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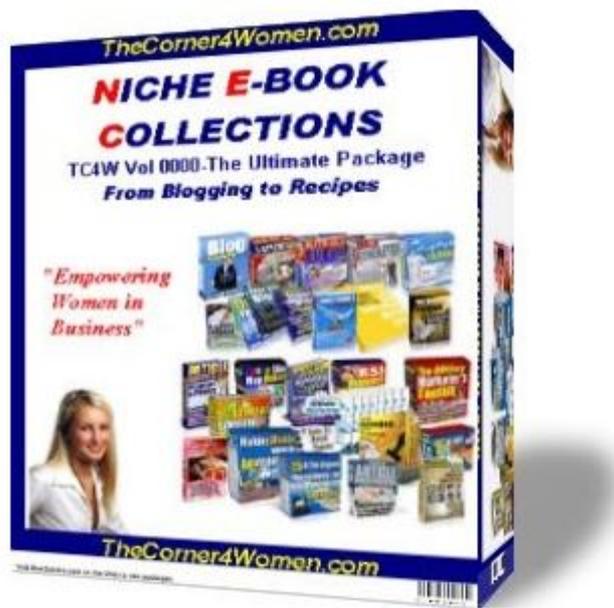
Ravyn Wilde

Creatures

Children of the Dark Mage

Volume 4

of Myth



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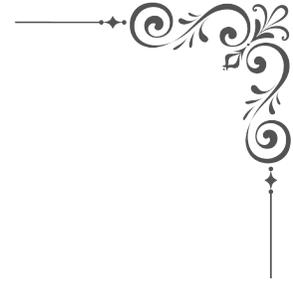
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1. **Midnight's Mystery, Book 7:** A Ravyn Wilde Publication, September 2016
2. **UnDuplicated Magic, Book 8:** A Ravyn Wilde Publication, July 2019
3. **Autumn's Awakening, Book 9:** A Ravyn Wilde Publication, January 2020
4. **Vlad & Veronica, Book 10:** A Ravyn Wilde Publication, December 2020
5. **A Century of Waiting, Book 11:** A Ravyn Wilde Publication, April 2021

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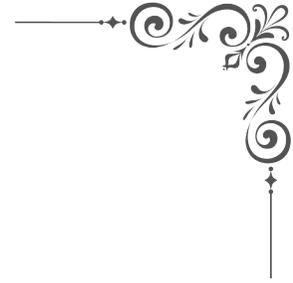
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From The Author



IN THE CREATURES OF Myth series - many characters appear in several books, allowing you to follow old friends. Yet each story stands on its own. The order refers to the timeline of events and builds on the overall understanding of the supernatural world.

This is true... except if you are following the subplot Children of the Dark Mage.

Midnight's Mystery, Book 7, is an alternate starting point for the series and serves as the introduction to the Dark Mage/Demon... Darcy Ifrinn.

Books 8, 9, and 10 have standalone romances and plots with an ending... but the supernatural community is still searching for Darcy and the children he is creating.

In A Century of Waiting, you learn more about Darcy's allies, the Dark Fae.



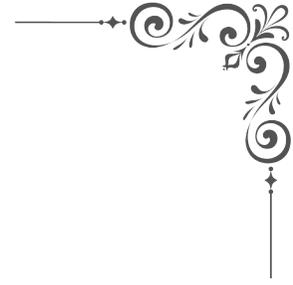
CREATURES OF MYTH & Creatures of Myth Series Overview

What if your fated mate...didn't believe in fate?

Creatures of Myth have existed through the ages—and continue into the future. Some Creatures are born into the supernatural world, and some are created in Magic and pain. There are blood-drinkers, shifters, and Others steeped in myth and lore.

In Creatures of Myth – the women can save themselves and the hero is to die for. The heroine finds a soul mate—even if she isn't looking for one! And the magic is real. Each book offers a happily-ever-after love story and includes a plot with a little thrill of horror and madness. All the books are hot, some are scorching, and very often the heat is magical.

WARNING - These books contain lots of laughter, steamy sex, and plots with a little horror! They deal with mature situations and have adult language.



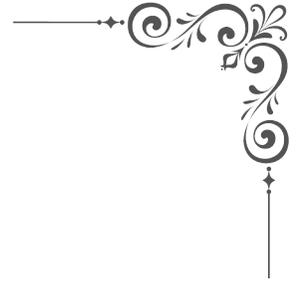
Midnight's Mystery

Creatures of Myth, Book 7



VOCABULARY

- **Hatchling** – first fifty years of young dragon’s life (think human toddler).
- **Fledgling** – fifty years to sexual maturity (human teen to mid-twenties).
- **Dragon sexual maturity** – comes at about two-hundred years.
- **Mature Witches** – past sexual maturity (over 200 years).
- **Dragonkyn** – are family, part of the coven.
- **Dragonkynd** – the species of human and dragon mix. This would be Dragonkyn as a collective unit...just as mankind, humankind.
- **Dragon-familiar** – the dragon half of dragonkynd.
- **Body-bound** – when the dragon is inside the host body.
- **Final Fade** – dragon death by “natural” causes or sickness, usually due to old age, also referred to as Fade.
- **Incantation Magic** – writing spells.
- **Purification ritual** - strong spells (i.e. poison into water).
- **Trinity** – three Dragon Witches that can combine their powers for complicated spells.
- **Separation** – When the Dragon Lords and Witches no longer lived together as family units.
- **Body-markings** - (body-tats) etc. The markings on the Witch or Lord’s body put in place by their dragon. This is done so the markings can be used to see, hear, and “feel” what is happening near their Witch or Lord. Some dragons are paranoid, so they cover their person. Some are more confident in their warrior’s ability to care for themselves and there are fewer markings.
- **Dragon Home** – Home to the Dragon Witches. It exists in a separate dimension but can be accessed from a cave in the Colorado mountains. Runs on Colorado time frame. It exists in a magically created bubble of time and space that is filled with the same flora and fauna seen in the deep woods of North America. It offers plenty of room for the coven of Witches and their dragon-familiars to live and work in harmony. In fact, there is room for at least a dozen more.



FROM THE ANCIENT DRACONIAN Chronicles,

DRAGONS HAVE REIGNED over the skies of this planet since magma cooled and formed the first small piece of land. At first, we were alone in our magnificence. Until one day we noticed strange creatures climbing from the muck and mire to walk on two legs.

At the gods' bidding, we watched closely as they evolved.

In so doing, we discovered a way to use our magic and take on human structure. Learning to mate and mingle with these fertile organisms, we used the budding intelligence of the new beings.

This is known as the time of Becoming.

We called ourselves dragonkynd, a new species formed of both man and dragon. The gene pool evolved, but it was in the First Giving that we found our purpose.

Shortly after our creation, the dragon-covens gathered and were granted unique talents by the interstellar gods. Accepting those talents meant each group vowed a Sacred Oath to oversee either the land, the oceans, or to govern and guide the countless creatures taking shape on the new planet.

The vows made during First Giving will forever regulate our lives.

In fulfilling our promise, we guarantee not only our future but also that of our human charges. The dragon half of our spirit and the magic we wield, separate us from humans, even though we are given the tools to walk undetected among them.

There are rules, and there are secrets.

As dragonkynd—both Witch and Lord are sworn to uphold both.

AT DRAGON HOME...

CLOSING THE SACRED book, Natura sat back and sighed. Since she was one of the first dragonkynd, she was intimately acquainted with how this new species would come to control the powers and knowledge of dragons while walking among the mortals.

Today—in the year 2204—there were no dragons left on Earth. There were a few hundred magically created dragon-shifters—but those beings

didn't have a trace of dragon DNA. Dragon-shifters were just humans who had willingly or unwillingly been magically turned into a shifter.

The only thing left of the original species of dragon was the dragonkynd. They didn't turn into dragons but had a dragon inside of them.

She didn't want to believe it could be possible, but her coven might be the only ones left of this ancient species.

Yet there were billions upon untold billions of humans who needed their protection.

She had been searching for others of her kind for centuries. When she discovered the three hatchlings—almost fifty years ago—she had hoped there were others to discover. But in all this time she hadn't found anyone.

Trying to find more of her species, especially one of the elusive Dragon Lords—was like trying to find one microscopic pin in the Mount Everest-sized haystack that was humanity.

Letting go of this failure, Natura smiled at the remembered vision of Midnight as she had been six centuries ago. This wasn't difficult, as she still looked the same now as she had at two hundred.

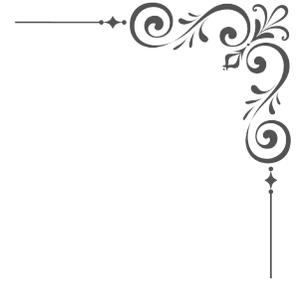
Her eldest daughter was all long, jet-black hair and big russet eyes. Her face was often set in an expression of irritated frustration, as she pondered the questions her mother couldn't answer.

Over the centuries Midnight's once unblemished and very pale skin had become adorned with dozens of all-black body-markings. Midnight's markings were similar to the designs on Natura's body. These symbols were the natural design of a dragon-familiar.

But the unusual pattern reflected on Midnight's body also foretold the responsibilities she would be given someday. The stylized dragon heads, claws, teeth, and wings testified to Midnight's destiny of coven leader. That destiny would come sooner, rather than later.

Midnight was strong, opinionated, and a force you ignored at your own peril.

Wishing things could be different—she allowed a solitary tear to trickle down her cheek as Natura acknowledged the *one glimpse* she was allowed of the future—Midnight would have her sister and the other coven witches by her side when she uncovered the remaining mysteries of her life...but she wouldn't have her mother.



——

*“I come from a long line of strong women.
Hell! That’s an understatement. I can trace my roots
to the time dragons roamed the Earth. In fact—
I’m related to those dragons.”*

~Midnight Draconia

——

HALFWAY AROUND THE world...

——

SOME DAYS MIDNIGHT wished there were fewer rules governing her actions. She couldn’t do *passive assistance* without craving stronger, more permanent measures of control under the best of circumstances—and tonight she had a headache. Rubbing her temple in an attempt to ease the pain, she glared down the sandy hill at the scene below her. Sitting at the apex of the sand dune with her body framed against the clear night sky, she didn’t bother to hide.

The sand, the entire lake’s surface, and the men gathered on the nearby shore were painted in bright moonlight. It was almost as light as day and yet the men were too intent on their mission to notice her. Swearing silently, she realized her headache was only going to get worse.

Idiot humans!

Scowling at the men, she wondered why she was feeling so irritable. Besides the fact that it was hot, and every breath burned her lungs, this operation was just normal day-to-day stuff. At least it was normal for an eight-hundred-year-old Dragon Witch who was sworn to protect the Earth from anyone or anything that could cause irreparable damage. This group of mortals was simply a clone of those she dealt with every day. Full of religious fervor, or quasi-environmental concern, or only the gods knew what kind of justification they found to explain their actions and their stupid, idiotic, self-destructive—downright asinine behavior.

Maybe that’s what bothered her. For weeks now, she had mentally struggled with the realization of how much easier it would be to just annihilate the humans below and go on to the next problem. Instead, she was honor-bound to stop these humans without taking their lives, practically guaranteeing they would do it again within a few short weeks. She wasn’t sure it was worth it.

Wow! Her thoughts shook her. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Her attitude lately really sucked. She needed a vacation. All she had seen of humanity in a very long time were the dregs, the terrorists, the idiots. She needed to go lie on a beach. Somewhere she could watch and enjoy the families and be surrounded by their love and compassion. It might help remind her why she worked so hard to save human lives and this planet. She needed to see some of the good things and not just the bad.

There weren't enough Dragon Witches left in the coven to stop every manmade disaster and help heal the natural ones plaguing Earth. She knew what she did made a difference, but it didn't keep her from worrying about the things she couldn't prevent. Or stop her from wishing she could take more permanent measures with idiots like the ones below.

Gritting her teeth, she conjured up a picture in her mind of the rules page in the ancient text of the Draconian Chronicles and focused on item three—*The Killing of humans is to be done only as a last resort.*

There was no way this incident qualified as a last resort.

While she watched, the human fools started rolling their barrels of chemicals down the moonlit hill toward the large lake. This lake happened to be the major water supply for the surrounding area. Not to mention it fed all the wells and little rivers and eventually dumped into an ocean. And why were these mortals polluting the lake? Because their little peapod brains decided it was an easy way to rid themselves of an invading army.

Did they consider that once they accomplished their goal there would be no drinking water for their families or livestock? *No.* Did it even enter their minds that by adding these chemicals to the water source, most of the flora and fauna used to feed the humans would die as well? *No.* Did they realize by taking this step, they guaranteed no one could live within, oh, say a *hundred miles* of the lake for almost a decade? *Hell, no.*

Morons!

She had seen enough. Using her magic to pull the night's shadows around her like a second skin, she stood and glared at the dozen terrorists below her. There wasn't a female in the bunch. Midnight knew from her own species' history that women usually had more brains. Even human females would realize the far-reaching consequences of poisoning the main water supply.

Males, whether they were human or Dragon Lords, had a history of throwing gasoline on the fire without understanding that it would *always* blow up in their faces. Dragonkynd history certainly proved her point. Look

at what the Dragon Lords had done to Pompeii. One little problem and the male dragons had used enough firepower to leave an entire city buried in ash.

Once the damage was done, the Dragon Lords wondered why they couldn't magically wave their hand and make the consequences of their actions disappear.

Now there was an idea.

She felt a cold wind surround her before she had a chance to start the purification ritual. Tugging at wisps of her long black hair, it whispered over her heated skin. The sigh of magic comfort eased the headache that had plagued her since she stepped on the infernal sand of this third world country. Without turning to acknowledge the source of cool relief, Midnight shifted the cover of darkness to include her friend.

“So, what are the human ants up to this time?” asked a melodic voice.

“Guess.” Midnight's answer was clipped.

Winter's laughter reached only as far as Midnight's ears. “Gee. How many tries do I get? One you say? Well, it would appear the imbeciles are about to shit in their own backyard, so to speak.”

“Give the sexy Dragon Witch a gold star. What are you doing here?” When Winter didn't comment right away, Midnight turned to look at her.

Both witch and warrior, the new arrival was one of her best friends.

Midnight, Winter, and Summer—another Witch from her coven—had formed a Dragon-Trinity. Forming a Trinity was a conscious process. The members chose to tie themselves together, it wasn't automatic. This type of metaphysical bond created a touchstone unit, granting each of them increased strength during a battle, and allowing the threesome to cast more complicated spells. The strongest spells *required* a Trinity. Tonight's activities didn't warrant the company.

So why was Winter here? Midnight looked at her friend carefully, inspecting her for telltale signs of distress or injury. But she could find none.

Dressed in what might be considered a Dragon Witch uniform, Winter's midriff armor was a strapless piece of spell-protected leather that barely covered her breasts and came to a point inches above the navel. Depending on personal preference and the extent of a Witch's dragon-markings, the lower half of their bodies would be covered with black leather pants, shorts—or like Winter's choice tonight—a string thong that *almost* covered her crotch.

Black brows arched above ash-gray eyes and Winter shrugged. “I’m not sure what I’m doing here. I just have a feeling I need to be with you right now.”

Watching her friend study the antics of the terrorists below them, Midnight frowned. Winter rarely had visions or *feelings*. Summer was the caretaker and dreamer in their Trinity, the intuitive one. Capable of kicking-ass with the best of them, Summer had a softer side when she wanted to use it.

Midnight was the thinker, the planner, and very occasionally...the voice of reason.

Winter was the wild woman among the three.

Like Midnight, the woman had jet-black hair falling past her ass. Where Midnight’s hair was stick-straight, Winter’s fell in stunning waves.

She wore ruby chandelier earrings that peeked between the strands, glittering in the moonlight. Something Midnight would never bother with.

On Winter’s right shoulder, there was the deceptive tattoo of a butterfly. It was the only manmade tattoo adorning any member of her coven. The butterfly seemed caught in frantic flight—maybe to escape the life-like body-markings of Winter’s dragon-familiar.

All adult dragonkynd had flesh marked by their dragon-familiars. Their dragons used the body-tattoos to feel, to see, and to scent. Covering the body-markings was not only uncomfortable but also unsafe. The marks radiated heat...and their familiars used the natural tattoos in a variety of ways.

On Winter’s right thigh, a Chinese dragon made up of vivid reds, coal-black, and steel-gray mirrored the colors of her familiar, Raven. The complicated body-markings included wings in flight, open to cover both cheeks of her ass. It was one of the reasons Winter rarely wore more than a thong. The marks were tied to her dragon—so she left them exposed or covered with magic. It was also why Winter stood or paced most of the time, and rarely sat down.

Tonight, Winter had enhanced her outfit with claw gloves adorned with a ruby at the elbow. She also wore thigh-high leather boots that were similarly embedded with rubies. The boots ended where Raven’s dragon wing-mark began.

Definitely gothic slut.

Not that she had any room to critique her friend’s choices. Midnight’s outfit was identical except for the thong. She preferred leather spanks—*very*

brief shorts.

All of Midnight's black body-markings were small. From the size of a quarter to that of a paper dollar. She didn't have any on her face, or her ass...but they covered almost everything else.

Both women had knives tucked into boots and gloves and carried a short-sword in a sheath on their left thigh. A Dragon Witch never went anywhere without being well-armed.

"So, have we decided what we're going to do with the mortals? I think they need a little encouragement to re-think the direction their lives have taken," Winter's voice cut through her musings.

"Oh, I don't know. How about a sign from God or Allah or whatever these folks believe in?" Midnight queried.

Grinning evilly, Winter did a very bad impression of a nineteen eighty's valley girl. "Like. You mean we can, like," Pausing, she flipped her hair in a flirty move guaranteed to make Midnight laugh. Winter was so *not* the girly type. "You know? Let the dragons out to play. Bitchin!"

"Yeah, we can let the dragons out to play. Do you want to do the Arabic equivalent to 'Hey, I'm the Supreme Being and I'm pissed?' Or do I get the honors?" Looking up at the brilliant stars in the sky, Midnight watched wispy clouds stretch fingers toward the moon. The scene below was about to get a lot darker.

Winter wrinkled her nose. "You can make your voice go lower and these yahoos won't take a female seriously. Plus, your Arabic is better. So, go for it. I'll just—"

Midnight heard Winter mumbling a purification ritual, effectively altering the physical makeup of the chemicals in the barrels. Together they waited until they heard male voices rise in alarm. Instead of the caustic smell of poison searing the nostrils of the men when they dumped the contents into the lake, there was only the clear, fresh scent of water.

Luscious? Using the mental path to her dragon-familiar, Midnight called her dragon out to take part in tonight's activities.

Yes, my Darkness.

Whether body-bound or flying free, Luscious was always a part of her. Communication between host and dragon-familiar was a simple matter of thought. *Want to come out and scare some irritating humans?*

Oh! I love doing that!

Midnight smiled at the enthusiasm in her dragon's mental voice. *Yes, I know. Raven will be out to play with you as well.*

Oh, goody. Can we eat them?

Before Midnight could answer this last question, she felt her body-markings throb. Rubbing over her heart, the small pain signified the dragon's departure from her body, warning her seconds before Luscious appeared a few inches in front of her nose—hovering in front of her.

In the first seconds after being released from their host's body, a dragon-familiar manifested the size of a small dog—a dog with a two-foot tail and a wingspan of about four feet. Reaching out to stroke Lushy's smooth, russet underbelly, Midnight knew the same red-brown color of the dragon's tummy gleamed in her own eyes. With the dragon's upper body covered in iridescent black scales, under her wings the leathery skin was bright orange. Her dragon-familiar had two little horns on the top of her head and a row of sharp spines running along the backbone to the tip of her tail.

“Hey, Lush. No eating humans,” Midnight said aloud.

Not nice, spoiling my fun. How about I just capture one of those men thingy's in my claws and bring him back for you to play with? It's been a looong time since you've done that sex dance. I think you are missing it. The feminine purr reverberated in Midnight's head.

Great. Luscious wanted something Midnight didn't have the time or inclination to give her. “I'm not missing it *that* much. Don't burn them, don't bring me one...don't eat the humans. Just scare them. Promise?”

Promise. Hate it. But promise. You're no fun anymore, 'cause I used to get to eat them sometimes. I think it's 'cause you haven't been doing that bumpy-grindy thing. Maybe I could...

“Luscious!” Midnight said in warning. Glancing behind her, she saw Raven was ready to go.

Winter's dragon was the same species as Luscious, but with entirely different markings. The underside of Raven's wings and belly were gunmetal gray. Deep ebony covered the rest of her body, with a vivid red stripe outlining the bones on the topside of her wings.

Winter and Midnight stood back while the two dragons expanded in size, growing large enough to make a definite impression. With the ability to shift their bodies within the range of a mouse to a two-story building—tonight the dragons settled on house size.

Breathing fire, the two beasts swooped into the darkening sky. Midnight knew they were eager to play their favorite game of *chase the terrorist*. For a moment, she watched them. The sight of dragons soaring into the sky with wings spread wide never failed to thrill her. Raven was a serious, matronly dragon...she always kept Lushy under control.

Using a spell-enhanced voice, Midnight warned the men of plague and pestilence if they ever tried a stunt similar to this night's festivities. Smirking at the sounds of fright coming from below, she enjoyed watching the dragons blow fire and work the evil crowd into a frenzy of panic. She let the two dragons play for a bit, knowing they derived more pleasure from making the humans scream than they did hunting deer and cattle at home.

Once the level of fear escalated to a point where it would seep into the mortals' minds, she and Winter combined their voices and sang a dampening chant to cloud human memories of tonight's events. The crowd would remember the terror of promised retribution—but not what caused their fear. Wiping the mortals' memories of dragons was one of the few dragon-laws Midnight agreed with.

Gods she loved this part of her job!

Before they could wrap it up for the evening, Midnight's skin began to crawl and she felt a sudden hollowness inside her soul.

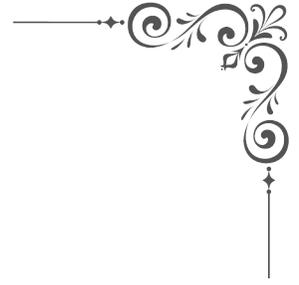
"Natura!" she screamed, falling to her knees under the weight of sudden sorrow.

"Midnight! What's wrong?" Winter moved quickly to her side and wrapped comforting arms around Midnight's shaking body.

Tears fell unchecked as intense pain clouded Midnight's mind and tore through her body. A terrible weight settled on her chest. Focused on internal warnings, she still heard Winter call out to Raven and Luscious, instructing them to return to their bodies. Feeling Lushy settle under her heart, Midnight rested her head against her friend's shoulder and sobbed. "Natura has begun The Fade and is passing fast."

"Go, hon. I'll finish here and be right behind you."

Lifting her head, Midnight gave her friend a small nod...and vanished from sight.



——

*Humans are nothing more than cannon fodder,
use them only to meet your needs.
A few women to slake your lust until you find your mate,
and the men to see to your estates.
Don't get involved in their lives or you will live to regret it.*

~From the diary of Dahvid Dracovin

——

IN EUROPE...SOMEWHERE...

——

MATEI DRACOVIN SAT up in bed, pushed the mass of black hair out of his eyes, and looked derisively at the pile of nude bodies.

Most of the women were asleep. But a couple of them looked his way, hoping for a repeat of last night.

He wasn't interested. But then, he hadn't really been interested last night.

Every few months his body demanded sexual release. He fought it for as long as he could, knowing that eventually, he would have to give in. When that happened, he would go to one of the large and disgustingly *human* cities—to get his rocks off.

He grinned. That saying was from an earlier decade. But he liked it. It signified the purely physical release that having sex with humans gave him. He didn't really like humans. In fact, he hated most of them.

When he could no longer fight the need for sex, he went out to the bars and used his considerable charm and good looks to collect a handful of women and take them to a hotel. He always booked a room with two queen beds and pushed them together to make a massive playground.

Then he would spend the next five or six hours taking them all in multiple positions, over and over again. His stamina and appetite insured the women were satisfied. And normally his body would leave him alone for a couple of months.

For Matei, there was no satisfaction. Sex with humans gave him nothing beyond a physical release.

He wanted a mate. He wanted what his father promised him—a Dragon Witch that would see to his every need. A dragonkynd female that would satisfy every fantasy and spend all her time ensuring he was happy. His father had such a mate. For a time.

Both his mother and father had Faded at an early age for the dragonkynd species. The couple mated when they were barely three-hundred years old, had children over the next several hundred years, and died before their six-hundredth birthdays. Even though the average lifespan for a dragonkynd was several thousand years.

Matei had been tasked with the upbringing and training of his younger siblings. And he had to do this alone. He was two-hundred and fifty when his parents Faded. Barely an adult dragonkynd. Now he was eight-hundred and fifty years old.

In all the years between his parents' deaths and now, he never found another Dragon Lord or Witch that wasn't his family.

There was no one to answer his questions or guide him in any way.

He used the extensive collection of diaries that his father left behind, to train his siblings. Thankfully the Dragon Lord cataloged every thought, every piece of remembered history of the dragonkynd, every rule and promise that he wanted to be passed down to his sons.

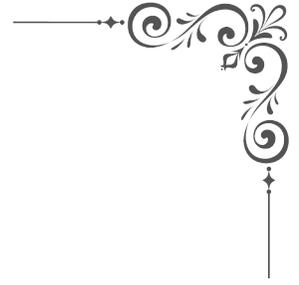
Even with all this written guidance, somehow Matei had failed his father. His siblings were a mess, and he couldn't find the Dragon Witch of his dreams.

He looked across the sea of human female bodies and shuddered.

He wanted someone to talk to that wasn't related to him, he wanted a woman for his own, and someday soon...he wanted dragon-babies for his legacy.

Something needed to be done before he went stark raving mad. Since he was the Dragon Lord in charge of his Dragonkyn—his family-coven—that something had to come from him.

He just wished he knew what the dragon-hell he was supposed to do!



——

*The human ritual of ashes to ashes,
dust to dust—is one of the few things dragons
understand about these senseless creatures. The Fade releases a
dragon’s body to ash, and the dragon inside releases its magic.
Both serve to replenish the Earth.
~Natura Draconia*

——

AT DRAGON HOME...

——

HESITATING IN THE HALL, Midnight bent to rest her forehead on the door of her mother’s room. Two days ago, she had come home from the desert to find her mother Fading. She sat by Natura’s bed, waiting until she couldn’t take any more. She had wanted just ten minutes of fresh air and sunshine. Ten minutes to get some sort of grip on her mother’s passing.

Well. She’d had her ten minutes.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to prepare herself for what was waiting for her inside. Dragon Witches didn’t die, their bodies simply dissolved until they *faded* from sight. Their dragon-essence would help replenish Earth’s inherent magic, as their minds become part of a collective consciousness the new coven leader could call upon whenever she needed guidance.

Midnight wasn’t sure this difference between true death and a witch’s Final Fade made Natura’s passing easier. Her mother would still be gone, unable to wrap reassuring arms around her daughters, or raise a dark eyebrow in gentle chastisement when one of the coven members needed direction.

How will I measure up? I have no idea what to do next or how to go about leading our small coven without my mother’s assistance. Fighting back tears, she quickly straightened her spine and pushed open the chamber door.

Looking sadly around at the walls that were painted a beautiful blue to subtly provide a peaceful retreat, she acknowledged that color therapy wasn’t making a dent in her anguish. Turning her gaze from the comfortable seating area by the fire, she refused to dwell on memories of Natura gathering Dawn and Midnight in the early morning hours for a little family time. It hurt too much.

Instead, her eyes focused on the antique bed below the largest window. Beyond the sheer bed curtains, Midnight could feel her mother’s weakening

spirit, sheltered within a body already incapable of speech.

The mature members of her coven stood solemnly around the bed, gathered to lend their strength for anything Midnight might need. Seeing Dawn standing between Autumn and Spring, she hoped the bonds of her sister's Dragon-Trinity would sustain the younger woman both emotionally and physically during the coming ordeal.

Just as Summer and Winter would make sure Midnight could call on the comfort of their Trinity.

Moving to the bed, Midnight parted the light draperies and lovingly looked in on her mother's frail body. Wanting to climb the steps and lie down beside Natura, to wail and weep with grief and pain at the coming separation. Instead, she felt the mantle of leadership fall on her shoulders. No matter how strong a warrior she was or how practiced a witch—she had never coveted leadership of the small group.

Winter placed her hand on Midnight's arm as if sensing her thoughts.

Midnight couldn't help but be filled with regrets. After all the centuries with her mother, she would miss her horribly. And she couldn't help but worry about all the things she hadn't learned. There were some subjects Natura wouldn't share with the coven and she guarded a few secrets of their race—even from her children.

Midnight hated secrets. Hated mysteries. She remembered a conversation with Natura when Midnight was still very young.

Mother? How will I know when I've found my dragon-mate and why do you think I want one?

These are some of the mysteries I am forbidden to share with you, my child. I can only assure you that your dragon will lead you to find the answers you seek. Time will help you as well. And that was the end of the discussion. Natura wouldn't say another word.

While Midnight had been irritated with the mysteries of their life, it really hadn't seemed *that* important to have all the answers. After all, Natura was there to guide them. Midnight was sure her mother would reveal the answers when it was time. Natura garnered both love and respect from her eldest child, so ancestral puzzles weren't pursued...and softly voiced suggestions to drop the subject were followed implicitly. There was no doubt in her mind that Natura knew what was best for all of them.

Now it was too late to cajole her mother into illuminating some of the mysteries of the past, including the obscure riddles surrounding the Dragon

Lords. Midnight might never know why Natura had kept silent. She could only hope these unanswered questions wouldn't come back to haunt her.

No one knew Natura's age. If Midnight had to guess, she would say her mother was well over two thousand years old. There was no cure for The Fade, not when it settled over a Dragon Witch after a long life filled with the use of magic. When she really looked at her mother, she saw the lines of age and frailty and understood there would be no miracle this night.

"Natura's link to her dragon-familiar, Temptation, has already faded, Midnight." Winter's soothing voice brought her attention to the once vibrant tattoos adorning Natura's body. The colors and markings connecting her mother to Tempy were now pale caricatures of the once magnificent being. Winter meant to warn her that time was growing short. In the ten minutes she was gone, her mother had Faded a great deal.

"Temptation chose to stay body-bound to mother. I wanted to keep the dragon-familiar with us, but Tempy is determined to Fade with mother." Dawn's voice cracked at this pronouncement.

"I know, sis." She had to swallow around a lump in her throat, knowing Temptation did this for Midnight. Tempy knew that Midnight's dragon would gain both power and wisdom from the final transference if she faded with the coven leader.

"Her hair has already lost color, Midnight." Dawn sobbed.

And Midnight wanted to breakdown and cry with her. The sight of her mother lying motionless, instead of the frantic tornado of activity she'd always been...hurt. Brushing a blonde strand of hair away from Dawn's pale blue eyes, Midnight agreed. "It hurts, Dawn. We need to prepare ourselves. It won't be long before she's ready to be taken by the wind." It was hard to be strong for her sister and Midnight realized drawing this out wouldn't help either of them.

It was time.

A quick glance around the room told her everything was ready. The windows were open, the light breeze causing Natura's lace curtains to dance. She couldn't help but wince at the happy sight. There was no reason for the wind to celebrate this night.

Opening her senses, she knew the ascension spell had been cast. A deep breath brought the smell of juniper and sage. The protective candles were glowing brightly and scented smoke filled the chamber, ready to mingle with her mother's released soul and protect its journey.

Natura was waiting for Midnight to finish this.

For one final moment, the little girl in her wanted to turn around and run from the chamber. If she did, would her mother continue to survive? Could it buy them time to find some way to reverse the Final Fade?

Unfortunately, the eight-hundred-year-old woman inside her body knew better. Nothing would stop this. If she hesitated any longer she was only courting disaster of another kind.

Right now, Natura was using the last of her strength, waiting to transfer all knowledge and memories of the *Draconigena Naturalis* coven to the new leader. It would go to Midnight if the united consciousness of Faded dragons from their coven judged her worthy of that leadership.

If she didn't take her mother's hand before the wind swept the fading body away—the knowledge would be lost. And hesitation, while noble...might cost them everything.

With a heavy heart, Midnight knelt beside the bed and gently bent to kiss her mother's forehead before she placed her hand around Natura's cold fingers. Closing her eyes, she felt the hot jolt of magic as a psychic bond formed between them.

Immediately she sensed the acceptance of the waiting souls and with their approval, she felt every cell in her body open and prepare to be imprinted with untold centuries of coven history.

Midnight expected a physical shock. She was prepared for the lightning heat from the charge of connecting and absorbing such a huge amount of information in the blink of an eye. Rocking her with the bite of concentrated magic, energy sizzled along her skin. Vaguely aware of her sister and the other members of her coven crying out in dismay, she was unable to focus on what upset them.

Waves of throbbing agony rushed through her, leaving marks on her soul.

She was unprepared for the emotional bombardment. It hurt to *see* Dracos flying free as they had many thousands of years ago, and know the majestic creatures would never again grace Earth's atmosphere. Not like this.

Both the emotional and physical pain intensified, causing Midnight to shift against the bed. She wouldn't let go, couldn't release her mother's hand because she knew that single thread was the only thing keeping her mother tethered to this space. The magic burned through her mind and body and left Midnight with the weight of Earth's uncertain future.

Tears formed in her eyes as she felt Natura take her last breath, leaving Midnight without a mother's love and in charge of the coven's fate. The loop of projected visions finally overwhelmed Midnight, causing her mind to shut down and her hand to relax.



OPENING HER EYES, MIDNIGHT stared at the light blue ceiling and realized she was lying in her own bed. Smelling the hint of sandalwood, bay leaves, and amber, she knew Dawn had added incense to the small brazier in her room. This particular blend of herbs was used to bestow peace of mind.

Midnight certainly wouldn't argue her need for an altered state of consciousness.

Struggling against the pain, she tried to sit up. Immediately she was assisted with a set of hands supporting either side of her body. Slowly she turned to meet the dark expressions of concern from both Winter and Summer.

"How are you feeling?" Summer asked quietly. Concern darkened her light brown eyes.

It took Midnight a few seconds to gather her thoughts. *How am I feeling?*

Ugh, not very good. "Headache, thirsty." It seemed one-word answers were all she was capable of at the moment. Cold and bone-tired, she watched Summer toss the curtain of sun-kissed, long brown hair over her shoulder as she fixed something to drink. Some potion her sister had left for her no doubt.

Marshaling her energy, she tried once more to speak. This time she managed to complete a sentence. "Summer, I'm cold. Would you...?"

"Not a problem, Midnight. You know your blood is thin from spending so much time in the hot deserts the last few years. This cold mountain fortress will take some getting used to."

It was a subtle reminder that Midnight wouldn't be traveling as much as she had been. Now that she was a coven leader, there were responsibilities. Feeling the warm breeze slide across her body, she sighed in gratitude and tried to focus on her friend.

No matter how cold the castle seemed, Summer never bothered to wear a cape because she created her own warmth wherever she went. Dressed in black torso armor, most of her chest and all her legs and arms were bare. Usually, her hands were covered past the elbows in black leather gloves tipped with fighting claws, but tonight her hands were bare, revealing long

delicate fingers with black painted nails. “Here, drink this. It’s Dawn’s blend of chamomile tea, she left it for your nerves,” Summer stated frankly.

Trying very hard not to think, Midnight concentrated on her friend. Both legs, over fifty percent of Summer’s arms, and most of one breast were covered in dragon-markings depicting rust, gray, and black fighting dragons. Those colors paralleled the ones on Summer’s dragon-familiar, Ruby. The little dragon rested on her shoulder, her gray and black wings folded in sleep, hiding her rust underbelly.

Summer was rarely at Dragon Home. Her area of expertise focused on the rain forests of the world, which were constantly under attack. They were all overworked, but Summer’s load was almost double that of the rest of the Witches.

Taking a long sip of the hot beverage, Midnight relaxed into the pillows and closed her eyes for just a second. It was a mistake. The images she’d seen during the Transference danced behind her eyelids, continuing to torment her with the collective memories of Faded Dragon Witches as they shared small bits and pieces of secrets.

She wanted it to stop.

It was pure anguish to see something in her mind she would never have in real life. The visions were stuck, forever looping in the time before the Separation. She saw entire family groups playing on the lawn, their dragons flying overhead. Midnight knew this had to be long before the split between Lords and Witches isolated the sexes. Tears filled her eyes when she realized that before the Separation, males and females had lived as one. She had assumed they’d always been separate. Never living in family groups as humans did. She’d been wrong.

The years had not been good to dragonkynd.

“Midnight, honey don’t keep it all in. You know Summer and I are here to help you bear the burden. Come on. Fight whatever’s going on in that brain of yours and come back to us,” Winter cajoled.

Sighing heavily, Midnight realized Winter was right. If she didn’t fight this constant barrage of history she would become trapped in the past—instead of working toward the future.

I get the point already, she thought. And couldn’t have been more shocked when the parade of scenes stopped.

Opening her eyes, this time she met Winter’s gray gaze and nodded.

“What happened, Midnight?” Winter asked.

“You mean why did I blackout?”

“Well. That I suppose. But I guess I’m really asking about the screeching cries of pain and your hair.”

