

The Silver Wolf

Published by Jennifer Wherrett

<https://www.thelady.com.au/books-and-publications>

Copyright © Jennifer Wherrett, 2023

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

*You cannot fully know yourself
If your heart is not open.
But you do not need to know who you are
To be who you are.*

Prologue

The chapel wasn't large, but nor was it small. It was somewhere in between. And it was shrouded in silence.

So complete and pervasive was the silence that it filled the chapel to its rafters and dominated, as if the silence believed the chapel had been created with the sole purpose of giving it a place to be, somewhere for it to reside. Only the faint scuffle of tiny rodent feet could be heard every now and then, but the silence was not perturbed by the sound because the faint scuffle barely touched it. The little scuffling feet really only highlighted the silence, drawing attention to it, so perhaps 'twas understandable that the silence allowed the little feet to go about their business.

The snapping and cracking of the chapel's wooden floor and ceiling was a slightly different matter, but the sounds of the chapel's wood as it adjusted to the chill of the night, contracting in the cold, were sporadic and quick, like a whiplash of sound, penetrating, yes, but so briefly the silence easily re-staked both its claim and its dominance once again.

And then, the stillness.

The stillness in the chapel was as pervasive as the silence, as if the two were in collusion, each assisting the other in their dominance of the chapel. But even the faint scuffle of tiny feet and the snap and crack of the chapel's wood did not mar the purity and perfection of the utter stillness in the chapel.

Bright, luminous strips of moonlight lay over the chapel's floor and painted the pews on one side of it, punctuating the darkness, and filling the chapel around the strips of light with an eerie greyness that seemed to somehow aid the silence and the stillness in their quest to own it. The moon's light elongated the chapel's windows as it filled them and outlined them on the chapel's floor and pews. And in the luminous strips of light, tiny particles of dust danced silently and floated serenely so that the perfection of the stillness was not marred by their floating movement.

In the muted, grey darkness of the chapel, darker shapes were easily discernible. Rows of long, empty wooden pews divided the chapel into two perfect halves, leaving a wide aisle between them. The rafters above appeared like darker shadows hovering high over the pews, and in the very centre of the room, a large, circular, iron chandelier hung low over the pews like a giant halo, suspended from the high ceiling on a long chain. Large, white

candles, appearing grey in the darkness, circled the chandelier, but their wicks were cold, unlit, as if the candles had fallen asleep in the stillness and the silence, causing their own unique function to remain unfulfilled, like the unprepared bridesmaids, awaiting the groom, in that famous biblical story.

At the end of the long aisle formed between the dark, wooden pews, the black shape of an opened coffin on a long stone table dominated the front of the chapel. It had been placed where normally the altar stood, covered in its bright-white linen cloth. The altar's position in the chapel and, indeed, its role and function of serving to draw the focus of the chapel's occupants, had been usurped, so it had been placed to one side, against one of the chapel's walls, its linen cloth appearing dull grey in the darkness, like the candles.

The opened lid enlarged the coffin in its appearance and exposed its inner contents to the chapel at large. Inside, a woman lay, perfect in her serenity, her skin pale, made even paler by the white satin of the coffin's interior. She looked peaceful, as if in the deepest of sleeps. Her closed eyes caused her dark lashes to fan against her pale cheeks, and her hands, crossed over her waist, were relaxed against her, the fingers of both curled slightly. Only the absolute stillness of her hinted at the fact that she was not sleeping. Her chest did not rise and fall with every inhaled and exhaled breath because there was no breath.

Her utter stillness was somehow joined, and even merged, with the stillness in the chapel, forming part of it, so that she seemed to belong there, as if both the silence and the stillness had accepted her, or were, maybe, even paying her homage.

Then, in the darkness, one of the shadows disturbed the perfection of the stillness, detaching itself and gliding towards the coffin. But although it disrupted the stillness, it did not mar the purity of the silence. Not a sound did it make as it moved, not even the soft whisper of cloth on the wooden floor, even when it raised its hands and removed the hood of its long cloak.

He, the shadow, moved to stand directly in front of the coffin and the lady lying therein. And when he reached her, he stood over her for a long, long moment, looking down at her, his eyes narrowed. Although he became, again, part of the stillness, his anger radiated out of him, subtly changing the ambience around him and in the chapel.

At the end of that long moment, he leant over the lady lying still in her coffin, and placed cold lips against hers. His kiss was long and lingering, but it was not the gentle caress of love, once savoured, now lost. On the contrary, his was a kiss born of anger and the supreme frustration of having been thus irrevocably deprived of the pleasures she gave him. So his kiss didn't just hold his unsatisfied desire, it held an element of punishment,

as if he believed he could bring the lady to her senses, or as if he believed his kiss could scare her into coming back to him. Or, as if he believed he held the power to cause her lips to move against his, as once they had, just by willing it, wanting it, needing it.

But the lady's lips remained implacably still and cold against his.

He straightened and looked down upon her once again.

“Oh how you disappoint me, Madeleine,” he said softly but harshly, his anger ringing through his words.

His softly-spoken words broke the silence temporarily, but as their echo faded, the silence seemed to gain a curious obdurate intensity as it once again reasserted its claim, filling the chapel. Even the faint scuffle of little feet stopped, as if holding themselves immobile, awaiting the outcome of the tussle between the silence and the shadow.

But the shadow ignored both warning and reprimand implicit in the heavy pall of silence.

“Oh how you disappoint me,” he said again, his voice harder this time, harsher, and, therefore, louder, as if in speaking the words the first time he had magnified his own anger, and now it erupted. This time, his words reverberated throughout the chapel, and even the silence was cowered.

For a moment more, the shadow looked down at the lady, and then he reached up and slammed the coffin's lid shut, hiding her away, depriving himself of the sight of her. He turned on his heel in disgust, his anger infusing the action with an element of violence, and his long, black cloak billowed out behind him. Like a magician waving his cloak with a dramatic flourish to disappear, the shadow was gone, leaving only the echo of the violent sound of the lid hitting the casket as evidence he had been there at all.

