me as we started to move toward the gate and heard Mac call for the oil and a gun. With my free hand I lifted the oil to him, giving him my own gun, as we rushed forward, Glenn's gateway to the inside of the castle closing behind us.

Chapter 25 – Racing to Freedom

"I'm so glad that you decided to come"

Poe

"Could've Gone Mad"

My gaze met Joel's for the first time in the waking world as we sped for the gate that meant freedom and it was then that I finally saw recognition in his eyes as he looked at me. I felt what was fast becoming a familiar tug in my heart whenever I thought of him and a smile touched my lips as magic continued to flow from me and into my aunt. He smiled back even as he urged his mount to go faster and that was the last thing I saw as a blinding pain enclosed around my entire head.

"Ahh," I cried out, as my hand left Siofra's to hold my head. Within seconds the pain had subsided enough for me to open my eyes and look around, but it still throbbed slightly as I tried to gauge how long I had been out of it. I figured that the pain had been a result of Siofra and I doing magic while we were still inside the castle walls, and as the pain continued to abate my gaze found Kenaz, who was now watching me in complete terror as she cowered in the skirts of the old woman who had accompanied Siofra.

"Keep her down, keep her safe," I managed, trying to assure the child that I was okay while I looked around us and saw that Mac was in the process of throwing the oil I had given him at the guards near the gate, the substance landing on them as well as the wall close behind them. Without thinking, I attempted to light fire to the oil to stop them from attacking us, but it didn't work and the headache that had been receding to a dull ache become blinding again.

Lightning struck the wall then, igniting the oil that Mac had thrown and the men that it covered. I looked to Mac as he lifted the powder bag and threw it in the fire as we sped past.

The guards that weren't on fire began to shoot at us as we edged ever closer to the opening that I hoped we made it through before it closed. Since I had given my gun to Mac I was now weaponless in the sense of anything I could use for the moment. I wasn't about to try to use magic again while we were still inside the castle walls, the pain was too much. So I waited until I could be more useful.

Siofra had produced a gun of her own and was firing at guards along with Mac. She was still cradling an unconscious Glenn in her lap. Panic grew in my throat as I saw a bullet graze Mac's shoulder, but when he kept his seat on his horse I knew that the wound wasn't a live threatening one for the moment. That didn't stop me from making a mental note to check him when we finally stopped.

Finally we cleared the gates and were on the other side of the castle walls. I used Life to heal my headache and watched as the people that were still waiting in line to enter the castle scatter confusedly as Os-tur in dragon-cat mode cleared a path in front of the wagon for us. He must have flown over the wall and landed in front of us.

Amidst the rain of bullets Glenn finally woke up and sat up in the bed of the wagon. Fortunately the guards that were following us all had really bad aim and aside from the flesh wound that Mac had received, we were making a pretty good escape.

Mac stopped on the bridge after everyone else was safely on the other side and dismounted his horse long enough to dump a line of the gunpowder across the structure. He then strategically placed the pouch in the middle of the roadway and stepped back enough to fire at line, the flames igniting the rest of the powder and quickly moving toward big pile. Then he mounted the horse again and pushed the animal to catch up with the rest of us before the whole thing blew.

I heard Eliza muttering something about Mac being reckless that caused me to look at her where she sat on the wagon seat, urging the horses to go faster. I wondered if she could use a break from the constant strain that holding onto the reigns of the horses was doing to her. "Do you need help up there?" I asked, thinking that I could take some of the burden from her since neither of us was accustomed to using our arms in that way.

"No, I'm fine," she replied. I looked down her body and noticed blood on her shirt so I made to climb onto seat to heal her now that we were on the other side of the castle walls. "Get in the back," she bit out.

"No, you're hurt," I insisted.

She flicked the reigns again. "I'm fine. You're gonna fall."

I ignored her as I tried to lift her shirt to get a better look. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said through clenched teeth.

"You're not. Did you heal?"

"Get down with the others," she yelled as she started to pull the horses into a slower pace as we approached a crossroad. She didn't seem to be favoring anything for the moment as she pulled the wagon onto an old road and finally stopped it, all be it with some difficulty, but she did manage to do it.

I decided to drop my questioning for the moment, figuring that if she were hurt bad enough she would have let me help her. Quickly we all climbed out of the wagon or off our horses and I joined hands with Glenn and Siofra to create a gateway that opened next to the circle of stones where we had arrived in this world in the first place. The gateway was large enough for everyone to move through quickly as Mac caught up with us and we passed through to the other side and assembled inside it.

I was eager to get back to our world, but I couldn't keep myself from glancing at Joel as I took Kenaz's hand and kneeled before her. He was checking the horses over as the others quickly scouted around for signs that we had been followed.

"Kenaz," I said to the little girl, trying to form the words that I hoped would make her understand what I was about to tell her. "I don't want anything to happen to you here once we leave. Do you want to come home with me?"

She looked at me quizzically, not sure what to say. "But I live here," she said matter of factly. "I don't want to go anywhere else."

The old woman that Siofra had brought along came forward and put her hands on the girl's shoulders. "I will make sure that no harm comes to the girl once you have gone." She looked down at Kenaz kindly and smiled a gentle smile. "It would do my heart good to have someone to take care of."

I nodded my head silently in agreement and got to my feet again as I caressed Kenaz's cheek with the tips of my fingers. All around me preparations were underway by Mac and the others to return home. Packs were being removed from the wagon and brought into the circle and Os-tur had rejoined us again, now back in his human form.

Like a magnet, my eyes were drawn back to Joel. I worried about any lingering effects that he might have after being liberated from Taeynd even as I continued to wonder if he had in fact had feelings for the other woman. Then I started to think about some of the things that he had said in the limited conversations we had and suddenly I had an idea.

I called forth Spirit to look at Joel in such a way as to determine whether or not he was possessed. That had to be it. He had said that he was bound to her... what if the only place he had free will was in his dreams? It made perfect sense to me but I needed to find proof of it, or something close to what I was thinking, in him.

I couldn't tell for sure, but there was definitely something inside Joel that resembled a poison or parasitic infection that triggered an alarm in my mind. Siofra was only a few feet from me and I crossed to her quickly as I reached into my pouch and pulled out the little stone wolf that my Grandfather had given me. "There's some kind of parasitic thingy in him," I told her, managing to keep the panic from my voice that was rising in my chest.

Siofra looked at me oddly, and then glanced over at him. "In Joel?"

I nodded. "I can't recognize what it is."

Siofra looked at me quizzically. "Do you want me to figure it out?"

I didn't know what it was, but the last thing I wanted was to leave whatever it was inside him. "Can we just get rid of it?"

"I don't know," she said with a shrug as she seemed to watch him closely, as if she might. "I don't know what it is." She continued to watch him for a few seconds as he checked the gun that had been strapped on one hip and the sword that was hung on the other. I recognized his attitude from the times I had seen Mac prepare for an altercation. Joel was in battle mode, I told myself and that, along with the fact that we were running for our lives, was why we hadn't yet had a chance to really... connect, for lack of a better word. There would be time for that when we were safely back home.

Eliza was fawning over Mac because of the flesh wound he had received. "You should be more careful," she scolded as she tried to pull the material of his shirt and tunic back enough to get a good look at the damage.

Mac stopped and looked at her incredulously. "Ring, hello?" he commended as he glanced down at her blood stained shirt. "Pot?"

She brushed his concern off. "You could have been seriously injured, and you need to take more care."

Mac grinned as he took her hands gently and pulled them away from his shoulder. "Yes, but then I'd have been dead and you'd have to kill me," he pointed out, humorously, his voice full of mirth.

"That is not funny," Eliza bit out.