Midnight frowned. She didn’t remember screaming. “What’s wrong with my hair?” Not waiting for their answer, she reached back and pulled a long section in front of her eyes.

And shrieked.

Midnight didn’t miss the look that passed between her friends. Before they could protest, she scrambled off the bed and stumbled on rubbery legs across the room to the full-length mirror.

“*Holy shit!*” Midnight said as she stopped abruptly and stared at her reflection. She couldn’t believe her pitch-black hair had turned completely white from the middle of her scalp—forward. Taking a brush from the dresser beside the mirror, she quickly smoothed her tangled hair down into some semblance of order. Turning a little to one side and then the other, she tried to see the back of her head.

“The back is still solid black.” Summer held up a hand mirror so Midnight could look behind.

“It looks like someone dipped the front half of your head in bleach. Really strong bleach. Your hair isn’t blonde, it’s pure white and there is a perfect line separating black from white, that extends from ear-to-ear.” Winter frowned.

“What happened?” Summer asked softly.

Sighing, Midnight met Summer’s concerned gaze in the mirror. “The knowledge transfer from Natura, combined with the emotional turmoil of all the faded Witches and overloaded my brain. I think the collective consciousness of those Witches tried to make a point, and my guess is thousands of years of history mixed with extremely frantic emotions would leach the color out of anything. I’m probably lucky I’m left with functioning brain cells.”

Taking another glance at herself in the mirror, she wrinkled her nose. She was still wearing the same warrior leathers from two days ago, from when she was called back home by the knowledge that Natura had little time left.

Her leather shorts and a simple front-lace leather vest provided protection from both the elements and her enemies. The skimpy, all-black garments didn’t look like they would protect much of her body, but the magic shielding was strong.

However, they were more than a little dirty.

With her dark eyebrows arched over russet-colored eyes, she noticed that purple bruises marred the skin under her bottom eyelashes, accentuating her pale oval face—especially since the hair framing her features had been shocked to a white the color of new snow. Besides a light coating of red dust, her arms and legs were covered in more of the small-stylized black dragon-markings of her familiar than she had before the Transference.

Midnight was mentally informed that the added body-markings signified an increase in Lushy's knowledge. She stilled at the unfamiliar mental voice, then sighed. The information came from what was going to be the ever-present collective consciousness of past coven members. Great. From now on she not only had her dragon-familiar chattering in her head—but the Transference gifted her with the voices of a few hundred Faded Witches. She was going to lose her mind.

She couldn't deal with this now. "I'm going to shower and put on a robe. Then I'll sit down and tell you some of what I learned during the transfer. Give me a minute?"

After Winter and Summer nodded their understanding, Midnight strode into her bathing chamber while her friends settled into chairs around the empty fireplace. Midnight knew Summer would have a fire lit and burning brightly by the time she returned. Just as she knew Winter would be sitting in the chair farthest from the flames, in a pocket of cool air she created. In this time of upheaval, it was comforting to realize some things would never change.

As she walked into the bathroom she glanced longingly at the large rock soaking-tub. Carved from the side of the mountain the castle stood on, this tub was the reason Midnight had chosen her chambers. Fed from an underground hot spring, the water was rich with a wealth of minerals that assisted healing. Since her body felt as if she were the loser in a very vicious fight, she could use its soothing properties.

If she got in that tub she wouldn't get out for several hours.

Midnight sighed and headed to her more modern shower. She had added the shower to the room a few years ago. It wasn't as if the full-body jets were a hardship.

As she showered, she searched internally. Her dragon-familiar rested beneath her heart, and Midnight rubbed that area as if petting the creature.

Luscious always chose this spot inside Midnight when she was body-bound. *Luscious?* The mental path between them was strong and clear. Comforting.

I am with you always, my Darkness. You will make it through this time by focusing on one step at a time. The dragon's response was heavily punctuated with fatigue. Most of the time Lushy preferred a dragon form of baby talk. But lately, when she gave advice, she tried to sound like an adult. Maybe there was hope yet.

Midnight stroked the tip of a finger just beneath her left breast, rubbing softly over what appeared to be the black tattoo of a dragon's head. Luscious had kept watch over Midnight during her vigil of the last few nights and the dragon was tired, so she remained bound to Midnight's body.

Scratching over the marking of tattooed ears, Midnight smiled. *Thank you, Luscious. I needed the reminder that I am not alone.*

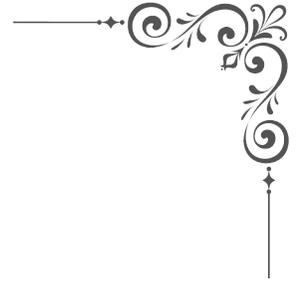
The body-markings on all Dragon Witches were more than just symbolic representations of their dragons. Etched into their skin from the inside out as their dragons hatched and matured, the tattoo-like artwork also served as a metaphysical tie to their dragons. Lushy could feel her stroke the symbols and be comforted. Just as the dragon could cause the marks to heat, or throb...as a silent warning system if their voice couldn't be used.

She snorted. Unfortunately, Lushy never lost her voice.

She felt the deep rumbling purr beneath her skin.

Never alone, Darkness, Luscious' voice was a bare whisper of sound.

Midnight smiled as she threw on a robe and walked back into her sitting room.



——

*A Dragon-Witch belongs at home,
taking care of her family—
providing for the continuation of our species.
Gone are the days when a Dragon Lord
had the luxury of allowing the women
to use their magic for the
protection of useless mortals.*

~From the diary of Dahvid Dracovin

——

IN ROMANIA...

——

MATEI DRACOVIN considered his preparations and once again ran the words of the spell through his mind. Writing incantation magic was not his strongest ability. Unfortunately, the gods gave you what you asked for, not what you *thought* you requested.

Often Matei would try a spell he created, only to find the result had nothing to do with the outcome he wanted. His strongest powers were in shaping the weather or communicating with any living creature—not in creating magic.

Neither talent would help him with what he needed to do this night.

Normally he used spells from the family grimoire, preferring to apply magic to incantations where someone else had worked out the kinks. But he had searched every page of the old tome and hadn't found anything to accomplish his goal. So, he took a chance and composed a new incantation.

Gods help him.

Dragging one hand through tangled black hair, he tried to figure out if he missed anything. If one of his brothers were here, he would have them check his wording.

Forget that, if either of his brothers were here, dealing with their fate instead of trying their best to ignore the demise of their species, Matei wouldn't try to use incantation magic to solve their problems.

He fought to strangle the growing irritation he felt with his siblings.

His brother Nicholae had been hibernating for several years. Intending to wake up every other decade, he planned to just pop his head out and see if his older brother managed to find a Dragon Witch.

Nicholae's faith in him was very misplaced. Matei realized he resented his brother's ability to shrug off the escalating problem and place it solely on his shoulders.

On the other hand, Yousef's plan was worse. He just planned to get himself killed. His youngest brother had become a magical sleuth...tracking reports of black magic and evil demons through a crazy network of otherworldly creatures. At three hundred and fifty-years-old, Yousef hadn't had time to test the full limits of his powers. If he didn't plan to die, why else would he poke a stick at things better left alone?

While Matei was irritated with Nicholae, Yousef's actions chilled him to the bone. His father would come back and haunt Matei if he let his little brother die.

That brother's apparent death wish inspired Matei to try and create a spell to track the presence of Dragon Witches.

Once again, he looked at his list. Clear wording specified he searched for a mate and wanted the ability to see a flame of color inside his mind if a Dragon Witch was within a single country's distance of where he stood.

He didn't want his internal vision overwhelmed with hundreds of Dragon Witches, either on Earth or inhabiting other planets.

His dragon-familiar snorted. *You aren't sure there are any Dragon Witches left in this world, why are you worried about overwhelming your vision?*

Because I'm being careful, he snarled back. Matei figured if he limited the scope of his mental sight to one country within the world he knew...he could track any Witches he found, at his leisure.

Aren't you being overly optimistic? His dragon-familiar delighted in goading him.

Probably, but I think this is worth a try. If it works, we won't have to be within scent range to know a Dragon Witch is near. We can travel about the world and check out each country before we move on to the next, Matei calmly explained. He'd been over his plan a million times with his dragon.

If we find one, we'll still need to use scent to determine if the Dragon Witch can be our mate.

Understood. Matei would go sniff the female dragonkynd to see if she was his. If she wasn't, he would *convince* her to visit, so his brothers could do the same.

Convince? Are you going to use the magic-suppression collar I created to convince them to stay? His dragon was being irritating.

He ignored the dragon's nagging as he checked the wording of the spell again. He was tempted to make specific references about what he wanted in a mate.

He wanted someone skilled in the healing arts, a gentle, submissive soul. In some ways, a woman very much like his mother. Since he wasn't interested in her magical heritage or skills, he wanted a woman that would be satisfied to stay home and see to his every need, while breeding the children needed to ensure their race.

You only create more ways for the spell to go wrong.

His dragon was right. Better to keep things simple.

Matei blocked any further communication with his familiar. It was time to either move forward or give up.

As Matei was the true patriarch of his family, giving up was not an option. Taking a deep breath, he said a silent prayer to all gods and goddesses that this would work. So much was riding on his ability to find a female to mate with. His family, the continuation of dragonkynd—Matei stopped caring what happened to humans long ago. Now his singular goal was to ensure his family's survival.

Stepping into the protective circle that was permanently embedded within the castle floor, he lit the candles he chose to aid this incantation—red for passion and white for purity of thought. Raising his hands toward the sky, he clearly enunciated the words of the spell:

*Here and now my intention is set,
Mate to find and all needs met.
Shining bright in colors clear,
Dragon Witch both far and near.
Within a country, for me to see,
The sacred flame makes known to me.
Power centered, energies as one,
Elements are summoned and magic's begun.
By my hand, this spell I have wrought.
Seeking a future, there is no plot.
Love and laughter never come free.
Passion and fire—its own destiny.
As I will, so dragons make be.*

——
MATEI KEPT HIS EYES closed. Nothing.

When he finally opened them, he noticed a gray dot in the far corner of his left eye. The small point of light represented the hope that his spell worked.

——
(SKIPPING AHEAD A FEW weeks...)

At Dragon Home...

Midnight?

Startled awake by Jade's tentative voice in her head, Midnight stretched for a moment and tried to get her thoughts together before responding. Her three fledglings had finally convinced her they could handle themselves on a summer trip to Europe. Before she agreed, she had insisted on updates about their welfare and location every couple of days.

The girls had been gone about a month and stuck to their bargain. She heard from Jade yesterday and wasn't expecting another check-in this soon. Up to this point, Jade was careful to calculate the time difference between Europe and North America so she wouldn't disturb Midnight's rest. Something had to be wrong.

Standing, she started throwing on clothes. She couldn't put her hands on her leather pants, so she settled for the thong she was wearing and her midriff armor. *I'm here, Jade. What's wrong?*

Do you want the good news first, or the bad?

Midnight could sense laughter in Jade's voice, so that meant no one was hurt. *You know, I've always hated conversations that started with that question. But I'll play. Give me the good news first.*

Well, my little Tulip spoke today. But before you get excited about my dragon talking—we seem to have found a Dragon Lord. Or, I guess more to the point, he found us. Tulip spoke when she saw him...she distinctly said, "He's not ours." And then went back to her incessant humming of Eensy Weensy Spider.

Jade wouldn't have shocked her more if she said the fledglings somehow landed on the moon. Not at what Jade's baby dragon said, that was typical for newly awakened dragons...but a Dragon Lord?

For several seconds, there was nothing but dead silence in her mind.

Dragon Lord? You found a...where are you? she demanded.

Well, you see that is the bad news. We're in Romania. In the Dragon Lord's castle, in a little town called Hunedoara. And he won't let us go.

With that pronouncement, Midnight stood to her full height and narrowed her eyes in lethal concentration. Very softly and succinctly she asked, *What do you mean he won't let you go?*

She could feel Jade's amusement and sense of anticipation when she started to explain. *Without going into details about how we met him, he invited us to lunch. We didn't know he was a Dragon Lord, but he knew about us. A few minutes after we got to his castle, he told us he knew that we're fledglings. Then he informed us that he is prepared to make the supreme sacrifice, and look after us for the rest of all time. He turned deaf when we told him we didn't need a dragon-sitter. Seems he has a couple of brothers as well. As he explained it, his plan is to train us to become proper dragon-mates...whatever the hell he means by that. And then when we "mature" he and his brothers will somehow figure out if they can mate with us. Isn't that gross?*

Midnight growled, *Did you tell him you belonged to a coven and are already under my protection?*

Nah. We thought it would make a bigger impression if you told him. With that, Jade mentally giggled.

Oh, yeah. I'll make an impression all right. Hold on.

By this time, Midnight had dressed in her fighting leathers and gathered up just about every blade she had. Leaving her room, she strode down the long hall and loudly beat on Winter's bedroom door. "Winter. Are you in here?"

"Sleeping. Go away."

Midnight rolled her eyes. Winter loved to fight. There was no way she would sleep through this. "Okay, I just thought you'd like to help rescue the fledglings from a Dragon Lord that wants to keep them and train—"

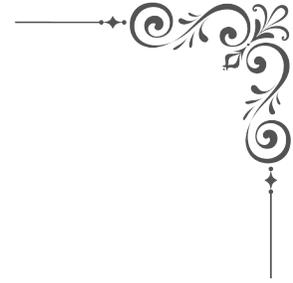
Before she could finish her sentence, Winter threw open her bedroom door, and a blast of cold air interrupted Midnight's ramblings.

"What! Did you just say a Dragon Lord has our fledglings?" Winter scowled.

Quickly Midnight threw up her hand and covered her eyes. "Jeez, Winter! I *do not* need to see you naked. But, yes, I did say that. Get dressed and ready to go to Romania and kick some dragon's ass."



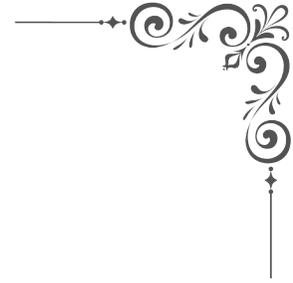
(FOR MORE... GO to [Creatures of Myth Volume 4 Amazon Page!](#))



UnDuplicated Magic

**Children of the Dark Mage
Creatures of Myth, Book 8**





Author Note



UNDUPLICATED MAGIC is the story of Jason Dark Eagle. He appears in the books Magic & Myth and Midnight's Mystery. Those stories are linked to this book.

The four-page prologue following this note was taken from Unending Magic, a free short story that is available to anyone who belongs to my newsletter.

If you would like to read this short story that details some of the magic and mayhem involved in raising supernatural children, just go to RavynWilde.com and click on [Ravyn's Nest](#). This password-protected area of my website is where I share exclusive content.

Once you click on Ravyn's Nest you will be told how to get the password. Besides this short story, there are deleted scenes from other books, character profiles, and miscellaneous information about the books that can't be found anywhere else. You do not need to read Unending Magic to understand UnDuplicated Magic. It is just a **Wilde Bite** of fun on the side!



Prologue—Ute Creation Story



THE NATIVE AMERICAN Ute tribe’s creation story has several different versions. The version used in this book comes from the Utah American Indian Digital Archive website (utahindians.org/archives/ute/earlyPeoples.htm), from the section titled—Early Peoples: The Utes.

My character Jason Dark Eagle will be using a *little fictional license* as he performs the creation story at a family reunion. This prologue is a small excerpt taken from **Unending Magic – a Wilde Bite**. (Short Story) The Author’s note explains how you can read the entire short story for free!



JASON STEPPED INTO the circle his family made for him—and with magic and myth—wove the tale of his beginning. The tale of their beginning. It was the ancient story of the Ute Tribe’s creation and how the first families of protective Shamans came to be.

“The Ute people have lived in what is now Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah for many centuries. Our ancestors believe that man was created by Sinauf. A god who was half-man and half-wolf. At the beginning of time a long-forgotten ancestor made a pact with this Great Spirit,” Jason’s voice echoed in the night.

He glanced at his niece Tehya’s big chocolate brown eyes. They were so much like his own. Her Native American name meant *precious*, and she was precious to him. She had a daughter and son that were precious to him as well. The little ones cuddled on their grandmother Naomi’s lap.

His sister Naomi could touch a person and read their soul and his niece had the ability to speak to Mother Earth. They both watched him, brown eyes lit from within and filled with happiness.

When he looked in the mirror, he didn't see that same light in his own eyes. Everything that made him smile was seated in front of this fire. When he left tonight, there would be nothing to warm his heart while he was away from his family, from those who mattered to him the most.

Tehya's two-year-old daughter slipped off Naomi's lap and toddled to stand before him. He kneeled and Ahna leaned in and whispered, "GeeUnca, you light coming." She placed her small hand on his cheek and kissed the tip of his nose. "Wuv you." She then reached out and offered him a pretty shell that was dusted with soft sand and held tightly in her small fingers. She must have picked up the little talisman on the beach today. She presented her trinket to him as if it were important. A priceless treasure.

As she laid the shell in his hand, the light brush of her fingers on his open palm filled him with warmth. That warmth expanded inside—chasing away the dark stain of evil. He took a deep breath and his entire body relaxed for the first time in months.

He looked down at Ahna's glowing face and grinned. He whispered his love for her.

GeeUnca was her name for him, Great Uncle. Ahna thought his light was coming. Naomi had said the child appeared to have very strong precognition abilities and was extremely empathetic.

His smile grew bigger. He thought Naomi was right, and yet there was more power in that little body than anyone realized. The next few years would be interesting.

They all watched the child totter over to her mother. Ahna had learned to walk but was still a little unsteady. If she fell anywhere near the fire, there would be a dozen family members diving to prevent injury. Many of those watching had preternatural speed. She would never touch the ground.

Tehya picked up her child and turned to look at him, a question in her eyes.

He shook his head. Now was not the time to share the fact that he was struggling with a life filled with evil. That his light was dimming. Hopefully, Ahna was right, and his light would come back. He slipped the shell in his pocket, knowing he would keep it to remind him of the innocence and love of this precious two-year-old. That her life and budding power needed to be protected. That alone was a reason to live for another hundred years.

Jason moved around the fire and used his voice and hands to tell the story in the old way. He twisted in the firelight, creating a fantasy of light and dark,

of shifting shadows and fire, and the dancing glide of his body.

This he did for the children in his family, to give them a sense of where they came from—and where their magic originated. He hoped it would enhance their ongoing sense of purpose.

His voice filled the night, **“Sinauf’s brothers were Coyote and Wolf. Legend says that Sinauf was preparing for a long journey, so he fashioned a large bag and filled it with special sticks. All those sticks were the same size but made from different types of wood. The bag was magical and when Sinauf put the sticks inside the sack, each stick became a person. As he put more and more sticks in the bag, the noise created by the people awakened the curiosity of all the nearby animals.”** Jason moved slowly around the fire. Long ago, the gods choreographed this dance and taught the movements and hand motions to their ancestors.

Several of the older children joined him. They’d heard this story before and over time, had learned the gestures. The kernel of happiness inside him grew. These children all had different skin tones. As the story explained—they all sprang from the magic sticks—but were made from different types of wood.

He smiled as Ahna and her four-year-old brother Frankie, tried to copy the hand movements from the comfort of their parent’s laps.

He continued, his voice low and a little gruff. **“Once the magic bag was full, Sinauf carefully closed it and then went to prepare other things for his journey. But the noise coming from the bag made his brother Coyote very curious. Coyote used his flint knife to cut a little hole near the top of the bag, peeking in to see what his brother put inside, that made so much noise. Before he got a good look, he heard Sinauf coming back—then he ducked down and ran away.”**

By this time many of the adults started moving around the fire, holding the little ones, and shifting their bodies to the rhythm of the story, or showing the toddlers how to place their feet and move their hands. The power of the story grew.

Jason’s voice was thick with emotion. **“When Sinauf finished getting ready, he came back and picked up the bag. He didn’t notice the hole Coyote made. He threw the sack over his shoulder and headed for the *Una-u-quich*, the distant high mountains. Those in the bag didn’t know where they were going, and they were afraid. They had no faith in the god. And because Coyote left a hole in the top of the bag, some of the**

stick people climbed up and jumped out, instead of trusting their god. When Sinauf finally reached *Una-u-quich*, he found only a few people left in his bag.”

He turned and found his niece beside him. “Tehya, do you know who was left in that bag?” he asked.

She smiled and flipped her long black hair out of her face. “Of course, Uncle! You were in that bag and so were my mother and father. Many of our ancestors were there!” She hugged him and danced on.

Jason grinned. **“Yes! Many of our family members stayed in the bag, believing that the god Sinauf had a purpose for us. Some of the people who jumped out of the bag fell in magical places and were transformed into werewolves, dragons, and many other paranormal creatures. As with all living creatures, some of the magical beings were good and some were evil.”** Jason grinned over at the children and made the fire roar and dance while they shivered in fear. **“Some of the people who jumped landed in areas with no magic. These people stayed human.”**

He stepped over to the fire, joining all the dancers with their palms out—calming the flames together.

“Our family agreed to protect mankind from the evil beings created during this time. But there is a catch. Not all our family members are born with supernatural abilities. So, we wait, sharing the heritage with those who show signs of power.” Jason looked pointedly at Tehya. “Many, like little Ahna, show signs right away—but with Tehya it took forever!”

The adults grinned or laughed.

Tehya stomped her foot, ready to jump in on cue. “It didn’t take *that* long. I just never told anyone about Sasha, my totem animal.”

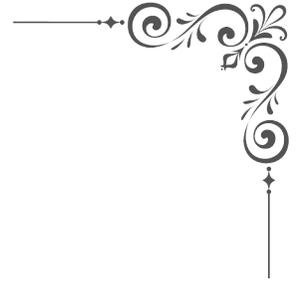
Jason laughed. He leaned over as if to whisper to them, sharing a secret. “In a ***normal*** Native American family, the animal totems act as guides throughout their life. They help the human get in touch with their feelings, to grow emotionally and spiritually. Native Americans can pray for a specific animal to guide us, or a certain animal may come to us *because* of our need. We know Tehya’s totem is the wolf, Sasha. The wolf is a teacher and a pathfinder. Their presence signifies when a person needs help or guidance in their life. If you are fortunate enough to be visited by the wolf, you could go on to teach others many of life’s lessons. The wolf can also help build personal strength and teach us to value our inner voice.”

Everyone nodded and grinned.

With his hands held out as if he had wings and was soaring, Jason led the crowd in the last part of the dance. “If your totem is the eagle, it will guide you to the divine and help you become a better leader. I rely on the Golden eagle’s vision, wisdom, and strength. The eagle helps us take responsibility for our actions. The eagle also helps me heal and protect Mother Earth from all evil. Using the eagle’s powerful vision can help me see the bigger picture, discover patterns no one else notices, and figure out hidden secrets.”

Jason finished the story the same way he did every time he told it. “We are a family of protective Shamans. Our spirit totems are more than just guides. Sasha lives in Tehya, as the eagle lives in me!”

The catcalls and hoots reached a crescendo as Jason uttered the last few words and touched the stone piece of Picture Jasper embedded in the leather strap around his neck. His clothes melted away and the large Golden eagle shot up through the night sky to the cheers and adulation of his extended family.





GYPSY'S HEART SKIPPED a beat, overcome by a premonition that her life would never be the same if she walked into the Devil's Boardroom.

She didn't have a choice. But she did take the time to say a quick prayer to any deity who would listen. She prayed for help, for strength, and maybe for a miracle.

Once the prayer was finished, she didn't blink or slow down. Reaching for the handle, she opened the door and slipped over the threshold. She stepped to the side and froze, letting her eyes adjust to the dark. Her other senses would never adjust. The loud, screeching music battered her eardrums, as the smell assaulted her nose.

Her body might be motionless, but her eyes searched every corner. It was dark in the bar and the men in their shades-of-black clothing faded into the background, believing the darkness hid a multitude of sins.

They were wrong—her eyesight was incredible. She could see that every eye in the place was turned to her. Those eyes all belonged to hard men. Men covered in leather with faces and arms all tatted up. Not that she had an issue with tattoos. She had a few of her own—but they weren't on her face.

She took a breath and winced at the overwhelming fragrance of beer and sweat. She knew this was a biker bar and it met her low expectations. She wondered if her contact thought the rough men and tougher surroundings would make her uncomfortable? Maybe enough to make her leave? She knew he didn't want to meet her and argued against it. He suggested that she just pass along information through their mutual contact and leave everything to him.

If he planned to make her nervous and jumpy, forcing her to cave in and leave the search to the big strong man... it failed.

She felt right at home. After all, she'd been in worse places, and often. She could do *biker-bitch* with the best of them and did when it was needed. But this wasn't a job to ferret out secrets and terrorists or to discover who stole the latest technology from her country. No. She was here on a personal mission, very personal.

The Glock on her hip was hidden by her floaty, colorful blouse. The feel of it comforted her. Reminding her that she could take care of herself. Guns were banned over a century ago. Except for the active military and those who used them for hunting. Gypsy qualified under both conditions, although technically she wasn't supposed to take a gun in the bar.

She didn't plan to drink. The knife strapped to her thigh, covered by her voluminous skirt added additional comfort. The pocket on the skirt was slit so she had easy access to the knife. She had practiced that move for years and knew she only needed three seconds and the six-inch blade would be buried in her target.

She was a Romany Traveller. A gypsy—no matter what country she called home. And she dressed the part because it made her look small, feminine, and safe. When she was anything but.

Another glance around the local watering hole verified that she'd seen worse. Lots worse. If she could live in the middle of a terrorist cell, deep in the mountains of a foreign country with men well-versed in the art of torture and mayhem—she could certainly handle anyone at the Devil's Boardroom. If she had time, it would be fun.

It was a cool name for a bar, she'd give them that. But didn't anyone know how to use a mop or a damp rag? She could feel the stickiness under her feet and see layers of it on every flat surface.

She still hadn't moved, but her eyes continued to shift.

She was searching for a man with copper skin and waist-long black hair that she figured would be streaked with gray. An older man.

Brett Isaacson, an old family friend that most called The General, sent her to this place. The man looked as if he were in his late eighties. But with all the advances in healing and restorative medicine, mortal humans often lived beyond the two-hundred mark. The General could very well be several centuries old.

The man she was supposed to meet had served in the military with The General when they were young. They fought together in the last paranormal war.

It was the summer of 2205 and those wars ended in early 2103—so the men served together over 100 years ago. Brett had been around their family for countless decades. She remembered him attending one of her birthday parties when she was about five.

She frowned. Realizing her father's best friend could very easily have passed the two-century mark. The General looked and moved extremely well for someone who was over two hundred years old. She sighed.

The point of all her mental wanderings was that the man she searched for in the dark and dingy bar, had to be close to the same age. Finding a two-

hundred-plus-year-old man in a biker bar filled with musclebound men in their prime should be easy.

So, where in the hell is he?



JASON'S EYES NARROWED on the beauty standing just inside the bar. He sucked in a sharp breath and caught the faint, exotic hint of patchouli and amber. The dark, magical fragrance teased his senses.

Patchouli was a well-known aphrodisiac and in the Dark Ages, amber was a prized ingredient for working sex-magic. Sometimes it was given as a gift to god and goddess. Both scents were used to balance fire and earth energies. He could feel himself relax and his arousal grow.

He wondered if this woman knew all that, or if she just liked the aroma? The answer to that question might make a difference in how he did his job.

She was magnificent. All curly dark hair falling to her waist. Her clothes were wild, soft, and flowing. She appeared to be a throwback to the hippies in the sixties. Or further back, to the gypsies of old. He had a vision of flowing skirts in a patchwork of colors as they whirled around a fire. He shook his head and focused. She was also wearing a loose peasant blouse. He'd always loved those. They made it so convenient to slip his hands in and reach up to cup full breasts.

He forced the thought away. It was inappropriate. *Especially* if this was his contact.

He hadn't been happy when asked to do this favor. Two days ago, when his personal communications unit beeped, Jason saw a digital access code connected to the ghosts of his past life. He debated answering the call because he was tired of being haunted. He wanted to push those ghosts back in the pit where they belonged. But old habits often died hard. *Jason punched the button to answer the call and heard a man's deep growl. Brett's voice sounded the same as it had long ago. "Remember Afghanistan? A few decades ago, when I saved your life, you said you owed me a favor. I'm collecting."*

Jason wasn't impressed, "Well hell! Nice to talk to you too, Brett. It's been years. But I get no hello, how are you, Jason? What's new in your life? Just—I need a favor? Fuck you, Brett! How many times do you plan to collect on the same damn debt?"

Jason listened to nothing but silence for a few seconds, then deep booming laughter.

After some shit talk between old friends, Jason agreed to the favor. To meet the woman in Vegas. He couldn't choose the city they met in, but he was told to choose the place.

And the call led him here, to this bar. Part of him thought taking a break from his usual mission might be a great idea, the larger part hated the interruption.

Hell, if Jason knew the woman looked like this, he might have kept his bitching to a minimum. He was normally very easy-going, but he didn't like being told only part of the story. And he knew Brett was damn well keeping much of the information secret.

Just then, the woman turned her body, and her eyes swept the room again. He could see her breasts move under the fabric. She wasn't wearing a bra. Those unsuitable thoughts he kept trying to suppress multiplied and took on a life of their own. Shit. *What the hell was wrong with him today?*

He had enhanced eyesight from his eagle, but he wasn't using that here. If he knew she was naked under that shirt he would bet that others in the bar did too. Hell, every damn man in the place might realize...

He quickly shoved back from the table and stood—drawing her attention. Much more, he was staking his claim.

His eyes caught and locked with hers.



GYPSY'S EYES MET AND held the man's gaze. She hadn't seen him until he stood. How had she missed him in the multiple sweeps she'd done of the room? She was trained to catch it all. She frowned. *Man* was such a weak word, and this powerful and gorgeous specimen of the male sex was anything but weak.

His long, straight, thick hair swept down his back. She didn't see any gray streaks in the unrelenting dark, but the lighting in the bar was bad. She would be willing to take him outside, find a quiet grassy knoll where she could sit, and get comfortable. Then spend long hours sifting through that stunning mane to check for silver and sin.

His Native American heritage was stamped on his face—high cheekbones, the strong hook of a nose. And his skin was dark and glorious.

She was so pale she glowed like a beacon in the moonlight. She had always been jealous of those with a darker complexion. Her gaze drifted lower.

There wasn't an ounce of fat on his body. But oh, mama! There was plenty of muscle. She could get lost for days, mapping the secrets of his body. Mapping, touching, and licking. She took a deep breath and tried to bitch slap her libido back into control. This wasn't like her. She never reacted to men like this.

Gypsy frowned. Brett told her the man had served with him in the Spec Ops unit during the height of the paranormal wars. It was during the time when humans and supernatural beings fought against each other. Until they banded together and fought against the encroaching dark forces when the demons and dark magic users became everyone's enemy.

Those battles laid the groundwork for many paranormals to come out of the closet—and even more chose to stay in that closet with the door locked and barred to the outside world.

Even though many years had passed since that war, there were still battles to be fought. There were still lots of badass idiots of both human and paranormal kind who wanted to take over the world. She should know, she fought evil in all its forms every damn day.

This man had served during the paranormal wars with Brett, and he certainly didn't look anywhere near the age of her father's best friend.

Well, she didn't look her age either. So, maybe he was something *Other*—a magical being or another paranormal species? She would see. No one else in the bar looked remotely Native American.

Anxiety flooded her body. He *had* to be her contact. She needed help. When Brett urged her to meet Jason Dark Eagle at this bar, he promised that this man would be the best chance she had to find her sister. She felt a wave of guilt for the lusty thoughts she had about this stranger. She shouldn't be thinking of anything but Rose.

She needed to find her sister before it was too late. That thought forced her to move forward until she stood in front of the powerful man. She looked up into dark brown eyes that had small flecks of gold.

“Brett said if you help me, he'll owe you one?” she spoke as if it were a question and waited with her fingers crossed and hidden in the voluminous fabric of her skirt.

The man smiled, making her shiver with repressed needs.

Holy Hannah, she was in trouble with this one!

“Brett already owes me several.” He shrugged. “And I owe him my life, so I guess it evens out. It’s become a game of who owes who and I’ll add your favor to the pile. I’m Jason Dark Eagle, and you are?”

She smiled, relieved to have found her man. Well—not *her* man. But she’d found help. “Gypsy Royal.”

He chuckled. “Of course, you are. Let’s sit for a bit.”

Before she sat, she looked back into his eyes. “I thought you would be older. Sorry.” She frowned.

His eyes twinkled with repressed laughter. “I am older. And wiser. And I have a lot more experience than you,” his whispered words danced over her skin.

Older... skipped. *Wiser...* slithered. And *experience...* brushed every single one of her erogenous zones. Jason Dark Eagle’s voice should be outlawed. Her eyes widened and she had to bite her tongue and clench every cell in her body to keep from jumping the man right there. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* This was not the time for her hormones to come out and dance. She needed control. She needed to think of Rose.

Ah, there. That splashed an icy mist of reality over her heated flesh. She wasn’t here to get laid, *damn it*. She was here to find her sister.



JASON FELT HIS BLOOD heat and his body ignite. It was a good thing this was the woman Brett sent to him. If she hadn’t been his contact, he would be tempted to forget friendship and duty. Forget he’d promised a favor. His reaction to Gypsy was off the charts.

The fact that he would have damn well blown off his old friend and taken a few days, *or weeks*, to make this witchy woman his own, made him feel extremely uncomfortable.

Who in the hell was this woman—this soul that lit up with the essence of summer and sensual heat—doing in a place like this? She shouldn’t look comfortable here, in control. But she did.

He arranged for this bar to be their contact point on purpose. With the sole intention of making her run far in the opposite direction, calling him with the information he would need to do the job while she left him alone. This bar was a hell hole, filled with men who didn’t smile and often didn’t bathe. He was dead sure it would scare her off. He didn’t believe that she would even show up.

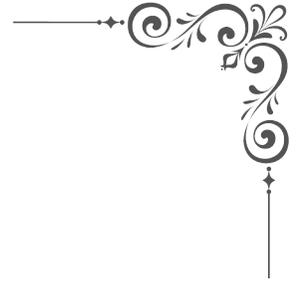
And she walked in the door as if she owned the place—or could if she wanted to. There was no fear or disgust on her face. Just a small internal smile.

And why was he acting like such an idiot? Staking a claim, threatening to blow off a friend for a woman. This wasn't the way he did things. The thoughts of claiming her felt right, but they were foreign to his nature. Damn it all to hell. *What was going on?*

This woman might be the best thing he'd seen in a hundred years. Who knows, she might be able to save his soul from the encroaching darkness. She was a blazing bright light and stood right in front of him. But it didn't matter. Because he was sure he didn't want anything she would give him. He just needed to get his shit together and tell her the only way he'd work with her would be if he did the work, and she waited.

He couldn't open his mouth to protest. The stunning woman looked like heaven and tempted him to forget all the reasons women like her were a bad idea.

They were sweet, kind—**human**. And not worth the heartbreak.



—❧—

“WHY DIDN’T YOU DRESS to blend in better?” Jason’s voice was gruff.

Without drawing attention to herself, Gypsy took a deep breath of air and mentally forced her body to relax. She could do this. Nonchalantly—when she was feeling anything but—she shrugged. She figured he was commenting on how the clothes she wore didn’t fit the biker bar. She had planned it that way.

Still recovering from all the heat in his voice, she shared more of herself than she planned, “I didn’t want to blend. I wanted to look weak, or safe. That way you and everyone else will underestimate me. It’s a tried-and-true method of disarming your enemy. Besides, I wear what I like and didn’t think blending mattered today.”

—❧—

JASON BLINKED. BLENDING didn’t matter today, and her method of disarming the enemy probably worked more often than not. He’d have to remember that. “Am I the enemy?” he asked her. And waited for the hesitant headshake. At least she knew he wasn’t there to harm her. Harm was the last thing on his mind.

He liked her loose floaty skirt. And wondered if she was naked underneath or if she wore underwear. That was what he’d been thinking about the short time it took for her to walk across the bar to his table. He already knew that she wasn’t wearing anything under that peasant blouse. The blouse with elastic at the neck. Making it easy to pull down and tuck under her breasts, leaving them exposed.

He wanted to see her naked but appreciated her style in clothes. While they worked together in the next week or two it would become a game. Exposing bits and pieces of her a little at a time. Seducing her. “If I slid my hand under your skirt, what would I find? Lace, satin, or skin?”

“Leather and cold steel,” she hissed between clenched teeth.

He noticed her face was flushed and that her hands were clenched in the fabric of her skirt. He wanted to play with her a little more. “I’d love to pull down that cute top and uncover one breast, so I could feast on your nipples.”

“Stop!” she pleaded.

Jason grinned in satisfaction. She had waited for the fantasy to play out a bit before she stopped him. She could have asked him to stop long before the

thoughts tied them together. He promised himself he would get a chance to do each one of the things playing in an endless loop in his mind.

Jason frowned and shifted away from her a bit. He didn't notice that he'd stepped closer. He was inhaling her scent, wallowing in the aroma. It bothered him that she had this effect on him. He was acting out of character. All but salivating over the woman. Where did his caution go, and the respect he had for women? He'd never been this crude and used such a blatant sexual tone with a woman he didn't know. Before he could change his focus, she spoke.

"I don't always dress like this," she warned.