He vanished, completely, long before the echoes of the sound died away.

~~~

*“You see, there's a fundamental connection between **seeming** and **being**. Every Fae child knows this, but you mortals never seem to see. We understand how dangerous a mask can be. We all become what we pretend to be . . . .*

*“You meet a girl: shy, unassuming. If you tell her she's beautiful, she'll think you're sweet, but she won't believe you . . . there's a better way. You show her she is beautiful. You make mirrors of your eyes, prayers of your hands against her body . . . when she truly believes you . . . Suddenly the story she tells herself in her own head changes. She transforms. She isn't **seen as beautiful**. She is **beautiful, seen**.”*

*The Name of the Wind*, Patrick Rothfuss, 2007,  
Gollancz, The Orion Publishing Group (pages 657 & 658)

I would gaze upon my own reflection,  
No matter the form that reflection takes,  
Whether another person,  
Or an inanimate object like a mirror.  
I would look my Self full in the face.  
I would gaze upon my glory,  
My Truth, my Light, my Power.  
I would see  
Me.  
First, though, I must be set free.  
In order to see, I have to be free -  
Free to be what I am.  
Then, set free  
I may gaze upon my own reflection.  
So, come, set me free.



# *The Mask*

He watched her move along the edge of the room, mildly surprised no one else seemed to have noticed her. Moments before, she had materialised as if out of the air, standing at the top of the staircase that dominated one end of the ball room. He'd noticed her straight away. She had a way of catching and holding the eye . . . well, he thought, glancing around him, his eye anyway. After standing for a long moment, surveying the room, she had descended the stairs, running her hand lightly over the bannister of the stairs as she descended them.

There had been no fanfare, no public announcement alerting the room's occupants to her presence, despite the fact that she was, technically, the lady of the house, the host's sister. She moved now along the opposite side of the room from him, and as she moved, he moved with her, watching her between the dancers who moved in and out of his vision, sometimes obscuring his view of her, sometimes allowing him a clear view. He noticed she was careful not to engage anyone, not to allow herself to be caught in conversation, merely bowing her head slightly when spoken to but continuing to move towards the other end of the room.

Half of her face was covered by a black mask so that he could not see her eyes. He could see the tension in her shoulders, though, and in the way she held herself as she walked. And he could see her unsmiling lips.

He, too, was masked, as was every other person in the room. The mask suited her, he thought. Masks did not suit everyone. Some people looked decidedly silly in their chosen masks. Not so her. Hers lent her an air of mystery, as if it allowed her to remain aloof and disconnected from all that was taking place around her, or, perhaps more aptly, from every person around her. And, with her eyes hidden, one's attention was drawn to her neck, shoulders and lips.

He thought her inner luminosity was reflected in the smooth paleness of her skin, and it was heightened by what she was wearing. Her gown was dramatic and colourful – red, gold and black – and sumptuous, the bodice hugging her body tightly, suggestively, the sleeves sitting on the very edges of her shoulders so that the neckline was wide and low, and the skirt was full and long, sweeping the floor behind her. But her gown was no more nor less beautiful than any other here. For most of the other women here this night, jewels

glittered at wrist and throat, catching the light from the thousand candles burning in the candelabra and chandeliers around and above the room, but not so her. At her throat she wore a simple equal-sided silver cross on a black ribbon. Her arms, wrists and fingers were bare. The cross was her only adornment. The simplicity of her choice of adornment made every other woman in the room appear like an overdressed Christmas tree, he thought.

He knew who she was, of course. Not everyone did because she was rarely, if ever, seen at these social events. He had known her father, and to know her father was to admire and respect him. He who watched her had seen her many, many times when he used to visit the castle to meet with her father, but she had been much younger then. Her father had died ten years before, and so he who watched her now had not seen her for the same number of years.

She was a girl no longer, of course. He'd known that before he came tonight, and he had been aware, at some level of himself, of his own curiosity about her. She always had held the promise of beauty within her, even back then, as a young girl. But even so, he was wholly unprepared for his reaction to the sight of her, the effect seeing her had on him.

She was beautiful, of that there was no doubt, but physically there was nothing about her that made her stand out among the crowd. She was a beautiful woman in a room full of beautiful women. Beauty in this crowd was common. So what was it about her he found so compelling? Was it just her aloofness? No, he thought, not aloofness, containment. She held and kept herself perfectly contained. But he could see she burned very brightly underneath the cloak of cool, calm control she had donned, or adopted, for reasons of her own.

He frowned ever so slightly. The cloak of self-containment was a part of her somehow; that is, always with her, as opposed to something she'd donned just for this evening. It wasn't part of her costume. It was part of *her*. It cocooned her, and it was the cocoon she presented to the world.

He inclined his head, fascinated. She used it to keep herself *in*, and to keep others *out*, and, as such, it was a prison of her own making. *She* was in a prison of her own making. How interesting, fascinating. Did she even know what was within her?

He wondered why she wrapped herself in her cocoon of containment, and he wondered if anyone else could see how brightly she burned underneath it. More importantly, and perhaps significantly, what would she look like if she was free to burn as brightly as she could, if she was no longer contained?

He watched her as she obviously reached her destination, joining the circle of people at the other end of the room from the staircase. The circle of people, he noticed, included her brother. The brother laid a possessive hand on her arm as he introduced her to the circle around them both. He who watched stopped moving, staying where he was to watch her, fascinated and wholly unable to take his eyes from her. As he watched her, he observed how much her beauty radiated from the centre of her, despite her best efforts to contain it, to control it. She radiated it unconsciously, like an aura.

“A comely wench, is she not, my friend?”

He who watched smiled, reluctantly, the words pulling his smile out of him against his will, but he didn't bother turning his head to acknowledge his companion. “Eloquent as ever, Christof,” he said without taking his eyes from her. “You have such a way with words.”

“It comes from reading too many books.”

“Of course it does.”

Christof placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. “I do hate to be the one to inform you, Jeremiah, but she is officially off the market, so please do not entertain any futile hopes where she is concerned. Or is the appropriate term 'spoken for' or 'unavailable'? I'm not au fait with the current correct terms for these things. Apparently, her brother has been conducting a virtual bidding war over her. Did you not know?”

“No. I had not heard. I'm not au fait with the gossip, especially where the nobility are concerned.”

Christof snorted. “Even though you are one yourself. Not that I blame you, my friend. These parties can be awfully tedious.”

At last, Jeremiah removed his eyes from the group of people at the end of the room and turned to look at his friend, an amused smile curling his lips.

“Is that so? Then what on earth are you doing here tonight? Why put yourself through the torture of coming at all?”

Christof snorted again, although not in amusement. “I'm here on business, you might say. 'Tis not pleasure that drew me here tonight, my friend. I'm not here to play.”

Jeremiah gave his companion a moment more to elaborate, but when no more information was forthcoming asked, “So what are you here to do, exactly?”

Christof was strangely sombre when he replied. “I'm here to get a closer look at something that disturbs me greatly.”

Christof's strange and out-of-character seriousness sobered Jeremiah, too. “By the

gods,” he said quietly, observing his friend, “you are disturbed. What is it, Christof? I can feel the tension within you from here.”

Christof nodded towards the circle of people at the end of the room that included the Marquis of Winthorpe, the evening's host, and his sister. “The brother has mismanaged the estate, as you no doubt know. Perhaps you even knew he would. I seem to remember the old marquis asking you to keep an eye on his son.”

Jeremiah shook his head. “Not possible. The son refused to include me in his circle of friends. In fact, he made it clear from the outset I was no longer welcome at the castle. So, I have stayed away. Until tonight.” He turned to look at the brother, as if seeking an answer that could be gained simply by looking. “For some reason, he chose to change that tonight by including me as one of his guests.”

Christof made a noise like a hurrumph. “And you've no notion as to why?”

“None, I'm afraid.”

“He is nothing like his father,” Christof commented. “More's the pity. He prefers whoring, gambling and drinking to taking on the mantle of the responsibilities that are a fundamental part of his inheritance. And now he finds himself in debt, and has begun to sell some of the family heirlooms and assets, including his own god-damn sister.”

“So she is to be married,” Jeremiah said, switching his eyes from the brother to the sister. “Who is the lucky groom?”

Christof hesitated, and then replied quietly, solemnly, “The Duke of Sandhurst.”

Jeremiah turned his head sharply to look at Christof, removing his mask as he did. “Are you sure?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“Does the marquis know what he's doing? He is marrying her to a monster, Christof, and I mean that literally, not figuratively.”

“I know how you mean it,” Christof replied. “And you are right. The duke *is* a monster. 'Tis that very fact that disturbs me so, enough to pull me here tonight. The duke is very selective about who he mixes with, and which social events he chooses to grace with his presence. I knew he would be here tonight. I've even heard a rumour he is funding this whole . . .”

“Does the brother know?” Jeremiah asked, interrupting. “He should be told.”

“He knows. He is indebted to the duke, and we both know what that means. The duke owns him now. He will do as he is told, and in return, the duke will make sure his indulgences are fed and financed.”

As if in response to their conversation, the duke materialised at the end of the room, joining the circle around the marquis and his sister. Both Christof and Jeremiah watched in silence as the brother formally introduced his sister to the duke, her future husband. She showed no reaction as the duke bent over her raised hand and placed his lips on her fingers. She neither smiled nor curtsied. Instead, she watched passively, the cloak of her aloofness intact. When the duke straightened, he stood close to her, looking down at her, deliberately isolating the two of them from every other member of the circle.

Both Christof and Jeremiah watched her speak to him. Jeremiah ached to know what she was saying.

“Is she aware of her fate, do you think, Christof?” he asked his companion.

“No, I think not. I hope not.”

“She doesn't seem overly enamoured, does she?”

Christof hurrumphed again. “A gross understatement if ever I've heard one. She's not stupid, my friend. Far from it. She would have heard some rumours, I would imagine. But what can she do?”

“Her brother's debts are not her responsibility.”

“And if she says no to her brother's proposal, will he allow her to continue living under his roof?”

“This is her home, too.”

“But not her inheritance. And do you really think the duke will let her go now that he has seen her. And paid for her, I might add?”

Jeremiah did not reply to the question. There was not the need since Christof made an excellent point simply by asking it, and they both knew it. So the two continued to watch the exchange between the sister and her betrothed in silence.

And then Christof sighed. “If only the father had left the estate to her and not to the brother. Then they both, sister and brother, would have been taken care of. Something must be done about that monster, Jeremiah. And not just for her sake, but for all our sakes.”

“I agree, but not by you.” Jeremiah looked his friend in the eye to ensure penetration of the truth he spoke. “This is not your responsibility, Christof. And what will you do anyway? Hit him over the back of the head with your bible? You are no warrior, my friend. You are a scholar and a theologian. A sword would not sit well in your hands.”

“I would not be so foolish as to take him on alone. And there are ways to fight him other than with a sword. The church has many weapons in its arsenal.”

Jeremiah was tight lipped with concern. "The church does not know what it's dealing with, and neither do you."

"I have a fair idea."

Jeremiah sighed inwardly. He knew that look in Christof's eyes. Nothing would dissuade him from the course of action he had decided upon, whatever that was.

"Please be careful, Christof, and for god's sake, be discreet. If the duke gets wind of what you are planning . . . well, he will make a formidable enemy. Heck, he'll kill you, no questions asked."