"Can't see anything," Siofra said finally as Joel went over to Glenn to make sure that he and Peorth were both okay after our quick escape from Horsetower. "You're seeing things."

"No, I'm not," I insisted as Gwrhyn padded closer, having heard our conversation while the others were checking things over. "No spirits per say," I heard him say in my head, but he did agree that there was some sort of corruption about him. "You're right, little one," he told me.

"Do you think it's something we need to look into right now?" I asked. "Or do you think it will wait until we get home?"

"What does your heart tell you?" he replied.

That was all the prompting I needed. I crossed the space that separated Joel and me. He was facing away from me as he talked with Peorth and I had to turn him so that he looked at me, then I laid my hands flat on his chest. "Why do you have...?" I started, then stopped and swallowed because this was the first time I was touching him in the waking world and a familiar warmth was coming from his chest and into my fingers.

"There's something in you, what is it?" I started again. "Did she do it to you?" I was trying not to look in his eyes. Trying not to show how scared I was at the thought that maybe Taeynd had done something to him we hadn't anticipated. Something that she may have the ability to trigger whenever she chose. Something that might kill him before I... before we could do anything to stop.

Joel lifted his hands and enclosed them around my wrists. "I told you, she used her blood in a spell," he told me in a quiet, soft spoken voice that caused goose bumps to sprout on my skin.

"I think I know what it is," Siofra said as she came up behind me. "I think I understand."

"We have to get it out," I told her, not taking my hands from Joel's chest. "How do we get rid of it?"

"I have no idea," he told me.

"Does her blood make you stronger?" Mac asked.

Joel shook her head. "No, it's not like that, it-"

"Binds you to her?" Siofra finished for him.

His eyes moved to her. "Yes."

I looked up at him and said quietly. "It needs to come out. How do we get rid of it?"

"Not standing in the middle of the circle," Mac said, eager to get the hell out of here before Taeynd and her men found us.

I glanced at him over my shoulder. "We need to get rid of it before we go home because it might be a tracking device."

"I will try to help you, but I don't know," Siofra said as she put her hand on my shoulder.

"I'm thinking Life," I told her, looking up at Joel again, who was smiling down at me reassuringly. "I'm thinking Spirit, Matter."

"Okay," was all she said, opening herself to her magic so that I could use it to, hopefully, get whatever was in him, out.

"We could try it together," Glenn said as he, too, linked with Siofra and me.

Chapter 26 – Rude Awakening

"She listened as her dreams silently screamed"

Poe

"Walk the Walk"

It was the greatest amount of magic that I had ever held, much less manipulated on my own. Usually I was just an added amount of quintessence that another, more experienced mage like Siofra or Glenn then used to achieve whatever means necessary. This time, however, it was me that was calling forth the Spheres and using them to expel whatever it was that was in Joel.

My eyes were closed as I concentrated on my task, but I could still feel Joel's warm hands around my wrists and they were a sure anchor that helped me remember what I was doing. The amount of magic nearly overflowed inside me as I sought whatever had invaded him and I needed every single ounce of will that I could muster to find the little black spot inside Joel's chest that was the center-point of the spell Taeynd had used. Once I found it, it was easier to carefully detach it from him and break it up so that the smaller pieces left his body without harming him and fell to the ground where they then soaked harmlessly into the ground.

As the last of the spell left his body, I felt Joel's body lean against me and I looked at him quickly, worried that I had in some way hurt him. Thankfully he was alright, the expression in his eyes telling me that it was exhaustion from the healing that he was feeling and not pain. His fingers were still around my wrists, but his grip wasn't as sure as it had been and he weaved against me so that I feared if he passed out he would take us both down.

I released the magic I still held and felt incredibly drained, but determined to do what I could to replenish his strength. Siofra must have had some indication of what was happening because she stepped forward and laid her hands on Joel's shoulder before I called for help. Within seconds the light was back in his eyes and his grip once again tightened around my wrists as his gaze watched me intently.

I smiled up at him and was rewarded with a similar one. I parted my lips to speak to him, but Mac's voice interrupted me.

"It was too easy," Mac said in a low voice. He was scanning the forest around us as if he expected an army to attack from all sides at any moment. I had to admit that getting Joel away from Taeynd had been rather easy in the over all scheme of things, but I hadn't put much thought into it until Mac had voiced his opinion.

As if to give proof to his statement, the stone in the center of the circle suddenly exploded, throwing dust and smoke into the air. We all dropped to the ground to avoid the flying bits of rock and when I turned around again I saw that Peorth, Kenaz and Siofra were all on the ground and appeared to have passed out from the blast. Eliza was still on her feet and looking between Mac and me, wondering who to go to. Glenn quickly moved to his wife's side to be sure she was alright.

Mac unsheathed his sword again and told Eliza to move over toward me, but she moved closer to his side instead. I quickly scrambled to my feet and was looking around me for Joel, but he and the old lady were gone. I was beginning to feel slightly dizzy and was about to call out Joel's name when Mac spoke. "It's a dream."

I leaned back against one of the rocks of the circle to keep my footing as the scene shifted back to our rooms at the inn. I watched as Taeynd materialized in all her dazzling splendor near Eliza with her men surrounding us the room as well. Waves of nauseating warmth washed over me as I realized that Eliza's body was bloodied as if she had fought off many seasoned fighters. I was afraid that I was going to pass out and I fought to remain conscious.

"It *was* too easy, wasn't it?" she asked as she smiled at Mac coyly. "Not quite as much fun as shooting me, to be sure."

My mind tried to latch on to a meditation exercise that I hoped would keep me awake, but before I could fully slip into the trance I felt my body drop forward, first onto my knees and then down further still until I felt the soft grass beneath my cheek and everything went black.

Chapter 27 – Harsh Reality

"But as far as I can see you are still miles from me"

Poe

"5 and 1/2 Minute Hallway"

I awoke next to someone in an unfamiliar small room. I opened my eyes slowly; not knowing what awaited me, and found that the room was small, but homey, albeit sparsely appointed. It had a welcoming air to it that made me relax slightly as I looked to my left to see who was beside me. It was Siofra's still sleeping form, and we were lying on the only piece of furniture in the room, except for a rocking chair I saw in the corner where an old woman was rocking as she carded wool quietly. Her eyes were milky white, indicating that she was blind, but that in no way hindered her in her work. There was a child of about nine sitting on the floor beside her who was helping her with nimble fingers that said this wasn't the first time she had done such work.

Siofra stirred next to me and the old woman seemed to sense somehow that we were no longer asleep. "I was beginning to wonder if you would ever wake," she commented dryly as she continued to concentrate on her task. Her eyes closed as she worked with the wool and I could see that there were fine lines on her lids that looked as if they had been tattooed there, they were so dark and perfect.

I sat up slightly and it was the child that somehow reminded me of what had to have been a dream from the night before. The one of us rescuing Joel and of Taeynd's abrupt presence in the stone circle and our subsequent loss of consciousness.

"Where are we?" I asked, trying to keep the panic from rising in my chest. *Where were Mac and Eliza?* my mind was screaming when I didn't see them right away.

"You were brought in the night to my house here," the old woman said. "It is where I live with my sisters. I am called An'daril al Na'tryn."

"Where are the others?" I asked, knowing that I probably sounded rude with my abrupt questions, but at the moment I wasn't really caring. Siofra was fully awake as well by now and listening to what the old woman was saying.

"The child is asleep in the next room," An'daril answered. "So are Peorth and the wolf."

A lead weight formed in my chest as I looked at Siofra, who still had yet to say anything herself. My mind was demanding to know where Eliza and Mac and Glenn were and my first instinct was to find Kenaz to determine if she knew anything about how we came to be here without them. Siofra seemed to understand where my thoughts were going because she nodded when my gaze met hers and I moved off the bed to leave the room. "How did we get here?" I asked as I did so.