All thought of getting a handle on his libido fled. He didn't think what she wore mattered. He would just need to be a little more creative. His life became a lot more interesting since she walked into this bar. And his once cold sex drive had become volcanic. He needed to figure out if she was influencing him and how. He wasn't normally like this. But he wasn't sure he cared what was happening to him. Just that she was in his life.

"Keep your hands and thoughts to yourself and we'll do great," she insisted.

"I don't think so. If I share my thoughts and my body, we will do much better than great!" he promised. *Shit*. He'd lost control of both his thoughts and his mouth. But business first. "Sit." He motioned to the chair. "You can tell me what you need, and we'll come up with a plan."

Jason had planned to get all the information from her and then go. Go track, go hunt, go find, just go. He always worked alone, *but not this time*. From the moment he saw her standing in the dark—her enticing scent filling his lungs—the plan changed. He wanted to spend time with this woman—and figure out why she made him feel like this.

"Do you want something to drink?" he asked.

She looked down at the table.

Jason knew what she was doing. The same thing he had done when he arrived. Made sure the table and glass were clean.

She smiled. "I'll have one of those."

Jason held up two fingers, confident the waitress would see. The woman hadn't taken her eyes off him since he walked in the door.

Sure enough, just as they settled in their chairs, she came by with two glasses of water—glaring at Gypsy before she left.

"Friend of yours?" she drawled.

Jason shook his head. “I’m an unknown in a bar filled with regulars. She’s bored—wants a walk on the wild side. I’m not walking.”

Gypsy had just taken a sip of water. At his dry comment, she choked, sputtered. When she found her breath, she giggled. And that appeared to shock her. Clearing her throat, she looked Jason up and down and fanned her face. Grinned. “I’ll bet,” she acknowledged. And groaned.

She was obviously uncomfortable with her reaction to him. It was a relief to discover that his crude pickup lines hadn’t scared her away. Well, he would just have to work harder and help her feel at ease.

He smiled and moved on. “So, who do you need me to find?”

Gypsy startled, her eyes went wide with confusion and a little fear.

Jason leaned forward and placed his hand gently over hers. For a moment, he was lost in the feel of her. His body sparked—and hummed in recognition and suppressed hunger. *Oh, hell!* he thought. By the magnitude of that reaction whatever was happening between them would be more than a quick fling. At least it would be if he allowed it. Damn it all, he was in charge, not his body. He was a hell of a long way from being a teenager. He needed to think, and he needed this shit between them to stop.

But she was afraid of him now and he needed to soothe, so he kept his hand over the top of hers. “I have many *skills*, Gypsy. But usually, when someone like Brett needs help or asks for a favor—it’s to find someone who is lost. I am what is known in special operations and intelligence organizations as an elite tracker. Isn’t that why he sent you to me?”

Either that information would reassure her, or make her run screaming from the room. Elite Trackers were used in the military to search for and then capture or kill high-target enemy combatants. Typically, they were used for counterterrorism activities. But Jason also specialized in hostage rescue, and more to the point, in personnel recovery missions. Kidnappings. Brett could have chosen him for any of those specialties.

Her eyes dropped at his touch.

Jason looked down and noticed the differences between them. His skin was darker in tone, his larger hand covered her much smaller one. Her flesh was almost translucently pale. Jason couldn’t resist using a light touch to trace along the blue veins in her soft skin before he moved back.

She shuddered in reaction and raised her gaze to his. Her eyes were a deep hazel green. He had already noticed that depending on the lighting and her mood, those eyes were sometimes olive-green, and even lighter. Right

now, there were flecks of brown and gold shot through them. He loved the color and could get lost studying all the emotions that flickered in their depths. But right now, those eyes were swimming with fear and sorrow. This time the fear wasn't of him, but of something else.

She nodded. "My sister. I need help finding my sister. And I believe she isn't missing but was taken. Kidnapped. I have a lot of skills, but not those of an elite tracker. I know what you specialize in and I am sure we will need both the tracking and probably the rescue and personnel recovery skills at some point. At least I hope so."

Jason noted that she didn't say, *I need you to find my sister*. She wanted help. Normally he would make it clear he worked alone. But not this time. Not with the sparks and body recognition, the visions that danced at the edge of his consciousness, and the deep need he had for this woman after just a few minutes spent near her.

This time he would take Gypsy as a partner and along the way, he would uncover all her secrets. Because he could see those secrets swimming in those beautiful eyes. He also wanted to take that walk on the wild side with her and see what happened next.

"I don't have a lot of information. Rose disappeared while I was out of the country. All I really know for sure is that she's gone, she didn't care for her boss, and there are more questions than answers in the emails she left me. Those emails paint a disturbing picture."

"Okay, we will get through all of that. How did you get Brett to call me in?"

"He's a family friend. An old friend of my father. I've known him since I was small."

"Okay, I'd like to get some idea of who I'll be working with. Tell me something about you," he pressed.

"Only if you return the favor."

"Sure, one for one. You start," he prompted.

"I speak seven languages. English, Romany, Italian, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, and French," she offered.

"Okay. I also speak seven. English, Shoshonean, Spanish, Arabic, Hebrew, French, and Swahili."

She blinked. "Swahili? Really?"

"Umm, yes. I spent quite a bit of time in East Africa looking for terrorists. Your turn," he said.

“Besides guns and knives, I’m an expert with explosives,” she smirked.

He frowned. That was unusual. He thought about it for a second, but it wasn’t hard to match. “I’m an expert with guns and knives, and with traps. Anything from a snare targeting a hummingbird to a pit large enough to swallow a platoon of soldiers—and everything in between.”

Her eyebrows raised. “Really? A platoon of sixteen or forty-four?” she challenged.

He grinned. “Forty-four.”

She sighed. “Which points out why you began this little exercise. I knew you were military trained. Now you know I am.”

“I was trained but I’m also out. What I do now, I do pretty much on my own. My guess is that you’re still in?”

Gypsy frowned. “Actually. I’m in the process of making that decision. I am still in, with leave to find my sister. I intend to use the time to decide if I want to re-up. It’s rare for me to hesitate for anything. I usually know exactly what I want to do. But I feel like I can’t make any decisions until I find Rose.”

“That makes sense. Okay. We’ve done the serious. Let’s share something trivial,” he said. “Tell me something fun, sweetheart.”

Gypsy pressed her lips together. It was obvious she hadn’t expected this, and she might be a little disconcerted over Jason calling her sweetheart. Suddenly she grinned. “I spent all of my teenage years trying to make my hair straight. If you haven’t noticed, my hair is long and wavy. It curls on its own and defies any effort to straighten it. Throughout my teens, I tried desperately to get straight hair. I used a flat iron, big curlers, hair goop. Nothing worked.”

By the time she finished, Jason was grinning. “I can just see you with those big curlers. Thanks for that.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, now it’s your turn.”

Because she chose to tell him a story from her childhood, Jason tried to do the same thing. He thought about when he was young. The world was a much different place. That was so long ago. Umm...Maybe six centuries or more. It was another lifetime. When he did the fire dance of Creation with the children, that wasn’t just a great way to tell the story. It was a way to connect to the past, to another life.

He shifted his eyes up to the ceiling and to the right. Searching inward for distant memories. The things that stuck in his mind after centuries of living

weren't happy or silly moments. They were the times that were hard, horrible, mind-boggling. Jason shied away from the darker images—and remembered his brother.

His voice softened, “Growing up—we hunted.” Jason thought Gypsy would assume he lived on a reservation or his family grew up owning land. But his childhood was spent in a very uninhabited and lush world that was full of wildlife and had very few people.

“My brother, Ouray—which means arrow—was teaching me how to use snares to catch rabbits. I don't remember how old I was. Maybe seven or eight? Anyway, we were trying to snare rabbits.” Jason grinned and ducked his head. “We would strip the bark from trees in long thin layers and create a flexible bark rope to use as our snare. My brother used only one thin layer of bark and sometimes his rabbits were able to break the snare and escape. I asked him why he didn't strengthen his rope and he told me it didn't matter, that he put out lots of snares each day so we would never go hungry.”

He took a sip of water and couldn't keep the smile from his face. “Of course, I had a better idea.”

Gypsy snorted.

Jason shrugged and met her laughing eyes. “I took three strips of the bark and braided them together. I remember my brother rolled his eyes at me and said no rabbit would be stupid enough to step in that snare, but I persisted. We stopped to eat lunch which consisted of one of the rabbits my brother caught, roasted over the fire. I wasn't eating fast enough so he made me follow him while I was still enjoying the meat. I found the place I wanted to put my snare and set the rabbit haunch in the dirt. And with greasy fingers, I set my snare.”

Jason could see by Gypsy's widening eyes that she had an idea of where this was going. “My brother pestered me all night. He'd have a rabbit, I wouldn't. Then I could tie my hair back with the useless snare I made. I had a very sleepless night. The next morning, we checked Ouray's snare first and he had a plump rabbit. Silently we crept through the underbrush to where I had placed my snare.” He stopped and took another drink of water, hesitated.

Gypsy kicked him under the table. “Well,” she demanded. “Did you get a rabbit?”

He laughed and shook his head. “No rabbit. But there *was* an enormous, pissed-off, beast of a bear in my trap. It was huge and scary and tried to rush Ouray and me. We screamed for my father and both he and my uncle came

tearing through the forest toward us. My brother backed up, ready to run, and said, 'We can't eat that!' Imagine the surprise on the faces of my father and uncles when they discovered my little snare, the one with the oil and juice of roasted rabbit all over it, had captured a juvenile male grizzly bear."

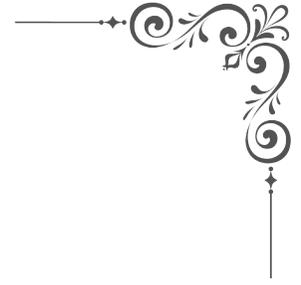
He laughed and shook his head. "We did eat it. And my mother taught me how to tan the hide and I used it as a coat for many years."

Jason sighed. He took another sip of water. Eventually, he shook away the sadness of loss, then looked up at her and grinned. "When my brother was alive, he never went more than a few days without reminding me that rabbit tastes much better than bear."

She giggled, and then all-out laughed. "You're an amazing storyteller. We have something else in common, I was also taught how to live off the land. To hunt my food and use the fur for clothing. It was an unusual childhood."

A fight broke out on the other side of the bar. They both looked over. Jason thought it was interesting that they did the same visual scan. Looking for weapons and deadly intent. This appeared to just be a brawl for fun.

Gypsy grinned. "As much as I'd like to stay and play—this isn't the best place for secrets. My home is close by, and I have some information about Rose printed out for you."





“YOUR HOUSE IS A ROMANI wagon.” Jason frowned. He stood in front of it, legs spread with his hands on his hips, radiating confusion.

The warm spring sun highlighted his blue-black hair and made her drool. She wanted her hands in that hair.

Gypsy grinned. “Technically it's a Vardo or Romanichal caravan although it is not a true reproduction. It's definitely more RV than Romanichal at this point.”

“Isn't it a cliché to use a gypsy wagon for your home?”

She snorted. “You tell me. You are an American Indian. I'm willing to bet that wherever you call home you have a tepee or some type of historical or ceremonial lodging. Would I win that bet?”

“That's different,” Jason insisted.

“No, it is not. Our wagons are home to us. They provide comfort and more.” She shrugged. She wasn't going to justify the Vardo wagon. She knew it was a cliché and didn't care. It was warm and colorful inside and it was home, no matter where she wandered. She had added custom panels that could be flipped, making it appear plain and unremarkable on the outside so no one would bother to look and see what secrets it held.

She had spells and protections woven into the wood, and the very fabric of her sheets and blankets, the curtains.

No one could harm her in this space. And if she hid within its walls, it would be exceedingly difficult to find her if she didn't want to be found.

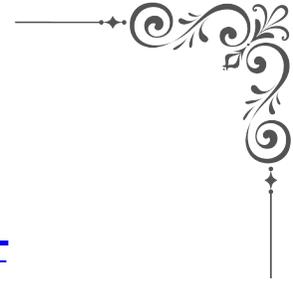
This was her home. Or one of them. She wouldn't tell him that she had six identical caravans stashed all around the world. She traveled so much it was hard to have a home base and a long time ago she realized she would need to take home with her. So, she had one on each continent. Wherever she worked, if she was going to be there longer than a week, she would have the nearest one brought to her. She used them as a hideaway during assignments. All six wagons had become important methods of hiding in plain sight, in being safe. The protections she added kept her hidden from both human and paranormal senses.

All six wagons were the same basic plan and all of them were furnished the same and then decorated identically in lush decadence. When space was this small it was easy to use the best fabrics, the softest mattress, and incredible finishes. It would be difficult to afford those touches of gold, and the glitter of gems in a larger space. And they matched because she wanted

the caravans to be home. If they were all decorated differently, they would *feel* different. She wanted them to be the same.



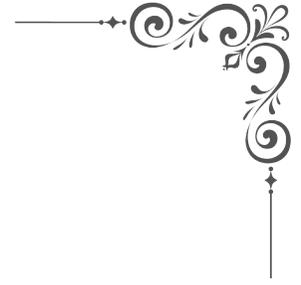
(FOR MORE... GO TO [Creatures of Myth Volume 4 Amazon Page!](#))



Autumn's Awakening – Dragonkynd

**(Children of the Dark Mage)
Creatures of Myth, Book 9**







*It was the perfect plan.
Create his own Supernatural ARMY.
One that was totally devoted to him.
He would use clones, creating children
and quickly raising them to be the perfect soldier.
He would train them to hate everyone, both Supernatural and Human.
He would use his army to kill all the Supernatural Guardians
And RULE humankind.
Why the DEMON HELL isn't it working?
~Rant by Darcy Ifrinn about wanting to rule
the world and his plans to accomplish this goal.*



“IT’S TOO BAD WE DON’T have something that belongs to the Dark Mage-Demon. Or maybe that mad-scientist, Nathan Michaels. Didn’t you say he had a home in the Boulder area? If I had something they touched or wore often, I could use the map here at Dragon Home to try and find them.” Autumn offered.

She bit her bottom lip and frowned. It was important to find either one or both because it was the only way the Dragon Witches could track and save the children the two men created. The children the damn demon was trying to turn into mindless soldiers to destroy all paranormal creatures so he could take over the world.

Nathan was the mad scientist who came up with the process for his boss, the evil Dark Mage-Demon known in this incarnation as Darcy Ifrinn. The supernatural community had discovered Nathan and Darcy were kidnapping hundreds of human and *Other* women from all over the world. The man and demon were implanting those women with the cloned fetuses they created from both willing and unwilling paranormals.

Then, using the woman as live incubators, the mad duo had somehow managed to decrease both gestation time and how long it took for the babies to mature. And Darcy wanted that time cut even more, even if it put the women and babies at risk.

The two had been overheard arguing about the process. Nathan told the demon, “*My responsibility is to take the genetic material from the creatures you want to copy, create the cloned fetus, and then put them in human*

wombs. *I've done that. And don't forget what else I've done for you. Gestation is the longest part of the process. I've reduced the time required from nine months to three. The children grow from baby to adult in ten years not eighteen. Within five years of their birth, they are physically and emotionally advanced enough for you to start their rigorous physical training. I don't see where I can shave additional time off this process.*"

During that fight, Darcy had grabbed Nathan around his neck, lifting him with his preternatural strength to bring the human up to his face. He angrily spat words at him, screaming his demands at Nathan, *"You must decrease all of it. From three months gestation to two, or one would be better! Then work on making it eight years instead of ten, then decrease it to six."* If the Dark Mage-Demon had his way, he would have adult soldiers created from supernatural cloned fetuses within six years instead of the ten it currently took.

And the Supernatural Council and all its warriors could only guess that there had been thousands already created with this process. Thousands of children between infant and ten years old were being forced to become soldiers and fight in Darcy Ifrinn's demon army. Not to mention there were several hundred women he'd kidnapped to use as live incubators for the clone fetuses.

There had to be a way to track these men!

They had to find the children. It was like an ache inside of her, a sickness that wouldn't allow her to sleep or think. She had to find them. She looked over at Gypsy. The woman was pacing the room, she was almost as anxious as Autumn.

They knew the Dark Mage-Demon's plans because they had just rescued several pregnant women and a handful of cloned children. One of the women was Rose, Gypsy's sister. Rose was safe now and would deliver her baby any day.

Nathan was trying to create an army of strong paranormals who would do Darcy's bidding and wipe out all the supernaturals throughout the world. The demon planned to kill any magical or paranormal creature who would object to him enslaving humankind. And since almost all supernaturals *would* object, he needed a massive army.

Autumn worried about all those women. She had spent many hours combing databases and searching through the internet for some hint that would give her a direction. Her eyes were shadowed and a little bloodshot.

The bun on the top of her head was messier than usual. Her hair was straight, coal-black with little slivers of white threaded through. It was long, thick, and drove her crazy so she stuck it up on her head.

She brought her focus back to the missing women.

They believed most of the women were human. They were the ones Autumn was sworn to protect. Then there were the *Others* who were part of her world or should be. When she considered those *Others*, she believed Darcy tried to target anyone with a little bit of magic ability.

Not someone with enough magical umph to challenge him or find a way to escape. But just a little bit of magic that could be stripped away and used to enhance his clones or speed up the creation process.

Many of the Others he captured were some type of shifter or paranormal creature. His only real requirement was that the women had to be fertile with the ability to bear live young. He couldn't use any creature that only reproduced with their fated mate, nor would reptile or bird shifters work. They couldn't serve as incubators for the babies. However, if he got his hands on any type of shifter it would give him more DNA samples to play with.

She considered the live birth requirement. It would mean vampire women wouldn't be taken as incubators for the clones. But what about using their DNA for creating the babies. She eyed Vlad and frowned. Speculation was useless. The list of possibilities and actions the demon might take was endless. Darcy Ifrinn had a huge pool of possibilities.

Autumn and those with her were fairly sure the missing women numbered in the hundreds. The created cloned children that had already been delivered into the hell Darcy would put them through, could be in the thousands. It was a freaking mess.

If that wasn't enough, they had discovered that Darcy Ifrinn was using some type of blood, possibly dragonkynd, to speed up the cloning process. In fact, last year Darcy had captured Yousef, one of the few Dragon Lords left on the earth, in order to take the dragon's blood for his experiments.

She rubbed her eyes and heard her name being called. She raised her head.

"Autumn!" Vlad stomped over to stand in front of her and glared. "You have a map that you can magically use to find someone?" he demanded, hands on his hips, glaring at her.

Evidently, he had been trying to get her attention for several minutes and was irritated with her distraction. The question from the leader of the

Supernatural Council snapped Autumn out of her musings. Vlad could be an incredibly angry and fierce vampire when he wanted. She didn't like to piss him off.

She quickly looked around the room, relaxing a little when she saw that Midnight and Veronica were there. Both women could control Vlad when he got a little testy, so she didn't have to deal with him alone.

She nodded and tried to warn the vampire, "It doesn't always work. But we've discovered that the more important the item is to the owner, the easier it is to track them. Often the best thing to use is a well-worn piece of clothing."

Vlad turned and looked at Midnight. "Please explain why I haven't been told that my Dragon Witches have this ability."

Midnight snorted. "Not yours, Vlad. Friends yes, slaves no. Besides, we don't have this ability. It is Autumn's personal power. Kind of like how Winter can turn anyone into a popsicle or Summer can melt an iceberg."

Autumn kept the grin off her face. Knowing exactly what Midnight was doing. Clouding the issue, taking Vlad's attention away from Autumn.

Vlad stared at Midnight for a long moment. "I believe we need to be talking many times. I did not know of the Winter popsicle or Summer melting anything. We will spend much time together on this. When we aren't critical. Please pop someone fast to that Nathan man's house. I want to see how this works." But he wandered off to mutter away from Autumn.

She turned to hide her smirk. Midnight and Vlad would dance around this issue for months. Vlad thought he needed to know everything. And the Witches were used to keeping their secrets close.

She looked over at Veronica and wasn't surprised to see the woman smiling at her husband. Veronica didn't hide the fact that the way her husband spoke English—turned her on. Autumn believed Vlad played to his wife's enchantment. She'd heard him speak perfect English before—always when his mate wasn't around to hear him.

The descent into broken English could be excitement and emotion, but she thought it was more because he liked making Veronica smile. Over hundreds of years, the way he spoke became a habit.

She glanced down at the large table that almost filled this room at Dragon Home. The map was one of the secrets the Dragon Witches had always kept close. But with hundreds of missing women and possibly thousands of

abused children somewhere out in the world, it could no longer remain hidden.

The searching map had been her mother's greatest power. Zyma used to spend so much time in this room. Standing over the map, sitting beside the map, and always studying the magical manifestation of the world—she would block out everything else, sometimes for days. Once in a great while, she would cuddle on the couch by the window with Autumn after dinner. Sharing what Autumn had learned in training. But if Zyma so much as peeked at the map, she would get lost in its secrets. In this manner, Autumn was forgotten... often.

Her mother could read the slightest change in the weather and the bare whisper of thought when a terrorist hatched a plan that would affect Mother Earth. When she was alive, Zyma had been closely tied to the map and not what was happening outside of the room. Her mother never fought a physical battle with their enemies, she didn't walk in the gardens and let the sun caress her face, she rarely left this part of the castle.

Autumn loved her mother. But that love and affection had been forced to revolve around what the map was doing. Autumn took a deep breath. *She was not her mother.* She knew Zyma had loved her. But the woman was a test case—on how obsessive-compulsive behavior centered on a magic object—could ruin the rest of your life and damage all your relationships. Autumn had watched her mother's health and happiness decline the more she closed herself in with the map. She made a vow to herself at an early age that she would not allow the map to rule her every waking moment.

She looked down and studied the map. So far, she'd kept that vow.

Autumn learned what she could about the magic, but she would not become her mother. Fixated with every little nuance and blip the map made. As a young Witch, she swore an oath to her Dragon-Trinity of Dawn and Spring that she would always fight, always keep the sacred promise to protect humans and Mother Earth. And she would never allow her focus to shift to something so small it could be put in one room. If she broke that oath, the two witches had pledged to take drastic measures to get her away from Dragon Home and this room. She didn't want it sucking the life out of her—as it had her mother.

Autumn looked down and her sharp eyes caught a shift in some of the coloring. She sighed. Which was probably why she could only understand a

small part of what the map tried to tell her. She didn't spend enough time with it.

Shifting her weight, Autumn admitted to herself that she was a little nervous. It was one thing to use what she called her *seeking power* when surrounded by the other Dragon Witches. They were her family. But to have Vlad and Veronica, Jason and Gypsy, Midnight and Matei, as well as Dawn standing beside the large magic map, watching her every move, and waiting for her to do something—was more than a little unnerving.

The map was one of two legacies from her mother. It was useful as a tool. The sword her mother had given her was an extension of her body. She moved her hand to rest on the short sword she always wore. Reminding herself once again, that she was not her mother.



DAWN NUDGED HER. BRINGING Autumn back to the present and the task at hand.

Her friend said, “They’re coming with the stuff from Nathan’s house. Are you okay?”

Dawn giggled as she looked across the room, drawing Autumn’s attention.

Autumn glanced up just in time to see the map magically shifting the elements on its surface. The movement inspired Gypsy to shove herself back, practically leaping across the room away from the map table.

Midnight snickered a bit and told everyone gathered around, “Autumn’s mother had a special affinity with the earth. Somehow her magic lingers in this map of the world. The magic in Dragon Home caused the map to expand and over the years it has become both more detailed and more difficult to read. Autumn was never trained on how to use it. But over the years she figured out a few things. For instance, she discovered that when there are flashes of yellow across the map it means there has been a natural disaster of some type. Red indicates terrorist activity that could damage the land or water supply. There are other flashes of color she hasn’t clarified yet, but she’s working on it. Besides the map, Autumn’s element helps her find missing things. If you have lost something vitally important, she can touch your shoulder or hand, and often the map will show where the missing item is. When looking for a missing person, she can hold something that belongs to that person, and often the map will highlight where they are.”

That was true. And it hadn't been her mother who helped her figure that out. It had been Midnight and *her* mother, Natura. Natura had mothered her more than her own mother. She'd taught her how to use her magic and develop her skills. Midnight trained her to be a warrior and encouraged her interest in human technology. Dawn and Spring were the sisters she never had. All of the Dragon Witches were her family. Autumn knew that no matter what, these women were there for her.

Unlike her mother. In the last hundred years of her mother's life, she barely spoke to Autumn. She would occasionally point out something interesting on the map, which is how Autumn learned about a few of the map's abilities. But not long after they moved in, Zyma quit asking Autumn about her life. About what she was doing, or how. About what she liked.

Her Mother had been nothing like Natura. The coven leader was interested in everything Autumn did. Everything any of them did. Autumn had to say the ache from Natura's passing far surpassed that of her own mother. And that was a sad statement.

The map shifted again.

Gypsy, who had just spent weeks looking for her sister, put her hands on her hips and turned to face Midnight, demanding, "Are you telling me if I had given you Rose's favorite shirt, you could have taken me right to my sister?"

Midnight shook her head no. Then grinned wickedly and said, "That wouldn't have worked because you didn't know us yet."

"Oh, my hell," Gypsy threw a pillow at Midnight and swung toward Autumn. "Okay Dragon Lady. How close will this get you to Nathan?"

Autumn pushed her sudden melancholy away and focused on finding Nathan the wacked out scientist and dragonkynd's worst enemy, Darcy Ifrinn.

Autumn answered. "The state, the town, sometimes the map shifts and will show the streets. I don't control the map—it has a mind of its own."

Gypsy moved back another step, by this time she was a dozen feet away from the map table. "I'm not sure how I feel about an intelligent map."

Jason laughed and leaned down to whisper in her ear, just loud enough they could all hear him, "I'll protect you."

The woman warrior wrapped her arm around her mate and turned as Winter walked in with Rye. A sack of items collected from the scientist's house in Boulder, Colorado in her hand.

Autumn held back a smile. She knew Winter was trying to uncover some of the Enforcers' secrets. None of the Dragon Witches could sense when the human man was close enough to eavesdrop. And it drove them crazy. Gypsy was also an Enforcer, and they could tell when she was near. But not Rye. The anomaly was consuming Winter's time and effort.

Autumn walked over and shifted through the things they brought, finally picking out a well-worn sweater. "This might work." She took it close to the map and stood in the casting circle that had long ago been drawn on the floor. Then lowered her eyelids and allowed her awareness to flow through the sweater.

She took several deep breaths and then opened her eyes and searched the map.

Winter pointed. "*There*. A dark cloud over Europe."

Autumn sighed. "I was afraid of this. Nathan's location is covered with dark power. The Dragon Home map shows a black cloud over an area that is too large to help us. The signal is magically blocked."

Midnight sighed. "I know you've tried using your Trinity with Spring and Dawn to boost the map before. It didn't work, did it?" she asked hopefully.

Autumn shook her head. "Where the map is concerned, not really. Normally the Trinity gives me a large increase in power. But when I'm trying to locate things, the boost is minimal. It wouldn't be enough power to clear this up." She waved at the thick clouds covering most of the European continent.

The mist stretched from the Arctic Ocean up north to the Atlantic Ocean on the west side, Asia to the east, and the Mediterranean Sea on the south. It included the countries of Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and more.

She sighed. She had no idea what to do now. "Anyone have another idea of what I could use to find them?" She looked around the table.

Vlad looked thoughtful. Everyone else shook their heads.

Matei shifted by Midnight. He looked at the map, then at Vlad, then he turned and faced Autumn. "My brother Nicholae can boost the powers of any Witch or Lord. We know it works and that it seems to increase powers about tenfold. I believe using his power to increase your own would be enough to clear the obstruction and allow you to get closer to Nathan."

The room fell silent. Autumn frowned.

Vlad watched Matei for a moment, finally demanding, “You said you do not know where he is? If you can’t find him that is not helpful.”

Matei nodded. “I don’t. But on the map, my brother won’t be hidden. If Autumn can locate him then maybe he can help her find Nathan and eventually lead us to the scientist and the Dark Mage-Demon.”

Autumn cut in. “If your brother can help it’s worth a try. Do you have something that belonged to him?”

Matei reached a hand in his pocket and pulled out a gold piece. “Nicholae collected coins. When he left this last time, he wasn’t sure if he would hibernate or seek the Final Fade. He gave me this coin as a goodbye gift.”

Autumn took a deep breath, worried about what she might find before she reached out for the coin. What if the Lord had Faded? Almost immediately the map shifted, showing tremendous detail. Including a symbol flashing over part of a section. She hadn’t seen that symbol before. She leaned over and said, “It’s over the village of Hunedoara.”

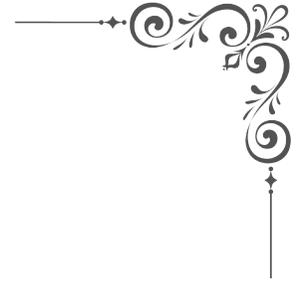
Her breath hitched and she exclaimed, “Right over the Romanian castle that has been in Matei’s family for generations!”

Matei looked up with a frown on his face. “I don’t understand.”

Midnight and Vlad started laughing and Autumn joined them.

“He is freaking hibernating somewhere in your castle!” Midnight exclaimed.

Matei shook his head, “You have got to be kidding me! I’ve been worried about him for decades and all along he’s been home?”



—❧—

*“She knew exactly what she wanted in life. She had a list.
Nowhere on that list was there room for an overbearing Dragon Lord.”
~from the journals of Autumn Dracore*

—❧—

AUTUMN STARTED AT THE top of the castle and worked her way down. It was a big place. She was beginning to regret telling everyone that she had to do this alone.

She didn't know why she felt that way. But the sensation was reinforced by Vlad's reaction. He insisted that she go by herself.

When Matei and Yousef tried to argue with him, Vlad simply locked them in the dungeon at Dragon Home. This was quite a feat. Normally the Dragon Witch castle answered only to them, but when Vlad waved his hand, the floor literally dropped out from beneath the two lords and they were sucked into a cell in the bowels of the dungeon.

Autumn closed her eyes and sighed. She didn't even know there was a dungeon at Dragon Home. Not the type with small cement rooms and magically reinforced metal bars.

The shocked look on Midnight's face made her believe that their coven leader had no idea either. Which meant there was more to Dragon Home than any of them realized. Or... their magic allowed Vlad to hijack it and create the dungeons.

She wasn't sure which made her more nervous.

Then she sighed. *Yes... yes, she did.* Vlad having any control at Dragon Home made her way more nervous. But so did the thought that somehow the Witch's castle knew they would NEED a dungeon with lockable cells.

So, here she was. In what appeared to be the deserted Dracovin Castle. So far, through all the dozens of rooms, and halls, and keeps or fortified towers... she hadn't found a hint of a hibernating Dragon Lord.

She stood for a moment, thinking... She'd been all over this castle.

After she first arrived, she simply sat in the Knight's Hall on the main level and searched the internet for floor plans for the first hour. The history of this very impressive castle that was surrounded by high battlements and a long drawbridge over the moat—was extensive and detailed.

Midnight had been so impressed with the moat and drawbridge that Dragon Home had magically added those features to their castle as a wedding

gift for her and Matei. The coven leader had been nagging about them for decades, so Autumn figured their magical home did it for its own sanity.

She knew the large edifice the Dragon Witches lived in possessed feelings and a sense of humor. This is probably why it allowed Vlad to lock the Dragon Lords in the dungeon.

Okay. That made Autumn feel better for some reason. She didn't want her home to turn over stewardship of the Dragon Witches to that Vampire. If the house thought this was a good joke, it was okay.

Dracovin Castle was nothing like Dragon Home. For one thing, it was steeped in human history. Dragon Home was secluded far from the human world in a magic bubble. She grinned. And then looked out one of the windows.

From where she sat, she could see one of the three-pointed towers guarding the perimeter of the castle. Just beyond was the road to the village. In the hall where she worked with her personal communications device, there were marble columns along the edges that stood about four feet from the wall.

It was the room Matei used to hold the fledglings when he captured them.

Autumn grinned. Thinking about that made her believe that Dragon Home put the Lords in the dungeon for its own reasons.

It used the vampire to have a bit of revenge.

During the hour she spent on research she discovered that one of the most famous figures connected to this castle in the town of Hunedoara was Vlad. There were conflicting reports. One source said he'd been imprisoned here. That several hundred years ago, a man named Matthias Corvinus had been an ally turned enemy of the man many called Dracula. Another source claimed that it was a lie.

The rest of the information had more to do with Vlad's territorial expansions. That he wanted to be obeyed in all things and was extremely power-hungry. Autumn snorted. Nothing new there. She did learn that Vlad valued honesty. However, he enforced his values and idea of loyalty with extreme means.

Basically, if you were his enemy or disagreed with him—then he would make an example out of your death. The reason given behind Vlad's supposed imprisonment was that Matthias had been friendly with Vlad. When he changed his mind about their alliance, he figured he needed to put "The Impaler" behind iron bars before he confessed to that change of heart.

Autumn agreed. If this truly happened, it would have been a good idea to lock him up first.

She spent exactly ten seconds wondering if she should call Vlad and ask him if he knew about any secret rooms, before realizing if he'd known anything, he would have told her before she left. The rumor of Vlad having spent any time in this castle had to be false.

She breathed a sigh of relief. She really didn't want to call him.

Once she finished with her internet search, she climbed to the top of the castle. This castle sat in a bit of a hole. You entered over the long bridge that was the main level, then there were two stories above and three below where you came in. But the three below weren't underground.

The kitchens were down there. Out a few of the windows, she could see extensive gardens that were just outside one of the doors on what you'd call ground level. Probably a door leading to the kitchen. There was also a driveway circling the base of the castle that led to extensive outbuildings. From the windows upstairs she could see those buildings. It looked like one might be a garage, plus there was a barn or two and various sheds. If she didn't find Nicholae in the castle, she'd have to search each of those.

The driveway exited the grounds over another bridge and there was a gate in a large rock wall that enclosed a huge area at the bottom of the castle. The setup was weird.

So far on all six floors situated above the ground, she hadn't found even a small trace of a hibernating dragon.

She had discovered lots of secrets and hidden things. Like hidden passages, rooms, cubbyholes, and safes. There was a great deal of space in this castle devoted to hiding people or things. That made her a little sad. All this space hadn't provided the family housed in these walls any joy and laughter.

She appreciated her home more every minute. Most of the décor at this castle was from at least a hundred years ago. There wasn't much that was modern at Dracovin Castle.

Dragon Home was so much... lighter. Happier.

She spent almost an hour in Maricara's apartment. Autumn had asked the woman if there was anything she wanted since Cara refused to ever come back to the castle again. She'd been given a small list.

Most of the things on that list were books, a few pieces of jewelry, and items of clothing. There was a small painting, signed by Maricara, of an

imposing blonde-haired man. Heavily muscled with a fierce expression on his face. Yet the painting was lovingly detailed. Autumn studied it for a moment. Maricara had two brothers currently living at Dragon Home. Both of them had dark hair. She didn't think the third, hibernating brother was going to be this blonde, Norse god creature. She smiled and put the painting carefully into the pack. Maricara had secrets. Good for her!

The Dracovin Castle was beautiful in a dark and gothic way. The drapes were heavy at every window and didn't look like they were ever opened.

Autumn wanted to rip them all down and let the light in. There were lots of very dark corners and oppressive furniture. This place reeked of unhappiness.

Knowing what had been done to the women in this castle made Autumn want to burn the thing down. They'd been prisoners in their own home, with their dragons bound to their bodies. The women had been forced to wear clothing that tortured them.

In both Maricara's room and her mother's, she found hidden passages to the outside. Both were obviously well-used. Autumn was happy to discover that when the women needed to, they could escape this castle's oppression. She was amazed that they kept coming back. The mother to an early death, the daughter to hatred so strong—she would never step foot in this place again.

Looking around at the dark stone walls that reeked of fear and sadness, Autumn couldn't blame Maricara for her decision to stay away. She wasn't sure she would even want anything to remind her of this place, although most of the items on Maricara's list had belonged to her mother.

Lightly touching the sword at her side, she realized that was something she understood.

Autumn far preferred Dragon Home. It was a castle that felt like a home, not a historic monstrosity paying homage to times long ago. The Dragon Witch castle was full of life, laughter, and beauty. There were no dark corners. She frowned. Actually, there were no curtains to block out the light at Dragon Home. They always had a view of the outside. The windows in the library were tinted so the sun's rays wouldn't damage the old manuscripts. But...

The darkness here wasn't just from the lack of light. She stood in place and closed her eyes. She felt a dark presence. Hidden. Watching. Its madness

had seeped into the brick and mortar of the castle. *It wanted everyone to suffer.*

She lifted her lashes and glanced around. Whatever it was—wasn't physically here she didn't think. But its essence was left behind to stain the lives that tried to find joy within these walls. She'd work on getting rid of that after she found Nicholae.

Now. If she were a hibernating dragon, where would she be? She looked at the floor and sighed. In the dungeon of course. She must have missed a hidden door the first time she searched. She was wasting time above ground level.



NICU WAITED IN THE shadows, watching the pretty dark-haired woman as she searched his home. She didn't turn on any lights, but his eyesight worked well in the dark and he could see her moving easily from room to room. It seemed she could see in the dark too.