"I know. I'm a scholar, as you took great pains to point out, so I'm not stupid."

Again, they both watched the duke and his affianced in silence.

"What does he want with her, do you think, Jeremiah?" Christof asked his companion. "I mean, why her? And why marry her? He has managed to avoid the matrimonial state all these years. Why change that now, after all this time, with her?"

The questions struck Jeremiah deeply, rocking him on his feet as they generated a powerful realisation within him.

"Christ alive," he breathed as he stared at the two, the duke and his new lady, watching the strange interplay between them, even though he could not hear what they were saying.

Christof waited, but Jeremiah had about him that strange stillness that accompanies an avalanche of thought.

"Jeremiah?" he prompted.

Still Jeremiah watched the duke and his lady, but he responded to Christof's prompting. "He sees her. He knows. And he wants what he sees."

Christof scratched his head. "I'm afraid you've lost me."

"He sees what she is," Jeremiah elaborated, "and he wants what is within her. He wants what she is. Christ alive," he said again, "I'm not the only one, after all. There is another. What a god-damned pity it had to be him. But then, Madeleine knew. She knew all along."

Christof considered this new information for a moment. "Nope, that still doesn't help."

Jeremiah responded by turning on his heel, turning his back on the scene at the end of the room. "I've seen enough," he said as he started to walk away. But he stopped and turned back to look at Christof. "Stay away from him, Christof. Promise me you will stay away from him."

Christof frowned. This was a side of Jeremiah rarely seen. There was an air of implacability about him, a ruthless determination that was capable of sweeping all and

every obstacle out of its way. Power. That was it. There was power in Jeremiah. Christof could feel it, sense it, see it. So why had he never felt it in Jeremiah before? It changed Jeremiah's whole demeanour and turned his normally blue-grey eyes dark, dark, dark.

"I promise," Christof conceded reluctantly. "I promise," he said again to no one in particular, because Jeremiah was gone, vanished, as if he'd never been there under the blazing chandeliers admiring the marquis' sister.

~ ~ ~

The duke's hand, as it held hers, was gloved, so she could not feel the skin of his hand, but she could feel his ice-cold lips as they touched the skin on the back of her own hand.

She could not suppress nor ignore the shiver that rippled down her back as she watched him straighten. His hair, pulled back into an elegant ponytail was black as midnight, his skin as pale as moonlight. He was elegantly dressed in a long, navy-blue tailored coat worn over a crisp white shirt with flamboyant, frilled cuffs that were far longer than the tailored sleeves of the coat. His black trousers were tucked into polished black boots. Nothing was out of place. He was immaculate, perfectly presented. But his pale-blue eyes as they looked into hers were ice cold like his lips.

He held her hand possessively, as if he already owned her, which he did. Bought and paid for, she thought. Her consent and her willingness, it seemed, were irrelevant, not necessary. She wondered what he truly got out of it. Why did he want her?

She knew he'd handed over a large sum of money. Was that really all given as payment for her, or was she only part of it? She should be flattered he thought her worth that much. Well, since he did not require her willingness, she would not give herself to him willingly. She would retain as much of herself as possible, and she was determined to signal the fact by dispensing with social etiquette and normal pleasantries, hence the lack of her response to his bowing obsequiousness – a facade if ever there was one.

"You have no heartbeat," she said bluntly, the tone of her voice flat, emotionless as she looked into his ice-blue eyes.

His expression did not alter, his ice-blue eyes looking steadily, unblinking, into hers. "How perceptive of you," he observed mildly.

"Are you even alive?"

"Do I not seem so?" He took a step closer to her, his hand still holding hers, and she felt his energy surround her, blocking out everyone else in the room, as if they were suddenly the only two people there. "I am more alive than you can possibly imagine. Soon, I will show you what it is to be alive as I am. You will thank me for it."

"I doubt that," she said calmly. "And if you expect me to thank you, I fear you will only be setting yourself up for disappointment. What do you want with me?"

"*With* you?" he repeated, raising an eyebrow. "'Tis enough just to say I want you. Is that so surprising?"

With difficulty, she tore her eyes from his and looked out at the room – the ladies in their colourful gowns twirling to the music, their jewels catching the light from the blazing chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, the gentlemen in their tailored coats sipping champagne from crystal glasses, surrounding themselves in a light cloud of smoke as they puffed on cigars. The room was full of light and colour and movement, and the murmur of a hundred conversations underpinned the silky strains of the violins.

"You can have any woman here tonight," she said, her eyes still on the room. And then she looked into his ice-blue eyes once again. "Why me?"

"They bore me," he said without looking at any of them. "They are all the same, and they are all empty. You are not. You may try to hide it. Or maybe you try to hide *from* it, but you cannot hide from me. I see what you are. As I said, I want you."

Her heart increased its beat and she resisted the urge to lick suddenly dry lips. They were standing so close she knew he would sense her unease. "And what am I?" she asked him.

"Light. Beauty. Warmth, for all that you try to convince the world of your coldness, your aloofness. I see you, my lady. Whether or not you know it, you are one of the Fae."

She swallowed nervously and did not care that he saw it. "You have no Light of your own, so you want mine," she said. "It does not work that way. And you should be careful. Have you not heard the expression? If you play with fire, you will get burnt."

He raised her hand, pressed his cold lips against her fingers again, and smiled that same cold, soulless smile. "Oh I hope so," he said. "In fact, I'm counting on it."

He held her eyes with his own, his challenging. Again, she was hopelessly unable to suppress the shiver that rippled down her back.

"You think you can possess the soul of another?" she asked him. "My soul is not yours for the taking," she said, not giving him a chance to reply to her question. "I do not give you permission. You may marry me against my will, so you will have my body, but you need my permission to touch my soul, and I do not give it."

Again, he merely smiled that same cold smile, and she could see for herself he was unmoved by her words. She reminded herself he had no heartbeat, so nothing touched him or moved or stirred him. He was not capable of feeling.



“We have a long time to work on that,” he said, and ran the gloved fingers of his free hand along the line of her jaw before touching the tips of his gloved fingers to her lips. “A very long time,” he repeated, “and I am a patient man.”

He released her eyes to turn and look at those dancing in the middle of the ballroom, and then, once again, his eyes caught and held hers. He smiled at her. “Shall we dance, my lady?”

~ ~ ~

Slightly breathless from climbing the spiral stairs to her mistress's room, Maggie opened the door and walked straight over to the hearth, putting pieces of wood onto the burning embers and stoking the fire back to healthy life. She fully intended for her mistress to find the room warm and full of light when the ball had run its course, and her mistress was free to return to her room.

Once she was sure the fire would burn brightly, accepting and taking hold of the new wood, Maggie lit a taper, and moved around the room, lighting the candles that would banish the darkness of night and fill the room with flickering light. She hummed softly to herself as she worked, thinking she was alone, but when she moved across the centre of the room, walking towards the canopied bed, she was forced to cup her hand around the taper to protect the flame, and knew the window was open. She looked at it, intending to close it.

“Oh,” she said involuntarily, starting in surprise. “Forgive me, my lady, I thought you'd still be at the ball.”

The ball was certainly still in full swing if the sounds of laughter were anything to go by. And she could also still hear the violins and the accompanying pounding of many feet as the guests danced to the strains of the music.

Her mistress neither moved nor acknowledged Maggie's apology. Rather, she stood perfectly still, a statue made of flesh in her red, gold and black ball gown, looking out through the open window across the black landscape. Only the light from the moon – a silver crescent in the black sky – painted parts of the landscape in a faint silver light. There was nothing else to see.

Frowning in concern, Maggie blew out the taper and placed it beside the bed. Then she went and stood beside her mistress, not at all interested in what was outside the window. “My lady?” she questioned gently.

When there was still no response, she reached out tentatively, and lightly, gently touched her mistress's hand. The contact seemed to rouse her mistress, seemed to jolt her awareness at least partially back to the room.

“The wolf is coming,” she said to Maggie. “I know it. He is coming.”

Maggie shook her head, not understanding, her concern for her mistress deepening.

“My lady?”

“He is coming. The wolf. I see the signs. I know he is coming.”

Maggie put her hands on her mistress's hand and arm, intending to steer her mistress away from the window. “Come away, my lady. You are freezing cold. Come sit by the fire. Let me close the window against the chill of the night.”

Her mistress offered no resistance, allowing herself to be thus guided, and she seemed to become fully aware of Maggie's presence at last. She took her eyes from what was capturing her attention through the open window and turned to look at Maggie. “The wolf is coming, Maggie.” And then, sounding uncertain, she added, “I think he intends to set me free.”

~ ~ ~

The Duke of Sandhurst hesitated in the act of stepping into his carriage. His hand on the door of the coach, he looked up, his attention caught. She was looking out of the window of her room, high up in the castle's south tower. The light from the room behind her turned her into a black silhouette, but he knew without a shadow of doubt that it was her. Even from here, he could see her Light, feel her essence. Oh how he wanted her. His desire for her surprised him – he who had long ago lost the desire for anything. He had no need of desire anymore because he was in a position to simply take whatever he wanted to take. Not so her. She was not so easily obtained. Perhaps that, in itself, was part of her allure.

And one glimpse was all it took.

He had no time for the brother, a weak character if ever there was one. But whether calculated – deliberate and conscious – or not, the brother had made one very smart move. He had brought his sister with him when he'd come to petition the duke for financial assistance. If not for the sister, the brother would have had nothing to offer the duke, and would have gone away empty handed. The duke did not give financial aid out of charity. There had to be a pay off – something wanted, something gained in return. And with the sister beside him, it just so happened the brother did possess something the duke wanted. From that day to this, the duke had made it his business to bind her to him. She would be his. He would make sure of it.

“Watch her,” he commanded his men. “Watch her closely. I want to be informed of her every move.”

His men, all six of them surrounding him, to a man, bowed, acknowledging the command and signalling their obedience. There was not the need to verbalise their acquiescence. That was taken for granted, and rightly so.

The duke watched her a while longer, and then he stepped into his carriage and sat. But he leaned forward to lower the window, and he watched her even as the carriage began to move. He watched her until he could see her no longer, and then he leaned back against the seat of the carriage, the light of satisfaction altering the colour of his eyes.

Tonight was the first time they had exchanged words. Before this night, he had only seen her. He had not attempted to engage her in conversation. His expectations where she was concerned, he had to admit, had been very high, high enough to pay a hefty price for her.

But tonight, she had managed to exceed them. She was everything he hoped she would be . . . and more. She was powerful, whether or not she knew it. He suspected she did not know just how powerful she really was. She would not give in to him without a fight. She would not so easily surrender what it was he truly wanted, and oh how he would enjoy her resistance. How he would enjoy wearing her down, seducing her, and then cracking her open, helping himself to what was within her until she was drained dry. Dry as a husk she would become, just like her mother. Only, the daughter was far more powerful than the mother. Even now, to this day, or night as was the case at the moment, he thought of the mother as one of his greatest pleasures, one he had long wanted to repeat.

Yet now the daughter promised greater pleasure still . . .

That same cold smile she had come to know in the very short time of their acquaintance altered the contours of his mouth whilst failing, completely, to reach his eyes, and the light of anticipation and desire, again, altered the colour of his eyes, darkening them.

A worthy acquisition, he thought, if ever there was one. Yes, she was worth every penny he had paid for her.