"Os-tur brought you," An'daril informed us as her sightless eyes followed my movements across the room. "He said that Bloodmark walked in your dreams."

That was putting it lightly, I thought wryly as I tried to suppress the ever increasing worry I felt for the three missing members of our family. I forced myself to breathe in and out evenly so my mind didn't run with the various tortuous acts I thought Taeynd would come up with to punish them as well as Joel.

Siofra stayed in the room with the old woman while I went to the one next it and roused the Kenaz to bring her yawning form back with me. The child was able to fill us in on the details of what had happened while Siofra and I were unconscious, which included Eliza trying to get us out of the inn before Taeynd's men arrived by dropping our lifeless bodies out the window of our rooms and into the wagon where Os-tur waited to catch us. Apparently Kenaz, Eliza and Os-tur were the only ones not affected by whatever spell Taeynd had let loose during the dream and that was why they had been able to get the two of us and Peorth out. Unfortunately, they hadn't been able to get all of us out before the guard burst into our rooms, taking Mac, Eliza and Glenn hostage.

Kenaz was also able to tell us that Peorth had not yet awakened from the activities of the previous night. As in the dream, the other woman had little to no training in the dream world and required assistance in escaping from Taeynd's trap in much the same way Mac had needed to lead her in the dream. Thankfully Siofra and I had apparently been involved in the same dream so we knew what we needed to get Peorth to do in order to get her out.

Peorth looked very weak when we finally managed to wake her and Os-tur relaxed slightly for the first time since we had entered the room. Siofra linked with me to heal her somewhat but she was still physically spent and would be of little help in freeing the others, which meant we were yet another person down when it came time to go to Horsetower.

"An'daril, where am I?" Peorth asked faintly when she was finally able to make some sense.

"Weaver's hut," was the mental answer that Gwrhyr gave everyone. He had come into the room while Siofra and I were instructing Peorth on how to break Taeynd's spell and wake up.

Peorth looked up at Siofra and myself and offered with a meek smile, "Thank you."

"We knew what to do," I told her with a smile and reached out to squeeze her hand.

"Where are the others?" she asked, her eyes filling with concern.

I glanced at Siofra, who had been unusually quiet with worry for her husband throughout what little time we had been awake. "They're in Horsetower, we have to go," I informed the other woman.

"We should make a few plans first," my aunt said, looking to the old woman as if she would somehow have all the answers.

An'daril nodded. "There's no use going off without doing so," she commented as she got to her feet, making a big show of looking old but appearing to be just as nimble as the child beside her who was now gathering the wool and putting it into a nearby basket.

"What if we used the Umbra to get in?" I suggested, knowing that both Siofra and I could do that with our magic abilities. The Umbra was a spirit land that ran parallel with our world back home. I wasn't sure that it existed in this one, but it was an idea.

"It won't work," An'daril replied flatly.

Showing some signs of her normal self, Siofra gave the old woman a dark glance and said, "Aren't you just a bowl full of negativity?"

An'daril's milky gaze moved to her and she said, "Many ways and many things have been tried to enter Horsetower."

"How many people have tried to use the Umbra to get in?" Siofra asked.

One of the older woman's gray tinted brows lifted. "Do you want me to list the ones that failed, or the ones that died trying?"

My aunt expelled an annoyed sigh. "What would you suggest?" she relented.

"I would suggest coming downstairs for breakfast. I believe that La'usel has it ready now. We can discuss it." She turned then and walked out of room, avoiding people as if she could see them and patting Kenaz' head as she went by her.

Sitting around and discussing the situation was the last thing I wanted to do. Some of the most important people in my life were being held captive by a crazy woman that I was sure was capable of the most horrific of things. There was no way that I could possibly sit down to a morning meal and be expected to hold down food when any one of them could be bleeding to death or dead. The thought made my stomach turn.

My thoughts must have radiated to Siofra because she looked at me and said, "You're not going to run off, are you?"

"Make it quick," I replied irritably as we filed out of the room and down the stairs that led to the main floor of the small house. I still wasn't really impressed with how Siofra had put us all in danger the night before by confronting Taeynd the way she had and I thought that we might be sitting better if she had left well enough alone to begin with but I chose to keep quiet about it for now.

What she said when we reached the bottom of the stairs nearly caused me to slap her. "You need to learn some patience."

Only clenching my fists together so tightly that my nails dug into my flesh kept me from actually doing it and I had to breathe deeply as I pushed ahead of her and into the kitchen.

I got the feeling right away that we were dealing with this worlds version of the Fates when we met the other two women of the house. La'usel al Na'tryn and Cal'lore al Na'tryn made up the other two-thirds of the sisters who lived in the cottage and seeing them with An'daril was like looking at the three women from the trailer in Nashville.

La'usel looked to be in her mid-thirties and seemed very protective of her sisters in a motherly fashion. We quickly learned that she handled the selling and money end of the small clothing shop the three ran out of their home. Cal'lore was in her mid-twenties and very beautiful, not trashy or man hungry like Carlene from had been.

I glimpsed bits of tattoos on both of these new sisters as well. I could see some sort of tribal tattooing along the neckline of La'usel's dress while Cal'lore bore a red dragon on the back of her right hand. I didn't know if the tattoos meant anything, but the work had been done with a sure hand and the colors were true. There were a few children playing nearby, a boy of about two and a girl that looked to be five, as the two women finished preparations for the morning meal and La'usel told us to have a seat at the set table.

"I'm having a déjà vu thing," Siofra commented to Gwryhr who was sitting on the floor next to her.

"Yes," I heard him reply in my head. "They do bear a striking resemblance."

"I'm sorry," La'usel said, looking toward Siofra. "I didn't understand what you said?"

"Déjà vu," Siofra repeated.

"Your counterparts in our reality bear a striking resemblance to yourselves," the wolf explained to everyone telepathically.

La'usel's gaze moved to Gwrhryr in surprise. "Oh, look, an intelligent wolf. Are you hungry?"

Gwrhryr nodded in a way that was so human that it still struck me oddly every time I saw it. "Very. Meat and potatoes if you have them," he requested at the same moment La'usel suggested the same thing audibly. The meal was served and I noticed that Kenaz was even

quieter than she usually was and clung to either Siofra or myself from her seat between the two of us.

"What's wrong?" Siofra asked her.

Her eyes look like they belonged to someone who had been through a traumatic situation and was holding tight to what was left. "Eliza poured water on you, and you still wouldn't wake up," she said in a quiet voice, causing Siofra to hug her close and tell her that everything was going to be alright.

"What are your suggestions to get in there and get them out?" Siofra asked as we started to eat.

The women exchanged looks amongst themselves, but it was Cal'lore who spoke. "Many have tried to enter Horsetower; no one has succeeded using magic."

Since I knew that already, I was still waiting for something new to surface. "Okay," Siofra agreed as she looked around the table. "Then we'll do it without magic, but I'm not leaving without them."

Cal'lore nodded. "That is understandable. If you are willing to listen to our suggestions, then perhaps we have a way into Horsetower."

Siofra nodded and picked up her fork. "Okay."

La'usel rose from her seat and went to the doorway to horse yard and called out, "Boy, come in here."

Chapter 28 – Ashrem Itemron

"Sometimes I feel it burning
That deep and primal yearning
I feel it burn, burn, burning"

Poe

"Fingertips"

A young man in his late teens entered the kitchen, wearing peasant looking clothing under a leather jerkin. I looked him over carefully, wondering how much he would be of any use to us when we faced Taeynd and what I saw in his eyes were the memories that told me he had seen more in his life that most would in twice the time. He looked to be only a few years younger than I was, but under the jerkin I could see the lines of muscle that told me he knew how to use the sword that hung from his belt and had in deed used it often.