Usually, the castle was oppressively dark and dreary, but it somehow seemed happier the minute this woman stepped through the door. But he wanted her to turn on the light, or open one of the heavy drapes so he could see if her hair was black or brown, or hell... dark purple. All he could tell in the dim lighting was that it looked dark.

He noticed she wore almost nothing. Small strips of dark leather covered her breasts, and a V of the same leather covered her center. Somewhere in his brain, the word thong reverberated, but he didn't care what it was called. She had a short sword strapped to her waist. And some type of markings on her pale, white flesh.

The detail was lost in the dark.

He moved with her, every few minutes wishing that she would turn on a lamp or even step through a narrow band of sunlight that came from one of the few windows in this monstrosity of a fortress. Not for the first time, he cursed the lack of sunlight. The entire building felt like a cave. He yearned for light and open spaces.

But the lack of light didn't seem to bother her. She wound around rooms stuffed with antiques without hesitating and managed to find all the secret doors and hidden passages.

She stepped from the deepest shadows into a puddle of gray light, lifting a hand to brush back her hair. Black hair that in the barely-there light he

could see was streaked with thin threads of white. And she brushed the thick hair back with a hand encased in a metallic glove. That glove covered her forearm to the elbow and was tipped with lethal and very sharp claws.

Dragon claws.

His mind and senses told him they were dragon claws.

His heart skipped a beat. *Who was she?* Was she hunting them? Coming to kill them?

She confused him. She didn't look like a thief, although she had taken a few items from one of the rooms upstairs. She turned and a streak of light filtering through one of the high windows in the dark storeroom caressed her flesh. The marks on her skin jumped out at him in fierce clarity and he stumbled back. Pushing further into the darkness, away from the curling snake dragon tattooed over most of her body.

Dragon-hell! She was a Witch and her familiar had only left the woman's face and chest unmarked. Although he could see some smaller markings peeking through the covering at her breast. Even that part of her flesh was covered in incredibly beautiful and fierce dragon-markings.

Damn the closed windows and stuffy castle. There was no airflow in here and he was too far away to smell her. But there was something about how she moved, about her smile. *Mesmerizing.*

He wanted to touch her. He moved out of the darkest corner and crept closer. *He had to make sure.* He was careful, moving just an inch at a time. With his heart beating wildly and the breath through his lungs coming in short pants. He thought he might vomit.

Finally, he was close enough to catch a whiff of her scent.

Peaches.

Once he saw her body-markings he knew she was a Dragon Witch. That first tendril of her scent told him that she was a Witch who could belong to him.

Quickly he melted back into the dark, not willing to wake her dragon before he could figure out what to do.

His heart continued to beat frantically in his chest as he tried to think. The blood rushing in his ears, making him feel faint.

Nico needed to handle this. But Nico wouldn't *wake the hell up.* He'd been asleep for decades this time.

So, it was up to him. *What should he do? What could he do?*

She was definitely searching for something. She had been through every room, opened every door and cupboard, tapped on walls, pushed on bookcases and fireplaces, and crawled into hidey-holes he'd long forgotten.

He pulled his hair and tried to think. To come up with a plan.

She wasn't dressed like any Dragon Witch he knew. And she was armed. He'd seen the sword, and the claws she wore were deadly. No one locked her in a room when she wanted to learn how to fight. No, this woman had been taught how to take care of herself.

He grinned. That was okay. She would be his and she could take care of him too. Only Nico wouldn't like that. He snorted. Well. Nico wasn't here so it didn't matter what he wanted.

Nicu planned to take care of this his way. He would take the Dragon Witch somewhere else. Somewhere far away. Somewhere nice where the memories didn't hurt.

But he should be smart about this. There were ways to control unruly dragons... and he'd learned those lessons a long time ago. He knew how to take care of dragons who would fight their captivity—even if they were only a prisoner for a little while.

That thought reminded him of the room downstairs. The one the Father had used to teach them control. To keep him bound and unable to fight. Until Nicu decided he didn't want to do anything that would get him sent to that room.

The room with magic-infused shackles and towering ceilings.

He couldn't jump on her and hope to win any fight. He'd never make it to the hidden room. And she would never find it.

She'd uncovered some of the castle secrets, but he knew that she would never find the rooms in the dungeon without help.

He grinned, then ghosted out of the storeroom and down the hall. He opened the secret passage and started down the stairs. Leaving the carefully concealed door to the underground—open just a tiny bit. To be sure it stayed that way he carefully used his magic to push a pebble into just the right location. It would keep the door from closing and provide a plausible reason for it to be open. The Little Witch would think herself lucky. And he would make sure she headed in the right direction.



AUTUMN STOOD BEFORE the slightly open door and looked around. She was on the very bottom level of the castle. Or she had thought she was. Evidently, there were rooms underground. She had passed the updated kitchens with their electric appliances and gleaming marble countertops. Gone through the storerooms, the laundry, and what was once a large wine cellar. Now she stood at the last door and a thrill of anticipation washed over her.

Here, she thought.

She sighed and grinned at the same time. Her inner warning system told her this was a trap. *What the dragon-hell?* She looked around the hallway and opened her senses.

Fire?

What my Flame?

Someone is stalking us.

I know.

What? What do you mean you know? You are supposed to warn me when that happens. Remember? Autumn hissed in her mind.

No. Not when it's our dragon-male.

Autumn was silent.

Do you mean Dragon Lord?

No

She released her breath. *You know we are searching for a Lord. But not for us, not to keep. This is to help find all the cloned children. When we find Nicholae we will take him back to the others. We don't want one for ourselves. Let the others have the babies and deal with the damn men,* she ranted.

Lushy likes hers.

Lushy likes her what?

Never mind.

Autumn could feel Fire sulk. She didn't have time for this now. She tried talking to her familiar to see if she could get a straight answer. *So, this is a trap. Question is, do we call for backup and be smart? Or do we just open the damn door—go downstairs and see what is waiting for us—and be stupid?*

Not stupid. I told you what is waiting. Our dragon-male.

What the hell is a dragon-male?

I can't tell you. But I want one.

Autumn felt like knocking her head on the damn rock wall. Obviously, Fire wasn't going to help. She closed her eyes for a moment and thought about calling for help. Her inner warning system never failed her and once again she felt the overwhelming sensation that she needed to do this alone.

"Okay then," she said to the empty castle. "Down into the dark we go."

The thing was, it wasn't much darker than the main part of the castle.

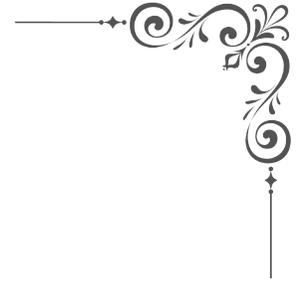
The stairs were steep. And dusty. But she could see clear footprints in that dust and decided that whoever left the door open was extending the invitation. When she got to the bottom, she realized she was definitely in a dungeon. This was not a castle basement where everything was clean and well-lit. It was dark, a little dirty, and heavy wooden doors led in three directions.

The one on the right was covered in chains. Autumn didn't think it would be an issue breaking them but why bother when the other two doors were wide open. Having a choice was interesting. Was she being given an option? Or the more likely scenario, did both doors lead to the same place?

She looked at the ground and stirred the dust at her feet. Took a deep breath of fresh clean air and looked at the walls. *Oh, this one was going to a lot of trouble.* Whoever it was, used extra effort to make this real.

The dungeon had been magically cleaned at one point in the very recent past. The walls were dust-free, the air clear of dirt and mildew, but recently the floor was covered with enough dust to ensure footprints would be clearly visible.

She grinned and took the middle door. The one with the very obvious footprints on the conveniently dusty floor.



——

*He'd been alone for so long,
and now there was a Dragon Witch who could be his.
He wanted her, he just needed to figure out
how to get her. And how to get Nico to wake the Hell up!
~From the musings of Nicu, dragon-male to Nico*

——

AUTUMN WANDERED IN the dungeon for a bit. Feeling her way around corners and down more stairs, following carefully in the steps where someone led.

She could feel something... a presence... watching her. Fire kept telling her it was a dragon-male, although she wouldn't explain what she meant. Autumn shrugged it off, thinking it was a term the dragon's used for a Lord.

Her dammed dragon was driving her insane. Fire stopped talking to Autumn and started singing a song. And Fire didn't have the best voice. Her dragon was screeching something about, *Come on baby light my fire. Try to set the night on fiyarerre!*

Making it impossible for Autumn to think or to hear anything. *Fire, for goddess sake, will you shut up!* She begged for the fourth time in as many minutes.

*Come on baby, light my fire
Come on baby, light my fire
Try to set the night on fire
Try to set the night on fire
Try to set the night on fire
Try to set the night **on fiyarerre!!!!***

Somewhere in all the caterwauling Autumn remembered the song. It was by the Doors and was from the 1960s. *Holy Hannah, Fire you have to stop!* she pleaded.

Autumn pushed around another corner, deaf and blind to anything but the song lyrics in her head.

She ran smack into a man who took advantage of her inattention and snapped a magick suppression collar around her neck. Then he immediately used his magic to enclose each wrist in a chain that went to the ceiling. Her arms hanging by her side. He hadn't pulled on the chain to force her arms over her head. *Yet.*

She might have a chance to get out of this.

“Oh, hell!” she fumed. She had a pretty good idea this was her dragon’s fault. And she would need her dragon’s magic to escape.



NICU MOVED HIS HANDS over the Dragon Witch’s body, removing all her weapons. She had several knives, a short sword, and a gun. She wore what seemed like small scraps of fabric. He didn’t think she could hide so many knives, but he was wrong. The tall boots hid several weapons. So did her hair.

She didn’t fight him. She kept her hands still and simply stood there waiting. Not saying a word. Even when he slowly slipped off the tight, elbow-length gloves tipped with dragon claws. She didn’t flinch.

He winced and backed up far enough that she couldn’t reach him. He used his magic to turn on the lights, so he could see her better.

She was beautiful. Her hair was black and sleek, highlighted with thin strands of white and silver. It fell to just past her shoulder, with some curling around her breasts.

Most of her skin was covered with a fierce snake dragon in vibrant red and blue. The Witch’s familiar had only left her face and part of her chest unmarked. He wanted to touch her skin, taste it.

He looked in her eyes and where he expected fear, he found arrogant irritation. Like she knew the chains he’d used to bind her wouldn’t hold for long.

He frowned. *What did she know that he didn’t?* He shook off the worry. No dragon could get out of those chains. He ought to know, he had tried often enough.

Her eyes were beautiful. Hazel green, flashing fire and annoyance.

He smiled. She had beautiful lips. They were snarling at him now, but they were beautiful.

She was tall, not quite to his six feet, but close. And her body was curvy, strong, and sleek. He moved closer to her. Taking big gulps of air, smelling her. Tasting her scent. Peaches...

She was perfect.

He couldn’t help himself. There had been chains left in this room of the dungeon for long centuries. He now used them to secure the hands he had already tied behind her back. She could still move a bit and stand flat on her

feet, but she couldn't touch him. Part of him knew it was wrong, but he wouldn't hurt her. And as soon as her scent woke Nico, he would let her go.

Dropping to his knees, he reached out and lightly traced the dips and swirls of her dragon-tats with the tips of his fingers. She was so fascinating, so soft, *his*. Following the path up her thigh, his fingers slipped under the small strap that left her ass bare.

Thong.

He knew what it was. And this one was black leather. He realized that the minuscule size of the clothing let her dragon breathe, let her dragon see. He smiled when the eye on the dragon head embedded on her hip, winked at him. "Fire," he breathed into the Witch's flesh. Her dragon's name was *Fire*.



GRINDING HER TEETH together, Autumn struggled not to move as the man at her feet worshiped her body. No, not her body, her dragon.

Damn, you Fire. Get me out of here.

No! And the traitor started humming.

Autumn rolled her eyes and looked down on dark wavy hair. He was breathing on her flesh, teasing her. She watched as he stuck out his tongue and licked a path along her thigh.

She sighed.

This was getting out of hand. Mostly because Fire was doing a little jig inside her, loving every minute of it. Autumn had to admit, the man had some moves.

Not man, dragon-male.

Whatever. Quit letting him lick us.

No.

Autumn stretched a little, into the touch of the dark-haired man. She watched as he moved his mouth and shifted his head back a bit so he could look up at her.

He had a little scruff of beard that tickled her flesh, tempted. With lush, dark brown hair that was just a little wavy and reached the top of his shoulders. Paired with the beard and soulful dark brown eyes, it was a killer combination.

Leaning back from her flesh, he stood. All quick elegance. When he smiled at her, she had to work to keep the smirk on her face. It was a lot of work since he had a really great smile. She'd seen the beard and part of her

realized he must have had a mustache but man, the stash was this man's crowning glory. It accented full, sensuous lips, a killer smile, and bright, even teeth.

Dragon-hell! She was a sucker for a pretty face and his was beautiful. His body was a little leaner than she typically liked. He had sleek muscles, a swimmer's body. It was nice but she loved corded, bulging muscles on a man. He was pretty. All spiffed up in a fancy coat with gloves in the pocket and his head and facial hair all groomed to a 'T.'

What she could see of his skin was tan, sort of mocha soft and flawless. He had long fingers and wore several rings on various digits. His wrists were wrapped in leather bracelets.

He moved to take off his coat, unbuttoning it to shuck it off nice shoulders and drape it over a rack that looked like it held torture devices. *Great.* She wasn't surprised to see that he had a suit on underneath the coat and a knit neck scarf. This man was GQ all the way. He snapped his fingers, and the suit was replaced by tight jeans tucked into little half-boots, a black tee-shirt that molded his chest, and a light leather jacket.

Better. He looked more appealing in ass-hugging jeans. Not to mention that wearing a suit in the dungeon was ridiculous. Not that she wanted him to appeal to her.

He still hadn't said a word and at this point, she refused to be the first one to speak. She had already tried to use her powers and the suppression collar did its job. She had no magic. Her strength wouldn't be enough to break the chains binding her unless her damn dragon decided to help.

Not yet.

Fine. You better not ask me for anything for several months.

I want to see what he does.

Autumn rolled her eyes. She could tell her crazy dragon where this was headed. The man was panting he was so turned on.

Not man, dragon-male.

Yeah, you keep saying that. What the hell is the difference between a dragon-male and a damn Dragon Lord? Autumn was beyond frustrated.

Not man.

Oh, my goddess, she was going to scream if Fire didn't...

Autumn's attention was drawn back to the male. She narrowed her eyes, wondering why he kept sniffing the air before he moved closer.



NICU TOOK A DEEP BREATH expecting the wonderful aroma of peaches. But all he could smell was the dust and dirt of the basement. He shuddered. He hated that scent. It reminded him of his childhood, the really bad parts.

He decided he must be standing too far away from the Witch to smell her. So, he took a step closer and filled his lungs. Coughed. Still cement dust and dirt.

Damn, he didn't want to get closer. Her presence overwhelmed him, took away all the thoughts in his head except for the need to pet her and to trace all her body markings. With his tongue. But he knew if he stood beside her, he would forget everything else but her body. And he was a little afraid of her. He shuddered, he wanted to touch her so badly. He knew that soon that compulsion would override what little good sense he had.

He needed Nico to handle this. He wondered if her scent would finally be the thing that woke up his Lord. He took another deep breath and exhaled in irritation. Damn damp and smelly basement. It was blocking the Dragon Witch's lovely, warm peach aroma.

He took another step closer and noticed the dusty cast to her skin. He couldn't have her magically clean off the gray, gritty coating because he was using the suppression collar. He could wave his hand and get rid of the dirt, but it wouldn't entice her dragon to fill the cavern with its scent and the only thing Nico would smell would be his magic. When he traced her body-markings earlier, Fire filled his senses with her fragrance. Now he couldn't smell anything but the soul-sucking basement.

He frowned. Fire wanted him to touch the Dragon Witch. To let her sing to him. He purred through their mental link and stepped closer, trying to entice the dragon to make enough dragon pheromones to wake up Nico.

The dragon wanted him closer, wanted his hands and mouth on them.

Frustrated, Nicu scanned the basement for ideas. How could he arouse the Witch and her dragon without putting his hands on her flesh and losing himself?

He noticed an old water bucket and held his breath, shivering. He remembered the ice-cold water being thrown on the dragon to wake him up. So, torture and training could start again. He hated cold water. But he loved warm water, would love it if someone would bathe him. He looked up at the ceiling where the chains were fixed. Right now, they were loose, allowing him to lock the Dragon Witch's arms behind her back with his magic. She could walk a few steps. Her arms were held with chains and his magic behind

her back. He could fix that, it would give him more control and curtail her ability to move, or to somehow slip away from him. He didn't want her to leave him.

He used his mind to turn the crank on the chains, drawing them up, ignoring the Witch's cry of distress when her arms were released from being bound behind her back, only to be pulled up and over her head until her body dangled in front of him. She was completely at his mercy. Now he could touch her without fear that she would break his magic.

The collar she wore and the chains coming from the ceiling had been created with much stronger magic than his.

He summoned the large wooden bucket and filled it with hot water and fragrant bubbles. Peach scented bubbles. He tugged on the hose, turning on the water so that it would warm up. He would never be so cruel as to spray his future mate with cold water. It was such a horrible shock to the system.

He dipped a soft sponge into the soapy warm water and turned to run it over her arm and chest. When she shivered, he pushed heat into the room and at the same time opened the doors leading to Nico's lair. A warm breeze flowed from Nicu, pushing past the Dragon Witch, and hopefully carrying her enticing aroma to the sleeping Lord.



WITH ARMS EXTENDED over her head Autumn couldn't fight or resist unless she was willing to kick the man in the head or the balls. She tested her balance and worked through the moves in her mind. The problem with kicking him was that even if she knocked him out, she couldn't get out of the chains unless Fire was willing to help her.

No.

Yeah, I figured. Part of her was frustrated with her dragon and the other part was just happy to hang here and see what happened next.

She hadn't said a word, neither had the man. They just moved through the motions in silence. Neither of them made demands nor bitched about the situation, they just watched each other, and he touched her once and a while. It was a quiet war of wills.

Now with her strapped to the ceiling, he seemed intent on washing her. Getting all the dirt and dust off from her scramble through this castle and into the dungeon. Autumn closed her eyes and fought the urge to give in. To what she wasn't sure, she just knew he wanted something. And having him

carefully scrub off the day's toil, enticed her to give him whatever he wanted. The warm water and the teasing motion of the sponge and his hands felt amazing and tempted her soul.

Bathing her turned very sexual. He started crooning songs, and Autumn realized it was more for Fire's benefit than hers. Her dragon seemed to be in a stupor.

"What is your name?" he asked.

Before she could decide if she would tell him or not, he nodded and said, "Flame. My Flame, *our flame*. It suits you. I am Nicu."

Fire, she hissed. Irritated that her dragon seemed to be spilling their secrets under this man's spell. Before Fire could correct her, Autumn pushed the thought that she *knew... not man*. She just didn't know *what* he was, and the term dragon-male didn't answer her questions. He said his name was Nicu and she thought that could be short for Nicholae. It surprised her a bit, she had expected him to be a little more... manly.



NICU WASN'T DISAPPOINTED when he asked his witch her name and she didn't answer, but Fire did. The beauty under his hands was called *Flame*. It suited her, she was a tall flame, and he would make her burn.

He murmured to her, nonsense because he wanted to calm the Dragon Witch. She didn't have to answer him, he just wanted her to know that he would never hurt her. Never let her be hurt.

He poured warm water over her, getting her hair and most of her body wet. Deciding that he would start at the top of her head and wash her hair.

It was one of the few pleasures in his life. He loved having someone massage his scalp and wash his hair. He often went to the barber in town, just to have his hair washed. They thought him a little strange, but he loved it so much.

When she pressed into his hands, he knew she liked it too, so he took his time.

He ran his fingers through her hair, scratching her scalp and then massaging. He grinned when she moved into his touch, seeking more. He spent several minutes just working in the soap, then rinsing her long, black hair. He wanted to stop, to brush it and braid it, and play with the long locks, tracing some of the white streaks, but he would do that another time.

Her wet, soft body was there for him to explore.

He moved his soapy hands down, gliding over every part of her flesh. First filling his senses with everything, then going back and paying attention to detail, to her reactions. Nicu made note of every time she shuddered or shifted towards his hands, then he would spend more time on that part of her body.

He skimmed the tips of his fingers over her face, her eyebrows, and lips, her cheekbones. She was exquisitely beautiful. Her eyes were closed, so he could stare at her body all he wanted. He smoothed his hands down her neck and over her arms, spending several minutes playing with her hands and fingers.

Then he shifted slick hands over her back, down to her buttocks, where he lovingly kneaded and smoothed her flesh. He knelt on the cement to get better leverage and spent several minutes rubbing her lower back and the globes of her ass. The Witch, his Flame, groaned and moved under his hands, obviously enjoying his efforts.

After long minutes, he stood. Running his fingers up her back and over her shoulders. He returned his focus to her front. Paying homage to her chest, her breasts. At first, he used the soap, rubbing it into her body then rinsing her off with warm water. He filled his palms with her breasts, testing her weight, teasing her flesh, rubbing light circles around her nipples but never quite touching them. She sucked in a breath and moaned, moving into his touch. Lifting her eyelids to watch him.

She shifted her body so her nipples would rub into his hands. He rewarded her by pinching the taut buds between his fingers. He washed away the soap with warm water and then bent over to use his mouth on her flesh. Licking her nipples and molding each plump mound, he used his teeth to tug the berry bright nubs. He couldn't resist suckling at her breast for long moments.

Eventually, he pulled back and sighed, grinning at her he dropped to his knees. Using the sponge and warm water he carefully washed each leg, foot, toe, and then up between her thighs. He trailed his fingertips over the soft flesh and when she spread her legs in invitation, he slid them over her slick flesh. For long moments he played with her sweet pussy, stroking, sliding, teasing her.



SHE WAS IN SO MUCH trouble. She had started this as a game, keeping her mouth shut, not talking to him, or telling him anything. Thinking to punish him in some way.

It hadn't worked for her. Now the only thing she wanted to say, would be orders. To touch her in specific ways, to bite her, pinch her nipples. Fuck her.

Goddess, she was so focused on what he was doing to her, she didn't care about the mission, or that this man was Matei's brother.

Not a man.

Oh, god. Shut the hell up Fire. She blocked her dragon from her mind. She didn't want to listen to the damn thing sing about fire or natter on about the male in front of her.

She wanted him to move. To touch her more, harder. To kiss her.

She gasped when he stood in front of her and stripped away his clothing. Changing the jeans and tee-shirt he wore to a loincloth that covered his manhood.

He didn't have dragon-tats. Nothing marked his body. It was a splendid body, but the lack of any dragon-markings meant he wasn't a Dragon Lord. So, this wasn't Nicholae.

Damn, she was wasting time.

He moved close to her and poured warm water over them both. When he shifted his body against her, she realized they were naked so he could slide his flesh over hers. She was slick with water and need.

Before the urge to move and get on with her search took hold, Nicu distracted her again. Once more, he started at the top. This time using his mouth, his lips, his entire body to surround her with his touch and the tease of flesh on flesh.

The slow, methodical seduction was driving her crazy. Making her pant and mewl, and she had to bite her lip to keep from begging him to do more.

Part of her was thrilled that he was so enthralled with the slick softness of her skin and how her supple flesh and muscular body reacted to his hands, to the slide of his body.

He kept up a running dialogue about every little nuance in her flesh. Whispering to her about how he could do this for hours. Spend *hours* petting her, playing with her.

Even the rasp of his soft voice in her ear caused her to moan and stretch toward him. She wanted more.

The soft sigh at her neck made her skin ripple as he said, “I want to lick you from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet. You smell so good, my Flame. I am going to taste every inch of your flesh, and when I get to your mouth, I’m going to tease your tongue, entice it to play. Then I think I’ll spend an hour just sucking on those beautiful nipples.”



HE MOVED HIS HANDS down her body. Teasing over her breasts to slide down her stomach and play in the trim bit of hair covering her cunt. He slipped his fingers through her slick folds, pleased that her scent now filled the dungeon.

Nicu teased her legs apart and leaned in to lick her ear, growling, “When I drop to my knees in front of you again, I will lick right here and taste your heat.” When he strummed her clit, she groaned and jerked against him.

She whispered, “More!”

It was a demand he would love to fill. He moved, using more force and more teeth and tongue as he caressed her body. Nicu knew that he was rubbing away one tension and replacing it with the strain of wanting more than Nicu would give her. Could give her. Not yet.

Not until Nico joined them. But it was getting harder and harder to remember that.

He wanted her for himself.

He found it hard to follow the plan to get her ready so he could offer her to Nico as a present. She needed to smell of peaches and sin and be perfect for the Dragon Lord.

She was already perfect for him.

He should stop. He knew she was ready, that her scent was back to peach perfection. He should take her to Nico. But when Flame moaned and leaned into him, then licked his ear, he couldn’t stop yet. Soon.

He traced his hands over her shoulders and drew her to him. Getting closer. Brushing her body with his. He moved his hands back to her breasts, cupping them, gliding his palms back and forth over her nipples, thrumming them. Faster, harder. Her beautiful mocha-colored nipples beaded for him. His Flame moaned and pushed into his touch.

He got caught in the sensation and forgot about Nico. He brought his mouth down, needing to taste her again. And he lost himself in her. He was

just a little enslaved by her touch and taste and the feel of the Dragon Witch he wanted for his mate.

He moved his mouth over her, murmuring promises into her flesh, “I’ll keep you safe. I promise to keep you forever. To feed you only good things. I’ll wash you every night and never hurt you. I won’t let anyone hurt you. Even if Nico won’t wake up, I’ll just keep you here, mine forever. In the dungeon. But not as a prisoner, as my love.”

Taking a deep breath, Nicu moaned, rubbing his face over her flesh and up to the nape of her neck where her scent was the strongest. The smell of her was driving him mad. He couldn’t help himself, she wouldn’t talk to him, but he told her everything. All about his pent-up fantasies of having someone to love. Someone to take care of him. Of what he could do to her body and have her do to him.

He reached a finger out to trace the dragon-markings on her chest and was lost in the swirl of red and blue dragon bodies crossing over her back and down each hip.

These were fierce fighting dragons. And he loved them. Loved the Fire and the Flame.



AUTUMN WAS LOSING HER mind. Her body was going up in flames and she couldn’t stop it. She took a deep breath and tried to focus. For goddess sake, her strongest power was lust. She had often used lust as her last defense, turning it on men so she could escape from their traps. Only she’d never had to fight her wishes before. Even more important, she’d never had to fight her dragon before.

She reminded herself that releasing the emotion and scent of lust was just a tool she used. She often pretended to be the innocent, helpless female, overwhelmed with a man’s desires.

Once those men succumbed and lost their minds in the haze of passion, she would kick them in the balls and leave them laying in the dirt.

Her body shifted against the male. But this time she couldn’t do that. Couldn’t fight him. Oh, goddess. She needed to do that and get out of this dungeon.

Maybe in just a few more minutes.

Today the power of lust was a double-edged sword. For as she turned him on, pushed out the cravings to embed themselves in his flesh, she couldn’t

keep her own needs locked away and uninvolved. She burned, just as he did. She needed his touch as much as he needed hers. She got caught in the vicious circle, using her element, pushing him to touch her more, to use his mouth and hands to bring her pleasure.

And she used the thought that he wanted to have her hands on him. Pushing that need. Right now, it wasn't the need she had to escape him. She didn't want to go. Not yet. This felt so good she genuinely wanted her hands on him. On his body.

For the first time, Autumn could feel the dragon within her responding, yearning. So, she had to fight not only her own nature and cravings but Fire's.

Part of her brain tried to work out the question of Nicu while he was driving her insane with lust. He wasn't Nicholae. For all she knew, he could be a thief or someone who cared for the castle. At this point, she was guessing. But the male had magic and moves. He had quit talking to her and Fire refused to get involved.

Other than purring and humming odd songs, the dragon was useless. Between the man using his hands and mouth on her and Fire's incessant humming, Autumn was losing her mind.

She had been well and truly captured by his lust. She needed to find Nichole but was struggling to remember why it mattered.

All at once, clarity returned and the lust in her body cooled when she remembered all of the missing and endangered children. She fed the memory with moments of caring for the few children they recovered last week.

Autumn took a deep breath, relieved to be able to rise above the needs of her body. Her needs didn't matter, the children came first. With a final mental shove, she cleared the fog of lust from her brain.

She leaned forward and whispered in his ear while she licked and suckled the flesh she could reach with her mouth, "Release me..." she cajoled. "Release me and let me touch you. I need to touch you." Then she used her teeth and tongue, and her power to call lust from any male.

Within moments Nicu responded to her. There was a small thrill when she felt the chains start to lower. Nicu shifted against her and magically let her down so her feet were once again solidly on the floor instead of her being on the tips of her toes, and her hands could rest by her side. Nicu stripped the restraints from her wrists so she could touch him.

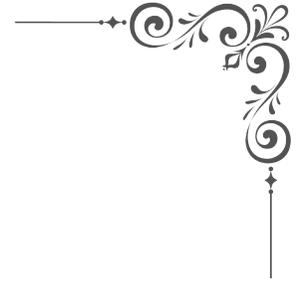
She let him pull her into his arms for one moment, then put her arms around him and held on for another.

She couldn't help herself. Autumn knew she needed to leave, but it wouldn't hurt to run her hands down that body, over that heated flesh. To use her mouth. For just a few more minutes.

Autumn lost herself for several moments in the man.

Not a man, dragon-male. That whispered insistence from her dragon snapped Autumn back. Clearheaded once again, she eased back from Nicu.

There was a tinge of regret when she felt her flesh slip from his hands when she turned and sprinted for the stairway for all she was worth.



——

*Suddenly awake after years of hibernating,
his mind frantically explored the space surrounding him.
He searched for the reason his heart raced,
and his body was electrified.
His eyesight sliced the dark, seeing nothing.
He took a deep breath and stilled.
The scent of ripe peaches disturbed his rest.*

~Nicholae Dracovin

——

NICHOLAE STEPPED RIGHT in front of the Dragon Witch. When she bounced off his chest, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her naked body against his fully covered one.

Nicu reverently sighed, “Nicholae!”

She squirmed and hissed, and then went still.

“Could your arms be any bigger?” she complained.

He didn’t answer. His body was heavily muscular, his biceps as thick as tree trunks. He could be bigger, but he didn’t need to be. Any larger and his speed would decrease. Nico had lived for almost eight hundred years. He had plenty of time to test the mass to speed ratio of his body.

He thought about willing away his clothing so he could feel her flesh against his own. He was dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and jeans to cover his dragon markings, even though the clothing slowed him down and made him weak. Ever since he was a small child, the Father made him cover all of the dragon tattoos on his body. He looked at his hands, wanting to touch the woman in his arms, but he had to wear gloves.

The body coverings made it difficult for him to go anywhere, do anything. He couldn’t stand the clothing, so it forced him to stay away from people and sleep his life away. The fierce aching in his bones only stopped when he slept.

He tightened his grip and bent his head forward, nuzzling the top of the woman’s head. Her hair was soft and fragrant. Inhaling her scent, he enjoyed the feeling of a woman in his arms. It had been centuries.

And this woman was a Dragon Witch. One whose scent told him she could be a mate for him and his dragon.

Nicholae closed his eyes and shuddered. He let his body absorb the feeling of having someone to hold. He enjoyed the press of her soft curves against his hard body.

When he woke from hibernation his body had been tight with need. His underground cell door left open and there was such a tantalizing fragrance in the air he couldn't help but follow the trail. When he discovered his dragon-male with this woman, Nico stood for several moments in the shadows.

When he realized it was her scent that called to him, he wanted to pounce on her immediately and claim her. Instead, he stood and watched as Nicu played with the Dragon Witch.

Panting, wanting, needing to touch.

Now she was in his arms, and he couldn't believe how it made him feel. She was perfect. With black hair threaded with tiny strips of white. He nuzzled his nose in that hair until he was drunk with her scent. The strands caught between their bodies released more of her fragrance. She smelled so good.

He loved peaches.

Her naked flesh was covered in markings. Not like his, she still had quite a bit of pink-toned skin showing around her dragon tats. But she had colorful snake-like dragons over her arms and legs, down her back and stomach, and curling around one of her breasts. Her familiar had only left the Witch's face and part of her chest unmarked.

Nicu used their private mental path to ensure he knew the familiar's name was Fire and the woman in his arms was the Flame. Their Flame. Nicu wanted them to claim her.

She fit in his arms. He was over six feet tall so he figured she was about three or four inches shy of that. Her body was strong, curvy, *his*. She looked up at him, her golden hazel eyes flashing irritation.

"I caught you, now I get to keep you," he growled. Just in case she didn't understand their intentions.

He opened his eyes and looked over her head at Nicu, mentally sending the word, *How?*

What he meant was—How did Nicu find her? How did he get her into the dungeon? How was it possible that she was their perfect match? But for now, instead of asking those questions, it was just—how?

He hadn't spoken to anyone in so long. Not mentally or using his vocal cords. It would take him time to regain that skill. Just as the first few steps

out of his cave had been weak and unsteady as he relearned how to use his legs and remembered how to walk.

Nicu grinned at him. Understanding what Nico wanted, he sent the mental picture of finding the Dragon Witch roaming around in the castle above them. She had meticulously searched every room and closet and taken some of Maricara's things.

When Nicu realized what she was and that her flesh smelled like peaches, the dragon-male made sure that her scent would fill the rooms. Hoping to wake Nico and make him crazy enough that he would finally move from his cave in the dungeon.

Nico sucked in a breath. Along with the images Nicu sent him, was the loneliness the dragon-male had felt over the decade or more he'd been hibernating. He frowned. He wondered how long he'd been asleep this time. He took a deep breath, bringing the peach fragrance deep into his lungs. He sighed.

Nicu was right to use the Witch to push him to rejoin the living. All Nicholae had wanted in the last few centuries was to sleep, to dream, and not be made to deal with the sadness in his soul.

Today that sadness had been replaced with the promise of a peach-scented witch.

But Nicholae felt his dragon's hint of desperate need. Not just for the Witch Nico held in his arms, but for the severed connection from his Lord.

Their minds connected occasionally while Nico slept. This was so Nicu could impart any knowledge the Dragon Lord would need once he woke from hibernation. But the link only lasted a few moments and it happened rarely. Nicholae suddenly realized that Nicu had been left on his own for entirely too long.

They hadn't talked. Nor had Nicholae asked how his dragon-male fared.

Nicholae had been in hibernation for a long time, and he knew he had neglected the dragon-male. His mind needed to catch up with everything that had occurred over the last few decades. He felt a pang of regret for having left Nicu alone for so long.

Nicholae shuddered as Nicu pushed information into his mind. His knees wobbled. He trembled and held on to the Witch, using her to keep him upright.



ONCE AGAIN, AUTUMN tried to break free from the arms wrapped around her and realized it was useless. Shit. She found what she'd been looking for—Nicholae. Could the timing be any worse?

She hadn't sensed anyone else in the dungeon except for her and Nicu. When she held him spellbound with lust and took advantage of his enthrallment to make a run for it, she was shocked when she ran smack into the muscle-bound god.

She turned and ran, hitting his chest, hard. And then his heavily muscled arms wrapped around her and trapped her against his body. Those arms were covered with a shirt, but she could feel the power of dragon-markings pulse in his body and then seep through hers. As if the fabric wasn't there.

Dragon Lord. Oh, my hell. Her body was overwhelmed with the feeling of the man's magic and strength. The essence of him pulsed within her soul. How could she believe for a second that Nicu was a Lord, the difference between the two men was astounding.

Nicu dragon-male. Fire sighed. *This man Dragon Lord.*

Autumn clamped her mouth shut. In front of her nose and mouth was a very tiny patch of flesh, she could breathe in the Lord and wanted to taste him with her tongue. Those massive arms kept her pressed into him, she couldn't move her head away and the almost overwhelming desire to taste was dangerous. This Dragon Lord was a threat to the freedom of her soul.

She needed to remind herself she didn't want a Lord.

"Let go of me," she squeaked into muscle. Then rolled her eyes at the weak-assed sound. She cleared her throat and tried again, shifting, wanting to stomp on his foot for emphasis. But she couldn't get any leverage. "Let. Go. Of. Me."

She felt his body shift around her, enough that she could move her head off of his chest. But before she could lash out, the chains were back on her wrists and her hands were lifted above her head.

And she dangled between the men. "Oh, for goddess sake!" she hissed. This time additional chains were locked around her ankles so she couldn't kick, and she tried. She was well and truly caught for the moment.

She lifted her eyes to glare at the Lord and her heart stuttered.

Oh, dear goddess. The man looked like a warrior of old. With long, dark brown wavy hair falling to the middle of his back. It was thick and wild and something she could spend hours playing with. His biceps and thighs were the size of oak trees and just as hard. What she could see of his body, and it

wasn't much because he was covered from neck to toe, showed her his flesh was heavily marked with dragon-tats. The dragon-markings she could see had no color to them, they were simply black with shades of gray.

The ones on his neck and the small Vee where his shirt opened at the top, showed that there was very little unmarked skin in between the tats. Just small slivers of pale flesh.