~~~

The Wolf

She pulled the hood over her head and wrapped the edges of the cloak tightly around her as she stepped into the small pavilion. Once there, she stood like a statue with her head bowed, breathing deeply with the depth of her upset and fear. She always came here when she was upset or distressed, or whenever she needed to feel close to her mother.

The pavilion was in the middle of her mother's garden – her mother's pride and joy. Her father had fastidiously maintained the garden in honour of her mother's memory, and she who now stood in the pavilion, in turn, had done the same, with help, in honour of both their memories.

The pavilion's true function was far greater than merely decorative. In truth, the pavilion was a small temple, made of white marble, with a domed roof and eight columns. Her mother had not placed the temple-pavilion in the middle of the garden just to adorn it. Rather, her mother had believed, and had taught her, that the temple-pavilion was a means of communing with the gods themselves, but it could only be so if you knew the temple's true function and if you honoured it as such. If you approached the temple-pavilion in ignorance, then its energy remained hidden, dormant, and it was indeed just decorative.

With her head bowed, she waited for the temple-pavilion to acknowledge, accept and welcome her, its energy surrounding and infusing her. Thus connected, she raised her face to look out at the night between the temple's columns. The night was clear but chill, and the moon had painted the garden with its silver light.

She felt comforted by the moon's light. Only a handful of nights more and its light would be at its most powerful. The moon itself would be full, its luminosity dominating the night sky.

She raised her face and looked up, through the round window in the top of the domed roof of the temple. The stars were winking like bright jewels against the darkness of the night sky, as if giant hand's had scattered handfuls of precious jewels across the blackness. Perhaps the gods themselves had scattered the stars across the sky as a reminder to mortals that the gods truly existed and were watching over their creation, or perhaps as a way of speaking to mortals, sending them messages, as her mother had believed. She could not read the messages in the stars. Nor did she take comfort from them, only from

the moon. She felt an affinity with the moon's beautiful but powerful feminine energy. She hoped the moon and the temple would have answers for her this night.

She lowered her face again, looking out of the temple-pavilion at the silver-painted garden, but not really seeing it. Her vision was turning inward, robbing her physical eyes of their power to see what was around them. And her thoughts vied within her for her attention.

Had her father been aware of just how weak Kyle would turn out to be? Surely if that had been the case, her father would not have left the estate to Kyle in entirety. Surely not.

Her parents must be turning restlessly in their graves at the turn of events. She was glad they were not here to witness the depth to which Kyle would fall, glad they were not here to see just how far Kyle would go to protect his addictions. How could he have sunk so low? And what could she have done to prevent it?

Standing alone in the pavilion, she shook her head rigorously. No, he would not be checked. He wanted drink and women above all else, and he became petulant, even vindictive, if anyone threatened to take those two away. And besides, he was not her responsibility. He was a grown man, free to make his own choices. She could not make them for him.

Long ago, she'd come to terms with the weakness of his character, but what little strength he'd still possessed had been eroded by the drink and the whoring. Again, she bowed her head as a new thought filled her mind, and, as a consequence, the sadness, the distress, and the fear took hold again – the very reason she was here in the temple tonight. The trouble with Kyle's weakness was, now, that it was starting to threaten the safety and well being of others, especially hers. But if he continued in this vein, the estate would struggle to maintain the castle and its grounds, and to support the people who were dependent on it.

She closed her eyes, breathing deeply as she did. But to sell your own sister, to a monster. And for what? For more money with which to drink and gamble.

She was lost. Her fate was sealed. Her fate had been sealed by her weak, selfish, indulgent brother. She could run, but to where? To whom? And she knew the duke would pursue her to the ends of their world rather than let her go. He had seen her now, and he wanted what he had seen. She could resist him, but for how long? And what would her resistance cost her? She was doomed. *He* was her doom.

Her awareness was brought sharply back to her surroundings, and she tensed as she heard a rustle, a disturbance, on the ground not far from the pavilion. She froze, all

thought suspended. There was no breeze this night. The night was as still as it was chill, so whatever had caused the disturbance was a physical presence. She waited, vigilant, looking out at the garden in the direction of the noise.

“Is anyone there?” she asked the night softly, nervously.

As if in reply to her question, he appeared.

She saw him easily, even though there was some distance between them. He, too, like the garden, was painted silver by the moon's light, but the silver light of him was dazzlingly beautiful. Her nervousness evaporated, and she could not take her eyes from him.

His movements were slow and measured as he crept silently towards her, and his eyes were fixed on her as he approached her, rounding the temple-pavilion until he was directly in front of her. Unconsciously, she dropped her arms to her sides, her cloak forgotten, and she took slow, uncertain steps to the edge of the pavilion, unconsciously wrapping her hand around one of the columns when she reached it.

He stopped moving to watch her warily, facing her, his head down, his tail still and lowered.

The wolf.

He had come, just as she had foreseen. But oh, how beautiful he was, far more so than her visions had revealed to her. He was large, far larger than was normal for a wolf . . . not that she had seen many wolves, certainly not from this distance, so close. His fur gleamed silver in the moon's light, and even in the dim light she could see his eyes were blue-grey.

Tentatively, feeling the fragility of the moment, as if any sudden movement could send the wolf running, she stepped down from the pavilion, first one step, then, slowly, the next. Still, he watched her, his eyes never leaving her. Not once did it occur to her to be afraid. She was not afraid of him. She was only afraid that he would run and leave her alone.

When her feet were on the grass that surrounded the temple, she lowered herself, gently, carefully, to her knees, and steadied herself with a hand on the grass. The action brought her eye to eye with him, and close enough to feel the tension in him. He was wary, every muscle tense and alert, every sense heightened. And so it was with her.

On her knees in front of him, she spoke to him as if he would fully comprehend and understand her.

“How did you find a way in here? The garden is walled and gated.”

As if in answer, he lowered himself, crouching on the grass, making himself comfortable. The action brought a smile up from the depths of her, and she crept closer to him on her hands and knees. They had established their comfort in each other's presence.

She knew he would not run from her now. When but an arm's reach from him, she stopped, sitting with her legs folded underneath her and her hands placed palms down on her upper knees. He watched her every movement, silently, passively.

She looked deeply into his eyes. "I saw you coming," she told him, "in my visions. So I have been expecting you."

He remained still, his eyes on her.

"Are you the moon's answer to the questions I hold within me?" she asked him. "Or," she added after a moment, "the temple's gift?" She allowed silence to reign between them, but in the silence, she bowed her head briefly before looking up at him again. "For I am in trouble, serious trouble, I think."

At this, the wolf rose to his feet in one fluid, graceful movement. Unconsciously, her back straightened with tension and fear swam in her eyes. She thought he was leaving her. For a moment, they looked at each other, eye to eye, and then the wolf stepped towards her, pushed aside the material of the hood of her cloak with his nose, and touched his nose to the sensitive skin on her neck below her ear.

"A wolf's kiss," she whispered as she closed her eyes and raised her hands to touch him. She buried her hands in the fur of his neck, and then leaned forward to press her face into the fur underneath his ear, inhaling the scent of him. Thus they stayed, frozen for a long, long moment before the wolf retreated, slowly, inching backwards. He looked at her again in the moonlight, and then he turned and loped away, into the darkness.

But as she watched the darkness swallow him, a single thought echoed in her mind as if he'd left it in his wake – a gift given.