"Ashrem knows a way into the castle," An'daril told us, drawing my gaze back to her where she sat at the head of the crowded table.

Even though he looked capable of using the sword, Ashrem seemed to be not quite sure of himself and was a little uncomfortable being the center of attention. "I have walked the caverns beneath the white cliffs. I can get you in," he informed us in a quiet voice that still held bits of higher tones of his youth in the deepening timber.

"How long will it take?" I asked.

"We can be at the opening in two hours," he said. "Another hour beneath the cliffs to the castle."

"That's a long time, but it's our only choice," Siofra commented as she glanced at him.

I nodded to her and looked at the other women. "I need boy's clothes."

La'usel spoke up. "We can accommodate that."

"We can pay you for them," I told her

She shook her head. "There is no need."

I nodded in consent and turned to Ashrem again. "How soon can you be ready to go?"

Ashrem straightened his shoulders and replied, "I was ready two years ago when the castle fell."

I was eager to be on our way so that sounded fine with me. Siofra asked to leave Kenaz behind, promising the child that we would be back for her when she prepared to put up a fight.

"Do you think we should take more than just us?" I asked, wanting to make sure that we only had to go back once.

"I suppose we can see if Peorth or Os-tur wants to go," Siofra suggested.

"Is there a rebellion around here?" I asked An'daril, thinking that even if the two did join us we might need a little more back up.

Unfortunately the old woman shook her head. "Bloodmark killed them long ago. What do you plan to do when you get in the castle?"

I looked at her, feeling very much like Mac for a moment. "We need to get in, find Mac, Eliza, Glenn and Joel and get them out."

"Sounds like a lot to do without using magic," she commented.

"There has to be a way to use magic in there," Siofra informed her. "We used magic in the bathroom in the dream."

"That part was dream," she told her flatly.

"You could undo the wards," Gwrhyr suggested in our minds.

Siofra thought a moment then replied, "Yes, but in my dreams we also--"

"Can we undo the wards?" I interrupted, needing to do something.

La'usel shook her head. "It's been tried."

That wasn't good enough and I wondered if we could somehow try again. "How close is the magic of this world to the magic we have?" I asked.

The older woman shrugged. "Having never been to your world or met one of you, I don't know."

The discussion then turned to magic and we managed to piece together that it was roughly the same, but we didn't come up with any ideas on how to undo the wards without alerting Taeynd and putting the others in more danger. All the talk as making me edgy because that meant more time we lost getting to Eliza and the others to free them and I stood so that I could walk about the room, hoping for a better idea as the discussion continued around me.

"Sit down and eat," Siofra scolded after a few minutes.

I rolled my eyes and found my seat at the table again saying, "I will sit down, but I am done eating." I couldn't believe that she was so willing to just sit around her talking while we could be on our way to the tunnels Ashrem had told us about.

An'daril nimbly picked up the teapot and refreshed my cup with ease. "Have some more tea, dear," she said soothingly.

"Thank you," I managed, trying to sound calm.

Ashrem turned to me. "Are you so eager to die?" he asked.

I looked at him and tried to control my temper. "I'm eager to get my friends out," I pointed out, remembering that he didn't have the personal stake involved like I did. My best friend, father and possible love interest were in there and he didn't understand that. How could he?

It took longer that I would have liked, but finally we finished the meal. As we did we discussed the fact that if we could somehow get inside the castle and have some way to use our magic, we might have a chance to remove the wards.

An'daril spoke up. "Cal'lore has been working on a cloth that could possibly allow you to use magic within the castle," she informed us, causing Siofra and I to give her our full attention. *Why hadn't she mentioned this before?* I thought to myself.

"How sure is she about this 'possibly'?" I asked.

"It's never been tried," An'daril explained. "But given what we know about the wards, it should work."

"I'm willing to try anything," Siofra said, looking at me for my thoughts on the matter.

"What if Taeynd is killed?" I asked, thinking that I wanted the others safe before we tried anything that might jeopardize them.

"If she's killed, it will be much easier to undo the wards," Cal'lore threw out.

"Wouldn't they just falter?" Siofra countered.

The other woman nodded. "Most of them."

"They're locked within each other," I said, understanding what she meant.

La'usel told us that she happened to have three of the cloaks done and that we could try them out if we wanted. I was more than willing to do so and we carefully folded them and put them in the packs we would take with us into the tunnels under Horsetower for use later.

Peorth was still weak, and not sure how much help she would be. Os-tur agreed to go in her place so she stayed behind with Kenaz. The child was upset to be separated from us, but Siofra promised her that we would be back.

Most of our belongings had made it to the cottage with us, including most of the weapons, though I noticed that none of them were Eliza's, which made sense because she would have had them all on her person during the attack. The women provided me with boys clothing for the journey since Siofra already had some.

After bidding the Fates goodbye we rode out of the yard and were finally on our way. I figured that it must have to have been at least nine o'clock by then and as we lost site of the cottage Siofra began to ask Os-tur more details about what had happened the night before.

"Im-ryn don't need much sleep," he explained. "Peorth wouldn't wake when she'd told me to wake her. The wolf came and spoke to me of the trouble in your room, the same trouble my Lady Peorth was experiencing. I brought my lady to your rooms, and your Dagger was determined to free those of you Taeynd had put into danger. She sent Kenaz with me to fetch the wagon and threw Peorth and both of you down to my arms once I had brought it around, but there was no time left for her to send down either of the men. As she threw you" he said indicating Siofra, "she bade me go, to see you to safety, and stayed behind to guard her husband and yours as well." He paused then as we digested the story he told as if making sure that we understood that he didn't purposefully leave anyone behind. "There was not enough time to get everyone out. I don't know what happened after we left. I went back after I knew the rest of you were safe and the innkeeper was gone. There was blood in the room."

"There was blood in the room?" I asked, a knot forming in the pit of my stomach. I was really glad that he hadn't told this story back at the cottage because there was no way in hell that anyone would have stopped me from leaving as soon as I had heard it.

Os-tur turned to me. "There were many bodies of the black guard taken from the room. I cannot say whose it was."

I said a silent prayer to Gaia that she would protect my family until we could get to them. I hoped she was listening.

Chapter 29 – Rescue

"You creep in like a whisper it's true"

Poe

"Amazed"

We rode toward the coast and made pretty good time. Ashrem didn't want to push the horses too fast so that they would be ready to get away quickly if need be when we had everyone. It was hard to me to not worry about Eliza and the others after the story Os-tur told, but I knew that worrying about it wouldn't do anything except give me a headache. Based on what he had told us I knew that Eliza was the only one conscious when the soldiers arrived and I had to keep myself from thinking that any of the blood was hers.

Deciding that the best way to keep my mind off what was happening to Joel and the others, I figured conversation was the best course of action to occupy my mind. "How did you learn of this way into the castle?" I asked Ashrem.

"When Bloodmark came to Horsetower I escaped through them," he answered, his eyes never leaving the path in front of us.

"What were you doing there to begin with?" Siofra asked.

"It was my home."

Siofra's expressed turned to one of surprise. "Who are you?"

He glanced back at her. "I am Ashrem Itemron."

"Are you the true ruler of this land?" I asked.

"My father was."

Siofra and I looked at each other in amazement that the women hadn't mentioned this before. "Is your father alive?" she inquired.

"Bloodmark killed him, and my mother," was his short, unemotional reply.

"Then you are the true ruler of this land," I remarked, wondering how this new bit of information changed things.

I didn't think that it was possible, but Ashrem's spine got even straighter in his saddle. "At this point no one rules until Bloodmark is dead," he commented, but I could hear his desire to see her removed from power in his voice.