She watched intently as he started to remove his gloves, one finger at a time as he circled her, his eyes mapping out her body. When he stood in front of her again and pulled off the glove, her body shivered. The man was Goddess blessed. Even his hands bore the markings of his dragon. Her eyes moved slowly up and focused on the large dragon scale pattern on his neck, before finally moving up to his face and hair.

The only clear flesh she could see was his face. She desperately wanted to see him naked and find out what else was marked.

He had amazing dark brown curls that sweep past his shoulders. A full, thick beard that was also dark brown, was accented with Viking braids. She grinned and tried to suppress it.

Those braids gave her a small hint of his personal creed. Showing his willingness to fight for what he believed in.

She took a deep breath and met his gaze. She thought she had prepared herself for the punch of lust those eyes would bring her. But she was wrong. They were ice blue and burning her with a fierce intensity.

Once he was satisfied that she was secure and unable to lash out with her feet, he stepped up to her and put his nose against her flesh, right where her neck and shoulder joined. His beard tickled her, right at her hairline, she shuddered when he drew in a deep breath.

His body brushed against hers. "Peaches..." he sighed into her skin, making her writhe with need in the captive embrace.

He held out his hand for her to look at, to watch as he slowly lowered his fingers to her flesh, and lightly skimmed over her arm, her chest, and down to her stomach. He traced her dragon-tats. And she watched and silently moaned at the soft touch.

He didn't move away from her but shifted around her. Keeping his body tight to hers while he used both hands to skim over her flesh, to follow the loops and swirls of her dragon. She could feel his cock grow and shift against her ass as he moved behind her.

Shit. This was getting out of hand fast.

He was in front of her again, using his fingers to slide over a nipple, he looked up and met her eyes. She tried to make the heat in them indicate fierce irritation and not lust.

He must have figured out she wasn't completely happy when he reached up to rub his finger over her lips as if trying to erase her frown.

That movement put his full front against hers and she hissed at the contact.

Before she saw Nicu naked she had wondered if he was a Dragon Lord. But even if she'd met Nicholae on the street without knowing his name, she would have known what he was. *This was a Lord.*

The size, the overall sense that he knew what he wanted and would try and take it. That entitlement thing. Plus, the power coming off his body in waves. The first man, Nicu, was just a little softer, a little gentler.

Hurt, Fire told her. *Dragon-male hurt.*

Autumn frowned. Shit. More things she didn't understand.

The big man in front of her raised his arm and rubbed the frown lines between her eyes. When he touched her, Autumn's body clenched tightly. She was ready, so ready for more.

"There is no need for worry or pain. I can make you smile, to gasp in delight and forget all your worries." His voice was deep, guttural, thrilling.

She rolled her eyes. Clamping her mouth shut when he dropped to his knees in front of her and put his mouth at the juncture of her thighs. Licked.

Then she gasped and moaned in obvious delight. *Shit.*

For several minutes he licked and purred and whispered his plans against her flesh. He wanted to lock her away, keep her for a pet on a chain. He would just take her out to play with once-and-awhile. He was going to fuck her, and keep her, and make her scream his name nightly.

Autumn hated that his words and tantalizing mouth turned her on. She even thought about asking his name, but she was afraid she knew. *Nicholae.* She bit her tongue to keep from rewarding his efforts.

She wasn't worried about what he said. Part of that was just sexual teasing, she understood that.

She'd like to hook **him** up down here, spread eagle on a bed with his arms and legs bound so she could have all that glorious body at her mercy.

But it wasn't going to happen. For one thing, there were a lot of people who knew exactly where to find her, and if she didn't check in with them in an hour or so they would come looking for her. *In force.*

When they did, she had no intention of having them find her naked with a Dragon Lord worshiping her on his knees.

She'd never live it down.

Autumn was having a marvelous time, but she had things to do. It was time to end this playtime and get back to work. She would make sure they picked up where they left off... later.

She shuddered when he purred the next words into her flesh.

"I'll strap you down and spend hours making you scream," the big man promised.

Before Autumn could comment, the big guy stood up and pulled her into his arms again, rubbed his covered body against hers. *If he were naked, could she resist?* she wondered. And decided it would be better if she didn't find out.



NICHOLAE'S VOICE BECAME stronger as he detailed his plans for the Witch. Part of him knew it wouldn't happen, but it was so fun to plan it all out. He pulled her against him and shuddered, wanting to be naked so he could feel all that lovely flesh against his. If he did that, he would lose complete control.

He knew he needed to keep her on edge, not able to think or she'd try and leave him. With the tip of his finger, he traced a light path from her neck to her core. Then he brought his hands up to cup her breasts and used his thumbs to flick her nipples. He leaned in and blew over the tips, watching as her body reacted favorably to his actions. He looked up and smiled into her eyes before he leaned in and licked first one, then the other deep mocha nipple, finally settling on one to pull into his mouth.

He moaned at the same time she did, entranced with the taste and feel of his Witch.

Nico leaned back. "I'll keep you hidden in my dungeon, tied up and at my mercy. I'll learn all your secrets. But don't tell me too fast, there is a selection of whips and torture devices I want to use on you. I'll even spank you to make you talk."

Nicholae was delighted that the Witch, Flame, seemed to enjoy his dirty talk. Her body shivered and the scent of her arousal increased. "While I would never mar your perfect flesh, I might enjoy spanking that cute ass. What do you think?" he whispered into her ear.

Before she could tell him to go to hell, he shifted around her naked body, holding her, touching her, distracting her by sniffing her hair, the soft skin of her neck, the slope of her breast. He continued the fantasy of her at his mercy, warning, “This dungeon is dragon proof. You may think you can escape, but I’ll bind you in chains and magic. Keep you bound to the wall as my plaything for all eternity, with your sole purpose to bear my children. If you are nice to me, I’ll bring you a bed, feed you from my hand, bend you to my will with both passion and pain.”

A cry from the corner had Nicholae whirling around to see Nicu slide down the wall to curl on the floor in the corner. His body was shaking, and he wrapped his arms around himself, rocking back and forth.

Nicu looked up at him with tear-filled eyes and screamed, “No. No, I promised her. We can’t hurt her, she’s ours. No dungeon, no hurt, no pain! Not our Flame, never our Fire. No!”

They watched in amazement as Nicu had what looked like a complete panic attack. He screamed and shook, rolled up into a ball, and cried. Then he threw his body out to rant about things that had been done to him in this dungeon and he cried some more.

Autumn and Nicholae looked at each other in shock. “What did you do to him?” they said at the same time. Then frowned at each other.

Autumn cocked her head. “Fire says the things you were saying to me and threatening to do, reminded Nicu too much of what was done to him as a child. She said he needs to be taken out of the dungeon, especially out of this room. What does your dragon say?”

Nicholae turned to her and frowned. *What did she mean what did his dragon say?* Nicu was his dragon. Before he could correct her, the dragon inside his Witch blasted out of her body and threw him across the room.

He didn’t think she could do that with the suppression collar on.



AUTUMN FELT HER BODY-markings throb. The small pain provided a few seconds of warning before her dragon popped out, just a few inches in front of her nose—hovering in front of her. Fire winked at her and charged the Dragon Lord.

In the first seconds after being released from their host’s body, a dragon-familiar manifested the size of a small dog—a dog with a two-foot tail and a wingspan of about four feet.

Fire was mad because they were ignoring Nicu. She flew straight at Nicholae making sure he hit the floor with the dragon on top of him. Then she turned her head and blew healing flame toward Nicu.

Autumn grinned as Fire manipulated the body of her dragon to expand until her weight nearly crushed the Dragon Lord.

The iridescent red scales on Fire's upper body gleamed in the light of the basement. Nicu had stopped crying for a moment and watched, transfixed by the now horse-sized dragon sitting on Nicholae.

"Ummph," Nicholae complained and pushed at the dragon's haunches. Fire sat there, unconcerned with the Lord's actions.

When Fire blasted out of her body, all the chains holding Autumn fell to the floor. She lifted her hands to pull her tangled mass of hair off her shoulders and fastened it in a messy bun on top of her head with a tie she had on her wrist. She didn't miss that the action redirected Nicu's attention from the dragon, so he concentrated on the lift of her breasts as she put her hands over her head. She could also tell that Nicholae lost his train of thought, the frown on his face disappeared as he focused on her movements.

She worked extremely hard to keep the smile off her face. She would have to remember how they seemed to lose their minds when she was naked.

Fire turned and blasted her magic and heat through Autumn, melting the remaining bits and pieces of the collar and chains that had bound her.

"Thanks, Fire," she said.

Currently the size of a horse, Fire glared down at Nicholae. The dragon turned her massive head toward Nicu, who was curled in a ball in the corner. He had started spewing out his fears and was rocking back and forth again.

Fire puffed out a small ball of dragon-heat that washed over Nicu and he calmed a bit. Fire looked back down at Nico. Autumn got the impression her dragon wasn't happy with him. *Good*, neither was she.

Fire huffed smoke over Nicholae's face and flew off to land beside Nicu, obviously wanting to comfort him. Her size had grown until she was big enough to cover Nicu's body with her wings. She wrapped her tail around the man. He started crying in earnest again and his rocking picked up speed.

Autumn scowled at the picture. That was just weird. Fire never paid any attention to the men who ghosted through her life.



NICHOLAE SAT UP AND stretched away the pain from slamming into the cement wall. He turned to make sure that Autumn was okay and blinked when he found his Witch was still naked, yet he could see she had found her weapons.

She was also glaring at him.

Evidently, no one liked his plan to tie her up in the dungeon.

“It was a joke. A form of foreplay,” he offered.

She snorted. “Your foreplay needs work. It wasn’t much of a joke. The walls of this place are still suppressing my magic. I found my weapons but don’t see my clothes.”

“I’m not the one who took them off of you. I don’t know what Nicu did with them.”

Autumn’s head snapped up and she hissed. “For goddess sake put some clothes on me before your brother and my family get down here and find me naked.”

Nicholae frowned at her, tilted his head, and listened for a moment. There was someone upstairs. He waved his hand and did as she asked.

She looked down in disgust. “These are not my clothes. This looks like something a nun would wear and anyone who knows me will freak the hell out and know somethings up!” She ran her fingers over the heavy fabric and snarled in distaste. “You need to change this unless you want to spend a few hours answering questions about what happened down here,” she threatened. “All of those questions will be centered on if I gave my consent for the chains and the foreplay.”

He frowned at her again. Weakly stating, “You didn’t object.” But she was right. And he could hear several people tromping around upstairs in the castle, so he did as she asked. He had seen the picture in his mind of the clothing she’d worn when Nicu found her upstairs. He tried to replicate it. *For now.*

Later he planned to have a discussion with her about what was appropriate for a Dragon Witch to wear. And explain why she didn’t need her weapons anymore. He would protect her.

His eyes crossed when he saw her dressed in the black leather strap of material between her thighs with a small triangle covering her mound. Two additional triangles tied together to barely restrain her perfect, heavy breasts. He’d seen it in his mind, but the effect was more scandalous in person. What the hell was she doing?

Before he could explain to her that this was not appropriate attire for a female, she distracted him with a comment about his family.

She grinned. “I can’t tell who is up there, but it is liable to be both of your brothers. Matei is mated to my coven leader, and they sent me here to wake you the hell up and to get some of the things Maricara wanted from her room. Since Maricara never plans to step foot in this place again, they thought I could gather a few of her belongings while I looked for you. I’ve been gone several hours, and they probably tried to contact me, but the suppression collar kept them out. Now the magic in the dungeon walls that targets witch magic is keeping me from figuring out who is upstairs. Since Matei tried to kidnap Midnight when they met, she would have kept track of the time.”

He frowned, trying to make sense of what she said. He gave up and walked over to kneel beside Nicu and Fire. His dragon-male was still crying, although the violent hysterics had subsided.

But the Witch’s dragon, Fire, wouldn’t let him get close enough to help.

So, Nicholae backed off and allowed Fire to calm the man with her heat and nearness. He seemed to respond to her.

Nicholae felt a little lost. He glanced at Nicu and knew that they couldn’t let anyone else see his dragon-male. Going from a sleep of, well—he had no idea of how long, but it felt like an awfully long time—to wide awake with a possible mate made him dizzy. He was feeling too much, too soon.

“Let’s move this upstairs, Flame. So Nicu isn’t seen.”

She frowned at him. “My name is Autumn. Not Flame. That is a private name between Fire and me. I’m a healer in the coven and what Nicu is going through right now isn’t physical. My dragon comforts him. We can deal with whatever issues this man has later.”

They moved toward the door. Nicholae wasn’t sure why *Autumn* didn’t know what Nicu was. He’d have to figure that out later. “Healer? Then why are you dressed as a warrior with so many weapons?”

Autumn snorted. “Because I’m a modern Witch. I can cause all kinds of pain, or I can stop the pain.” She turned and grinned at him. “I’m one of the lucky ones. I get to do both!”

As Autumn started explaining a little about why she was here, he watched her every small movement. Avidly. This was his Dragon Witch. The words rattled around in his head. He was struggling to understand her.

“So, if that isn’t Matei and Midnight clomping around up there, then it has to be Vlad.” She sighed. “I really hope it’s your brother.”

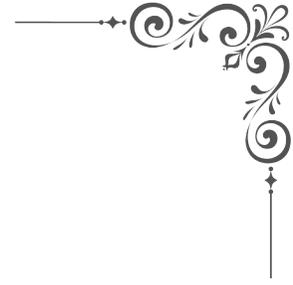
“My brother?” he asked and looked back at her.

She nodded. “Yes, maybe both brothers. I told you Matei is mated to my coven leader, and they sent me here to find you and get some of Maricara’s things”

Nicholae closed his eyes and tried to contact Matei. His head hurt. He had tried to absorb Nicu’s knowledge too fast. In too big of a chunk. Not to mention that it had been so long since he’d tried to use his powers. Pulling the little triangles out of the air to cover Autumn took little thought but reaching out to his brother, *hurt*. He sighed. He had a feeling he had been asleep too long this time. It was going to be hard to put himself back together.

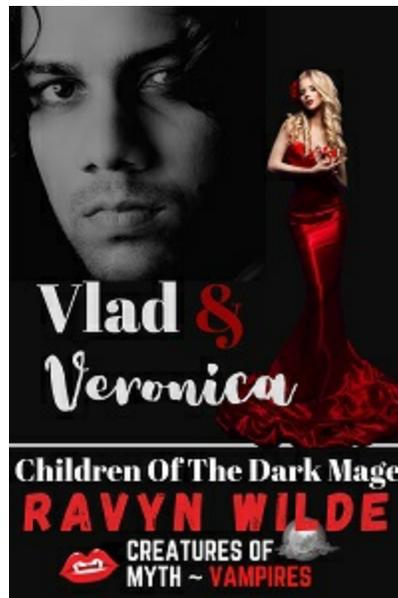


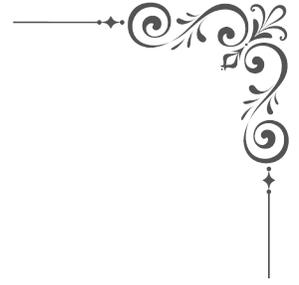
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Vlad & Veronica

**Children of the Dark Mage
Creatures of Myth, Book 10**





—❧—

Technically, his True Bond mate shouldn't be able to leave him at all. But, Eve had presented Jazz with an unusual birthday present this year. Each sublingual strip allowed them twenty-four hours apart—without either of them succumbing to separation sickness. Luke couldn't wait to explain Eve's new drug to Vlad.

The man would kill him.

"I sent a box of the strips to Veronica last week," Jazz mumbled.

**~Luke Skylord, Vampire Sentinel
and his mate, from Luke & Jezebel (In the year 2203)**

—❧—

VLAD

It was still strange, going somewhere without Veronica. They'd been together for centuries. Becoming a mated vampire pair was an extremely rare event. It happened only when a couple had perfect chemical compatibility and he'd only seen it occur about once every other century.

Some trick of fate had allowed Vlad to find Veronica and she was that perfect match for him.

Vlad had been a vampire for almost seven hundred years. Besides the vampire bond he shared with Veronica, he only knew of three other mated pairs—Marie Antoinette and her mate Justin were one couple, Zane and his mate Nicole were another, and Luke and his mate Jezebel were the third.

A True Bond meant that a vampire could share their life with another. It meant they wouldn't grow territorial. But the nature of a vampire True Bond meant that they couldn't be apart, or they would become extremely ill, and if not reunited in time, they could die from separation sickness.

Or it had meant sickness and death until the geneticist and chemist Eve Longtree created a birthday present for her sister Jezebel. Eve came up with a drug they could place under their tongue and it would allow vampire mates to go their separate ways for twenty-four hours.

He and his mate had used the strips only a few times. Initially, Vlad kept Veronica from trying the manmade creation. He didn't believe there was a reason to fight against their nature. But here he was. In San Francisco looking for a supernaturally ancient creature... who may or may not be the victim of the Dark Mage. He'd come to the west coast of the United States to check and see if the demon had killed or taken the ancient for their power.

It was the longest distance he'd been from Veronica in all their long lives together. It seemed like a good idea to leave his mate safe at home in Romania while he searched for evil over half the world away.

He couldn't help but miss her.

He wandered around one of the oldest parts of San Francisco, climbing steep, paved hills while he tried to find a specific Gothic building. It was the year 2206, Vlad hadn't been in this city for several hundred years and it had changed. Expanded up and out more than he thought possible. It had been crowded before. Now it was... full. Noisy. Insane. It was impossible to think or navigate with so many bodies crowding around him.

New buildings surrounded anything that might have looked familiar to him. It was impossible to find the one building he needed.

He didn't miss the glances he got on the street. He should have worn a hat and sunglasses. Tried to hide his identity and his power. His was a well-known face. As leader of the Supernatural Council—his face was in the media a great deal.

Not to mention that anyone with even a wisp of *Other* in their veins could feel his presence if he didn't shield. The *Others* were anything not human. They could be a shifter, or one of the Fae, or any type of creature that possessed a touch of magic.

When he was recognized, most turned and walked as fast as they could in the opposite direction. They wanted away from him. Away from the reputation that he had earned first with death and destruction, later with threats of the same. He liked the fact that his reputation preceded him. He loved watching the humans and lesser Others scurry from his sight. Praying, often aloud, for a much holier being to save them.

Vlad snorted. *Idiots.*

He was one of the oldest supernatural creatures. At least one of the oldest that the humans knew about. They would die of fright if they met one of the true ancients. He was a pussycat compared to them. No, wait. Cats still had claws.

He was one of those fussy little lapdogs compared to the ancients. A wicked smile spread across his face. There were many older vampires and Others that made Vlad look as powerful and as scary as a human. Which was to say... **not at all**. They should count their blessings that Vlad wasn't an ancient.

The ancients weren't just the oldest of them. But the fiercest. The less disciplined. Only that wasn't it. It wasn't just that they lacked discipline. It was something else.

Many of the ancients had been Gods or Goddesses at the beginning of time. They'd been revered. Worshipped. Their every need and want was seen to by a flock of humans. No matter how barbaric or insane their desire or craving... humans had met those needs. Many of the ancients couldn't deal with the loss of that worship and focused admiration.

Vlad snorted. *No one had worshipped him throughout the long centuries.* Feared yes, but there hadn't been admiration. Vlad thought fear was better.

Until he thought of his lifemate.

Loving Veronica was better. Having Veronica's love was the ultimate feeling. It made him do stupid shit sometimes when it came to their safety, but love made him feel human.

Veronica's love centered him.

He sighed. That was a truth that no longer made him uncomfortable. The ancients had no center. Nothing to replace all the years when they'd been admired and worshiped.

He blinked. As the English would say... gobsmacked.

He had to stop and think. To wonder.

Did that mean that for the ancients to learn to fit in the human world—they needed to discover love?

Oh, hell.

He was not going to play matchmaker to the things that scared the monsters.

But—the paranormal community already had a yearly conference that included Supernatural Speed Dating as one of the draws.

Shit. When he had more time, he would follow this thread of thought and talk to the Council to see what the other members thought of his revelation. Together they would decide if the ancients needed to be nudged out of their self-imposed solitude. At least long enough to find a mate. Then as far as Vlad was concerned... they could crawl back into whatever hole they'd been hiding in for centuries.

Sharing the burden of leadership and decisions wasn't a natural gift for him. It was another thing his wife taught him. That he didn't have to be involved in every small detail. He could simply look in occasionally and make sure someone else was taking care of the chore he'd given them.

Besides, Vlad's instinct was to solve issues with the use of murder and mayhem. He did that so well. Holding someone's hand and leading them to their only love—was not in his wheelhouse of expertise.

Unbidden came the reminder that it had been Vlad who sent Autumn—one of the Dragon Witches—to wake up a hibernating Dragon Lord. The Witch and Lord met and fell in lust within seconds, which eventually led to love. Vlad did have a hand in that relationship. But he wasn't a matchmaker and absolutely did not want that responsibility.

Sighing, he looked up at the small piece of blue sky that he could see above the skyscrapers. At least it wasn't raining. The last few times he'd been to this city the rain didn't stop.

He snorted. At that time the rain had more to do with Justin, a newly turned vampire. San Francisco's newest vampire struggled to control his supernatural gift. He had been True Bonded to Marie Antoinette, one of the oldest and strongest among them. When vampire True Bonds were formed, the strength and gifts for each of them were based on the age of the oldest vampire.

So even though Justin was a new vampire, his gifts were that of an ancient. Justin's secondary power was dominion over the weather. Wielding a new power wasn't intuitive. A vampire had to work long and hard to control many of the gifts they were given. The man had struggled for several long months and San Francisco had some very unusually wet and windy days. Not to mention a few freak snowstorms. The human scientists were still trying to figure out why it snowed in the middle of their summer months.

He allowed himself a small grin and then forced his brain back to the problem at hand, away from the ancients and their love-lives, and Vlad's need to matchmake. Away from San Francisco's irritating weather. Back to the ancients and the possibility that one of them was missing.

The truly ancient among them didn't waste time communicating with humans. They stayed secluded. Unless something or someone forced their hand. Like quite possibly... a demon.

Was Adramelech—the demon who was trying to kill or enslave all supernatural creatures—targeting the ancients? In some ways it made sense. The demon wanted a clear path that would enable him to rule the human world. His biggest obstacle to that goal was the supernatural creatures who had the power to fight him. The ancients were some of the most powerful among them.

Was the demon preying on them, hoping no one would realize if they went missing? Because hell, Vlad was the only one who communicated with most of them and decades often passed between each contact. He just didn't bother speaking to most of the ancients and they weren't thrilled to hear from him when he did reach out.

But there was evidence that one of them had been used by the demon to enhance his power and further his goals to rule the world. Which meant Vlad would be forced to reach out to them all and figure out a way to ensure that no one ever kidnapped one of them for nefarious purposes.

Like to suck off their power to create a clone army and enslave both humans and **Others**. Something the demon was already doing. The question was—*who had been captured?*

Shit. He needed to start keeping track of every single one of them. It would take a hell of a lot of time and effort. Most of the ancients didn't have personal communication devices or any way for him to speak to them... except in person.

Vlad searched the skyline once again and sighed. Without help, finding the Stone Guardians would take more time than he wanted to spend. And there were so many more to contact.

It was a good thing that Vlad was the ruler of every vampire throughout the world. It meant when he wanted to talk to one of them, he didn't need a communications device. He just needed to use his mind to reach out and touch the Vampire Sentinel who patrolled this region.



MARIE ANTOINETTE

She struggled to keep the smile off her face when she saw Vlad sitting on a park bench in her city.

Born in 1431, Vlad Tepes was about eight-hundred-years old. History had painted the man as a brutal, almost insane Romanian prince. History probably had it right during the early years. Skilled in the gruesome details of war, Vlad was a man you wanted at your side if blood needed to be spilled.

The man could be the best of friends or the worst of enemies. Since meeting Veronica, he was more concerned with having friends.

His wife liked people, so Vlad kept his natural instincts in check. And he worked on not chasing everyone away. Veronica's soothing influence on the paranormal leader meant that everyone quietly watched over the bubbly

blonde woman. If something happened to Vlad's mate, all hell would break loose. Literally.

Currently, Vlad wore his black hair just touching his shoulders. He was several inches shorter than her mate Justin's six-foot frame. Yet, Vlad was stocky and had a mountain of muscle. There was an old human saying... that someone was built like a brick shit house. That was Vlad.

In today's vernacular, humans would say Vlad was *ripped*. He was all solid muscle and power. Besides physical strength, Vlad had several mystical abilities. Including one that allowed his deep brown eyes to see right through you and know your every misdeed.

On the lighter side of things, in the years since he'd met Ronnie, Vlad had started sunbathing. His olive skin was even darker than it was the first time Marie met him. Vampires of a certain age could manage a little sun. Marie was old enough she could be out for most of the day. When vampires got as old as Dracula, they could evidently sunbathe.

Marie would pay money to see Vlad sitting in a lounge chair, soaking up the sun. But he kept that part of his life private. Hell, she'd pay money if she could sit there with him. She was tired of being so pale.

He turned and met her gaze. "Hello, little queenie."

God, she hated his nickname for her. "Hello, Dracula." It wasn't original. But it still made Vlad wince. The man was wearing jeans and a black tee-shirt. Simple, understated, and very human. When Vlad was anything but. He should have blended into the fabric of her city, but he didn't. The man was too powerful to pass for plain.

Marie sat beside him. With her mate, Justin, silently standing at her back. Offering support. He nodded at Vlad but the two didn't speak.

Both Vlad and Marie sat for a minute and simply watched the people on the street.

After several minutes of comfortable silence, Vlad sighed and explained why he was here, "I believe the demon may be targeting the ancients. I think he had one at the cave we discovered in Greece. That creature escaped and went on a rampage, killing all the guards and medical personnel. But it didn't harm the women or children who were also prisoners. This creature escaped right as we showed up. He is a powerful telepath and even in his weakened state, he was able to shield enough that we couldn't identify or follow him. It is also telling that the shackles used to hold the creature weren't magicked but were made of iron. I believe the demon was bleeding him, using his blood

to speed the development of the clones. Because I don't know who it was, I can't tell you if the demon scooped him back up or if they might have sickened and died from their mistreatment. I do know that whoever it was, they had at least two forms. One form was humanistic, but they could also shift into something that was exceptionally large and not remotely human in appearance."

Marie looked up and over to the right. Vlad didn't have to explain what demon. The paranormal community had been tracking the same damn one for centuries. Adramelech was trying to clone supernatural beings and force them into its demon army.

But it took her a moment. Putting all the pieces together. Because Vlad was speaking perfect English. He even had an American accent. Normally, Veronica was with him. Just as Marie was normally with Justin. It was just part of their vampire bond. The couples stayed together.

Having Vlad here alone, meant he'd used one of Eve's sublingual strips that gave vampires the ability to spend time away from their mate. Which probably meant he was really worried about what he might find.

But the way Vlad talked around Veronica... was with a heavy Romanian accent. Using broken English. Because Ronnie loved it and Vlad liked to keep her happy. Having Vlad speak without his accent or confusing words, took some getting used to.

She sighed. Marie had to admit it freaked her out.

But back to the issue of missing ancients. "***Iron.*** So, one of the oldest of us. Do you think the demon captured one of the Stone Guardians?"

Vlad shrugged. "It's a possibility I need to check."

Justin shifted behind them and asked, "Who or what are the Stone Guardians?"



VLAD

He stopped studying the buildings and turned to look at Marie and Justin.

Justin had dark and dangerous blue eyes. Vlad knew this man had lived in hell as a human. He'd fought human wars and seen things that took the sparkle out of his eyes. Marie put that sparkle back. Justin was like Vlad in that aspect. He would do whatever it took to protect his mate. He was tall, muscular, and blonde. Becoming a vampire had only increased his alpha male

tendencies. But those aspects of his personality had been part of him long before he became Marie's mate.

Justin looked to be in his early forties. He still had a dark blonde beard and mustache, though they'd changed styles. Justin's appearance hadn't changed much over the centuries. He was just a little neater and more stylish. Vlad hid his smile. That hadn't been Marie's influence, he knew. It was all because of their human servants. Marie had two males who served her for several decades before she met and mated Justin.

Each one of the human servants was a very handsome man. One was blonde, and the other had dark hair. The two were a couple long before Marie made them her human servants, in order to save their lives. They often walked with Marie, one on either side of her. And the area's paranormal society had dubbed them her **bookends**. The two gay men had definite opinions on wardrobe. Over the years they'd shaped Marie's taste in clothes and Vlad knew they were responsible for the change in Justin's grooming habits since the man was converted over two hundred years ago.

His eyes shifted to Marie. She looked small and fragile. With very pale skin that didn't have a mark on it. Her eyes were an ethereal misty shade of gray-blue. Black as the deep night, her hair fell past her shoulders in a shiny, sleek mass. Marie's face could only be described as regal. She had high cheekbones, a pointy nose, and a high forehead framed by perfectly arched dark eyebrows. At first glance, you would say that this woman was a pampered princess.

Hah! That assessment might get you killed. Vlad liked that about Marie. That her looks often made their enemies think she was weak.

The once Queen of France—Marie Antoinette—had been miserably lost in the century she was born into. She'd been a mouse, trod upon and used as a political tool. One who had no clue what was happening around her, or why her handlers wanted her to dress a certain way. They set her up to be a pawn in their games and she did what she was told.

In the many centuries since her **death**, she'd grown into a woman of power. She ruled the Others in her Northern California territory with an iron fist, yet she was also very caring and compassionate.

He was impressed with her use of modern technology in managing all the duties required of a Vampire Sentinel. She knew exactly what was going on and she would know almost immediately if one of the paranormal creatures under her protection went missing.

He glanced at her armored car. Most of the knowledge of human technology came from one of the men standing against the side of the black vehicle. The bookends Matt and Brian were incredibly intelligent. One was a financial genius, the other a technological guru.

Vlad knew the two leather-clad men didn't listen to orders very well. Maire would tell them to stay away, and they would rush in to save her or Justin, putting themselves in danger.

Glancing across the street, he caught sight of Igor, his human servant. He had told the man to stay home, but Igor consistently ignored Vlad's orders. That wasn't unusual. Most Vampire Sentinels who had human servants chose individuals that didn't follow directions very well. They put the lives of the vampires they cared for, above their own.

He sighed again. Something else human servants had in common. They often liked to play practical jokes. Marie's two were no exception to the rule. They were crazy and loved playing tricks on everyone... especially Vlad. The few times he'd needed their help understanding today's human technology, they had driven him insane with their playful antics.

Vlad looked back at Marie and then shifted his gaze to Justin. "The Stone Guardians are what humans referred to throughout the ages as ***gargoyles***. Not all gargoyles are Stone Guardians of course. There are only a few clans left. But there is a clan in San Francisco."

"We don't know any gargoyles," he started and looked at his wife. He rolled his eyes. "Okay, so I don't know any gargoyles," he mumbled.

Marie grinned. "Don't feel bad. They are rarely awake. In fact, it's been decades... longer. I haven't seen them since we met." She frowned.

"And that is one of the problems we face. There are so many of us. The oldest and most powerful, the ones who hibernate or rusticate in their caves and castles and refuse to deal with humans or other paranormals—could be dead, or captured, or on a rampaging spree of death and destruction—and we wouldn't know until it was too late to save them or ourselves," Vlad complained. "I didn't realize that keeping track of them was an issue, until now. We need to come up with a way to track their health and welfare, and their location, without being obnoxious about it."

Brian walked up and offered, "We could fit them all with tracers, or a paranormal equivalent to a panic button... or no... something like a medic alert button that they have to press every thirty days and verify they are alive and in good health. If they don't call, we can send someone out to check on

them. If they are attacked or captured, they could press it to get help. But either way, we can track their location via the tracer.”

Vlad blinked. “You could do that?”

The dark-haired man shrugged. “Sure. You hold down the ancient, I’ll tag them with a tracer and then we can run like hell.”

Vlad snorted. “It would take more than me to hold down any of them. But I get what you mean. The technology is there, it is getting their approval to use it.”

Matt grinned, “In the meantime, you can give us a list of ancients and their last known address, and we can arrange search parties. Brian and I can coordinate with the Sentinels in each territory and send out burner phones for the ancients to use. We’ll explain the problem and ask that for the short term they check in every week. Threaten them with constant harassment by the local paranormals if they don’t make the call.”

“That might work for most of them. Thank you. I just realized that I can’t do this on my own, it would take way too much time. I will give you a list of the ones in your territory before I leave and then will send the others after I’m home. For now, let us all go check on the health and wellbeing of the Stone Guardians. That will take a few of the names off your list.” Vlad stood and motioned to Marie. “Lead the way, little queenie. Your city has grown over my memories.”

Marie grinned at him and then took Justin’s hand and led the way.



MARIE

She knew exactly where the Stone Guardians’ building was located. They may not be awake, but she checked on them every few weeks. She liked to sit on the roof of their building and chat. She knew they were semi-aware of the world when incased in stone and she liked to keep them apprised of the changes going on around them.

The few times she’d seen them when they were awake, she never thought to ask them if they could hear her when they were in their stone forms. But she liked having the one-sided conversations whether they learned anything from her or not.

She walked quickly, knowing Vlad had no patience for a stroll through the streets. Soon she ducked into a side street and down to the end of an alley. They were close to the old part of downtown, standing behind a six-story

gothic building that sat right in the middle of several taller buildings. This ode to gothic architecture was hidden from view unless you were right in front of it.

Marie knew that the fire escape for this building was always down. Authorities had struggled for years to keep it raised. But no matter what they did, when night fell the bottom ladder always rested on the ground. Everyone said this building was haunted. Or at least the fire escape was.

The few who still believed in the Stone Guardians... knew better.

It wasn't dark yet, but the small metal ladder was resting on the ground. Vlad, Marie, and Justin simply levitated to the roof. Leaving Matt and Brian to scramble up the steps.

Vlad looked around and frowned. "This is the right building. I remember these columns," he said pointing to several large, *empty* pedestals.

"They're gone," Marie stated flatly. "But this couldn't be the demon. Could it? We are talking eight, enormous creatures. Could the demon take all of them?"

Looking around, Vlad walked over and crouched beside one of the pedestals. Then he looked back to the fire escape where Brian and Matt were just stepping onto the roof. "Look. A trail of bloody handprints. Someone crawled across this roof and stopped at this spot. Their hands must have been covered in blood to leave such full prints."

Marie nodded. "Or they were still bleeding. They could have called to the protectors on purpose, or they might have awakened them on accident."

Justin frowned. "I don't understand."



VLAD

Vlad let his paranormal senses search the building while Marie explained.

"The eight gargoyles who protect this city are granite monstrosities that can be called upon to guard the innocent. With a little blood and great need, a stone being can be brought to life. I've never known all of them to wake at the same time," she offered.

"There is a lot of blood. And it circles all the pedestals. Whoever pleaded for help, woke them all." Vlad had never spoken more than a few words with the Guardians. For one thing, he'd never been innocent. For another, not many believed anymore so there wasn't anyone asking for help. Which meant

the stone creatures spent a hell of a lot of time asleep. They weren't awake for him to talk to, so he didn't know much about them.

He spoke again, "I don't sense the demon, nor do I feel that there was a death up here. I believe the Stone Guardians were awakened and they've taken their charge or charges away to care for them. The demon couldn't wake them from their stone sleep as he is not innocent. In a sleeping state, the stone protectors couldn't give the demon what he needs, which is their blood. I don't fear for them, but we should make sure they are aware of the demon's threat. The demon would love to capture one of these ancients." Vlad hadn't been thinking.

Asleep, these ancients didn't bleed. He didn't believe the demon had them. But that meant eight ancients were running around the world. Ancients that hadn't been awake for centuries. Shit. Another problem to deal with.

He looked at Marie. "See if you can find them. Later tonight I'll send you that list of the few ancients in your territory that would tempt Adramelech. And I'll put together another list of the top twenty worldwide for Brian and Matt. They can work their magic and get the other Sentinels searching. Be alert, aware, and watch over your people. The demon has had some success with his plans. He'll be more determined now than ever."



BACK AT HIS CASTLE, Vlad called out to his mate. "Veronica! I'm home. Where the hell are you?" As the leader of the Supernatural Council, he'd gained the ability to shift time and space. With Others all over the world, he needed to be able to pop in and out of continents within moments. He always took Veronica with him, and sometimes Igor.

But the strips had given him the luxury of going alone. Igor had followed under his own steam. This was the first time since he'd mated Veronica that they had been separated by so many miles. The hours had gone by fast, but he'd missed his mate.

The sublingual strips had been created by Eve to allow vampire True Bond mates to spend time away from each other. Without the strips, vampire mates needed to remain close. Like in the same room. It was frustrating when Vlad needed to do things that might put his mate in danger.

But the modern drug had a time limit. The drug wasn't wearing off yet, but Vlad could feel the need for his mate, creeping up on him.

Veronica didn't answer his call, so he set out to search all one hundred and twenty-two rooms of the castle. Rooms Veronica had painstakingly decorated to meet their combined personalities. Which hadn't been easy. She was sweet, caring, and lived to help others.

Vlad was none of those things and didn't have a problem admitting it.

Contrary to misguided history, his castle had never been Bram. He hadn't even had a castle until he'd been a vampire for some time. Vlad had preferred life on the road. Pillaging and fighting didn't require a home base.