"I will show you how evil can be defeated."

~~~

A rap on the double doors that marked the entrance to the duke's study briefly preceded the doors being pushed open suddenly, loudly, violently. One of the doors crashed into the wall behind it with the force used to open it. The duke raised his eyes from the parchment he was writing on, his pen suspended above the parchment.

Two of his men strode towards him, one tentative, uncertain, slightly trailing in the other's wake, the other unconcerned at the interruption.

"Forgive the interruption, Your Grace," Kent, the determined one of the two said insincerely. He bowed low when he reached the duke's desk and then stood. "You wanted to be told of your lady's every move, particularly if her movements were in any way a deviation from her normal routine."

The duke narrowed his eyes slightly, and ever so slightly inclined his head. "So I did."

"It's just a dog, Kent," the other of the two men pre-empted Kent's explanation, sounding exasperated.

Kent turned towards his companion. "It's not a dog, Rygiel. Christ alive, man. How many times do I have to tell you? It's a god-damned wolf, the largest god-damned wolf I've ever seen."

Slowly, deliberately, the duke returned the pen he was holding to its pot of ink, and then shifted his attention to the two men standing in front of his desk, clasping his hands in front of him like a benevolent headmaster getting ready to deal with errant students.

"A wolf?" he asked, his voice steady and deceptively mild.

"Yes, Your Grace," Kent said. "For the last five nights, it has come to her. It visits her in the castle's garden. How the devil it gets into the garden I cannot tell you. I've tried to see for myself where it could possibly be getting access, but I cannot find even a small opening. The garden's gate is shut tight, always, and its walls are impenetrable. The wolf just seems to materialise in the garden. She seems to know it, your lady. She waits for it, and she talks to it."

The duke digested the information silently, his face an implacable mask. Only a barely-perceptible tightening of his lips hinted at his extreme displeasure.

"Does it touch her?" he asked his men after an elongated silence.

"Yes, Your Grace," Kent answered for them both. "It does."

The duke narrowed his eyes, and both his men now felt his displeasure. It radiated from him in waves and filled the room, surrounding them. Rygiel swallowed nervously and took a small step back, but Kent stood his ground, awaiting his master's orders.

"You were right to tell me of this," the duke said, his words clipped with the depth of his anger and displeasure. "This is important. Kill it," he said harshly. "I want it dead. Am I clear? I want it dead."

It was a measure of his displeasure that he even felt the need to repeat himself. He did so for his own sake, not for theirs. There was not ever the need for him to repeat his commands to either his staff or his men.

Kent and Rygiel both bowed their acknowledgement and acquiescence of the command.

"Your Grace," Kent said as he straightened. Both turned on their heels to leave, but before they'd taken but half a dozen steps away from the duke's desk, he stopped them.

"Kent, Rygiel. Do not drink its blood. Am I clear?"

They both looked at him puzzled, so the duke felt it prudent to again repeat a



command.

“Kill it, but do not drink its blood. Do not. Its blood will do you harm.”

“Your Grace,” Kent replied for them both, again bowing, and then turning on his heel. Rygiel followed him out of the duke's study.

Left alone in the silence of his own study, the duke leaned back in his chair, his eyes ice cold and hard. This was, indeed, an irritating development. He would not be thwarted in his plans for her, he would not. If they continued to interfere, he would kill them all, the consequences be damned. Yes, he thought, his lips curling into a snarl, he would kill them all, personally, using his own bare hands if he had to. They would learn the hard way that their power was no protection against the force and power of his very great wrath.

~ ~ ~

She awoke abruptly, unsure as to what it was, exactly, that had awoken her. The room was still dark. The fire in the hearth was little more than a few burning embers. She looked over at her window. It was open, and she could see the darkness of the night was just, just beginning to turn dark grey with the onset of dawn.

And then she heard it again. A distant scream.

Heart pounding, she sat up and got out of bed in one fluid movement. On the way out of her room, she grabbed her dressing gown, and slid her feet into slippers. She was still belting her gown as she descended the stairs in the castle's south tower.

Outside, the air was chill, crisp, and she shivered. Wrapping her arms around herself in a futile attempt to keep warm, she looked around. She wasn't sure from which direction the scream had come, so she stood for a moment uncertainly. And then, as Jeffrey and Maggie joined her, she heard a whimper. The chill forgotten, they all ran towards the sound. One of the castle's maids stood beside the well at the far end of the garden, a wooden bucket tipped on its side on the ground beside her as if it had been dropped. She was bent over, covering her face with her hands, sobbing uncontrollably. As they drew closer, all three, the lady of the castle, Maggie and Jeffrey, saw the source of the maid's distress.

“Maggie,” she, the castle's mistress ordered, “take her inside, get her by the fire in the kitchen, and give her a dram of Kyle's whisky. He will never know. He will not wake this morning. He will sleep through to the afternoon.”

Maggie nodded and moved to obey her mistress's commands. With an arm firmly around the girl's shoulders, Maggie began to steer the young maid back towards the castle.

“Maggie.”

Maggie stopped and turned to look at her mistress. "My lady?"

"Speak of this to no one. Do you hear me? For your own sake, do not ever speak of this again. You, too, Kristy."

Both girls nodded.

Left alone, the lady of the castle and Jeffrey moved to stand over the source of the maid's distress. Two bodies, both with their throats torn from their necks. She frowned as she looked down at them. She had thought they could not die, their kind, but they looked very dead to her. They were still and pale, paler than usual, and their eyes were open but sightless and staring.

"We should burn them, m' lady," Jeffrey said.

She shook her head at him. "No need, Jeffrey. Watch and you will see to what it is I refer."

And so they stood on either side of the bodies while the sun's light grew stronger and stronger, and dawn turned into early morning. By the time the sun was well above the horizon and the light of day had fully chased the dark of night away, the bodies were naught but ash, and all that remained on the grass where the bodies had been were two sets of clothes and two pairs of boots.

"Those," she said, pointing to the clothes, "you can burn."

Jeffrey snorted, and she could not tell whether in amusement or not. "Aye, m' lady," he said. "Twould give me the greatest pleasure to do so. I don't s'pose you know what they were doing here in the first place?"

"Keeping an eye on me, I would say."

"O' course," he responded, as if the answer was obvious now that she'd given voice to it. "And dare I ask if you know what did this to them?"

"I have a fair idea."

Jeffrey nodded as if he'd known the answer already, and she had merely confirmed it with her response.

"Jeffrey," she added for good measure, "it's probably best not to tell anyone about this."

"Aye," he agreed. "Not sure anyone'd believe me anyway."

~~~

"Hello, Lliandra."

She jumped ever so slightly as she looked up from the book in her lap. Involuntarily, she glanced at the door to her room. It was closed, and she had not heard it open. So she turned in her chair and looked behind her at the bedroom's window. She had closed it

before coming to sit in front of the fire with her book. The window was wide open.

“Forgive the intrusion,” the duke said smoothly, not sounding at all contrite about standing beside her in her room uninvited.

Her actions deliberately slow, she closed the leather tome in her lap and stood, holding the book against her for protection, even though it was heavy. She had retired for the night, and so, thinking she would be alone for the rest of the evening, she had not bothered to wear her robe over her nightgown, and the flimsy material of her nightgown did little to hide her body. She was naked underneath it, and she was aware that he would know it.

When she stood in front of him, the light of the bedroom's hearth fire behind her turned her unbound hair into a red-brown halo around her face, and outlined her body through the soft material of her nightgown. He unashamedly ran his eyes slowly down her body, from her face and hair to her bare feet, as he slowly, elegantly removed his gloves, one at a time.

Tonight, he wore a long black cloak over a white shirt, black trousers and polished black boots. His black hair was, as usual, pulled back into an elegant ponytail, and gold glinted in the lobe of one ear. Perfectly presented as always. She wondered, fleetingly, if he'd come from somewhere else or if he'd dressed just for her. The same cold smile she had come to know curled his lips but failed to reach his eyes, although his eyes signalled to her far louder than if he used words that he liked what he saw.

She saw his desire in his eyes but chose to ignore it. It moved her not at all. Nor did she fear it, and nor was she seduced by it.

“And you are here, uninvited, because . . . ?”

He came straight to the point. “Two of my men are missing. I thought you might know what has become of them.”

She, too, came straight to the point. “Well,” she said sweetly, innocently, “we found two bodies in the garden yesterday morning. Both men had their throats ripped from their necks. I watched the sun's light turn them to ash, and then we burned their clothes. Could they be the two to whom you are referring?”

His facial expression did not alter as he looked at her. He showed no reaction at all, but she felt his displeasure all the same. It radiated from him. Try as she might, she could not suppress a smile of satisfaction. For all his displeasure, it was a pleasurable thing for her to see his reaction to something he had not ordained or orchestrated, something he could not and did not control.

His eyes narrowed as he noted the amusement sparkling in her eyes. As he slapped his

gloves against his open palm, he said, "That is inconvenient indeed. They were two of my best men."

"I thought your kind could not die," she said seriously, her amusement gone.

"There are two ways my kind can cease to exist," he informed her mildly. "We can burn, or we can have our heads either fully or partially removed from our necks, which happens to be the case when one's throat is ripped from one's neck."

With no warning, he moved swiftly, so swiftly she had no time to move herself. In a blur of movement, he stood close to her and wrapped a hand around her throat, partially applying pressure and partially caressing.

"No more delays, Lliandra. No more petty excuses. You are mine, and it is time to make that official. We will be married a week from today. Do whatever you need to do to prepare. I care not what you wear. You are no blushing bride, after all."

His hand was holding her neck in place so that she was unable to move. Undaunted, she still responded to his pronouncement, still managed to sound amused. "You would have us marry on a holy day? How delightfully ironic. Will we marry in a church as well?"

"The day is merely a coincidence. 'Tis simply one week from now," he said as he changed the position of his hand on her neck. He moved it behind her, his thumb caressing her cheek. "And no, we will not marry in a church. I think the pavilion in your garden will do nicely. What do you think?"

He felt her body tense against his, and smiled in satisfaction.

Oh how he wanted her. He could take her here and now. There was no one to protect her, and she was his anyway.