"Well, today might be the day that you have to take over," I told him. "She may have to die for us to succeed."

He didn't turn again when he spoke. "There's no 'might'. She will die."

"Yeah," Siofra breathed lowly.

"Okay, so it shall be," I said, not sure that how I felt about the idea of it. Sure, Taeynd wasn't the nicest person by any stretch of the word, but I had a hard time allowing myself to be part of killing her. She had kept Joel here as her prisoner and slave for two years and that angered me greatly, but I didn't like being anyone's judge and jury. It wasn't my place to be something like that.

A few minutes of silence past before Ashrem turned to me. "Where did your sister train?" he asked me, meaning Eliza.

"The school of hard knocks," I replied, his question taking my thoughts back to the fact that she was being held by Taeynd and I hoped to Gaia that Eliza was still alive as well as the others when we finally arrived at the castle. I held tight to the feeling that if they weren't that I would somehow know it. Eliza was the closest person in the world to me as well as my mother. Something time me that if she weren't alive anymore that I would someone know.

Dwelling on the negative makes it real, I told myself as I prayed that she was okay. Willed it will all my being.

"I've never heard of that before," Ashrem commented, reminding me that we weren't in our world anymore and my witty euphemisms were lost on him. "Is it near here?"

"She's been on her own since she was about your age," I explained, knowing that I would never tell him the whole story so I hoped he didn't ask too many more questions. "She's lived a long time; she's had to fight in the streets to survive."

Ashrem looked back at me. "She had no family to care for her?"

I remembered Kate and the few stories that that I had managed to get out of Eliza. "At that point, no."

"I can't see how she could pick up the skills to kill so many of Bloodmark's black guards on the streets," Ashrem commented, clearly perplexed. "La'usel said she was a Dagger?"

I shrugged. "Some may call her that."

"My mother was a Dagger," he said with pride.

"What exactly is a Dagger?" Siofra asked.

Ashrem turned to her. "Your brother-wife is a Dagger and you don't know what one is?" he asked.

Siofra shook her head. "Nope. We're not from here," she explained.

"Daggers are women trained in weapons and defense."

"That's Eliza," I said with a grin.

Ashrem continued. "They guard persons of high rank and will defend them even until death."

Siofra looked at me and nodded with a grin of her own. "Yes, that's her."

"And she learned her skills on the streets?" Ashrem asked.

"In the beginning," I told him.

"Where we come from there are many ways of learning pretty much anything," Siofra chimed in, prompting Ashrem to name off three or four holdings she might have trained at in his world and Siofra shook her head to each one. "No, no, and um, no," she told him.

Ashrem, of course, seemed confused. "I once knew all of the training centers for Daggers. They were trained here, once."

"They will be again," I assured him, trying to steer the conversation away from the fact that there was no way Eliza could have gone to those places since we weren't from there.

"As I said before, we are not from here," Siofra told him, echoing my thoughts, but not necessarily in a way that would take away his interest from the topic.

"So what do you do to support yourself?" I asked.

Ashrem glanced at me. "I am La'usel's guard," he said, as if I should understand everything by that statement. I got the feeling I was missing something.

"And that pays you?" Siofra asked.

Ashrem shrugged. "Yes, more or less."

That didn't seem to make sense to Siofra because she crinkled her nose and commented, "You're the would-be ruler of this kingdom, and you're just guarding someone?"

Ashrem glanced at her and his expression said that he couldn't believe what she was asking. "If Bloodmark knew I lived, I would be dead," he explained carefully. "And it is the way of our people for the men to guard the women."

I turned to Os-tur, who had been quiet up till now and said, "That must be what you are to Peorth." I think I was finally understanding a little.

The other man nodded. "Yes, I am." I nodded in return and he asked, "Do you have no guard?"

I shook my head. "No."

"She has her family," Siofra told him.

I shrugged and smiled at him. "We protect each other."

"But you have a guard," Ashrem said to Siofra.

"I have a husband," she corrected.

"Some times there is no difference," he replied.

"I can take care of myself," she told him.

Ashrem studied her for a moment, and then a knowing smile sprang to his features. "You're a witch, aren't you?" he asked.

Siofra smiled back. "Yes, I am," she confessed.

Ashrem regarded her a little differently now. "Then you can take care of yourself," he conceded.

"Yes I can. I said that before."

"So do you only guard one person at a time, or multiple people?" I asked, wanting to know how it worked. "Do you guard all three of them, or just the one?"

Ashrem nodded. "When necessary, I guard all three, but La'usel is my charge."

"Your charge?" I asked, not understanding the term.

"My Lady," he explained. "I'm bound to her for a year and a day, or longer if we both find it agreeable."

"Are you like her husband as well?" Siofra wanted to know.

Ashrem shook his head in embarrassment. "Oh, no. She's too old for me."

"My husband is much older than I am," Siofra told him.

"It is different when a man is older," he replied adamantly.

"Is there a girl that you are interested in?" I asked, wondering if he was so unwavering because someone else had caught his interest.

Ashrem look slightly embarrassed again. "There is one," he confided slowly, watching the road ahead.

"Really?" I asked. "What is she like?"

He then told us about a strong girl who was hard willed and stubborn. One who did not always listen to her mother as she should. But there was something missing from his story. Something that made me wonder if he even knew the girl he was speaking of. There was a surety to his voice, but the fact that he never gave her name or spoke of any time spent with her that made me wonder.

"That sounds familiar, Corrinemackenzie," Gwrhyr said in my head, pulling me from my thoughts and causing me to give him a look that said he wasn't funny.

"She works hard at learning," Ashrem finished.

"She lives in the village then?" I asked, wondering if I had seen the girl he spoke of and if she knew he liked her. "You grew up with her?"

Ashrem shook his head. "No, she lives far away."

"How did you meet her?"

Ashrem never answered my question because at that moment he looked off toward Horsetower and said, "We're nearly to the cliffs."

We left the horses in a small stand of trees near the cliffs. Ashrem led the way into the unsteady terrain that was at the base of the high rock walls about twenty feet away and I was happy to be off the horse and on my feet again. I wasn't used to the long hours of riding that I used to do as I kid on the farm and my butt was killing me.

Once we were at the base of the cliff he soon found a stony path that was hidden until just as we reached it that led downward. It wasn't an easy path, but we managed, Ashrem leading, then Siofra and myself, and finally Os-tur and the wolf bringing up the rear. We carried torches to light our way and packs that held food, water and the cloaks were strapped to our backs. Ashrem recommended that we not use magic until it was absolutely necessary because Taeynd would know.

We walked in relative quiet until we came to a small cave where we would now have to crawl about twenty feet on our hands and knees in order to get through. Once on the other side Ashrem said that we were officially in Horsetower, which caused Siofra and I to then pulled out our cloaks and put them on. As soon as I had mine on I disregarded Ashrem's recommendation and used magic to try sense the people they're looking for, but I came up empty handed.

"Where does this tunnel end?" Siofra suddenly asked Ashrem.

He glanced at her. "In the Chamber of Torment."

Sounds like a charming place, I found myself thinking as I tried to keep my thoughts from going to the fact that we might find all of them there. Now that we were so close, the only thing I could think of was getting to them and getting them the hell out of there. "Can't we go any faster?" I asked Ashrem. I had edged in front of Siofra when we started again and was close behind him. I knew that I was pushing him and doing some serious invasion of personal space, but I didn't really care we were so close now.

"If we go too fast, we'll be heard," he said.

I tried once again to sense any of them and this time I was successful in locating Joel. Unfortunately what I was feeling was that he was unconscious and that only made me want to get to him that much quicker. I wondered where Mac and Eliza were and why I couldn't find them and I wanted to run to get closer.