It was also a misconception that he had killed to acquire the castle. Vlad snorted. No, he did it the old-fashioned way. He paid money for it. For one thing, Veronica wouldn't allow him to do anything else.

Being head of the Supernatural Council required a home base. Having a mate that he loved and wanted to protect, made it even more important.

It wasn't the love of a good woman that kept him in line. Kept him from solving all his problems with mayhem and murder. It was Vlad's love for Veronica. He snorted. The love of an unbelievably bad man for the flickering light in his soul.

He frowned when he stepped out on the sun deck at the very top of his castle. Veronica wasn't here. She wasn't anywhere within the castle walls.

Gazing over the calm fields and watching the sunset, he pulled out his com device to check for messages. There weren't any. But he noticed the home communicator had been answered by Veronica several hours ago. She'd talked to Autumn. Maybe the Dragon Witch knew where he could find his mate.

As he waited for Autumn to answer, Vlad pictured the Witch in his mind. She had dark black hair with thin white streaks running through it. The other Dragon Witches often teased Autumn that the slivers of white were caused when lightning bolts of knowledge hit her brain.

She had taken every bit of digital information out of the cave in Greece, where they had rescued many clone babies and a few women incubators.

Vlad knew she was looking for clues. Trying to find other locations they could search for the demon.

He wondered if she'd discovered anything.

"Hey, big guy. Did you get the message?" she asked instead of greeting him.

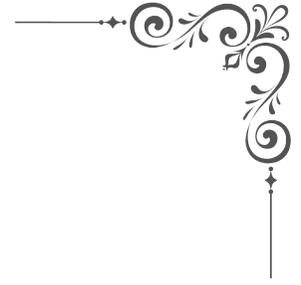
Vlad frowned. "You left me this message?" he asked.

“I did. And now I’m confused. I called this morning and talked to Ronnie. I told her about a place that we needed you to inspect. It appears there might be a training school or military camp there for the clones. It’s not far from your castle. Veronica said she would tell you as soon as you got home. She told me you went to test one of your theories on who might have been held captive in the last cave.”

“I went, I saw nothing. It is not this morning—it is the night. Veronica is not home where I left her.”

Autumn gasped. “Oh shit!” she muttered.

Vlad couldn’t help but agree. His heart raced in fear for his mate.



——

*Being married to Vlad had its ups and downs.
He loved her, that was a definite up.
Because he loved her, she'd been kidnapped multiple times
and shoved in cold dungeons.
That was a downer.
~by Veronica Tepes*

——

VERONICA

She slammed her hand against the dungeon wall and cursed, “God damn it, this is getting tiresome! You would think people—*read idiots*—would learn to leave me the hell alone.” She knew no one was close enough to hear her rant, but it made her feel better.

Every once in a while, one of her husband’s enemies—and to be perfectly honest—Vlad had a lot of enemies... would kidnap her to use for bait. This time she didn’t think her captors knew who she was—or more to the point, that her mate was Vlad. Ronnie had simply taken a walk, doing a little sleuthing on her own, and fell into their hands.

They recognized her as a vampire, and the fact that she’d been out “hiking” during the day amused them. She could act like a ditzy woman with the best of them and for a short time, her playacting worked.

She was a tall, leggy blonde with long, straight hair. Veronica was on the thin side, with big boobs and plump, pink lips. The clone army soldiers that ran across her in the woods weren’t sure what to do with her. But the scientist geek they called on the communicator... said to bring her in.

If she had kept her mouth shut, she might have been let go. But no. Her mouth always got her in trouble. She had never been able to be quiet and demure. Not to mention she had picked up the vocabulary of a London dock worker in the early 1900s, or maybe she should blame it on the long-haul truck drivers she’d forced Vlad to hang out with in the twenty-first century.

She clenched her teeth shut while she batted thick eyelashes over her bright green eyes. She acted a little confused, unsure of why they detained her. But the moment they stuck her with a needle, she got pissed off and started calling the idiot in the white lab coat a mother-fucking prick. All her sweet, demure attitude... disappeared.

She sighed. *Yeah. She should have kept her mouth shut.* She didn't think kicking him in the balls helped either. Vlad would get a kick out of this. Ronnie always had to tell him to calm down and be nice.

It didn't help that her skin was obviously tanned by the sun. Once they determined she was a vampire who could go out in the heat of the day—they believed her to be several centuries old. So, they took more blood and then threw her into what they considered a vampire-proof cell. *Like cement and stone would keep Vlad out.*

The man would walk through hell for her, cheerfully annihilating everyone who got in his way. Since most of the time she tried to curtail his more violent tendencies, he used every opportunity to vent a little.

And her very scary husband was nobody's fool. Veronica knew Vlad could sense a trap from three countries away. She thought it was funny that these idiots were worried about her escaping, not realizing they needed to worry about Vlad breaking into the dungeon. They were going to get a chance to meet Vlad. The scariest and most notorious vampire of them all.

Pulling at the hair on her head to alleviate the beginning of a headache, she looked around the small cell as she'd done every few minutes since she'd been roughly pushed through the door. What? Did she think she overlooked a few creature comforts?

She had no such luck. There wasn't a convenient key to the door, nor was there somewhere to sit except on the cold, stone floor. Hell, they hadn't even left her a pot to piss in. It was a good thing she didn't need one.

Sighing, she turned her thoughts back to her husband. Since they'd met and became freaking vampire soul mates several hundred years ago, he'd had plenty of practice getting her out of dungeons. This was what? At least the tenth time she'd been imprisoned. She'd lost track.

And why for once, couldn't her captors have more than a passing acquaintance with modern plumbing or put her on a floor above ground, that had heat? She was sick and tired of being thrown in the dungeon to freeze her cookies.

Glancing down at her watch, Ronnie saw that she'd been in this hellhole for about three hours. Add another hour for the time she spent in the woods, the interrogation, and blood-taking, along with the time it took to drag her down to the dungeon... and that meant that anytime now Vlad and Igor should be breaking down the castle walls. *Literally.* Vlad never went for subtle when he could destroy things in a more theatrical manner.

Rubbing her temple, she leaned back against the wall and tried to calculate how much longer she would be here. The longest time someone managed to keep her captive was six hours and twenty-five minutes. The least amount of time was right at half an hour.

Pathetic really.

When she was a new vampire, *she'd* managed to hide from Vlad for almost two days, and yet none of her supposedly organized kidnappers were able to keep her from Vlad for even a fourth of that.

Who was she kidding? Being held in the dungeon for fifteen minutes was too long.

Hell. She sank to the cold stone floor and rested her aching head on her knees. She didn't know if her head was starting to pound because of separation sickness or because one of the soldiers had slapped her after she kicked the lab guy.

The biggest downside to being one-half of a vampire True Bond, was the sickness that would overtake them the longer they were separated. Normally, whenever she and Vlad were more than thirty or so feet from each other they would start to get sick. If kept apart long enough—they'd both die.

But early this morning they'd used strips created by their American scientist friend, Eve. She had created the sublingual strips for her sister, Jezebel. A birthday gift from one sister to another. A few months ago, they sent a box of the strips to Veronica when it was her birthday. The strips gave them twenty-four hours of alone time. Vlad could go his way and she could go hers. They could have a little space. Her mate wanted to go halfway around the world to check on one of the ancients, and he wanted her to stay home. Safe, where no one could hurt her.

So, they'd used a strip this morning.

This time, after Vlad left the house, Veronica got bored with being home alone. She realized she should have planned something to do. If she'd planned it, she could have gone to visit one of her friends or arranged to have a few of them meet her somewhere fun. The day had been a total waste of freedom.

She had been staring at the wall and twiddling her fingers when Autumn called to talk to Vlad. Veronica took the message about a location that might be one of the demon's facilities—a school, or a possible training center for the clones. And she figured *what the hell*. She could take a short drive into the country. Then go for a little hike.

It didn't make sense to use the strips and then simply wait for Vlad to return from an adventure. He would walk in the door and be forced to turn around and go back out again. But not if she went and checked out the address Autumn was concerned about. Veronica had wanted the freedom to come and go and be her own person for just a few hours. She needed to take advantage of the independence granted to them by Eve's creation.

She knew Vlad wasn't comfortable using the strips that enabled fated vampire mates to have a little space, but it hadn't stopped him from using them. Usually, he took the opportunity to handle council business while she stayed home. She enjoyed alone time.

She had been with her husband since the Victorian era. The only time she was away from him was when someone swooped in and kidnapped her. She thought it would be nice to have just a little freedom.

Looking around at the boring grey cement walls, she sighed. Being separated from Vlad wasn't the gift she'd dreamed it would be. In the beginning, she'd been thrilled to drive in the car alone and walk along trails in the forest and through sun-drenched meadows... by herself. It had been heaven. Total peace and serenity without Vlad, who bitched every time he was in nature. Her husband didn't like being outside with the bugs and the crazy humans. Her mate did not like to hike unless there was someone he could pummel at the end of the trek.

Veronica had treasured every moment in the beginning.

She'd been surprised to walk around a large boulder in the trail to find herself surrounded by four armed men. The men were dressed in modern battle fatigues. One of them had been a shifter, a werewolf she thought. And he'd known she was a vampire.

Veronica regretted the urge to do a little investigating on her own. She had just planned to take a hike through the woods and have a look around. It was interesting that she hadn't *seen* anything... except the soldiers with their guns pointed at her.

And within about twelve hours their time would expire. Which meant if Vlad didn't find her before then, she would get extremely sick.

Vlad was going to be worried about her when he got home and couldn't find her. She hoped it wouldn't take him long to discover Autumn had called. Then he would guess where she'd gone. Or at least where she started to go.

Veronica hadn't followed Autumn's directions. Instead, she'd turned off and followed what looked like a military vehicle. Reasoning that if they were

looking for a clone army, that army would have some type of transportation that looked like the vehicle she followed. When the heavy truck left the main road, turning onto a private lane, she drove a few miles further and parked at a nearby nature trail. This area was riddled with hiking trails so she knew it wouldn't take long to find one going toward the private area. And she'd been right.

Then she went hiking. She had walked for almost an hour before she was stopped by the men.

Yes, Vlad would be worried. And upset. But since she planned to let him beat on anyone that had been involved in detaining her within the walled compound, he'd get over being mad. He just needed to get here so Veronica could go home.

The address Autumn gave her was only a few miles from their castle. Veronica planned to check it out so that when her man got home... they could spend time together and share stories of their day. Sit in front of the fire with a bottle of blood sangria and talk. Veronica hoped to have something to report to him about her adventure. It wouldn't be just Vlad telling her about his day. If she didn't find anything, Veronica figured there would still be something to talk about.

Even to her, Veronica's inner voice sounded whiny. Like an old-fashioned wife complaining that her husband never let her do anything. She sighed. Vlad did not like her going anywhere alone, that was true. She also knew he felt that way because of times like this.

Sighing, she sat up and looked around the cell once more. Nothing had changed. She bumped the back of her head on the cement wall behind her, disgusted that Vlad probably had a point. He was never going to let her forget this. In a few hours, the medicine that allowed her to spend time away from her mate would wear off. She already knew how bad it could get. She'd had separation sickness several times in her life.

Veronica wanted to go home.

Not for the first time, she cursed her supernatural powers. Being able to heal with touch didn't do her a hell of a lot of good in this type of situation. No, she was the softer side of their partnership. Her husband was the one with all the violent arts. He could make someone's eyes bleed with just a look—she could only heal them.

It was a pity she didn't get at least one power that could help when she got into messes like this. Hell. *It would be nice to be able to summon a*

blanket. Her powers were useless when it came to taking care of herself. She couldn't transport out of the cell or talk to anyone telepathically. Her fighting skills were nonexistent. She could create ice bags and bandages out of thin air if she needed them to treat someone who was injured. She was a fantastic healer when she worked on someone else. It was too bad she couldn't heal herself.

With a single wave of his hand, Vlad could clean them both. Then another wave and he'd change their clothes. But she couldn't do that. It was ridiculous and she often felt it was unfair.

Veronica liked her creature comforts. Things like warmth and chairs. And she wanted Vlad. They'd been apart long enough. The sun was going down, so she figured they took the strips over twelve hours ago. The strips were supposed to give them twenty-four hours, but she knew the symptoms would start before their time ran out. It wouldn't be long before she got a headache and then nausea would follow, making everything worse. Ultimately every cell in her body would throb with an unholy pain.

Like now. She didn't know if the wave of misery was just from being upset and cold, and a little battered—or if this was the onset of the separation sickness. Hell, the lab guy had used several needles on her. She thought he had just taken her blood, but maybe he injected her with something too. Whatever was causing it, Ronnie fought the nausea. She didn't want to vomit. From experience, she knew the smell in the small airless space would make everything worse.

Sliding down to curl up in a fetal position, she tried to concentrate on something else, on anything else.

Vlad. Just thinking of Vlad eased the pain a little. She brought her husband's face into focus. Concentrated on remembering each strand of his dark, curly hair and the love in his eyes that she saw every time he looked at her. He kept his hair longer than he liked it, for her. She really liked the way he looked with longer hair.

Of course, she hadn't thought he was so wonderful the first time they met. Handsome? Yes. Husband and soul mate material? *Ah, that would be a definite no.*

She was sure he felt the same about her. Vlad had been disgusted by her impulsive nature and strong, feminist opinions. They clashed from the beginning, spending several days at war with one another.

Once they quit fighting, it didn't take long for the sparks to fly for other reasons.

Ronnie let her mind drift back a few hundred years to the time they met. It was as good a way as any to escape her *temporary* prison. She sent her husband a mental poke before she closed her eyes, *Damn it, Vlad. Hurry up!* She fell asleep waiting for Vlad... and found the past.



IN THE YEAR 1899

At home in Boston, Veronica had cared for her younger brother. Andrew was born with a disease that weakened his body. For all his short life, she functioned as his nurse. When he died, she had no idea what she would do next.

Andrew's physician knew how disconnected Veronica was from her parents. He also knew how badly she wanted to continue nursing, and how good she'd been at the new profession. He suggested Veronica contact an orthopedic hospital in England that employed female nurses. To see if they would take her on.

She wanted to leave Boston and all the memories of her brother. So, over the next few months, Veronica corresponded with Agnes Hunt, the founder of a convalescent home for crippled children that was in Baschurch, England.

Veronica was offered a nursing position if she would complete a program at The Florence Nightingale School of Nursing in London.

Her father had a sister who lived in London. Josephine had been widowed a few years ago. Veronica wrote to her and found that her aunt would be happy to provide her with room and board if Ronnie would agree to be her companion for a short time each day.

Within a few months, Veronica traveled from America to England. Her goal was to become a nurse, then hopefully a physician. To pay her way across the sea, she'd taken a job as a nanny for a couple returning to London with their three children.

She hadn't been paid wages, just her passage to this country. Once in London, she lived with her aunt. Spending the early part of each day as the woman's companion allowed her to pursue her dream of nursing. She could attend late afternoon classes and work at the hospital each night. The hospital didn't pay her for the work, they were teaching her to become a nurse and figured that was payment enough.

All had gone well in the beginning. Her aunt didn't require much and was happy to allow Veronica to study and practice things like wrapping her limbs in swaths of bandages. She didn't mind Veronica leaving before dark and coming home with the sun. She allowed her niece to sleep for a few hours each morning before seeing to her duties as a companion.

Those were the happiest months of Veronica's life. She was doing what she loved and working toward her goal of becoming one of the first women doctors.

Until one morning she was released early from the hospital and was on the street before dawn, heading home.

She didn't know what happened. When she concentrated, her mind flashed to a feeling of terror. She remembered the eyes... and the teeth of her attacker. But couldn't remember more. When she woke next, she was lying on the floor in a dark room. She'd obviously been sick, as the place reeked of vomit. And she cleared her stomach again before shutting her eyes.

There had been a small cycle of waking to be sick and then passing out. Or sleeping. It was hard to tell the difference between the two. But she didn't remember anything of those days and nights, other than the feeling of being sick, tired, numb. And very, very afraid.

Now she was awake and so very hungry. But when she tried to eat a small piece of bread, it came back up. She tried again to eat, until realizing that no matter what it was, food made her sick. She tried to think like a doctor and ran down the list of normal human illnesses that could cause extreme nausea and vomiting.

Most physicians would assume that because she was female, the condition was caused by pregnancy. It was typically the first thing doctors checked when a woman couldn't stop vomiting. Pregnancy and all its symptoms were easily documented. There were so many things that the doctors couldn't explain or diagnose, they often targeted the most common solution.

But Veronica knew she wasn't pregnant. She would have had to be with a man to get pregnant and she wasn't interested in men. She wasn't interested in anything except becoming a physician. But the male doctors she knew, believed her only talent with the sick was in feeding them or changing their bedpans.

She sighed and looked around her. She'd known when she started that this journey would be difficult. She pressed a hand to her stomach and

considered food poisoning. Eating bad food was often the cause of stomach ailments. But she hadn't had anything to eat in days. She tried to eat, but after one or two bites the food came right back up. It didn't have time to poison her.

Her hand throbbed and she looked at the burnt flesh. When the sunlight landed on her hand this morning it had burnt immediately. Blistering within mere seconds. The burn was too severe to classify as sensitivity to sunlight. Besides, she'd never been sensitive before and she'd only been in the sun for a moment.

Peering through the dark, she knew she needed to get off the street. She was going to be sick again. She ducked into an alley and found a dark corner where she could hide.

She'd been walking the streets and alleys of London for a couple of days, ever since she woke up in an abandoned warehouse. She was cold, bloody, and had no idea of how she got into the warehouse or how long she'd been asleep on the floor.

Veronica knew she was sick. Horribly sick. But she didn't know what disease she had, and she didn't have any idea what she could do.

Looking around the alleyway, she knew her options were severely limited. She couldn't go back to her aunt's home. Not if she had caught some type of horrible disease. She would never take the risk of infecting Josephine.

Besides, she doubted if she would be welcomed. Veronica guessed that she had been gone for several nights without explanation. Her reputation would be shredded. It didn't matter that she had no idea what had happened during those days and nights. She was single, and she hadn't come home.

There wasn't anywhere else for her to stay in London. She was out of options with only the clothes on her back. And those clothes were filthy. Because she had no guardian or chaperon, no inn would allow her in the front doors. Even if she had enough money to pay for a room, she wouldn't be allowed to stay.

She was destined to die of this strange illness, and no one would ever know what happened to her.

Even if she somehow survived, her dreams were over. The hospital wouldn't take her back as a student. She'd been gone for several days without notice or word. She couldn't go back to her aunt, sick, and without any idea of what happened to her. She was doomed.

The only place she had to stay was the deserted warehouse. The warehouse held nothing but nightmares of being sick, being terrorized by the eyes and the teeth... Of crawling back every night because she didn't have anywhere else to go.

Until she woke up very disorientated, to find a man leaning over her.

She didn't know him. She'd screamed and tried to run. But she didn't get far. The man overpowered and silenced her. Then simply picked her up and took her to his home.

She wasn't the only one he saved that night.

No, both she and another girl had been rescued by a man named Damian. She'd been so sick—she didn't remember much of that night. Damian gave them something to drink and she felt better and managed to sleep without nightmares.

He arranged for both women to have baths and he found clothes that fit them. Once she was clean and dressed, she felt even better.

After the first night, Damian told the two women that he couldn't keep them. He said they needed to be taught certain skills and trained to live in the world they'd been thrust into. None of that made sense to her. Unless he meant that they would be trained as whores. But she wasn't allowed to argue.

The night after he'd taken her and Tara off the streets, he bundled them into his carriage for a ride out to the country. When they begged to stay with him, Damian explained that there was only one person in England who could provide the help they needed. Damian was taking them to the man's country home.

Their smiling, gentle savior took both girls to meet the devil he called Vlad.

Vlad was terrifying. He didn't want the women and he said so loudly and often within the first few minutes of meeting them. He railed at Damian, telling the man he wasn't responsible for their training.

Damian hadn't been moved, he simply raised one eyebrow and said, "You always said... you create it—you train it."

The big, surly man rolled his eyes and protested, "I did not make these women."

"Exactly. Someone isn't following the rules. Rules you wrote down and handed out. They aren't Obyri, Vlad. They are vampires. And they've been poorly treated. From what I can piece together, the women didn't give their permission to be turned, and they have no idea what the hell has happened to

them. They don't know how to feed, to hide from the sun, Veronica's hand is severely burnt. I can't help them, Vlad, you can."

Before Vlad could comment, Tara pushed her way in front of Vlad. "Wait. What are you talking about? What do you mean by a vampire? I've heard that word before. And that we didn't give our permission to be turned. Why do we have to avoid the sun? What is going on here?"

Veronica heard all the questions Tara asked. And thought about staying around to hear the answers. But the dark-haired man was rubbing his head and had his eyes closed. He wasn't watching her.

Tara stood over Vlad, getting insistent. Demanding he listen to her and change her back. Her demands kept Vlad's attention focused away from Veronica.

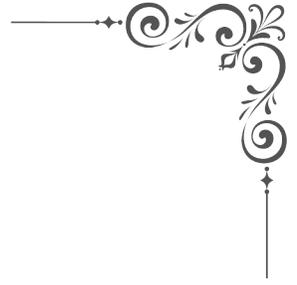
She glanced at Damian. The man was propped up against the far wall, smirking at Vlad, and the woman screeching at him.

Veronica sighed. She doubted if Vlad could fix anything. Tara could demand anything she wanted—nothing would change. Ronnie knew one thing; she didn't want to be here. She didn't like the angry, dark-haired man. She didn't like being shouted at or told that he didn't want to take care of them.

She had a pretty good idea that it wouldn't be long before he got rid of them. Whatever that meant. Veronica had a good imagination, and she didn't like any of the options.

Slowly she inched toward the door that was on the far side of the room from Damian and the screeching woman. One more look proved that Vlad wasn't paying attention to Veronica at all. She studied the open door and noticed it led to a small office. She could see another door that looked as if it led to the outside. She wanted out of here.

As the men argued and Tara shrieked at Vlad to change her back, Veronica slipped across the hall and out the second door. It led her to a small patio and the yard. Within moments, she was running down the road leading back toward a town. It only took her a few hours before she managed to steal a horse and start back to London.



—❧—
*It wasn't the love of a good woman
that kept him in line.
It was Vlad's love for Veronica.
The love of an unbelievably bad man
for the flickering light in his soul.
~by Vlad Tepes*

—❧—

VLAD

Pacing the floors of his home, he waited for backup. Waiting made him angry. Made him want to throw things or hit someone. Made him want to scream at the world that he was Vlad Tepes, the Impaler, and **he waited for no one. Needed no one.**

He didn't need backup. Didn't want any backup. He wanted to rend and tear and kill anyone responsible for taking his mate. He knew Veronica was in trouble. His supernatural senses were screaming at him. Vlad did not doubt that his mate was locked in a cell somewhere. He could only hope that it had running water and a soft bed.

But Vlad knew from experience that it most likely had stone walls, cold floors, and there was probably nowhere for her to hide from the sun. She would be hot, uncomfortable, and he knew she wouldn't feed—even if given a chance. In their long lives together, this had happened all too often.

So, for the love of his life—he waited for backup. It was still pitch-black outside, making a search almost impossible. It was the witching hour. That time past dawn when nothing moved. He would only wait until the sun rose.

Vlad knew he would never take chances when it came to his mate's welfare. If he said no to help, then what would he do if she were held in a place he couldn't break into? Denying help might put her life at risk, so he waited.

When what he wanted was to run to her rescue, intent on mayhem and murder to avenge his woman—without anyone holding his hand.

He paced the halls of his castle and waited for Autumn and a few other Dragon Witches and their Lords. He consoled himself with the knowledge that the dragonkynd knew how to fight. If he needed help, they would pit their strength against any type of paranormal creature and win.

He had been told that one of the Druid-Mages, a Native American Shaman, or one of the Romany Gypsies would come to his aid. They were all highly skilled, and Vlad knew that no matter what flavor of magic might be used against him—the power of the one sent to aid him in his quest to free Veronica—would light up the night.

He had requested the nearest paranormal soldiers to come to his aid. The request was just in case he needed more bodies. Some would come, and he would use their skills. But mostly—he waited for Igor. For his body servant to make his way back from San Francisco in a much slower fashion than Vlad had done. Vlad moved with the power of a supernatural thought.

Almost, but not quite human slow, Igor traveled in the supersonic glide he had commandeered last night when he left for the West Coast of America. The man had known Vlad planned to travel to San Francisco this morning, and he left ahead of Vlad so he could be in the city when Vlad arrived.

Igor was his human servant. The man had been invaluable to Vlad over the centuries, but never more than the times Vlad needed him to find Ronnie.

Sitting on the chair in front of the fire, Vlad put his head in his hands and thought about the advice he'd given Zane, his Vampire Sentinel in the Pacific Northwest.

*Over two hundred years ago, when Zane discovered that his True Bond mate had been captured by a radical human group, Vlad clearly remembered sitting in the car and telling the vampire, **“This is why you need a human servant.”***

Zane had turned with a look of stubborn irritation on his face. “What are you talking about?”

“You know our human servants can track us.” Vlad knew his stare made the vampire nervous. But this was a serious subject. He willed the man to understand.

Zane had shifted his focus to look at Igor for a moment before he put his hand in his hair and pulled, then turned back to address Vlad. “What the hell does that have to do with anything? I’m not missing—Nicky is.”

Before Vlad could reply, Veronica had reached over the car seat and put her hand on Zane’s shoulder. She knew the man was hurting, and she offered comfort. “It’s going to be okay, Zane. You know we’ll find her. With all the power sitting in this car, we can’t fail.”

Zane stared at Ronnie for a moment before he took a deep breath, then turned to glare at Vlad before demanding, “Explain the human servant

remark.”

He was happy too. “Igor became my servant a few years after I was turned. He has always been able to find me when I’ve needed his help. There have been times when I was too wounded to call to him, yet he knew I was in trouble and came to extract me from whatever prison my enemies forged. He once told me that there’s this little red dot in his eyesight that lets him know where I am. It flashes if I am agitated or hurt.”

Igor didn’t talk, except telepathically to Vlad—and Zane knew that.

Zane sighed, obviously frustrated with the conversation. “I’m not the one who’s missing,” he said again.

Vlad laughed. “A few days after I met Veronica and started getting sick... before I realized she was my mate—Igor acquired a second little dot. Except for this time his new mental beacon was green.”

It took Zane a minute. “The green dot told him where to find Veronica?”

Ronnie answered his question. “Yeah. Imagine my dismay when this big, hulking beast,” she pointed at Igor and smiled, “tracked me down. I ran away from Vlad, and he couldn’t find me. Igor didn’t know what the green flashy thing meant, but he felt a sense of urgency to figure it out.”

Vlad leaned forward. “Ronnie has been kidnapped twice. Each time Igor is the one who found her.”

“Hey! Don’t make it sound like I’m always the one getting in trouble. Igor’s had to track your ass down a couple of times as well.” His woman huffed.

Vlad continued. “My advice to you, my friend? Find Nicole. Once the mating fever has cooled a bit, get yourself a human servant. Think about it as an insurance policy.”

“How in the hell do you find someone willing to serve a vampire for eternity? I’ll bet you didn’t give Igor a chance. I can’t just take over someone’s life like that!” Zane swore.

Vlad snorted. He knew Zane could and would do it if it meant keeping his mate safe. “Do what Marie Antoinette did a few decades ago. Her bookends were dying. They enthusiastically became her servants when they found out she could cure their disease and give them more time together.”

He’d seen the calculated look on Zane’s face. The man must have thought it was a good idea because less than a year later he had a pair of human servants.

Zane raised horses. He found another man that was as crazy for the beasts as he was. The man was dying. He was married but had no children. And both the wife and husband agreed to serve as Zane and Nicole's human servants. They were happy to have their lives extended, and in exchange, the couple had saved Zane and his Nicky several times.

That day, Zane simply agreed and told him "Fine you win."

Vlad snorted. "Of course, I do. You might want to remember this. One way or another, I always win."

Looking around the study at all the things he and Veronica had collected as a couple over their many years, he knew it wasn't as simple as winning. It wasn't Vlad that kept his mate safe. It was Igor. It had been Igor from the very beginning.

Igor knew he was upset, and why. The man's thoughts filled his mind. "I can find her. But except for the first time, it is your strength that saves her."

"Good," Vlad answered along their mental path. "*You are back.*"

Igor told him, "No. Almost. But no. I am close enough to contact you mind to mind, but I'm not close enough to see the visual indicators for you or Veronica. It might take another hour."

Before Vlad could comment, Igor added, "*I'll hurry.*"

Vlad could do nothing but wait. Wait for Igor, for Autumn, and anyone else near enough to help. Although he knew that as soon as Igor arrived, the waiting was over. If the others weren't here by then, they would need to catch up.

With a thought, the wood in the fireplace started to burn brightly. Veronica loved that ability. It was one of the few powers she had that could be used at any time, not just when she healed the sick or wounded.

She bemoaned her inability to cleanse or dress herself, or to summon even a small blanket. But fire she could do. She often wandered through the castle at night, candles flaming in her wake. In each room she entered, a fire would blaze to life on the hearth.

Vlad walked behind her to snuff out each and every one of them. Fire was one of the few things that could kill a vampire. But they always had a fire in the bedroom. Vlad would light it in the wee hours of the morning, just before dawn. The fire comforted Ronnie and Vlad was unable to deny her anything.

He'd been so blessed to find her. To discover their bond even though at the time, he had no idea that a True Bond existed for vampire kind. The first few months weren't easy. But those first memories always made him smile.



IN THE YEAR 1899

The first time Veronica ran from him, he laughed.

He would have let her go if the Obyri who brought the women to him, hadn't been right. Since their maker created the women outside vampire rules and then left the women without even basic survival skills, they were now Vlad's responsibility. He was the acknowledged leader of all vampires. He made the rules, now he had to abide by them.

Damian left the newly created female vampires in Vlad's tender care. That thought, pored with the memory of his temperament at that time of his life, was good for an eye-roll. If he were honest, his first thought had simply been to kill the newly made vampires instead of wasting the time to teach them. Both women were... not the gentle creatures of his time. They were militant, combative, demanding. And they gave him a headache.

But instead of giving in to his first instinct, Vlad shrugged and nodded at Damian. Promising the Obyri male that he would do the right thing. These women would either change their attitude and learn what Vlad could teach them or go their own way and find themselves beyond help. If they chose the second option, Vlad wouldn't hesitate to put them out of their misery. An untrained vampire was dangerous. Not only to humans but to all blood-drinkers, putting them at risk of exposure.

The Obyri were an ancient species. They drank blood, but they couldn't create more of their kind in the same way that vampires did. The Obyri were born, not made. When Damian found a compatible mate, the creation of a child would extend the mother's life. The child would be Obyri, the mother would become a nearly immortal human.

Damian couldn't teach the females or be responsible for them without endangering his race.

It took Vlad several hours to realize one of the women had escaped. And several more hours to find Veronica the first time. She was an intelligent, resourceful woman. She ran from his house in the country and made it back to London. He found her sitting outside a café, trying to eat, while earnestly explaining to a young doctor that she had been infected with a new disease. One that made her super-sensitive to the sun and kept her nauseous so she couldn't eat.

Later, Vlad discovered that Veronica knew the intense, dark-haired man from her work at the hospital. But for the moment, all he could think about

was getting her away from the doctor who was way too interested in what the new vampire had to say.

It amazed him that she managed to travel this far on her own. It was his first clue that Veronica had a core of iron under all that sweet exterior. Of course, at this time he hadn't seen much of the sweet either.

But he would learn over the centuries that there were some issues that his mate felt deeply about. Common sense or love for him would not change her point of view on these subjects. If she wanted something badly enough, she figured out a way to get it. If she wanted him to do something specific, he might as well give up and do it. This time that iron will... got her to London.

He watched her sit at the table, talking to the doctor, ignoring her intense need for blood. He could feel that need... beating at him. How she had made it from his country estate to this café was a mystery. He knew she had taken one of his horses, but she could only travel a few hours during the dark of night. When the sun came up, she must have found a dark corner of a barn or dug a hole in the forest to cover herself during daylight. It would have been risky, and uncomfortable. The fact that she managed it, amazed him.

But this couldn't be allowed. It was easy for Vlad to step up to the table and take control of the doctor's mind.

The man's thoughts were easy to read. He was contemplating locking Veronica away in his lab and using her for his experiments.

Vlad stripped the man of his memory of Ronnie and pulled the woman to her feet, taking her away from the table.

She didn't fight him. She was too sick. Both from lack of blood and the food she tried to eat.

"I'm sick!" she warned him. And then promptly vomited all the solid food she'd consumed tonight.

Vlad sighed, then let his incisors grow until he could slice the vein in his wrist. The blood flowed freely, and he held his hand under Veronica's nose. She grabbed him with both hands, bringing the blood to her lips. Her instincts took over and she latched on, her fangs sinking into his vein. And she feasted. Feasted on ancient blood that would heal any issues she had and make her stronger.

For several minutes there was welcome silence.

Suddenly, she lifted her head and jumped back, hissing at him. "**Fangs? Blood?**"

Before Vlad had a chance to speak, Veronica crossed herself in the way of the Catholic religion and whispered, **“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen... Holy Mary, Mother of God. Save me.”**

Vlad laughed at her words. “It won’t be the Holy Mother or God who saves you, woman. It will be me.”

Veronica wiped off the blood on her mouth with the sleeve of her dress. She took a step back and pointed at him. “You were forcing me to drink blood. You are trying to make me one of those filthy creatures. Those vampires. I’ve read all about you, you know.”

Before he could comment, she continued, “I’ve read Lord Byron’s poem The Giaour, and a few novels about your kind.”

She didn’t see him roll his eyes. Her night vision wasn’t quite developed yet.

Veronica stood tall and chanted, “But first, on earth as vampire sent,
Thy corpse shall from its tomb be rent:
Then ghastly haunt they native place,
And suck the blood of all they race.
Therefrom thy daughter, sister, wife,
At midnight drain the stream of life;
Yet loathe the banquet which perforce
Must feed thy livid living corpse.”

Vlad couldn’t help it. He started laughing again. Shaking with mirth. This woman made him laugh more than he had all year.

Veronica blinked and stomped her foot. Angry at him. “I didn’t think it was real. But you gave me your blood. You’re trying to make me a vampire,” she accused.

Vlad looked at her, disgust apparent in the stance of his body and tone of voice. “I’m not trying to turn you into a vampire, you silly creature. **That was done several nights ago.** I don’t know who attacked you and Tara, turning the two of you into vampires. But I promise I will hunt the man down and make him pay for his crimes. There are several hard and fast rules for our kind, but the most important is that **if you make it, you train it.** Since the one who created you, abandoned you without the skills to live in your new world, it falls to me to keep you alive long enough to learn how to survive in your new reality. Your first lesson is you can no longer eat human food.”

Her eyes shifted to the food her body had naturally expelled.

He waved his hand and disposed of the mess and smell, ignoring her cry of alarm at what she thought was the devil's magic. This woman had a lot to learn. Including that he **was** the devil and she better do what he said. "The second lesson is that you must have blood to live." He tried to keep the words **idiot woman** out of his mouth and was happy he succeeded.

The woman before him narrowed her eyes as if she could read his thoughts. Then she stumbled forward.

Vlad caught her before she hit the ground. The idiot woman fainted in his arms.



PRESENT-DAY

Vlad dropped his head back and opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling. He was just a little sad that he couldn't go back and relive the past with Veronica. The hell of their first days together was still better than being parted. He worried about her. The gnawing in his gut meant she was in danger. Possibly hurt.

He tried again to contact her with his mind. She was too far away to hear him. He frowned, or she'd been fitted with a mage collar so she couldn't communicate telepathically. Those were certainly easy enough to come by. There were other options to keep paranormal creatures from using any type of magic. She could be imprisoned in a bespelled room that prevented mind-to-mind communication.

Sighing, he raised his head and bit back a howl of anger. He wanted his mate back in his arms. She was the only one who could make him laugh. Smile.

Making Veronica happy is what kept him from going on a killing rampage.

Vlad opened his senses and searched the castle and surrounding area. There was no one nearby.

He didn't know why that disappointed him. He didn't want their assistance, yet they had offered it, and no one came. *What the hell were they all doing?* He glanced at the clock on the wall.

Damnation.

He wanted to scream with frustration and worry. It had only been a few minutes since the last time he checked. No one had come to help because they hadn't had time to travel to the castle. It just felt as if hours had passed,

not minutes. Whoever planned to help him with this rescue had better get their asses to Romania. He was losing his mind, and his control. He needed Veronica. **Now.**

Taking several deep breaths, he leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. Struggled to remain calm. If he couldn't be with his True Bond mate, he would think about her. Remember how unexpected it was to find he was tied to the petite woman. A woman who could crook her finger and make Vlad rush to do her bidding. He snorted. Well, not quite. It only seemed like that to him. Vlad was sure Veronica had a different viewpoint of their relationship.

In those first few months together, they fought about everything.



BACK IN THE YEAR 1899

Vlad and Veronica clashed every time they were near each other. It was a struggle to get her to wear the clothing he had Igor purchase for her, to live in his country home. Or to get her to feed from his wrist.

She ran from the country home so many times, he finally moved them all to London. This way she could just slip out the door and he could follow her trail. She didn't have to steal a horse or vamp some male into letting her ride in their carriage.