He was surprised by the potency of the sexual desire he felt for her. Just the sight of her had aroused him. It had been a long, long time since he had felt such desire for a woman, for anyone, for that matter. He lowered his head, and placed his lips against hers. But the simple touch of lips on lips was not enough, so he moved his lips against hers, and kissed her thoroughly, using his tongue to force her lips open, not at all perturbed by her lack of response.

She still held the book to her chest so that it acted as a shield, a barrier between the two of them. He could have taken it from her, forcibly, and he toyed with the idea, but decided against it. He would allow her her protections for now. Soon, very soon, there would be no protection for her.

When he raised his head, she felt moisture on her lip, and tasted blood when she touched it with her tongue. He was so close to her he couldn't fail to see both the action

and the expression on her face as she realised what the blood on her lip meant.

He smiled, enjoying this moment of intimacy between them. “A week, Lliandra, and we will be married,” he said, and then stepped away from her, sliding his hand out from behind her neck as he did – a parody of a lover's caress.

He would not take her now. He would give her a week to think about what was to come, and then he would take her.

He made a show of putting his gloves back on, not looking at her as he said, “We will kill your wolf. I came here tonight to tell you myself so as to make sure there are no misunderstandings between us.” With his gloves back on, he looked at her again, stepped towards her, and touched her cheek with his gloved finger tips. “We will kill your wolf.”

She did not reply. Instead, she stood holding the book against her as she watched him turn and walk towards the window, his cloak billowing out behind him. And then, as a thought occurred to her, she gave it voice. She had been thinking it for days anyway, wondering, and his presence here gave her the perfect opportunity to ask him.

“My mother was one of the Fae,” she said. “Why did you not take her?”

He stopped walking, standing for the briefest of moments with his back to her, and then he partially turned, looking at her over his shoulder, his eyebrows slightly raised. “Who says I didn't?”

She drew in a quick, involuntary breath, and threw her next words at his retreating back. “But she died of an illness.”

He reached the window, turned again towards her and inclined his head, smiling that same cold smile at her.

“If that is what you were told then it must indeed be so.” He would've gone, then, leaving her to ponder all that had occurred between them, but he couldn't help himself. He had to add more. “I should have known her blood would run in your veins. 'Tis as well I did not think of it sooner. You are much more enticing to me as a grown woman. I look forward to our dance together, Lliandra.”

And in the time it takes to blink an eye, he was gone.

~~~

# Madeleine

She held a lantern high as she pounded a closed fist on the thick, solid wooden door. The lantern's light surrounded her but left the rest of the corridor in darkness, and she could feel the cold of the castle's stone around her even through her nightgown and robe. The depth of her upset gave her strength so that her pounding shook the solid door in its frame.

She heard a muffled reply from inside the room and stepped back. Following the sound of the latch being lifted, the door opened.

"My lady?" Jeffrey said uncertainly. "Is everything all right?"

The question released the upset burning in her throat, and, with it, the tears she had been trying to hold back.

"What happened to my mother, Jeffrey?" she asked him, her voice sounding choked.

"Well, she was ill, you know . . ."

"No," she said vehemently, shaking her head at him. "Do not lie to me. Do not. I would know the truth."

Jeffrey sighed long and loud, and rubbed his hands over his face.

"All right," he said, sounding utterly defeated. "Let me get my robe. It would be better to talk in front of the fire in the lounge. At least we'll both be warm while we do."

In the lounge room, he made her sit in a chair beside the oversized stone hearth while he thoroughly re-stoked the fire. By the time he'd finished, the fire was roaring, filling the room with warmth and light. He figured it best to ensure it was so. The conversation she was determined to have and he would do anything to avoid would not be over in a matter of mere minutes.

He, too, pulled a chair close to the hearth, sitting opposite her. Thus were they both bathed in light. She would know if he lied. She would see it, and he knew it. He had no intention of lying anyway. She needed to know the truth. He probably should've told her long ago, but he had hoped he would never have to.

"You know they were not overly social, your parents, even though they were popular. They were in high demand if the dozens of invitations they received every day were anything to go by. Some they accepted, most they declined. They made a handsome couple, but 'twas more than that, of course. They were exciting, different, interesting, and

she was so beautiful.”

Lliandra watched the interplay of expressions on his face as he spoke to her of her parents, and realised, with a mild shock, that he had been in love with her mother.

Why had she never seen it before? Probably because many, many long years had passed since they had spoken of her mother. Jeffrey had been born at the castle, which effectively made him the longest serving member of the castle's staff. But he had always been considered more family than servant. Both her parents had treated him thus, and even her weak brother treated him like a beloved uncle. Jeffrey was one of the few people who could actually get through to her wayward brother. He had, now, been with her family for over fifty years, so, really, he was the one responsible for the smooth running of day to day existence at the castle, and the running of the estate.

“They never really needed a social life,” Jeffrey continued, glancing at her as he spoke, unaware of the trail of her thoughts, and her realisation, for that matter. “They had everything they needed in each other, you see.”

She nodded. She did see. She remembered that's how it was with her parents.

“Only the gods know what were their reasons for having one of the season's important social events here at the castle. They never had before. I guess they thought it would be fun to give a ball and play host.”

He looked away from her at the flames dancing in the oversized hearth.

“Honestly, little lady,” he said, unconsciously adopting the affectionate title he had used to refer to her when she was a little girl, “I do not know what happened that night. I wish I did. At first, after the ball, Madeleine, your mother, just seemed to be tired, and we all thought she had exhausted herself with the preparations and organisation necessary for hosting such an event. But she got worse in the weeks that followed, and then it was obvious that what was ailing her was far more than simple exhaustion. She lost her vitality. She lost her unique sparkle. She became wan, a pale semblance of what she had been, and she moved around the castle like a ghost. Sometimes, she would sit for long periods with a vacant look in her eyes, as if she wasn't there at all.”

Listening to him, Lliandra swallowed nervously, and her heart began to pound in her chest. Was he describing her own fate? Was this what she could expect?

“Eventually, she became bed ridden,” Jeffrey continued, unaware of her thoughts. As he spoke, he continued to look into the flames, seemingly lost in memories of his own. “Your father was beside himself. Heck, we all were. We got the doctor out, and they were going to put the leeches on her, but . . .”

“But what, Jeffrey?”

He looked at her. “But the leeches wouldn't attach. Doctor said he'd never seen that happen before. He said either the leeches did not like her blood or . . .”

“Or she had no blood for them to suck.”

Jeffrey nodded. “From the look of her I'd say 'twas the latter. Ye gods but she was pale in the end, and she did not even have the energy to lift her head from the pillow. In the end, she just slipped away. It was as if she fell asleep and never woke up. You were eight years old at the time, your brother eleven, both far too young to lose your mother. Your father, of course, never fully recovered from her death. He struggled on valiantly, but he followed her seven years later. I think his grief exhausted him, and he could no longer carry the burden of it.”

When he finished his account of what happened to her mother, they both, her and Jeffrey, sat in silence, both lost in their own thoughts. Both stared into the flames, and the hiss and crack of the fire was the only sound in the room.

Finally, she roused herself.

“I am sorry to make you revisit these memories, Jeffrey, but I know what happened to her. In truth, I mean. Or perhaps I should say I know *who* happened to her.”

Jeffrey turned his head quickly and looked at her without speaking, without moving for a long, long moment. She wondered at his thoughts. And then he spoke them out loud.

“The bodies in the garden,” he said simply.

She nodded, mildly surprised at his ability to make the connection.

“And now it seems I am to suffer the same fate,” she said flatly, softly.

“Over my dead body,” he said vehemently, his teeth clenched as he spoke the words. “I mean it, Lliandra, my little lady. You will not go the way of your mother. Not if I have anything to do with it. I made her a promise all those years ago. It was all I had to give her. I vowed to protect you with my own life if ever it came to it, and I intend to keep that vow. What must we do to protect you?”

She was silent for a long moment, and then she answered him. “There is a way, I think. We have a plan.”

He frowned at her. “We?”

She smiled. “Yes, we.”

~~~

The duke sat back against the seat in his coach, swaying slightly with the movement of the wheels of the carriage against the uneven road. He felt strangely light headed, even

dizzy, and he felt hot, as if the sun's light was touching him, or as if he had a fever. The sensation was not pleasant. On the contrary, he felt decidedly ill – something he'd not felt for centuries, so that he had forgotten what it felt like to be ill.

He loosened the tie of his shirt, and then leaned forward in the carriage to lower the window, with difficulty given the movement of the coach, to allow in the chill air of the night. And when he sat back again he held the window's edge to steady himself.

And, then, he felt his body make an adjustment, as if all it needed was time to process a foreign element, something newly introduced. A moment more and, slowly, he began to feel normal again.

Yet another interesting development, he thought, as he readjusted the tie of his shirt.

He ran his tongue over his lips. He could still taste her blood. Such a sweet, sweet taste. Just a few drops. That's all he'd taken from her tonight. And those few drops had made him ill, albeit briefly. His body would get used to her blood, but he would need to exercise extreme caution, not to mention patience, and his body would never handle her blood in large doses. Little bit by little bit by little bit. Discipline. Moderation. How he hated the necessity to be disciplined and patient.

But the danger of an overdose was real where she was concerned, and, as such, had to be acknowledged and catered for.