Regrettably, I knew that there was no way Ashrem was going to let me do that, so I decided to ask him more about the year and a day thing he had spoken about earlier concerning his service to La'usel to once again distract my thoughts. He told me that women of any ranking in this part of the world made agreements with men who could fight to be their guards. The minimum amount of service time was a year and a day and could go longer if both parties agreed. Sometimes the arrangements turned to relationships and the man and woman could marry and maintain their standings of lady and guard at the same time.

Siofra was unusually quiet during this time and finally she asked Ashrem how much longer before we arrive at the entrance.

"About ten minutes," he told her. She fell silent once again after that and I wondered if she were talking to one of them. If she were, then it was likely that she was talking to Glenn.

After about five minutes she will then say, "Ashrem, we need to step it up a little."

He looked back at her as we continued. "Why?"

"Eliza's unconscious, Mac is bartering for everyone's release in a rather nice room, and Glenn's getting pissy," she informed us, her first comment causing my heart to stop in my chest.

Ashrem glanced back at her questioningly, but to his credit didn't say anything, just continued to move forward. Apparently this wasn't his first exposure to magic users so I was glad that we didn't have to explain anything to him.

For a third time I used my own magic in an attempt to locate any of the four people we were looking for. Surprisingly enough I found Mac first, even though he was the furthest away from us. He was fairly healthy with only a few minor injuries and I was able to determine that he was higher in the keep than the others were. Glenn was okay as well and located very close to the next person I found. It took me a minute to realize that it was Eliza because as Siofra had already informed us, she was unconscious and injured very badly.

Joel was the last person I sensed. He was slowly regaining consciousness again and was in a considerable amount of pain that he felt more and more as he woke up. He was on same level as Glenn and Eliza, which would make it easier to locate him, and I could feel that he had many injuries, but not as many as Eliza had. I knew that we would have an easier time of getting him, Glenn and Eliza, but I had no idea how we would get Mac since he was on a higher floor and would no doubt be under stricter guard.

"We need to pick up the pace," I said, worried that if Eliza didn't get immediate attention she might not make it. "Where are we coming into the castle?"

"The Chamber of Torment," Ashrem repeated, making me think that was where Joel was since he was the closest to us.

"How soon will we be there?"

"Five minutes."

"Why do you feel the need to hurry?" Os-tur questioned from the back of the line. "I realize that they are all in danger, but why the sudden urgency?"

I looked back at him to answer. "Two of those that we seek are seriously injured. Mac is higher up in the castle, meaning that he's separate from them. We're going to have to find him."

"We'll have to find them all," he pointed out.

I nodded and continued to move forward. "Well, I can locate them."

"You should listen to your father and follow his wishes," Gwrhyr said in my head before starting to list several times when those who should have listened to their father didn't and came to a bad end. I had the feeling that Siofra was included in the conversation, but I wasn't sure.

"And what are his wishes?" I asked the wolf since Mac hadn't told me what he was planning, but Siofra, so I felt no need to allow him to continue with his crazy idea. Eliza watched him die twice already; I wasn't about to let it happen a third time.

"He wishes you all to leave as he is bartering for everyone's release."

I felt my eyes narrow as I looked down at the wolf again in the torch light. "Is he included in this bartering?" I asked dryly.

"I wouldn't count on it," Siofra said, adding the conversation for the first time and confirming that Gwrhyr had been speaking to her as well.

"He was not specific, but I'm sure..."

"Then why don't you specifically ask him if he's included?" I interrupted, wanting nothing more than to drop this line of conversation. Mac wasn't getting left behind and that was that.

But the wolf didn't get my drift. "Cormacalaster is a bright boy, I'm sure he has a way out."

It was a good thing that I choose not to answer him because at that point a bubble of fluctuating blue light suddenly appeared around us as we continued to move down the tunnel.

"By Ishonmir's beard, what was that?" Os-tur asked as he started to pull his sword from its sheath.

"Just a little bit of protection," Siofra answered as if he should have known what the bubble was.

I glanced behind me just in time to see him push the sword back in its sheath as he muttered, "I hope you're not getting us caught before we even get in."

"I've been using magic all along," she replied without looking at him. "Relax."

Finally Ashrem slowed and motioned for the rest of us to be quiet as we came close to the end of the tunnel that became a wall of stone about thirty feet ahead of us. I sensed the area around us, expanding my perception into the room ahead and the first thing I felt was how aggressive the people who were in the room were. I was also aware of Joel, the current of his being filling me with a calm that I need to keep a level head.

I felt Gwrhyr pop out suddenly as I continued to probe what was happening in the castle above us. There was a thin spot in the stone, one that might indicate the way in that Ashrem had promised, the door.

Siofra edged around me and came to an abrupt halt. "Stop, I've got to do something," she said, reaching behind her for me. "Hold my hand. I have a way to get them out. You need to help me."

I took a tight hold of her hand without hesitation. "We're going to do one at a time," she explained, "starting with Glenn."

I felt her drawing on my magic before I had a chance to argue that Eliza and Joel both needed help more than Glenn, but the amount of energy she was drawing off of me quickly made me realize that we would need Glenn to help with whatever it was she was doing if we were going to get all of them out quick enough.

I heaved a sigh of relief when Glenn materialized next to Siofra and the two embraced. Then my aunt turned to me and asked, "Joel?"

I gave her a 'duh' look that rivaled any she had ever given in her life as I removed my pack long enough to pull out the extra cloak we had brought from the Fates. He looked at me in confusion and I said, "It lets you work magic."

He turned to Siofra. "And you didn't give it to me an hour ago because?"

Siofra rolled her eyes and told him crisply, "Put it on."

I had no idea what we were doing or why we hadn't done it before, but we linked hands again as Os-tur and Ashrem stood guard, waiting for the possibility that we might be discovered. Joel appeared in front of us and started to fall forward, toward the ground. I tried to catch him, but ended up going down with him as well so that he was on his side and I was

on my knees. There was a great deal of blood on his clothing and he was covered with sweat and grim from whatever it was they had been doing to him. I laid my hands on his chest and used Life to try to heal him, but I wasn't focusing properly and it didn't work very well.

Chapter 30 – Getting Them Out

*"I dreamt tomorrow had a prettier face
I dreamt tomorrow would have better things to say"*

Poe

"That Day"

I took a deep breath and attempted to center myself so that I could effectively heal him when Siofra stepped forward to help. "I'll deal with him," I told her, looking down at my hand and noticing for the first time that I had his blood all over my hands. "Get Mac. Get Eliza, she's hurt."

I felt Glenn and Siofra draw more magic and I was aware that they transported Eliza this time as I continued to pull myself together. I glanced over my shoulder as she appeared on the ground and saw that her clothes were bloody like Joel's were, but hers had a lot more blood on them than his did. Siofra bent to heal her as I turned back to Joel.

I could feel the tears of desperation in my eyes as I tried to focus, knowing that I would never be helpful to anyone unless I pulled myself together. Joel moaned a little, not really coherent at the moment and not aware that he was no longer being held by Taeynd's men.

I tried talking to him, trying to reassure him that he was safe and that soon he would be home. Finally I was able to get a reaction out of him and he opened his eyes and looked at me, reaching for my face with a filthy hand and whispering my name.

I smiled down at him and felt a tear slip down my face at the knowledge that he recognized me. "Can you stand?" I asked, hoping that if he could get to his feet I would be able to figure out where exactly he was hurt and be able to focus my magic better. I didn't know a lot about first aid and was relaying totally on what my magic was doing to heal him.