She learned that lesson very quickly. And just as quickly she realized she couldn't use it. Once a male had been vamped, they were difficult to get rid of. The mental possession didn't wear off without Vlad's interference.

The thought of those days and Veronica's antics made him shudder.

No. It was much easier to just take her to London and let her wear herself out. Let the reality of her new life... sink in.

For some reason, Vlad just couldn't let her do it on her own. He shadowed her. Haunted her room in the hours after dawn when she had to sleep... and because of age and strength... he didn't. He watched her. Watched over her. Stole innocent touches when he let his finger slip down her cheek, or across the softness of her wrist.

He tempted her, and himself, by providing blood to keep her alive. Lying to her. Telling her that he also needed to take her blood. Just a sip or two... So that she would grow stronger. He didn't do that with the other woman.

Tara learned and was independent in a short time. And Vlad liked it that way. He wanted her out of his house. But he didn't feel the same way about Veronica.

He couldn't help it. For the first time in his life, he craved—something. It irritated him that he couldn't resist her. Couldn't stay away from Veronica no matter how many times she demanded he leave her alone. And the craving for more was growing inside him. That craving for more than her blood was driving him insane.

Their lives... changed when Veronica acknowledged that she would never be able to hunt. She refused to go into the streets and use her wiles to tempt a human male into the shadows so she could feed. She wouldn't even try to feed on another woman or a child.

Her expression when he suggested the last option was clear. **She'd rather die.**

The other woman. That Tara person had quickly learned all the lessons he would teach her and moved on. She left his home within a week and Vlad didn't see her again for more than a century. She learned the lessons well and he wasn't sorry to see her go.

Veronica wasn't going anywhere. To stay alive, she needed blood. Since she wouldn't hunt for that blood, she took it from him. She **couldn't** go anywhere, and he liked it that way.

She wouldn't feed on humans. **But she regularly fed on his life's blood.** That fact settled something in his soul. She couldn't leave him. Not now. Not ever if Vlad had his way. And he usually did.

Vlad didn't understand why Veronica's refusal to feed from others didn't piss him off. In fact, the thought of her sucking on some man's neck, made him want to kill someone.

He easily dismissed that urge because wanting to kill someone was normal for Vlad. The threat of death was his one-and-only coping mechanism to anger, irritation, or pretty much anything. So, he shrugged off the touch of jealousy and the sense that Veronica was in some way his—and he went out every night, eating for two. Returning early so Veronica could suck on his wrist. He didn't lie to himself. This was something he wanted and needed.

It pained him that Veronica didn't feel the same way.

She fought her needs nightly. Taking long weeks to give up on the belief that her dependence on blood couldn't be healed in some way.

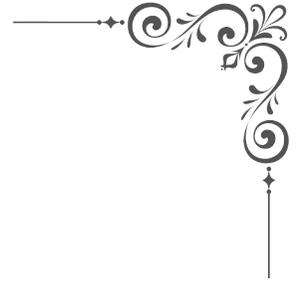
He often wondered if this obsession with healing herself came from her studies. She had planned to become a nurse, then a doctor. Lofty goals in the early nineteenth century. Whatever the reason. It took Veronica several weeks to realize that her craving for blood, wasn't going away.

He watched her grow quieter until she barely moved each day. Finally getting to the point where she refused to wash or change her clothing.

So, Vlad did it for her. Waving his hand to bathe her in seconds, clothe her in the most fashionable dresses, and untangle the rat's nest of blonde hair that cascaded down her back. He liked her hair down, so he didn't bother with an updo. Simply cleaning it each night and brushing it himself, until it shone.

Vlad knew she was losing her will to live. He spent long hours each night after she slept, searching for a solution. Not a solution to Veronica being a vampire. No. That wasn't going to change. But he felt that she was willing herself to die.

He needed to discover something to reawaken her desire to live.



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*Veronica lied to herself about so many things.
She was afraid to see the truth.
To live with the truth.
But she knew what some of that truth was.
She sat up straight and admitted it for the first time.
Not out loud. But to herself. To her inner, frightened soul.
She wasn't sick. She didn't have a disease.
No. She'd been attacked and turned into a vampire,
~by Veronica Tepes, 1899*

——

VERONICA

Moaning in pain, she cracked open one eye and sighed. She was still in the damn dungeon. Veronica felt as if the medicine patch had worn off. The beginnings of separation sickness started to pound through her body. The need for her mate pulsed through every cell and tore through her bloodstream.

This disease craved one thing, there was only one cure... and that was Vlad.

She wanted, needed her mate. God... she'd been through this before. Several times in the centuries since she'd been made a vampire. At least now she knew what was happening.

Veronica was True Bond mated to a vampire.

She grinned through her pain. She couldn't forget the look of shock on Vlad's face, all those years ago. After they bonded and an ancient explained what they had to look forward to. Told them about the restrictions and requirements to stay close to one another.

Up until they bonded, it was believed that this "gift" to vampires had disappeared over time. Over five hundred years had passed since the last True Bond mating had occurred. No one talked about the phenomenon because it no longer existed.

Hah! What a surprise their bond was! Not just for Vlad and Veronica, but the entire community of vampires.

She giggled and closed her eyes. She knew from experience that the best way to survive separation sickness was to try and sleep through the first hours

of pain. She would let herself dream about the heaven and hell of those long-ago days. When Veronica first realized she had feelings for Vlad.



BACK IN THE YEAR 1899

Veronica sat in the chair, staring blindly out at the garden. It was night. She shouldn't be able to see anything in the dark, but her night vision was now amazing. This sickness may have given her a craving for blood, but it also made her stronger.

She glanced up at the painting that now covered the hole she made when she punched her fist through the wall. She'd been angry when she woke up and Vlad wasn't here. She knew he was out sucking on someone's neck, and that thought blasted through her body. Before she could control herself, she slammed her hand against the wall. Veronica was shocked when that fist went through the plaster as if it were paper.

The disease gave her strength, and night vision that enabled her to watch an owl swoop down and take a mouse from the garden at midnight. She could see well enough to note the flash of fear in the mouse's eyes. The disease had also given her an all-consuming hunger for something she didn't understand.

It wasn't just the blood.

Veronica's body yearned for Vlad's touch. She went to bed earlier each night and pretended to sleep, waiting for the dawn to claim her. But that wasn't all she waited for. She knew Vlad snuck into her room each night when he believed her to be asleep. His nearness soothed something inside of her that pulsed through her veins. It was a different type of hunger.

And when he traced the curve of her cheek with the tip of his finger, she had to struggle not to grab him. She wanted more!

Moaning, she slumped in the chair in her bedroom and sighed. She had a problem. Afraid that whatever that more was... it wouldn't be enough.

These feelings had to be another symptom of the sickness.

She winced. Veronica lied to herself about so many things. She was afraid to see the truth. To live with the truth. But she knew what some of that truth was. She sat up straight and admitted it for the first time. Not out loud. But to herself. To her inner, frightened soul.

She wasn't sick. She didn't have a disease. No. She'd been attacked and turned into a vampire by what Vlad called a rogue. A vile man who was intent on creating a harem. Only he didn't stick around to teach his creations

how to take care of themselves and he ran when Vlad and another man started hunting him.

Not that it did him any good. She pretended to ignore Vlad when he spoke of vampire laws and tracking down rogues. Vlad usually killed those who didn't obey the laws because he said it brought too much attention to the rest of their kind. Since that attention came with fire and pitchforks pointed at what humans called the monsters... one of the most important supernatural laws was for them to stay hidden.

But this time, Vlad went on the hunt to avenge Veronica. And the other woman. Tara.

Veronica sighed. Tara hadn't stayed with them for long. She was different than Veronica. Stronger somehow. She had learned all that Vlad could or would teach her, then she left. Since Veronica was in extreme denial, Tara hadn't had much to say to her. The women had never become friends and rarely spoke to one another. Veronica didn't miss her. She did hope the woman would learn how to live as a vampire.

Neither of the women had been taught how to feed, or shelter from the light of day. They had no idea what they'd become.

She shuddered. Veronica couldn't hunt. She bit her lip and sighed. Since she was hell-bent on telling herself the truth tonight, she had to admit that she could probably hunt if she had to. But she didn't want to.

No. She didn't want to suck on a stranger's neck, she wanted to suck on Vlad's wrist. Well, more truth... she wanted to suck on his neck, and maybe other parts. So, Veronica refused to hunt, and she let Vlad take care of her.

It was a vicious circle, and she admitted it was also kind of sick. She didn't understand herself these days. Not at all.

She had weird thoughts when she was awake. Of things like... throwing Vlad to the floor. She could do that with her new strength. And ravish him.

Only she wasn't exactly sure what it meant to ravish someone. Kiss him. Probably. Suck on his neck... that thought sent all sorts of tingles through her body and she didn't want tingles.

Her mood shifted, as it often did these days. Away from Vlad and thoughts of ravishment to despair. She wanted to fade away into nothing. Her life was over. She'd never be a nurse or a doctor. Never do all the things she planned to do with her life.

There would be no marriage or children after she reached her other goals.

When she wasn't focused on thoughts of Vlad's neck, she hated the man. He wouldn't leave her alone and let her die. She hated that he had forced her to learn the basics.

That sunlight would burn her and if the burns were extensive enough, she'd die. He showed her how to hunt without killing the human, how to feed, and she had hated every minute of it. Blaming Vlad, wanting him to just let her fade away. They'd fought, and she'd screamed, and when he went out to feed so he could turn around and feed her—she was afraid to embrace all these churning feelings and emotions that weren't centered on hate.

This one time, while she was committed to telling herself the truth—she would admit that she wasn't afraid of dying. She was afraid of living.

Dying would definitely be easier.

The door to her bedroom swept open and Vlad stood directly in front of her. He was just there... she hadn't seen him walk into the room. He just appeared. Sometimes he did things just to boggle her mind. She thought it was meant to shock her out of her depressed state. To tempt her into asking questions and taking a broader interest in her new life.

She looked up at him. Mesmerized by the thick, black hair on his head. That hair brushed his wide shoulders. The man was taller than Veronica by several inches and was all muscle. His deep brown eyes gleamed with an internal fire that made her question the sanctity of her soul.

She wanted him.

He reached out and pulled her into his arms. Against his body.

She sucked in a breath and pulled his scent into her lungs. It was all spice and heat. Frankincense and Myrrh. A dark, mystical fragrance that made her heart race.

Vlad nuzzled her hair, whispering, "Tonight, I won't offer my wrist. Instead, you must take the blood from my neck. Take what you need from me, Veronica."

He tempted her. She'd just been dreaming about this, hadn't she? Wondering what it would be like. Had he read her thoughts, her needs? Before she could worry about that, the scent of Vlad's blood beckoned. The pulse at the curve of his neck called to her.

She leaned closer and licked across that pulse.

He shuddered, then stilled as if afraid the movement would frighten her.

Veronica wrapped her arms around him and leaned in... piercing his vein with her fangs.

The taste of him overwhelmed her. As it always did. She sank against his body and he wrapped his arms around her. Holding her to him.

She drank, deeply.

While she drank, Vlad shifted his body against hers and ran his hands over her flesh. He'd stripped her clothes off with his mind. Stripped himself of all the layers he wore.

Veronica didn't care. The need inside her grew. For blood. For this... When she drew back from feasting on his blood, she licked the last drop off his flesh and felt his manhood surge against her.

It all seemed so right when she lifted her head and Vlad kissed her. So right that their minds connected, and she heard his every thought. She knew that he heard hers. He felt her body's every reaction. As she felt his.

More, with their minds linked together, she felt his overwhelming need for her—surge through every cell of her being.



THEY WERE ONE.

Kissing Veronica took him to another realm—one he hadn't known existed. Fire burned through him and flames licked along his spine to dance over his flesh. Over their flesh.

Power and passion sparked between them and almost brought him to his knees.

Veronica moaned into his mouth.

Vlad's body reacted with a hot rush of blood pounding through his veins, thundering in his ears, to center in his cock.

She moved her hips subtly, rubbing against him, inflaming him further. When she felt that response she moved again. Down his body she trailed her mouth, kissing his chin and then licking his throat. She nipped her way to his chest.

Vlad wondered if she was taking ideas from his mind, and she answered silently, **Yes.**

He sighed and let go of the concern, that this wasn't supposed to happen. He fisted some of her glorious hair, acknowledging something he'd just admitted to himself. In all his long centuries of life, only Veronica managed to drive him right to the very edge of his control. He did things without thinking, going entirely with his subconscious desires when it came to her.

He always prided himself on being extremely disciplined. On being able to deny all his needs, except for blood.

Now it was except for blood... and Veronica.

She giggled in his mind and moved against him. Asking for more. He knew that Veronica loved the fact that she could make him lose control, and she planned to push those limits right now.

His thoughts and the pictures in his mind gave her something to strive for. She wasn't feeling lost and alone. Immersed in his mind, she was powerful and knew exactly what she was doing.

Vlad bent his head to brush a gentle kiss over her eyes and then her lips. His teeth grazed over her lower lip and he bent to her throat. His hands flexed and became more possessive.

He slid his palms over her skin, learning her body. He was gentle in his touch yet made it clear that he thought her flesh... belonged to him.

She shuddered at that thought. And wanted to deny him. But when he kissed his way to the curve of her breast and found her left nipple, all thoughts of denying Vlad anything... evaporated.

He tormented her for long moments. Suckling at her breast. Drawing her soft flesh into the heat of his mouth and then using the edge of his teeth, making her gasp as he tugged and rolled her right nipple with his hand.

She moaned and silently begged him for more, so he kissed his way slowly down her ribs to her belly. He could feel every delicate little shudder coursing through her body.

He felt her need more. Want more. Vlad used his mind to shift them to her bed. He laid Veronica on her back—and he settled a bit to one side. Over her, but not smothering. Before she could think to protest, he leaned down and spent long moments teasing her breasts with his tongue and teeth. Until she was panting. Begging him out loud for more.

He lifted his head, seeing his blazing eyes reflected in her heated gaze. He felt possessive of her. She was his and he planned to make sure she knew it.

“You are mine, Veronica, body, and soul.”

She started to protest until he added, “As I am yours.”

He reached down and encircled the girth of his cock with his fist. “This is yours. As your body is mine. My playground, my feast. My body is impatient for yours, there is no hiding that fact from you.” He smeared the clear drops of liquid leaking from his aching, sensitive crown with his thumb and then

slid his fingers between her legs, rubbing softly. Then he leaned over and sank his fangs into the vein at her breast.

Silently he told her. *You are mine. Mine to feast on. In every way.*

She shrieked, loudly, through her first orgasm. Panting, she demanded, “More. Oh, God. More!” She felt the need for him, and he fed it. Giving her everything she desired.

He raised his mouth to hers once more and kissed her. There was so much fire and passion between them, he felt overwhelmed. It was like a pure flame burning through both of their souls.

The flames burned through her and into him until he could barely breathe or think rationally. He wanted everything from her. He wanted his mouth and hands, and body to possess everything she was.

And she thrilled to that possessive spark, insisting that he give her everything.

Vlad wasn't sure that she knew what she demanded of him, but he couldn't deny her, or himself. So, when she pulled on his hair, her fingers locked in his dark tresses, and the other hand dug long nails into his buttocks in the attempt to pull him closer to her, he shifted his weight and slid on top of her.

Then lifted his head and once more started down her body with kisses and nips. “Vlad.” There was an ache in her voice, a plea for everything.

“You need this. I need to ensure that your body is ready to take mine. Just enjoy everything, Veronica. We will get there.” Vlad swamped her mind with not only his physical need but the emotional. He **needed** this connection. It was as important as her blood running through his veins. He slipped his teeth into another of her veins and sipped. Just a taste this time. Before he moved on.

Her fingers in his hair tensed, then let him go.

Every lick and taste of her skin was as addicting as her blood. He wanted to see if the nectar between her legs held the same fascination.

She caught his musings and jerked. Shock and anticipation warring in her mind.

He felt nearly feral, the wild craving in his soul pushed him to skip long sections of her body and led him to lift her legs over his arms. He opened her to him and settled between her thighs. Her scent welcomed him to heaven.

Before he moved forward, he looked up the expanse of her body and met her heavy gaze. “This is mine,” he said as he leaned forward and took that

first long, slow lick over her weeping flesh.

Veronica cried out. Her hips bucked.

The unique taste of orange blossom and cinnamon spilled over his tongue. That taste, that yearning connection with her mind and her body's reaction to his frantic lapping, threatened to drive him insane. He clamped down on her legs, holding her in place, one hand splayed wide on her belly.

Using their strong mental path, he warned her, *we have all night. I plan to keep my face buried between your legs, for most of it. Scream if you need to. No one will hear.*

His tongue circled her clit and then flicked. Her entire body shuddered in reaction. The pleasure she felt and shared with him was different than anything he remembered. It had been long decades since the last time he'd been with a woman. But this experience felt like so much... more. He'd never wanted anything this way.

The coils of pleasure cut deeper. Burned hotter, branding their souls together. They both felt the same passion and need, the same ties reaching out to bind them together. Vlad didn't understand it.

And for the moment, Veronica didn't care. "More, Vlad. More." Her head thrashed from side to side on her pillow, her hands clenched the bedsheets, and her body was so tense it shook with need. She was nearly incoherent in her demands.

So, he gave her more and reaped the rewards of those binding threads. Feeling every touch and sigh that she felt against her sensitive flesh.

Her body's reactions drove his higher.

Vlad's thoughts pushed Veronica into madness, *I want to eat you alive, you taste so good. I want to use my mouth and teeth until your only thought is a demand for me to join my body to yours. This night is all about pleasure and need.*

When she gurgled what sounded like permission, he let himself go. Feasting on her, wildly assaulting her senses using his lips and tongue. He used his fingers, flicking and tapping, and then raking with the edge of his teeth only to soothe with licks. He suckled gently and then stabbed deep, switching from gentle to rough until she was writhing and sobbing his name, her nails biting deep into his shoulders or, alternately, her fingers fisting in his hair.

Vlad took her over the edge twice before he was satisfied that she was slick with heat, mindless with need, and ready for the size of his cock. The

relentless pounding of his blood was nearly terrifying as it surged through his body.

Veronica's gaze clung to his, her teeth biting down on her lower lip. Droplets of blood tempted him. She looked radiant, disheveled, sensual, and so completely his. Vlad pressed the broad crown of his cock into the scalding heat of her slick entrance, feeling the flames licking up his spine with a ferocious burn that spread over his body, a wildfire out of control.

He had to breathe deep to keep from slamming into that tight, scorching sheath. Instead, he fought for control and pressed into her with measured care, inch by slow inch. Her tight silken muscles resisted but gave way reluctantly in the face of his persistent invasion. Her breath exploded out of her lungs in a long rush. His did the same.

She was pure heat. White-hot, with muscles clamping. Her body grasped his cock tight, massaging and milking, a thousand sensations that were so scorching hot, he was nearly out of his mind with the need to move fast and hard in her.

Veronica's hips bucked. She squirmed. Pushed herself onto him. Her hands flailed looking for something to hold on to and caught his arms. Her fingers dug into his flesh. **Vlad.** Her mind pleaded with him. For more. For everything he could give her.

"Almost there, my sweet. I'm trying to be careful with you," his voice was nearly hoarse with the effort to hold back.

"God, just finish it. I don't need careful. I need..."

He loved her bossy demands. He rewarded her by pushing deeper and found her barrier. He gripped her hips with his hands and took the pain from her mind as he surged forward, letting her feel the explosive pleasure as his cock ground over her most sensitive spot. She cried out as he buried himself deep, fully planting himself in her, so they were not only sharing minds but sharing bodies.

Vlad paused for a moment, savoring the feel of Veronica's feminine sheath surrounding his cock, gripping him so tightly, so ferociously, as if she would never let him go. He could feel her heartbeat, the heavy pulse driving him mad.

He treasured the intimacy between them. It was the most exquisite, perfect, amazing moment of his exceptionally long life.

Vlad looked down at his woman. For however long he could keep her, she was his. Her eyes were hooded with stunned passion.

He began to move, withdrawing slowly, savoring the drag of her muscles as they reluctantly released him, stimulating every nerve ending. He surged forward hard and fast, driving through her folds so that lightning streaked through his body, through hers.

Her eyes flew open and she cried out. Her body followed the direction of his hands, lifting her hips to meet his every thrust.

He looked down at her, at the sensual feast of her brilliant green eyes. His eyes raked over her soft, pale body, enjoying the way her large breasts swayed and jolted with every surge of his hips—as he drove his cock into paradise.

Her moans began to rise in urgency. Her full pink lips pressed together to keep the screams from shattering the night.

She didn't need to be quiet. He didn't want her quiet. With a thought, he soundproofed the room. No servant or neighbor would hear her screams. They belonged to him and him alone.

The pleasure in her mind expanded to surround him the way her silken tunnel surrounded his cock. He could feel her heart beating hard and fast, right through his thick shaft to beat in time with his. That was how tight she was, squeezing down on him like a vise. His breath came in harsh, ragged gasps, accompanying her soft moans—the sound resonated within their souls.

A wild explosive burst of awareness tore through every cell in his body, every cell in hers, to come together on a fiery precipice that held them both. Hanging. Waiting.

Vlad? She was breathless. Fearful.

Let go, Veronica. Fall with me.

Veronica's body was coiled tight, and just like that she relaxed, giving herself to him, putting her mind and body into his hands. Her body clamped down around his shaft, strangling him, milking him, biting down with scorching fire.

He couldn't take his gaze from hers, watching her go before him, as they were taken into paradise. Her gaze clung to his, a little dazed, a little fearful. But soft with passion.

He gripped her hips harder as he emptied himself into her, the wild, helpless jerking of his cock a fiery, volatile reaction to the continuous grip of her silken muscles. The more he gave her, the hotter the walls of her sheath until one orgasm rolled into the next. In the end, even the small aftershocks

were enough to make him shudder and twitch. Finally, he collapsed over the top of her. Spent.

Vlad let himself absorb her soft feminine form, the rightness of his body still embedded within her, his mind merged with hers, while their hearts pounded in perfect rhythm. He didn't try to think, he just let himself feel this closeness and euphoria.

He also felt that she had one hand in his hair and the other gliding down his back. He had no idea how long he lay there but it took an effort to slide his body from hers and roll off her, to lie beside her. Veronica lay sprawled out beside him on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

He threaded his fingers through hers and brought her hand to his chest over his wildly pounding heart. He watched her eyes close, and she sighed.

He looked out the window and snickered.

The sun was coming up.

As a vampire well over two hundred years old, he didn't have to sleep when it rose. But Veronica was new to this life. For long years she would be controlled by the rising and falling of the sun.

He brought her hand to his mouth and brushed a kiss in her palm before he stood and tucked the blankets around her body.

So many things had happened tonight with Veronica that weren't...
normal.

He walked out the door and didn't see Veronica's eyes pop open. She wasn't asleep. She had no idea what was going on, but the sun wasn't controlling her any longer. As it had when she was first made. And she had been in both her body and his when they made love. Her mind and his.

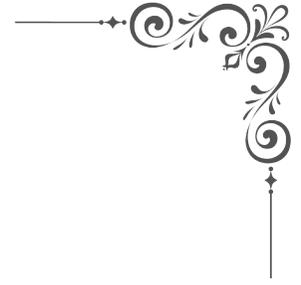
She stayed quiet, keeping her focus internal. She felt Vlad's touch leave her mind, and then she knew when he left the house. She was alone with her thoughts.

Staring at the ceiling, Veronica prepared to spend another sleepless night, debating her options. She was torn. And overwhelmed. Sex with Vlad had been mind-blowing. She realized he could use that skill to own her.

She knew herself and believed that she would do anything to have sex with him again.

She should get up, dress. Leave. Or he would own her soul.

But she was tired. Before she could act on her intention to leave, she tumbled into a deep sleep.



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*Vlad wasn't surprised to see Aebhel Afekan
sitting on a throne made of skulls.
Afekan was the goddess of a cannibalistic nation.
This **Ancient** being didn't have a problem killing her enemies,
she just thought there should be a reason and a plan.
Today, he didn't need her help killing.
He needed to know about vampire mates.
If such a thing existed.*

**~Vlad Tepes with the Ancient Goddess Afekan
(From A Century of Waiting.)**

——

STILL IN 1899, VLAD

Outside Victoria's room, Vlad paused with his hand on the door. Deep in thought, he worried about everything he just felt, and the growing connection he had with the woman he enjoyed ravaging.

The sex was amazing. Mind-blowing. Their mental and emotional bond had been intensely erotic and unusual. Like nothing he experienced before.

And that was the problem.

He didn't understand what was happening to him. To them.

He needed to think this through. And maybe seek answers from the **Ancients**.

Humans believed in vampires. Or well, they didn't really believe, but they acknowledged vampires as mythological creatures. They also labeled all bloodsucking creatures—as a vampire.

The reality in the supernatural world did not match human expectations.

There were three species of bloodsuckers in the world. All were unique, and all three kept to themselves. They didn't intermingle or talk to each other unless it had to do with their survival. They did accept that the threat of annihilation to one species of bloodsucker was a threat to all three.

The threat of extinction by the human masses meant they had established rules that were kept by all three species. The first rule of continued survival was that they stayed hidden. All three species agreed that if humans knew they existed, it wouldn't go well for any of them. So, when someone flouted that rule, no matter what type of bloodsucker they were—all three could step in and offer justice.

Therefore Damian, one of the Obyri, had rescued and taken care of Veronica and Tara. Then, because they were vampires, the women were brought to the leader of their group, which was him. Damien could have hunted the vampire rogue who turned the women. But because he was courting what the Obyri called a blood lover, he had excused himself from the hunt.

Vlad had already dealt with the wayward vampire, so the rogue was no longer a problem.

He entered his study and sank into a chair before the fire. It was a cold night, so a wave of his hand brought the flames leaping into life.

Staring blindly at the burning wood, Vlad contemplated the reaction of his body and mind to Veronica. It unnerved him. She was quickly becoming an addiction.

Vlad had married as a human, had many lovers and conquests over the more than four centuries since his birth, and he'd never felt like this before. *As if his entire well-being was held in the slender hands of this frail woman.*

There! That thought was a *bunch of crap*. Vlad recognized the words were not something he would think. That he would never, ever, put his well-being into anyone's hands. More specifically, he would never place his well-being in the hands of a **woman**.

Yet it felt like he had. Worst of all, the thought didn't scare him as it should. ***What in the hell was going on?***

Of the three species of bloodsuckers, vampires were the most prolific. Suck on the same human neck for three nights, give the intended vampire your blood... and ***whala***, a new vampire was created.

The human didn't need to have a specific blood type, there didn't need to be any hocus pocus connection. Just go through the process for three nights and it was done.

But that wasn't true of the other two races.

Long ago he had this discussion with the other leaders. One thing Vlad discovered was that vampires were the new kids on the block. Both the Obyri and the Dhampir had existed for eons longer than the first known vampire. He acknowledged that they were better at staying hidden than most new vampires. The Obyri and Dhampir were true ancients. Like they were some of the first to walk the Earth—ancient.

Their societies and the creation of new souls were so fraught with rules and regulations and magic, that it rarely happened. They both had to find the

perfect woman to bear their children. She would be the *only* woman. Destined by blood—or magic—or some shit, and their relationship had to last for hundreds of years. Because their species had to be born, not created in blood and human death.

He didn't believe that he *was* dead. But the differences between the other species and vampires were big. Vampires fed on blood and only blood. The other two species could take sustenance from food. So, they ate most of the time and only took a small amount of blood as a sort of rejuvenation ritual. Sips really, versus his big gulps.

He knew the Obyri could go out in the sun, and the Dhampir he'd met could tolerate weak sunlight. While newly made vampires burned to a crisp in the sunlight—older vampires gained some tolerance.

Vlad believed that burning to death had more to do with keeping the numbers down than anything. The vampire needed to be smart enough to keep out of the sun for a couple of hundred years before they graduated to another level.

So, the idiots were fried, and the number of vampires stayed at a manageable number. Once a vampire was over two hundred, something in their body changed, and it allowed them to spend time in the sunlight again. Not the bright light of mid-day—but the weak early morning and late afternoon rays were good. Cloud cover was even better. Until they got older. Then the sun didn't bother a vampire at all.

Did it work the same way with the Dhampir? Vlad had no idea.

The Obyri were a race of creatures whose life was tied to the blood and energy of others. Their maturity included a process of steps, where they achieved higher levels of power as they aged. To evolve, they had to find a *l'amant dans le sang*. This partner would become their *lover in blood* and had to willingly agree to let the Obyri take blood at the specific moment of orgasm. They needed to do this once a century to increase their preternatural skills.

Vlad knew that every Obyri went through a series of revivals. In some centuries, the power they received was barely noticeable, and at others, it was a big leap in abilities.

The Obyri race was proud to say that they were alive, had souls, and while they lived extremely long lives compared to humans, they were not immortal.

Hell, as far as Vlad was concerned, no one was immortal. Chop off any bloodsucker's head and they would die.

Except... he thought about Marie Antoinette.

Marie was a vampire before she was beheaded by guillotine during the French revolution. She'd been lucky that the beheading was done in a darkly shaded courtyard and that the body was displayed indoors, which kept most of the sun's rays from her vampire flesh.

Because the revolutionaries wanted to make a powerful visual statement about the evils of royalty, someone went to a great deal of trouble to ensure that when Marie was put in the coffin, her head was perfectly aligned with her body. The meticulous care when they put the pieces of her back together—ensured her survival.

He winced. The ex-queen of France had recuperated for a time at one of his secluded residences. The healing process before she could even dig her way out of the ground had been horrific. The long months and years required to repair all the damage was extensive and again... painful.

But it did enhance the story that vampires could be immortal. Under the right conditions, they could regenerate the blood, bone, and muscle connections if you lopped off their head. You just needed to quickly put everything back where it belonged.

That wasn't true of the Obyri. Nor did he think it was true of the Dhampir. But he wasn't sure. He supposed that might count as a bonus for vampirism.

Most vampires were created as an act of violence or domination. Vampires with a lot of morals didn't convert others. Not once they realized that the person they converted—no matter how much they loved them—would become territorial over the years and need to move on. They were meant to be alone forever. Two vampires could not share the same territory for longer than a few weeks once the new vampire grew into their powers. It would be impossible to stay with a newly created vampire for more than a year or two. Not long when you considered their life span.

Vampires were doomed to live as solitary creatures. That wasn't true of the Dhampir, or the Obyri.

The Obyri came from families. They had a mother and father and often siblings still living. They chose to live in family groups in large Obyri communities. And when they wanted to... they searched through time and the world for their Obyri blood mate.

As Vlad understood it, an Obyri blood mate was basically a lover in blood that the Obyri developed strong emotional and physical ties to. The blood mate would never need to take blood, they didn't get the powers that an Obyri had—allowing their body to dissolve into mist or move through walls—but their mortal life span was extended hundreds even thousands of years, as it was tied to their Obyri mate. The Obyri weren't destined to wander the world alone.

Once the woman became pregnant, the baby's blood altered the mother's life span and genetics. *Huh*. Vlad had never really thought about that before. All the Obyri Vlad had met in his considerable lifetime were male. Did they even have female children? He had no idea.

It also meant that whatever female the man chose as his mate, needed to become pregnant in order to become an eternal blood mate. He could see a world of unhappiness in those restrictions.

But at least the Obyri had the option of finding a mate.

So did the Dhampir. Even amongst the Others, the Dhampir were believed to be created when a newly turned male vampire mated with a human female. In mythology, their offspring were known as Dhampir. But the reality was even stranger. The Dhampir were a unique race of male beings that had been created at the dawn of time by the New Guinea goddess Aefkan Afekan.

Aefkan made it possible for only one specific human woman to be each Dhampir's mate. This meant that out of millions of women throughout the world, each male had to find the **one** woman who could give him back his virility and the chance to continue their race.

Just like it appeared to be for the Obyri, the Dhampir were a race of males. Vampires were both women and men. That had to mean something.

But that was a question for another day. He'd think about it later. When he had more time.

The Obyri species believed that the Dhampirs' need for one particular Blood Mate out of millions of women—versus the Obyri's ability to love almost any human woman—was done as a punishment by the goddess.

Vlad wasn't so sure. For one thing, the Dhampir species had a chance. It might be a small chance, but it was better than not having one. Another reason Vlad didn't think the punishment angle was true, was because Aefkan loved her children and she wasn't that vindictive.

As far as he knew, vampires didn't have any chance of finding a mate for all time. It didn't matter that he felt as if Veronica was the other half of his soul. That half was just waiting to get torn out of his body when she matured in her vampire powers enough that she could be on her own. She would need to move on, and he would be compelled to let her. At most, they might get a year together.

It upset him. That the other two species of bloodsuckers could have the option of a mate. Someone they cared for, that they could spend their lives with.

He frowned. So, why didn't vampires? Why couldn't vampires mate too? Maybe there was a chance, and either no one knew... or no one bothered to tell Vlad.

He snorted. It made more sense to think that one of the truly ancient vampires had simply deemed it unimportant or forgot about it—than to think that not one of them had run into this concern before.

He glanced around his library. At all the books and journals that he'd painstakingly gathered over the centuries. Many were written by paranormals. Or those studying paranormals, some without realizing what the creature they found... truly was. There was a wealth of knowledge in his books. He'd even learned a great deal about the Obyri and the Dhampir through the ramblings of a few of their kind.

But he hadn't read anything about vampire mates. And over the centuries, he'd gone through all the books at least once.

Vlad sighed. He was procrastinating. Stalling. Trying to come up with a way to find the knowledge he sought when he knew damn well there was only one person in the entire world that might be able to tell him what he wanted to know. Well, one specific goddess... and she lived in New Guinea.

Many years ago, Aebhel had told Vlad the story of the Dhampirs' creation. He didn't have any choice but to believe it. The woman was scary powerful and very... emotional. If she didn't think Vlad believed her, she would torture and kill him with the smallest thought. He liked living.

So, he believed it when Aebhel told him that she had taken several hairs from her own head and braided them with moonlight and wisps of night-magic to fashion the first Dhampir. The moonlight used in her creation meant direct sunlight burnt their skin, forcing them to become nocturnal or stay inside a very dark building during the bright light of day.

Aebhel was a sanguine deity, which meant she was a blood-drinking goddess, so her created race of beings also fed from the blood-energy of others. But like the Obyri, it wasn't their only source of sustenance. They could also eat food.

Remnants of the enchantment used at their making ensured that each Dhampir developed magical characteristics common to all... and had a unique supernatural gift.

Vlad sighed. Hell... he needed to go see Aebhel.

But he hated the magical shit he had to do to be transported to her jungle. Reluctantly he pulled out the box carved from the rock of an ancient volcano. It was one of the first magical relics he'd ever seen. And he hated it. Hated that he didn't understand why it worked the way it did, and he really hated using the box. It always hurt.

Closing his eyes, he kept a tight hold on the box and opened the lid.

What he hated most, was the sensation of shrinking, of his body being compressed and then sucked into the black, shiny darkness of the box—only to be spit out over half a world away, in New Guinea. Right into the middle of the hot, dark, jungle.

He opened his eyes and gazed upon the goddess.

Her visage flowed – changing her looks from one woman to the next. The disconcerting flash of a tall, deeply black-skinned female who morphed from New Guinea primitive to a Victorian lady to a tall, leather-clad warrior-woman from the future—reminded him of the first time he met her.

She had almost killed him, scared the shit out of him, and then saved his life.

Vlad had been a newly made vampire. Rampaging through several wars when she swooped in and dragged him into this god-forsaken steam bath of a jungle.

She threw him into the deep red mud and said, “I am Aebhel Afekan, but you can call me Afekan.”

Even back then her looks changed madly, never settling on one form. She was a contradiction. One moment appearing as an ancient stone age goddess or every goddess... the next second taking on an appearance that would have her blending into the streets of London today.

If it weren't for the tone of her flesh.

Aebhel's skin was the deepest, darkest ebony black. With just a hint of shining red color. Her flesh was unique and would always garner attention.

Especially when she then appeared as something out of his worst nightmare.

In their first meeting, she pointed a finger at him and said, “You no ken kilim all men. It tambu.” She started speaking in what he assumed was her native dialect. Then shook her head and spoke perfect English. “All the humans in your part of the world will be dead if you keep killing at this rate. You need to slow it down. Think. Be something more than a warlord.”

He had laughed at her until she raised an eyebrow and literally took the breath from his body. She made it clear that she could kill him with a thought. And without weapons or words. She used her mind to show him bits and pieces of how the world would evolve, and what his role could be.

She also showed him all the things she could do to him... if he didn't do what she wanted.

Then she came to him every night for a month and showed him more. Teaching Vlad how to survive and thrive as a vampire. Proving to him that she was a hell of a lot more powerful than he would ever be and that the world was more than just his little piece of ground.

Their strange friendship evolved, but he never forgot that she looked at him as if he were a bug that could be squashed beneath her goddess feet.

Every few years they would talk. She schooled him on the **Ancients**, on the **Others**, and molded him into the vampire leader he'd become. Hundreds of years later, he still had no idea why.

Except... One time, Afekan wanted him to do something for her and he asked her why she just didn't do it herself. The requested favor wouldn't have taken the goddess any time to accomplish.