He smiled in the darkness of the carriage, and this time, his smile almost reached his eyes. Mmmm, he thought, savouring the knowledge. An element of danger was now to be a part of their dance. Such an intoxicating cocktail she was for him: danger, resistance, beauty, strength, sexual desire.

This element of danger, though – a potentially dangerous reaction to their blood – had not been evident in Madeleine, the mother. But then, he had already seen and acknowledged that the daughter was far more powerful than the mother. He wondered how that was possible given the fact that the father had been purely mortal. The mix of blood – the mother's Fae blood and the father's human blood – should have resulted in diluted power, not heightened power. The daughter's power should, by rights, have been half that of the mother. Something to ponder. He would ask her next time he saw her.

So, he thought, changing the direction of his thought process, it would take him a long, long time to drain the daughter dry. Not so the mother. The mother had been disappointingly easy to drain in the end. But the daughter. Their dance would last far, far longer, and she would be entirely his, not to be shared with others.

He leaned back against the seat of the carriage, the same smile still curling his lips, and

he closed his eyes as he ran his tongue over his lips again, tasting her blood. He would savour every moment of their dance. And if she continued to stimulate and excite him to this extent, he might even consider turning her, thus making their relationship, their dance, more permanent.

~ ~ ~

The Tree

There were six of them now.

The duke felt six against one better odds than two against one, particularly since the odds of two against one had so obviously favoured the wolf. The six were crouched on top of the castle's wall, effectively surrounding the garden. They were dark, indistinct shapes against the dark of night, and this despite the luminosity of the moon's light. They were still as they crouched, watching and waiting, so that they looked, for all intents and purposes, as if they were part of the garden's wall.

The moon's light touched them not at all, despite the fact that the garden was lit with its light. The moon's light did not expose them, the six. Rather, it seemed to pass them over, ignoring them, unwilling to touch them, and unwittingly aiding the darkness of night in concealing them.

Moments before, the hooded, cloaked figure of the duke's lady had walked through the garden to the pavilion. Now she was standing, as she always did, still as a statue in the pavilion's centre. Not long now. The wolf would come, as it always did. Then the six would pounce. The wolf was fast. All six could attest to the speed with which it could move. But they, too, were fast. With six around it, the wolf would stand no chance. They just had to be very careful they did not hurt the duke's lady in the process. The duke would not be happy if she was hurt. And the six had strict instructions not to spill any blood, either hers or the wolf's. Thus was their task rendered more difficult.

All six were tense and wary, every muscle poised and tight with the tension of waiting as they kept a silent vigil atop the castle's wall. All six were wondering how their attack on the wolf would play out. All six were running different scenarios through the recesses of their own minds. If the duke's lady interfered or tried to intervene to protect the wolf, things could go badly. That's why one of the six would hold her back if necessary. And if that indeed became a necessity, the duke had made it clear he wanted her to witness the wolf's death. They would force her to watch.

The eyes of all six constantly scanned the garden for any sign of the wolf, all their senses attuned to detect even the slightest of changes in the sounds of the night and in the air itself. The duke's lady was in the pavilion. Not long now. Soon, the wolf would come, and the six would pounce.

~~~

She hugged herself in the darkness, more out of tension than cold.

“Are you cold, little lady?”

She nodded and then realised Jeffrey could not see her doing so. “A little, but I’ll be all right. You?”

“I confess I’m more nervous than cold. Are you sure you have the right place?”

Again, she nodded, and then looked up at the tree. The moon’s light had turned it white in the darkness, so it was not hard to find. Its long, thick branches should have covered the part of the forest in which she and Jeffrey stood, waiting, but at some point in the tree’s past, something, lightening perhaps, had caused most of the tree to break off. If lightening was indeed the cause then a powerful strike it must have been because the tree’s trunk was huge, thick, and seemed infallible, all evidence to the contrary.

The tall stump loomed over them both in the darkness. The tree must have been enormous once, but it looked to her, even in the darkness, like a body torn in half. While its trunk was almost pure white in the moon’s light, the top of it where the rest of the tree should have been was black and charred and jagged. The effect was somehow eerily beautiful – a contrast of opposites – the white of the moon’s light and the black of death and destruction.

She shivered and hugged herself more tightly. The tree, to her, was a symbol of tragedy. It should have been timeless, enduring, its presence a defining factor and feature of the forest. But something had destroyed it, and now this remnant, this stump, was all that remained to hint at what would have and could have been.

“This is the right place, Jeffrey,” she said, answering Jeffrey’s question.

The image of the tree had been seared into her inner vision. She would have known it anywhere, but it was exactly where she had expected it to be. The wolf had made sure of that.

“He will come, Jeffrey. I promise you. And when he does, do not be afraid. He is not what he seems.”

“Aye, little lady. Think I’m fast getting used to that.”

She smiled.

Over the many nights he had come to her in the garden, even though it appeared to those watching that they simply sat in each other’s company, she with her hand on the fur of his neck, the wolf had spoken to her. They had both, she and the wolf, discovered that the images passed from him to her were far more potent if she touched him, hence her

hand buried deeply in the fur of his neck.

At first, she had seen the images in her mind's eye and thought them simple manifestations of dreams and visions of her own. It had taken her a long time on the night of his second visit to realise the images were coming from him. Once she realised, she saw the coherency of the images, and realised he was giving her pieces of an overall picture, like assembling pieces of a jigsaw puzzle one at a time to reveal the whole.

Gradually, the message took shape, and she realised he was instructing her. He had a plan. As the plan began to take a clear form she was able to send images back to him if she didn't understand, or to question him out loud, seeking clarification. She knew he understood her, but whether he could understand her words or simply picked up on her thoughts, she could not tell.

'Twas a unique language they spoke mind to mind, quickly learned by necessity. But the language was not an alien thing to her. She recognised it, and, in fact, she'd spoken it, at first unconsciously, and then consciously, since she was a little girl. 'Twas the language of the soul they spoke, a language of symbolism and metaphor, analogy and archetype. It was the most beautiful of languages, and he spoke it so very well. It was a language that did not necessarily require the help of the conscious mind to either speak or to absorb and interpret.

So, often in the dead of night, as she lay sleepless in her bed, replaying his visits to the garden in her mind, the meaning of a particular image passed from him to her would come to her. During the day, her subconscious mind processed it without her necessarily being conscious that her deeper mind was working with the image. And the image of this tree was, perhaps, the clearest of them all. The tree was their designated meeting place, now, at this time on this night.

And he had made it clear that she must wait for him no matter the time it took him to appear. He would appear only when he deemed it safe to do so.

On the night Jeffrey had told her of the true nature of her mother's death, she had, in turn, told him of their plan, the wolf's plan. Jeffrey held all the keys to the castle. Indeed, no one could leave or enter the castle at night if not for Jeffrey, with the exception of the duke who could not be kept out despite lock and key. Even Kyle, her wayward brother, needed Jeffrey's help to leave and come home after a night of indulgence.

Jeffrey had listened avidly, attentively, as she outlined the plan, occasionally offering suggestions of his own, and one in particular that would turn out to be valuable, and clever. He had been adamant about not allowing her to wander the roads and forest alone at night.

He had, in fact, insisted on accompanying her, and he would stay until the wolf appeared.

She knew he was very uncertain about releasing her into the wolf's care, particularly as the one question she had not been able to answer had been that of where the wolf would take her. She knew only that she was to go with him. She had no idea of where he would take her or of what would happen to her beyond meeting him here tonight. She really was placing herself completely at his mercy.

Once she had clearly outlined the plan to Jeffrey that night, he had sat in silence looking at her in the light of the flames. Again, as she had earlier, she'd wondered at his thoughts.

"Ye gods," he'd said, "but you are so like her. You grow more like her every day." He looked sad, then, and he'd breathed heavily, sighing the inhaled breath as it was released. "You know you are entrusting this creature with your very life, Lliandra. And you are giving up everything you know in doing so. You will be leaving everything you are familiar with and everyone who loves you. Are you so sure you can trust him?"

She nodded gently. "Yes, I am sure."

"How can you be so sure? How can I be sure you will be safe with him?"

She smiled at him, subtly, slightly. "Well, you will have to trust me." And then she shrugged. "I saw him coming, Jeffrey. And I knew then, from my visions, that he would set me free, somehow. And then, when he came as I foresaw, I discovered that he and I are connected in some way I cannot yet understand. Yes," she nodded again, "I trust him like I trust no other. Except you. I trust him as I trust you."

That seemed to placate him. "All right. So be it, then. When do we do this?"

He stood close to her now, and she could feel the tension in him as he constantly scanned the forest around them.

When the wolf appeared, he did so silently.

With the exception of that first night, he always just appeared, silently, so that she had come to realise he had deliberately prepared her that first night by heralding his appearance with the rustling noise. So, as was always the case, apart from that first night, he was just there in the clearing, as if conjured out of the air itself. And when he appeared, he crept towards her and Jeffrey, his movements wary and measured as he moved further into the clearing towards the tree, towards them.

His eyes were fixed not on her but on Jeffrey. He was wary, every muscle tense, all his senses alert, and Jeffrey responded in kind. Unconsciously, she stepped slightly in front of Jeffrey, protecting him, facing the wolf.

“Jeffrey is my friend,” she told the wolf. “He is loyal to my family, and he has helped me this night. He will not betray us. You have my word on that.”

The wolf did not relax, but although he remained tense and wary, he took a few steps back and lowered his eyes.

“By the gods,” Jeffrey breathed beside her, his eyes riveted on the wolf, “he understands you, little lady. He knows exactly what you just said. What magic is this?”

She smiled as she turned to him. “’Tis Fae magic. The Fae are here to protect us. Remember that, Jeffrey. My mother was one of them, as am I. I’m not sure you ever knew that.”

“I knew she was different. How could I not? She was bedazzlingly beautiful, as are you, little lady. If that is Fae magic, then it has my full support.” He turned towards her, facing her, tearing his eyes away from the strange creature who was watching their every move. “You will be safe then, Lliandra?”

“I don’t know about that,” she replied. “But I know without a shadow of doubt that he will not hurt me. And I think he would protect me with his life if it came to that.”

“All right, then. May the gods protect you, Lliandra, my little lady. I will miss you.”

He wrapped his arms around her, and she returned his embrace, clinging to him in the darkness – her last pillar of familiarity.

“I will see you again,” she said as they pulled apart.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

The wolf turned and trotted to the other side of the clearing, on the other side of the tree. At the edge of the trees, he turned, watching her, waiting. She released Jeffrey and moved away from him, trying to master the burning lump in her throat. He was right. She was leaving behind everything she knew to go where? Only the wolf knew where they were going now. When she reached him, the wolf turned and trotted into the forest, and without hesitation she followed him.

Jeffrey watched as the two were swallowed first by the tall trees of the forest and, then, by the darkness. Then he, too, turned and left the clearing, in the opposite direction.

~ ~ ~

He was not a patient man, or not tonight anyway, and so he moved and fidgeted, and then eventually lost patience altogether, opened the door of the carriage, and got out.

He was wearing the long black cloak again, and it billowed out behind him as he started pacing, first in one direction and then in the opposite direction, back and forth, back and

forth. He had plans for the evening, but he'd put them on hold to come here personally, to wait. He wanted the wolf dead. And he wanted to know as soon as the deed was done. If she wasn't there herself to witness the wolf's demise then he would personally see to it that she knew. He wanted to see her face when she realised she now fully belonged to him, and there would be no rescue.

Finally, after an age, or so it seemed to him – he who had lived an age – he heard footsteps, boots crunching the stones on the road.

His men loomed out of the darkness, all six of them. He stopped pacing to face them.

“Well?” he prompted impatiently.

One, obviously nominated as their spokesman, answered for them all. “The wolf lives, Your Grace. It did not come to her tonight.”

The duke narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “She was there?”

“She was. She must have warned it somehow. There was no sign of it.”

Angered, the duke turned on his heel and resumed his pacing. His men watched him, keeping a discrete and respectful distance. They had all discovered from personal experience that it was always best to give him plenty of room when he was this angry.

“It's up to something,” he said. “It knows what it's doing, and if it has not come to her, there's a reason. So why doesn't she know what it's up to?”

He stopped mid-stride.

“Or does she?” He threw his head back and laughed a brief, cold, cynical laugh in the darkness. His men shifted uncomfortably. “If she thinks to escape me.”

But really, he had expected nothing less. In fact, he would have been disappointed in her if she had just come to him willingly. This was all part of their dance, was it not? She would not be so easily tamed. Had he not already established that? And was that not part of her allure, her charm?

“Where is Caine?” he asked his men. Without awaiting a response, he continued. “Get him. He is our best tracker. He has a nose like a bloodhound. And get the rest of the men. All of them. Be quick about it. Get back here as soon as is physically possible. Do not disappoint me on this. I will meet you here. I have business of my own to attend.”

His men bowed their acknowledgement of the commands, and then vanished into the darkness. He followed suit, ignoring his coach. It would only slow him down. He would find out for himself what she knew and what she did not know.