Joel winced uncomfortably and attempted to shift himself to get his arm under him. "I can try," he said and tried to push himself up. I helped him as much as I could and Os-tur came forward to help as well.

Joel was leaning on me heavily, but he got to his feet and the moments it took to get him there gave me the time to get myself enough to properly heal him. A sob caught in my throat when recognition came to his eyes and he was able to breathe easier. "Thank you," he managed, his hand coming up to touch my cheek with the back of his fingers.

I was so relieved to see him okay that I couldn't think of a thing to say so I pulled a skin of water from my pack and gave it to him as I used my cloak to wipe his face free of blood.

"Let's get Mac," I heard Glenn say. "Then take Taeynd with us somewhere other than the castle where we have more room to kill her."

Killing Taeynd wasn't something that I thought was a good idea at the moment and I turned to face the others just as Siofra was attempting to give Eliza, who was now sitting up, water. Eliza was ignoring her, though, as she looked toward me then said, "I don't want water, I want Mac."

"We're getting him," Siofra told her comfortingly.

Siofra and Glenn linked again and soon Mac appeared in front of us, holding a large sword in his hand. Eliza quickly scrambled to her feet and ran to him to check him for injuries while he checked her over as well.

"I fixed her," Siofra told him quietly, causing her brother's gaze to move to her.

"I highly doubt that," he replied dryly, but concern was clearly written in his features as he pulled Eliza close to him for a quiet moment.

Siofra rolled her eyes. "She has no more injuries," she retorted just as dryly.

Mac smiled down at his wife and kissed her forehead. "Oh, okay," he said half heartedly, having eyes only for Eliza as he said without words how much he loved her. "Let's go," he told her, then glancing up at the rest of us.

Eliza put her head on his shoulder briefly. "Yes, please."

With Joel still leaning on me, we moved closer to the rest of the group so that I could link magic with Glenn and Siofra and the next instant we were back in the common room of the Fate's hut. An'daril was once again carding wool, but this time she was sitting by the fireplace, the little girl once again at her side to help her. Cal'lore was weaving at a loom near the window and La'usel was making tea. All of them stopped what they were doing and looked at us in surprise when we poofed unexpectedly into the room.

"We're back," I announced unnecessarily, looking to my left to make sure that Joel was still with us even though I had my arm around his waist tightly.

An'daril sniffed. "We don't have to ask if they worked," she said, meaning the cloaks.

"No, they worked quite well, thank you," Siofra said with a smile as she took Glenn's hand and held it tightly.

Joel was still looking a little pale from his last encounter with Taeynd's men and even though he protested a little I was able to ease him down into a nearby chair as La'usel asked, "Is she dead?"

Siofra shook her head. "No," she informed the women as Mac led Eliza to another chair to have her sit on it.

"I'm fine," she tried to insist.

"Bullshit," he countered as he pointed to the chair. "Sit."

"You sit, too," she insisted, clearly but all too certain that he was fine.

Mac's mouth set firmly, like it always did when she mothered him too much. "You sit first."

"You sit with me," she pressed.

"Sit down!" he boomed, and she did.

Since it was really the first break in the action I turned to Eliza and used Life just to set my mind at ease that she really was okay. I gasped at what I learned.

Joel was half out of his chair before I knew it and had a steadying hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice full of concern.

I nodded, unable to believe what I had just learned as I urged him to sit again. It was Siofra who asked Eliza, "How long have you known you were pregnant?"

She gasped in shock and Mac looked around the room questioningly. "What the hell is going on?" he asked.

When no one answered he looked at the wolf. "Gwrhyr?"

"I'm fine," Eliza insisted, her hand grabbing the hem of Mac's tunic to reassure him.

Mac looked at his sister. "Sprite?"

"She's not dead?" La'usel asked again, taking everyone's attention away from Siofra's sudden disclosure of Eliza's pregnancy and back to the immediate problem at hand.

Siofra glanced around the room and shook her head. "No, she's not." All three women were clearly disappointed in the news, but Siofra was quick to reassure them. "We're working on it. It was more important to get the injured ones out."

"We need to go back and take care of her," I said, not wanting to see her dead, but knowing that she couldn't be left in power either.

"We're not going back," Siofra said. "We're going to bring her to us."

I looked around the crowded room and recommended, "I suggest that we go somewhere a little less populated." I didn't think the women would appreciate an altercation in the living room.

Siofra agreed. "I think we need to get cleaned up and get ready first."

An'daril objected. "Is it a good idea to give her time to prepare for you?"

"We need to get out of the hut," Siofra said.

"Then lets gate somewhere," I suggested, anything to get this over with to get home. I was keeping at least one hand on Joel at all times as everyone talked. I wasn't about to loose him again.

My aunt nodded. "Why not the circle?"

I had to agree that it seemed like a good a place as any. "Let's go?"

"Armor?" Mac asked.

Ashrem came forward. "There is armor here."

The next half an hour was spent in handing out weapons both the weapons that Os-tur had brought to the cottage with us and the extra supply that Ashrem had to spare.

Mac handed Joel an extra sword and I moved to his side to put my hand on his arm. "Are you sure that you're okay?" I asked him. There was no need for him to further injure himself when there were plenty of us to take care of the situation.

Joel smiled and cupped the side of my face for a quick moment. "I'll be fine, don't worry about me. Just let your family take care of Taeynd. Are you okay?"

I nodded and relished in the small contact of his skin against mine. I prayed to the Gods this would all be over soon so that we could go home.

Chapter 31 - Justice

"I wanna kill you, I wanna blow you...away"

Poe

"Angry Johnny"

Glenn made a gate that opened facing the stone circle and the Fates went with us to help in what they could. Ashrem came as well and I figured that it was because he felt that he had to see this whole thing through to the end. Os-tur opted to remain behind with Peorth because she was still feeling too weak to be up. Kenaz stayed behind as well.

"So we're bringing Taeynd here, and we're going to kill her?" I asked, thinking this was one of the worst ideas we could have come up with.

"Are you helping bring her here?" Siofra asked me pointedly.

I hesitated in answering and Mac asked a question of his own. "Where are we bringing her to?"

"I suggest we form a circle and bring her in the center of it," Siofra answered.

"Is there any way we can take away her ability to do magic without killing her?" I asked, hoping they would see reason. "Let's look at this; justice would be to leave her with no ability to control these people like she's been doing. Wouldn't that be the ultimate revenge instead of just killing her?"

"No," Ashrem replied vehemently as he stepped forward.

"You have another stake in this," I told him, hoping the others would listen to me. We couldn't just kill her in cold blood, no matter what she had done. It wasn't right.

"She has to die. If you can't stomach it, turn your back," Ashrem came back a little too harshly.

"We do not have the right," I insisted, looking around at the others for support.

Eliza came to my side and put her hand on my arm. "Corrine, maybe you should take Joel over to that tree over there and sit down," she suggested.

Siofra came closer as well and tried to explain why we couldn't just leave Taeynd alive. "For all the bad she's done with no remorse, for imprisoning people against their will, for killing a small child's parents."

I glanced at Joel, hoping for one last bit of support in this sea of chaos my family insisted upon. But he looked at me with remorse in his eyes as he gently took my hand in his. Without a word, he led me off toward the tree that Eliza had pointed out a minute ago and turned my back to the circle. A sense of regret took over my heart knowing that I had somehow failed, but I knew that there was no way I was going to stop them, so I let him lead the way.

I felt Siofra and Glenn's magic as they brought Taeynd unknowingly into their trap but I refused to look, concentrating on the material of Joel's sleeve as he rested his hand on my shoulder. I heard her scream and closed my eyes tightly and leaned towards Joel. They were horrible screams that sounded like she was being eaten alive from the inside out and I felt his hand touching the back of my head. Then I heard a single gunshot and I tried to pull away from Joel, but he took me in his arms and held my head against his chest comfortably.