She had looked at him and sighed, explaining, “I can't. It's against goddess rules. I'm forbidden to directly intervene in any of my children's or would-be children's lives. Or anyone's life for that matter. I create life and opportunities... and then I am forced to allow that created life to make their own decisions. I hate that part.” The crazy dark-haired goddess had shrugged and added, “That's why I have you, and others like you. You can do the things I cannot do. My will gets done, and I don't break the rules. If I need something killed, you are nambawan kilim all men. Gutpela assassin.”

Over the years, he started doing more than killing for her. And they started talking about not just what needed to be done, but the how's and the whys of it. He had a feeling that he had evolved—just as she wanted him to.

On this trip, he fell into the mud again. He heard the goddess laughing at him. He shook his head and stood. Vlad wasn't surprised to see Aebhel

Afekan sitting on a throne made from skulls. Afekan was the goddess of a cannibalistic nation. This *Ancient* being didn't have a problem killing her enemies, she just thought there should be a reason and a plan and she had to do it according to somebody's rules. He never figured out whose rules they were, but she followed them.

Vlad had long ago agreed with her. He now had a plan and a reason for everything.

"Vlad, this is a surprise. Usually, I need to force you to come to me. Why are you here?"

He took a deep breath of the wet, heated air and let his body relax. He came to Afekan because he knew there wouldn't be any games. She would listen and if she knew anything, she would tell him. If he needed help killing a monster that was bigger and stronger than he could handle, she would come to his aid. Today, he didn't need her help killing, he needed to know about vampire mates. If such a thing existed.

"Do you know if any vampire has found a mate? Something like the Blood Mates of the Dhampir or the Obyri?"

She raised an eyebrow at him and smirked. "I wondered when you would ask this question. And the answer is yes. The vampire can form a True Bond."

It took Aebhel Afekan about an hour to go over the mysteries of a Vampire True Bond. How it was formed, what it would mean to the vampires if they were lucky enough to find one. It didn't surprise him to discover that this type of mating was rare, as he'd never heard of one.

Nor did it surprise him that Aebhel knew about it. She knew a great deal about his race and their mates. ***And what she told him, changed his world.***

"Why the hell didn't you tell me this before?" Vlad demanded, glaring at the goddess.

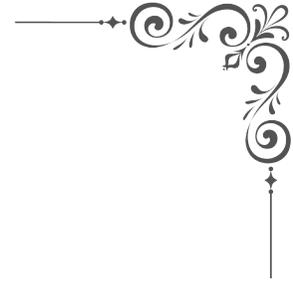
She lifted one eyebrow in disdain. "You didn't ask. Now you will need to consider what else you haven't asked. Come back when you have better manners, and I might have more answers!" And she sent him back through the vortex in the tiny black box.

The trip home was infinitely more painful and left him feeling sick. It had been done this way because he'd snapped at a goddess. He had to learn to keep his temper in check when he spoke to her. The woman could slap him down like a pesky fly.

That was his last thought before he passed out across his desk, his hand gripping the black, obsidian box. Making sure it stayed closed.



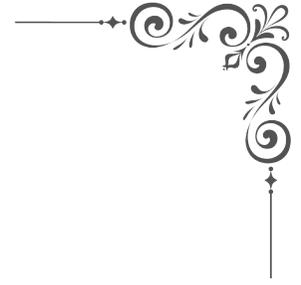
(GO TO [Creatures of Myth Volume 4 Amazon Page!](#))



[A Century Of Waiting](#)

Bloodmate **Creatures of Myth, Book 11**







THE BONES HAVE FOUND a Blood Mate.

Lukian jerked awake. Had he been dreaming? Glancing around the smooth stone walls of his sleeping chamber, he felt the last rays of the sun slide beneath Earth's surface. *Naul?* he questioned the whisper of voice-path in his mind.

Yes, it is I, Lukian. As always, Naul didn't waste time with small talk, he was concise and to the point. Aiwai Meri has called four men for this test. You are one of them.

The fertility Goddess, Aiwai Meri, had called him? Could he dare hope? *The Goddess Bones have been found? Where? When?* Lukian scrambled to make sense of the summons.

Does it matter? Naul replied with some censure. *Do you refuse this test?*

No. No, This is the first test for a Blood Mate in over a hundred years, I would not refuse, he countered incredulously.

Lukian knew humans believed the Dhampir to be no more than mythological creatures born when a newly turned male vampire mated with a human female. In reality, the Dhampir were a unique race of male beings created by the New Guinea Goddess—Aebhel Afekan.

He often wondered if their creator was punishing them for some disobedience when she made it possible for only one specific human woman to be each Dhampir's mate? Out of millions of women in The World, each male had to find the **one** woman who could give him back his virility and the chance to continue their race. Was the Dhampirs' need for a particular Blood Mate an oversight... or an intentional punishment?

The creator Goddess had removed several hairs from her head and braided them with moonlight and wisps of night-magic to fashion the first Dhampir. The moonlight used in their creation meant direct sunlight burned their skin, forcing them to become nocturnal or stay inside a windowless building during the brightest part of the day. They could go out on cloudy days or wear special clothing and head coverings. But no matter what precautions they took, sunlight remained a risk to their wellbeing.

Aebhel was a sanguine deity, which meant she was a blood-drinking Goddess. Her created race of beings also fed from the blood-energy of others.

Remnants of the enchantment used at their making ensured that each Dhampir developed magical characteristics common to all... and they were often given an exclusive supernatural gift.

A *gift*? Lukian always felt his special power was more of a curse. He shied away from his thoughts to dwell on the return of the Goddess Bones.

At the beginning of time, the males Aebhel formed didn't have a problem finding and claiming their unique Blood Mate. But as the centuries passed, searching through the hordes of mortals covering the Earth—for one specific female fated to be each Dhampir's mate—became an impossible task. Humans had a saying... that it was like finding a needle in a haystack. That sentiment matched the chore of finding a Blood Mate.

It remained an impossible task until Aiwai Meri felt the Dhampirs' suffering and took pity on her sister Aebhel's children.

Using her leg bones, Aiwai fashioned a mystical gift for the Dhampir. A gift that would search out and find the special women needed by their race. Aiwai Meri had been their savior, and for centuries the Goddess Bones worked perfectly.

They'd worked so well in fact, that Lukian hadn't worried at all when he neared his two-hundredth birthday. It was time to start including him in the ritual of choosing. It might take decades to find his woman but eventually, his Blood Mate would be found.

Only it didn't happen that way. One day the magical Goddess Bones simply disappeared. It was whispered that Aebhel was jealous of Aiwai's status among her children, and she'd hidden the Bones from the Dhampir in order to punish them. Other whispers hinted their mortal enemy, the Dark Fae, had somehow stolen the bones. It would be an effective way to end their race.

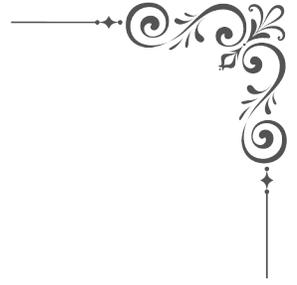
However they vanished and for what reason—the Bones were gone. And Lukian's century of waiting had turned into two and then more. So many more that he quit counting. He burned with the need to find a Blood Mate. His mating years were almost at an end. If he didn't find a mate soon—he never would.

This miracle was too much to hope for. He was over three hundred years old, and the Goddess Bones had resurfaced, somehow finding a woman who could be *his* Blood Mate. The ritual would determine who this woman belonged to. Lukian tried to school his thoughts, worried that somehow the sister Goddesses would know what he felt and that they might change their plans to include him tonight.

He knew Naul could read his mind and possessed additional powers only hinted at. The Goddesses were even more powerful.

We'll meet with The People within two hours, Naul said in parting. Be prepared for your part in the ritual and quit complaining about things we can't control.

Lukian gave up his struggle to conceal his blasphemous mental speculations from the Dhampir leader. Obviously, it didn't work.





WALKING UP THE STREET, Jessica frowned when she noticed the small package sitting on the front porch of her antique store. Pushing her long mass of dark brown hair out of her eyes, she grimaced in irritation. The mailman was trying to drive her crazy. She had specifically requested he not leave packages on her porch. He was supposed to send her a digital notification to pick packages up from the post office. That way no one could steal merchandise from her. But when the packages were smaller, like this one, he often forgot.

She'd walked to the bank during her lunch break. She did that every day when the weather was nice and there was money to deposit. It hadn't taken more than twenty minutes so thankfully the package hadn't been sitting here for long.

She leaned down to pick up the parcel and noticed it had been mailed from Port Moresby, New Guinea.

Chills raced down her spine. *Uncle John*. The postmark was dated two days before his death. Unable to stop the tears from clouding her vision, grief rushed over her in waves.

Uncle John. The cool uncle, the crazy man, the only one of her family who understood her need to do something on her own and not just *be* a Markson. His death left her feeling so alone in this world, adrift without the anchor of someone who loved her for just being Jessie. Not someone who had to live up to an inflexible idea of perfection.

She snorted at that—like she could ever live up to the *ideal* of the family name. She might have some of the money, but she'd been at the back of the line when the poise and polish and overall snob-nastiness was given out to her other relatives. Uncle John was the only relative who'd agreed with her view that just being a Markson wasn't enough.

Before his untimely death, he'd traveled the world working in underdeveloped nations to help provide clean water sources and teach the natives how to practice healthy hygiene and grow food crops.

She had opened up an antique store. Started a *business* for God's sake. You wouldn't think their diverse lifestyles put them in the same category of familial revolt. But it had. A Markson, after all, didn't get their hands dirty with either philanthropic endeavors or by trying to make a living. If you wanted to make a difference, you could send money.

Spending gobs of money was the only acceptable thing for a Markson to do. However, spending the money created more problems. Mainly because family money came with strings. If you spent Markson Money, you also got a spider web of obligations and restrictions and opinions on how the money should be spent and how you should look while spending it.

Glancing down at herself, Jessie smiled. How you should look *never* included worn jeans and a tight tee-shirt molded to your less than willowy body. If you had the bad grace to be born with curves, you should hide them. De-accentuate huge handfuls of breasts and camouflage the hourglass waist and hips—or be labeled crass. If you didn't comply, you were deemed too earthy and common for a true Markson.

No thank you. Perfectly acceptable haute couture and a closet full of shoes had never been her style. Her hair was long and curly wild. She only went to the hairdresser to get her bangs cut. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a manicure. Her nails were trim, unpolished, and her hands were a little rough from all the chemicals she used to refinish furniture.

Uncle John's answer had been to escape to third-world countries, not leaving *the family* a way to contact him and bitch.

Shortly after her parents died, Jessie's revolt had been to move as far away from Boston as she could physically go and still live in the US. Making her own money and leaving her inheritance untouched, meant she didn't have to allow her small horde of relatives a say in the way she lived her life.

She was a big fan of electronic ID and voice mail. She never answered her personal or her business communications unit until she checked the number. Only in an extreme situation would one of her family members show up in the Pacific Northwest. They would be afraid to become tainted by her foray into commerce.

The only one to see her beautiful little house and thriving antique business had been her father's younger brother. But Uncle John had died a few weeks ago... somewhere in New Guinea. The details of how and why and where had been very sketchy.

Pulling her lower lip between her teeth, she considered the package in her hands. Maybe there would be some answers in this small box. Well, she didn't have x-ray vision so that meant she was going to have to stop stalling, open the door and go inside to see what her dead relative had sent her. Oh, that was so not funny, and in very bad taste.

Uncle John would have loved it.

Unlocking the front door of her small blue Victorian, she entered the antique shop that haphazardly filled the bottom floor of her house with furniture and collectibles. The kitchen and second story comprised her living quarters while the attic did double duty as her formal office and storage area for seasonal dust catchers. The main storage room was in the back of the shop along with her safe and a desk for whoever was working.

Glancing quickly at the row of antique clocks above the front counter, she noted there was still about thirty minutes before she needed to open the store.

Moments later, Jessica deposited the box on the battered oak table in the breakroom. Looking around the cheerful, pale yellow room, she found the box cutter sitting out on the marble counter where she left it last night after unwrapping the new shipment of eighteenth-century Venetian glass.

Carefully she slit the seal on the package and peeled back two layers of bubble wrap. Only to find kernels of Styrofoam popcorn that needed to be scooped out of the way. The contents must be very fragile. When all the packing materials had been cleared out, she looked down into the box and frowned.

The light from the window illuminated two objects in all their...umm...glory.

Illuminated so much that for a second, she thought they glowed. Rubbing her hands over her eyes, she looked again.

Nestled in the packaging material were two pieces, both about twelve inches in length. Cream colored, with dark stains that looked as if they'd been soaked in black tea. The coloring suggested the ornate carvings were probably ivory. Or bone of some sort. But what were they? *Candlesticks?*

Maybe.

She bent over to inspect the carving and had to laugh. Whatever else the pieces were, it was evident they were fertility statues. *Not* a very subtle hint from Uncle John, she mused. But so like him.

One was decorated with the obviously naked form of a woman on the front, complete with large breasts and crossed legs. *Crossed legs*. Well, okay, on second thought maybe not fertility. The second part of the set was carved with a man...no, this one had breasts as well. Only this woman was shorter. Closer inspection showed the woman wasn't shorter...she was kneeling with her legs spread wide. Dangling between her legs was a loincloth. It looked as if she were wearing a ceremonial headdress as well.

Jessica reached out to lift one of the pieces from the box for a closer inspection. She felt a mild jolt of electricity run through her fingers. The shock coursed through her body and she shuddered.

When she furtively glanced over her shoulder to ensure no one was watching, the action brought her up short. She was frightened. Of what?

Don't be ridiculous, she told herself. It's just static from the packing materials.

She tilted the piece upside down and looked inside. Weird. The thing was hollow with no real base. *So not a candlestick.*

It must be some sort of dust catcher. No physical purpose, its life was only to serve as a decoration. The inside wasn't smooth like it would be if it was some sort of plastic, it was rough.

Running a finger up into the center, she pulled it back quickly and sucked the small red dot at the tip. "Shit." She'd snagged her skin on something. Left a drop of blood on the inside of the mysterious gift. Drawing back, she noted the surface was honeycombed like... oh, my God!

He wouldn't! Now, this was taking a macabre sense of humor almost too far.

Jessica knew from her Uncle John's letters that pockets of natives in New Guinea still practiced cannibalism. He'd written about how strange it was to see human skulls and the bones of other body parts decorating some of the huts, even huts of tribes that no longer ate each other.

These pieces looked like they were carved from bone. Leg bones. *Human leg bones?* Jessie shuddered. Uncle John had always had a very black sense of humor, but would he have sent her human leg bones? *Eeewww.*

Digging out the other piece, she ignored the second shock to her system and started rummaging through the packing material for a note. Surely, he wouldn't send her something like this without any explanation.

There was no note. The custom's slip simply said—

Artifacts - 2.

Great.

Maybe he'd sent a letter at the same time and she just hadn't received it yet. Well for now these artifacts were going back in the box and up on a high shelf. She would figure out what to do with them later. Ugh!



AFTER A LONG DAY, JESSICA settled deep into sleep. Until the nightmares came. Tossing and turning, she cried out for help. Subconsciously she heard the musical notes of all the grandfather and anniversary clocks downstairs as they chimed the midnight hour. When a glowing red light pulsed, she opened her eyes a slit and grumbled.

What are those damn leg bones doing on my dresser? They were supposed to be on the top shelf in the linen closet down the hall. And what is the light coming from them? Great, she was dreaming.

Involuntarily her eyes closed as she struggled to stay awake. She felt the air around her thicken, pulsing to the beat that was set by the flashing illumination coming from the bones. With so much moisture in the air, it became hard to breathe.

Did I leave the shower on?

Trying to make sense of anything was impossible with her head spinning. No. More than her head, the bed was spinning. If she could only open her eyes, she knew the nightmare would go away. She was falling. Falling...

She was too warm, the air around her thick with moisture and heat. Why was she asleep in a steam room with her body wet, bathed with hot mist? Every breath brought heavy tropical air into her lungs. She frowned at that, she had spent time in some of the world's rain forests and the smell and feel of the air reminded her of the ripe, intense scent of a jungle. Behind her eyes, a light flickered again. That thought came with the awareness that she was not alone, she heard low chanting coming from several voices.

She was laying on something hard—

—And she was bare-assed naked.

Startled, Jessie's eyes flew open, and she found herself in the middle of what had to be a vivid product of her bizarre imagination. The flickering light was firelight. She was in a large, rectangular, and extraordinarily primitive hut. Well, maybe not hut. The building had a thatched roof and a smoke-hole in the ceiling. But only a few half walls were separating her from what was happening outside. There was a large bonfire in the clearing and a glowing coal bed that meandered toward the jungle for several feet.

She watched several shifting bodies move rhythmically around and through the fire before they started walking over the coals. The fire dancers were dark-skinned, incredibly exotic, primeval, and oh, God... their movements seemed ritualistic. Mesmerizing. They didn't run through the fire, they strolled. Danced. It scared the crap out of her.

A few of the men wore nothing but ceremonial paint. Jessica gawked as one man danced into view.

He had on a large and very scary-looking mask that covered not only his face but also part of his upper body. The mask was ornately carved wood. There were small white shells embedded within the wood, highlighting the wearer's wild-looking eyes. The mask also sported a large, curved bone looped through an oversized nose. The man's body was covered in some sort of red dye, his... manly bits... were painted yellow.

Jessie was disgusted to note that this little ritual certainly made him happy.

Tightly closing her eyes, she murmured to herself that this was only a dream. Only a dream.

Only a dream, damn it!

She tasted blood and realized she bit the inside of her lip.

Her mind... expanded. That was the only way she could explain it.

Somehow, she connected with a consciousness that had all the answers. It felt as if her mind was flooded with knowledge. At least about this ceremony. Unfortunately, it didn't help at all with her personal questions. Like how to wake up and get out of here?

Suddenly she knew that for this village, the ceremonial Fire Dance could be done for several reasons. But the most important times throughout the year occurred to celebrate when several of their young men reached puberty—or to encourage fertility for newly mated couples.

Jessie winced. She didn't want to guess why this particular ceremony was being held.

Then she reminded herself that this couldn't be real... it was a dream.

The wailing of the bamboo orchestra and the crackle of a palm frond blaze filled the eerie darkness of the jungle night. Her inner thoughts shattered, as a figure emerged from the shadows. She was transfixed by the sight of a grotesque, near-naked figure in a hideous white mask.

Somehow, she knew the mask was called a Kavat. The villagers had gifted her with the choice of one of their most prized masks, the one resembling a cassowary bird.

Her mind stuttered over that fact. She had absolutely no idea what a cassowary bird looked like. But whatever was expanding her mind with facts on the ceremony... included information about the bird.

The scary visage on the mask was a great representation of the picture forming in her mind of a large, dangerous bird. She knew there were three varieties, and the birds were native to Australia and Papua New Guinea.

She sucked in a breath. Both more afraid and a little comforted. Of course, her dreams had taken her to the New Guinea jungle. It was where her uncle died and today, she received his last gift to her.

Thank God, this is a dream.

The information dump didn't stop with her hopeful realization. Instead, pointing out the bird's bristly feathers, vivid blue face, the two wattles or red flaps of skin that were hanging from its neck, and the prominent helmet that adorned the top of its head. She discovered that the cassowary could be as large as six and a half feet tall and weigh over a hundred and thirty pounds. And they were known to kill human beings with slashing blows of its feet, as one of its three toes had a long daggerlike nail. The birds were fast, running up to thirty miles an hour. And the villagers considered the bird to be both a delicacy... and featured the bird in most of its rituals. The bird was their most dangerous prey. Unless you counted humans.

Oh, God. She shouldn't have thought that. How the hell did she know all this?

Why could she see exactly how the mask was created. She knew the bark of a special tree had been stripped, beaten, and stretched to form a tapa cloth. Then it was fitted to a bamboo frame and decorated with black and red dye extract created from other trees in the surrounding jungle.

In fact, the knowledge filling her mind was so precise... she felt as if she could easily recreate the mask.

The dancers turned toward her, moving closer. Drawing Jessica's attention. She noticed all of them were male. It was hard to miss since most of them were naked, or nearly so.

The same damn commentary filled her mind and she recognized that they had all used white clay to paint their bodies. And that the large, rough penis covering worn by some of the men was known as a limid.

The saucer-shaped disc had also been created from bamboo and tapa. Then strips of the tapa cloth were woven into the man's pubic hair, holding the covering in place. That disc was pulled tightly downwards over the genitals, and the tapa and bamboo were then tugged between the man's legs and up to the base of the spine where it was pinned to the skin with either a sharpened cassowary bone, a sliver of bamboo, or even a safety pin.

When the men turned their backs to her, she could see that some of the tapa cloth was left dangling over their backside... like a tail. Grass thatch covered the dancer's calves, and their feet were bare. Nothing was done to protect their feet from the hot embers. And they danced over and around that pathway made of hot coals.

The information download didn't stop there. She knew that some of the decoration on the dancer's skin was human blood. They used their own blood for this ritual. Using a serrated leaf, drawing it down their tongue until it bled. Then painting parts of their body.

She didn't need to know that. It didn't help the nightmare.

There were other dancers, ones without masks that circled the area, blowing a deep foghorn sound through a bamboo tube. The crowd slowly increased. Adding more dancers, more instruments. Until she could hear a full orchestra and there were too many bodies gyrating around a second fire, she lost track. Then the chanting started.

Her mind fractured a bit at that point. She stared in rapt attention. Watching the ghost-like figures gyrate in the flickering of the firelight. One by one, more figures join the first—and the beat of the bamboo drums intensified.

The hair on her head stood on end and her flesh was covered in goosebumps. She inhaled the smoke-filled night air, and her heart raced, matching the tempo of the drums. The figures moved through the blazing fire for over an hour, sometimes stamping through the coals and sending out a cascade of sparks.

The combination mesmerized her, but not enough to calm the fear growing in her mind. Would this nightmare never end?

What seemed to be hours later, the fire in the clearing started to dim. As it dulled to just a faint glimmer of light, the dancing figures drifted into the darkness. And walked off into the jungle when they reached the end of the coal bed.

Once the male fire dancers were gone, more bodies filled the small clearing and circled the fire. Some of them moved into her thatched enclosure, but they stayed at the other end of the building. Everyone was dancing, moving to the beat of the drummers.

Where all the fire dancers had been male, this group included both women and men. She could tell because no one was wearing anything above the waist.

That weird, all-knowing feeling came back over Jessica. And somehow, she understood that the women of the village believed the fire dancers were from the spirit world.

Because of this belief, they hid their eyes and refused to watch. Waiting in their homes with their eyes covered until they were told it was safe to come out. They did this, worried that if they looked upon the spirits, in nine months they would bear children whose features resembled the grotesque mask.

But now that the spirits had departed, they could join the ceremony.

The chanting began again. Jessie closed her eyes. Her body and mind were so tired. And she was afraid. She could practically taste the anticipation in the air. Feel the tension of the dancers.

When the chanting reached a small crescendo and then ebbed into silence, Jessie kept her eyes shut. She didn't want to know what came next. Vacillating between being intrigued by the vividness of her dream and the horror that it might not be one, she struggled to ignore her mounting alarm. A dream would make sense. There was no way she could be in some primitive jungle.

Jess wanted to sit up and get out of here. The thought flashed through her mind that she had no idea where she was or where she would go without clothes, but she firmly squelched the niggling detail. It didn't matter anyway... this was all a dream. She tried to move and couldn't. Her arms were laid out along her side and when she tugged on them, she couldn't move.

Her eyes popped open, she shuddered at the sight in front of her, and quickly closed them again. Tight.

For the few short seconds Jessie's eyes had been open, she had intentionally kept her gaze away from her body. She knew she was naked, but since this was a dream her state of undress wasn't important. The important thing was to catalog the impressions and the amazing detail her mind had sketched, so she could try and figure out what the dream meant when she woke up.

There was no cause for concern. Her subconscious recognized that she had been thinking of New Guinea and her Uncle John and his strange gift. It was natural that she would dream this. *Right?*

Sweat seeped through her tightly closed eyes and for the second time she tried to lift her hand to wipe it away. She really couldn't move. That fact had been lost when her attention turned to the crazed dancers. But now her heart

started to pound, and her mouth turned as dry as dust. She had to open her eyes.

Looking down at her body, Jess began to lose her detached attitude.

Maybe now would be a good time to panic? Her brain screamed but she couldn't force the sound out. Her lips were locked in horror.

She was laying on a stone slab that looked like an altar of some type... oh, God! Someone had used twisted vines to tie her arms to metal rings embedded in the stone. Pulling with every ounce of strength she had, she wanted to throw a tantrum when she couldn't move even an inch. Lifting her head, she peered down her naked body. Damn! Whoever had done this to her had made sure she wouldn't be getting away. Her feet were tied in the same way.

When she tried to sit up, she realized there was another vine rope around her neck. At that point she decided she didn't care if it was a dream or not, she wanted out of here.

Fighting her bonds in earnest, she struggled unsuccessfully to pull even one of her limbs free. Unfortunately, her movements didn't go unnoticed.

All the dancers stopped their gyrations and turned to look at her. Jessie didn't like being the center of attention. Completely still, with her heart pounding in escalating alarm, she waited and prayed they would all go back to dancing.

She could lie on the cold rock bed for hours if the dancing natives would just turn around and return to what they were doing. Mentally she reassured them. *Go on. Go back to dancing. Nothing of interest here...* she didn't want anyone in the frightening group to focus on her.

But it was too late.



(FOR MORE... GO TO [Creatures of Myth Volume 4 Amazon Page!](#))



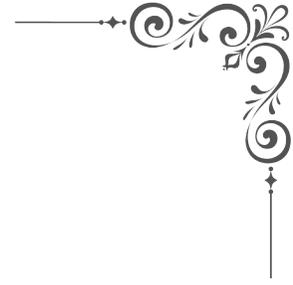
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CREATURES OF MYTH SERIES

If you enjoyed this book you might enjoy other books from Ravyn's Creatures of Myth series.

In Creatures of Myth – the women can save themselves. The heroine finds a soul mate—even if she isn't looking for one! And the magic is real. Each book offers a happily-ever-after love story and all the books are hot, some are scorching, and often the heat is magical.

Creatures of Myth have existed through the ages—and continue into the future. Some Creatures are born into the supernatural world, and some are created in magic and pain. There are blood-drinkers, shifters, and Others steeped in myth and lore.

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(Each book in this series can be read as a standalone, yet the overall world of supernatural creatures is revealed throughout the series.)



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“Buckle up for another Ravyn Wilde ride! Yes, Nicky, there are things that go bump in the night... like two souls destined to be one!”

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CREATURES OF MYTH SERIES List

- [Saving Sahara, Creatures of Myth – Ancients](#) (Free Book)

Sahara is dying. With only days to live, Damian offers to heal her. But is the price worth living?

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(Children of the Dark Mage)



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One night. One body. Vampire Marie Antoinette discovers a legendary monster she can’t kill—and a fated love she might die for...

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Natasha's mother and witchy-best friend think she needs a social life, so they're forcing her to attend the Supernatural Speed Dating event. She doesn't have time for this crap.

- [Luke & Jezebel, Book 5](#)

When the sparks fly between Luke & Jezebel in the middle of a Human vs. Other race war, they are both singed by the outcome. Will they discover they are fated mates before it's too late?

- [Adam & Eve, Book 6](#)

Werewolves have one genetic breeding mate. During Lupine Moon they can scent and claim her. Eve refuses to allow an alpha male to dictate her life. She has never forgotten to lock herself into her safe-room when the moon is full. Until now.

- [Midnight's Mystery - Dragonkynd, Book 7](#)

When a Dragon Lord kidnaps Midnight's fledgling Dragons Witches, she kicks his ass and gets the girls back. He takes her by surprise and hides her from her coven with the intent of making Midnight his ideal mate. All she needs to do is wear more clothes, stop saving humans, and quit using her magic. *She is going to kill him.*

- [UnDuplicated Magic - Children of the Dark Mage, Book 8](#)

A Dark Mage intent on world domination. A binding love spell. Can Jason and Gypsy break their magically hot connection and save the world?

- [Autumn's Awakening – Dragonkynd/Children of the Dark Mage, Book](#)

Save the Children. Rescue the Clones. Kill the demon. In order to do those things Autumn needs to wake up the cranky, old-fashioned Dragon Lord and get him to help. She is going to rock his world!

- [Vlad & Veronica - Children of the Dark Mage, Book 10 \(End of 2020 release\)](#)

Is their love enough to save the world from the insane plot of a megalomaniac demon? The Dark Mage Demon, Darcy Ifrin, has plagued the supernatural community for decades. Now he's kidnapped Veronica. It's up to Vlad to find her, save her, and then destroy the demon before his clone army takes over the world.

- [Century of Waiting, Book 11](#)

Can she love him enough to save his world? One of three races who require blood to live, the Dhampir use the Goddess Bones to find their one true Blood Mate. But the bones have been missing for over a century and their race is nearing extinction. When the Bones reappear, the modern woman chosen to be the first Blood Mate in over a century... refuses her fate. Jessica plans to destroy the Bones, ensuring that no other woman will be forced to endure the barbaric rituals.



CREATURES OF MYTH (& Magic!) Series List

- [The Men Of Her Dreams, Book 1](#)

She didn't know she was a witch. Catriona's husband gave her a trip to Scotland for her birthday. Before the luggage was unpacked - he asked for a divorce and abandoned her at a remote castle. She should be devastated - and she was. But the castle is owned by two brothers who rush to offer comfort. **Too bad one of them is a GHOST**, because Cat realizes Jacob and Jamie could be the men of her dreams!



OUT OF THIS WORLD SERIES (Closely Tied to the Zylar's Moons Series)

Have you ever fantasized about being abducted by a sexy alien? Or having one walk right up and knock at your door...ready and willing to convince you that he is your destiny? Well...Alien at Her Door is just the book for you! You'll find three, Out of THIS World stories that will give new meaning to the words *lost in space*.

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ALIEN AT HER DOOR (Books 1 - 3)

Alien To The Rescue (Books 4 – 6)

Or Read Them Separately

- **[Passionflower, Out of THIS World, Book 1](#)**
- **[Keeper of Tomorrows, Out of THIS World, Book 2](#)**
- **[Guardian Alien, Out of THIS World, Book 3](#)**
- **[Promised ~ To The Alien, Out of THIS World, Book 4](#)**
- **[Sold ~ To The Alien, Out of THIS World, Book 5](#)**
- **[Wed ~ To The Alien, Out of THIS World, Book 6](#)**
- **[3 Weddings & An Alien \(Serialized Read – Kindle Vella\)](#)**

Read 3 chapters free! This book tells Tallie's story, but it will also visit the three women from Earth (From the books Promised, Sold, and Wed above) so we can see how they cope with alien mates... and life on an alien planet. Along the way... someone gets kidnapped. *Again*.



HIGHLIGHTED BOOK

[Promised ~ To the Alien – Out of THIS World Book 4](#)

Makayla watched as her sister and cousin were carried off their Texas ranch by over a dozen red-skinned aliens who had four-arms. When she asked for help, no one believed her when she told them her family was spirited away on a spaceship. She'd do anything to get them back.

Excerpt

Falcon stood at the door that had been abruptly closed in his face. He was in shock. He had arrived at his Keeper's home and rang the doorbell to the large white house. As he waited, with his heart pounding in a wild beat and his hands shaking, he reviewed the advice from successful Guardians to ensure he had followed it closely. His hair was a little long, his body muscular and had on a black leather jacket, even though the weather was a little warm. He gripped the bouquet of flowers and let just a tiny touch of the binding pollen dust his body.

He was ready.

When the door started to creep open, he held his breath and almost passed out when he got the first glimpse of his keeper. *She was beautiful!* She had a mass of curly dark hair secured in a messy bun on the top of her head, mocha colored skin that tempted him to touch and caress, and deep brown eyes. He kept his hands to himself. Waiting for her to invite him in. Then he would touch. He took a deep breath.

"Can I help you?" she asked him. Her voice a little clipped.

He frowned. Was something wrong with the way he looked? She didn't seem to find his form pleasing. The other Guardians had said the women went crazy over their muscles, and really liked longer hair. He'd also taken their recommendations and dressed this form in tight jeans and an even tighter black tee-shirt. She didn't seem to find him irresistible. That was disappointing.

His high expectations, sank.

He held out the wildflowers he'd chosen for his Keeper and slowly drew them back when she ignored them. He looked at her and frowned. "My name is Falcon and I am here for Makayla."

"I'm Makayla."

"I know. I...brought you flowers." He offered them again.

She sighed. "No thank you."

"I would like to come in and explain why I'm here, I can take you places you've only dreamed about."

She snorted. "Buddy, that is lame and the only places I'm dreaming about are in outer space." She raised her hand in the universal sign that meant stop. "Unless you have a spaceship and can help me rescue the girls, forget it!"

Then she slammed the door shut in his face.

Falcon's mouth dropped open. She had shut him out. She wouldn't even speak with him or give him an opportunity to convince her. The advice from

the other Guardians had been wrong. He started to turn around when her last words ran through his head.

He stopped and grinned.

When he popped into the house and stood in front of her, she gasped and stepped back. Putting her hand over her heart.

“I have a spaceship and will take you anywhere you want to go if you agree to be my Keeper,” he announced and smiled at his amazing woman.

It didn't take her long to recover. She stood as tall as she could, using the wall for balance. He noticed her foot was encased in a cast. He wondered how she hurt it.

His Makayla challenged him. “Really? Prove it,” she demanded.

So, he did.

Makayla screamed and crumpled at his feet. ([Get it now!](#))



ZYLAR'S MOONS SERIES

The Zylar's Moons Series is a hot alien abduction romance series. On the planet Zylar, there are two suns - and three moons. A Zylan male doesn't choose a mate, his body does. Women are traditionally submissive, but all Hell breaks loose when the ruler of Zylar abducts his mate from Earth. Come along for the ride as Nyssa fights for not only her freedom but the freedom of all women on Zylar. But when she's done, she's keeping the chains!

Come play with a sexy alien and fall in love with something Wilde. Just remember...Earth girls aren't easy!

What readers are saying:

"Wow! This book is an emotional roller coaster..."

"Hot read with great characters..."

"Love aliens. Great plot and characters..."



ZYLAR'S MOONS SERIES List

[Zylar's Moons Series – Volume 1 \(Books 1 – 3\)](#) Alien Abduction

This earth girl isn't easy! On the planet Zylar there are two suns - and three moons. A Zylan male doesn't choose a mate, his body does. Women are traditionally submissive, but all Hell breaks loose when the ruler of Zylar abducts his mate from Earth. Come along for the ride as Nyssa fights for not

only her freedom, but the freedom of all women on Zylar. But when she's done, she's keeping the chains!



OR READ THEM SEPARATELY

- [Zylan Captive, Book 1](#)

VanNyssa thought Alien Abductions were fiction. She discovered she was wrong when she woke one morning in a stranger's bed, gold chains attached to certain...um-delicate parts of her body, on a planet ruled by a man now claiming to be her life-mate. Tar plans for her to be his quiet, unassuming companion. Not! This earth-girl can never be called "easy."

- [Selven Refuge, Book 2](#)

Tala doesn't realize that her bid for freedom may kill the man she secretly loves. Tala has never liked the way women are treated on Zylar. When an earthling demonstrates to Zylan women that they have the power to control a very intimate and binding aspect of their lives—this newly discovered ability sparks a feminist revolution.

- [Zylan Rebellion, Book 3](#)

A madman kidnapped Ahnika and took her to Zylar. Now he plans to sell her into sexual slavery... Forced to witness and endure things that could break her spirit...she decides she can't take any more. Just before she's to be sold at auction, she comes up with a daring plan to escape, knowing she'd rather die than remain a prisoner.



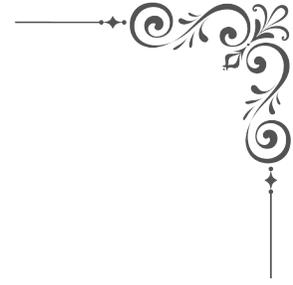
OTHER BOOKS

[Saved by the Book](#)

Jenna and Joey's lives are falling apart. Jenna's ex-husband is trying to kill her. Joey can no longer do her job with her self-esteem in tatters. How do they repair the broken pieces of their lives? Do they deserve a second chance at love?

They each find a book...research possible solutions and come up with a plan. Along the way, each woman meets just the right man. A really great, smokin' HOT guy—who makes their toes curl...and their hearts start to believe there might be a second chance at love.

Unfortunately, they are not the women they could be, and even the best plans...fail. They have secrets...and ISSUES... Meet two women, with two very different stories—and discover if they can be... Saved by The Book.



About the Author



RAVYN WILDE IS THE author of the [Zylar's Moons](#), [Creatures of Myth](#), and [Out of THIS World](#) series. She writes **Hot** romance filled with things that go bump in the night! Get Wilde with a werewolf, or vampire, maybe a dragon or two...or let an Alien hunk take you away from all your troubles. But keep track, because once and a while a story-worthy human comes along.

She makes her online home at www.ravynwilde.com. You can connect with Ravyn on Twitter @RavynWilde, on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ravynwilde/, or email her at ravyn@ravynwilde.com.



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