"This isn't right," I told him in a whisper.

"There was no other way," he said solemnly. "It had to be done."

We waited a moment then Joel took my hand again and led me back to the circle of stones. I carefully averted my gaze so that I wouldn't see Taeynd's lifeless body and as we approached I heard La'usel tell Siofra that she and her sisters would take care of Kenaz. The knowledge made me feel a little better, knowing that the child could stay in her native world and have a loving environment to grow up in was a comfort. One of the few I would leave here with, the biggest one being that Joel was returning with us.

Siofra gated back to hut to tell Kenaz goodbye and as the opening closed behind her Mac looked at me and said, "Get the medallion out, we're going."

"We're waiting for Siofra," Glenn told him, making me wonder what had happened before we rejoined them to set Mac off. His face was harsh and set in stone like it was when he was irritated.

Eliza moved over to me. "Are you okay?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"You realize it had to be done," she said.

I looked away from her. "Can we not talk about it?"

She looked at Mac like he should take care of this, like he was any better at the emotional or comforting stuff. "What do you want me to do about it?" he asked gruffly.

"Make her feel better," Eliza rebuked, using her thumb to indicate me.

Mac glanced at me and then back to his wife. "About?"

It pissed me off when they did that. "Can we not talk about it, and can we remember that the child is here and she can hear you?" I asked irritably as I went back to where I had left my pack to make sure it was all set to go. I was grateful when Joel followed me and Eliza moved off to find something to get together before they left as well.

I pulled the medallion out from under my shirt and left it on top of my clothes so it would be easier to pull off when the time was right. I turned to Joel. "Are you ready to get out of here?" I asked.

He smiled and moved closer so that I had to tip my head to look at him. "Yes, please," he said in a half relieved, half smoky voice that made Goosebumps spring up in my skin.

"I'd like to wait for my wife," I heard Glenn comment to Mac.

The two looked at each other challengingly. "We can get ready," Mac told him, not really doing a good job of making me think that he would wait for Siofra to return.

I allowed my gaze to move over to where I knew Taeynd's remains were and was half relieved to see that there is no sign of the body. The three Fates must have done something with it while everyone was talking, which was fine by me.

Siofra return with Kenaz for goodbyes and we learned from the women that the medallion could be used again to come back whenever we wanted and that Joel obviously knew the way and could lead us back as well.

The women and the child moved off to one side of the circle with Ashrem and we took our places to perform the ritual that would take us home. The wolf took his place on the center stone with the medallion around his neck and we pushed the correct sequence of stones to activate the spell. I took Joel's hand comfortingly in mine and closed my eyes as the magic stirred around us. When I opened them again we were in the cave.

Chapter 32 – Back Home

*"But now no matter where I go
I always seem to return"*

Poe

"Spanish Doll"

"Where are we?" Joel asked as everyone else checked their possessions and the surroundings of the cave.

"Nashville," I replied as I dropped my bag to a nearby rock to verify the contents.

"It's where we live, well, Glenn and I," Siofra added, and then pointed to me, "She lives in Salem." Then she indicated Mac and Eliza, "And they live on a little island."

Joel turned to Mac. "Little island?"

"Little island," Mac nodded.

Joel smiled as he glanced from Mac to Eliza and back to Mac again. "Picket fence?"

Mac grinned back. "Working on it."

The contents of my bag had once again returned to the modern day items I had packed and with a huge amount of relief I pulled my cell phone out and hit a key to illuminate the faceplate. It was Saturday; the day after we had left to find Joel in the first place, so I was glad to see that time hadn't differed in any way.

Within minutes we were walking out of the caves and to the car. I made sure that I sat next to Joel in the last seat and after we were on our way back to Glenn and Siofra's, I handed him my cell phone. "Is there someone you need to call?" I asked him and he looked at my questioningly.

Joel smiled, but shook his head. "It's been two years," he said quietly, so only I could hear him. "It can wait a little longer."

I nodded, understanding that he probably wanted some privacy when he talked to his family for the first time, so I slipped the phone back in my pocket and contented myself with the fact that he was there next to me.

On the drive back to the house Siofra called my grandparents to tell them we were back safe and sound. After she got off the phone she reported that Ian and Eddie were doing fine and couldn't wait to see us. We were expected for breakfast the next morning to present Joel and to tell them the entire story.

When we got back to the house, Joel asked Glenn to use his phone to call his parents and my uncle showed him into the study so he could have some privacy. Since we all had to be in Ireland in the morning Glenn and Siofra invited everyone to stay at the brownstone and we could all travel over together. I quickly agreed, hoping to get a chance to talk to Joel before he was swallowed by his family.

"We'll stay here," Mac told his sister about the invitation.

"Like our bedroom isn't just a few steps through that door," Eliza commented, making me think that she didn't want to stay for some reason.

"Yes, but the parents are expecting us early Ireland time. We'll stay here, it's just easier." He looked around the group and said, "Plus I want to make sure there are no more repercussions."

"One more night won't hurt anyone," Siofra told Eliza. "Besides, running water, and clean clothes, our clothes..."

"...and coffee... cigarettes," Eliza finished.

Siofra got a mock dreamy look in her eyes. "A real bed, in my own room."

I had to stifle a giggle. Sometimes they were so funny.

Being in the same space with Joel without being able to talk to him, really talk to him was beginning to leave me with a feeling of uneasiness. It was surreal in way to have him here, in our own world and space where I could touch him if I wanted to, but not feeling free to do so without knowing how my family would react or if he really wanted me to. I was having a hard time breathing inside my aunt's spacious brownstone and I think it was because I was feeling the weight of his presence that filled me with warmth and want.

I needed to feel the moonlight on my face. I needed time to try to sort out the jumbled mix of emotions that were running through my head like a storm. Part of me wanted Joel to take me in his arms until I was able to really process the fact that we were both here, together, and okay. But another part of my brain kept reminding me that regardless of the feelings that I had quickly developed for him, Joel was still a stranger to me and maybe now that he was out of Taeynd's clutches he would feel differently towards me. Even taking a shower and changing into fresh clothes hadn't helped to clear my head so I was hoping the night air would do the trick.

I didn't say anything to anyone as I slipped outside into the lovely backyard that Siofra tended with such care. I knew that during the warm months the riot of colors from the various flowers and herbs my aunt kept made a happy space during the day where everyone was welcome to spend happy sunlight hours in conversation or study. By night the space was still welcoming, the shadows held no sense of malice, mostly because of the many wards Glenn maintained to protect the property.

I milled around the outer edge of the yard, where hollyhock and lupine grew thickly next to the fence line. I fingered the delicate blossoms that were now closed until the morning sun beckoned them to open again and I wondered where Joel and I went from here. He was going to the island with Mac and Eliza to live and teach Mac, that much I knew, but what I didn't know was how that would effect the chances of he and I figuring out what was happening between the two of us. I loved my birth parents just as much as I loved my Mom and Dad, but they were so protective of me that I wasn't really looking forward to trying to date someone under their noses if that's what Joel and I decided to do.

Of course they had known Brian, heck for a while Eliza had even rented an apartment from him, but Joel was going to live in the apartment over the garage and would be working really closely with Mac. I didn't want a relationship between the two of us to become a point of conflict between Mac and Joel because for now that relationship was more important until Mac had the skills he needed.

I sighed into the empty stillness of the night, telling myself that there was no use worrying about the future until Joel and I had a chance to actually talk about it. For now I had to be happy with the fact that Mac had the teacher he needed and hopefully, Gaia willing, I would be able to find in him the happiness I had seen mirrored in his eyes when he looked at me. Only time would tell.