~~~

Maggie was huddled in the chair by the fire in her mistress's room, wrapped in her

mistress's cloak, sobbing softly. Her mistress had said it was a game, but Maggie had known by the urgency in her mistress's voice and the tension in her hands as they held Maggie's shoulders that it was far more than just a game. Both the urgency and the tension in her mistress had scared Maggie, and so, she had done as she was bid, without question. She had stayed in the pavilion for as long as she could, until she was stiff with cold and her legs were aching with the effort of standing so still.

But when she had returned to her mistress's room . . .

Her tears dried suddenly, and she jumped at the unmistakable sound of boots on the wooden floorboards of the room. She raised her tear-stained face to look at the door of the room. It was closed, and she had not heard a knock. The boots stopped beside the chair she was sitting on.

"And who are you?"

The harsh implacability of the voice made Maggie jump up out of the chair as if she'd been caught doing something wrong. She faced the owner of the voice, and took a couple of self-protective steps backwards at what she saw in his face, in his eyes. He loomed over her, a shadowy figure in a black cloak, but his blue eyes were compelling, and they held hers. She could not look away.

"I am Lady Lliandra's maid," she replied timidly.

"And what is your name, girl?"

"Maggie, my lord."

"Well, Maggie, I am your lady's betrothed, and I have an inkling she is in trouble. I fear she might need my help." He looked at the room around him and then looked back at Maggie, deliberately softening his features with a charming smile, and softening the tone of his voice so as not to frighten the girl any more than she already was. "Your lady is obviously not here. Do you know where she is, Maggie?"

Maggie started crying again and shook her head. "No, my lord. I don't know where she is . . . and . . ." She finished on a sob.

The duke moved. He laid a hand on her shoulder and steered her towards the chair. "Come, Maggie. Sit. Perhaps you should tell me the whole story."

Maggie nodded as she allowed herself to be guided back towards the chair. When she was seated, she looked up at the man who was her mistress's betrothed. The duke was far too experienced to miss the awe in her eyes. He squatted on his heels beside the chair.

"Now," was all he said. It was enough.

"It was a game she said, just a game." Maggie shook her head. "But I knew."

“Knew what?”

“I knew something was wrong. She was so jittery. She's always so calm, you see. But she was not calm tonight. She was nervous.” Maggie lifted the material of the cloak she wore in both hands. “She bade me wear her gown and cloak, and she told me to stand in the middle of the pavilion for as long as I possibly could. So I did. I stood for so long I couldn't feel my toes anymore. When I came back, the room was empty. She was gone. And I've waited for her to come back, but she hasn't come. She's out there, in the dark, all alone, and I don't know where.” She began to cry again.

The duke stood and looked down at her with his arms folded. He could snap her neck as easily as a man may snap a thin twig. He was sorely tempted. His fingers twitched inside his gloves. The girl's death would show Lliandra that it was not a good idea to involve others in their dance. The girl obviously knew nothing. Lliandra had made sure of that. But Lliandra had still involved her.

What it was that stayed his hand, he could not say, either then or afterwards. He suspected he left the girl alive because he did not want to antagonise Lliandra. Killing her maid could potentially rebound to become a thorn in his side. It would certainly not be conducive to his plans of seduction were he to kill someone she cared about.

“Fear not, young Maggie,” he said. “I will find her. Dry your tears. I will make sure she is safe.”

Maggie raised her face, and he couldn't fail to read the adulation in her eyes. It moved him not at all.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said, her eyes shining. “Oh thank you.”

He nodded briefly and held out his hand. “But I will need her cloak. May I have it please?”

~~~

# *The Forest*

For the second time in the same night, the duke paced, back and forth, back and forth, his black cloak billowing out behind him every time he turned.

He could not help but be aware of the fact that they were running out of time, and with every turn in his pacing there was that much less time. The first hint of the grey light of dawn would, by necessity, bring their search to an abrupt end, and the search would not then resume until the sun's light had again disappeared.

Almost every one of his men, over three dozen of them, were scouring the landscape for any sign or, more aptly, scent of her. And he was damned if he would sacrifice any of them to the sun's light in aid of this search. Caine, his best tracker, was among them, so he had every confidence the trail of her would be discovered.

The knowledge she would be found did not ease the tension in his gut, though. He wanted to know where she was, and he wanted to know now. And when they found her, this time, he would not let her go to wander the night alone. If he had to hold her under lock and key to keep her from leaving him again, so be it. He had been patient enough where she was concerned, by necessity, but the time for patience had passed. She had seen to that herself courtesy of this misguided, foolish, futile attempt to escape him.

Hearing footsteps on the road behind him, he ceased pacing and turned towards the sound. One of his men approached him and bowed low.

"Your Grace, Caine sent me to get you. He's found something."

The duke nodded. At last. "Lead the way," he commanded his man.

He wasn't at all surprised when his man led him into and through the forest. Deep, deep into the forest, in fact. He had expected that. He knew, after all, that she was following the wolf, and where else would the wolf lead her but deep into the forest.

The wolf! The god-damn wolf. This was the wolf's doing. He would kill the damned thing himself when they found it.

He and his man emerged from the densest part of the forest into a clearing dominated by the large remnant of a destroyed tree. Most of his men had converged here it seemed because they were almost filling the clearing. He frowned, irritated, when he saw them, wondering if they were helping or hindering Caine in his work.

"Where is Caine?" he asked the group at large.

“Here, Your Grace.”

Caine emerged from the darkness on the other side of the clearing, and bowed low but briefly to his master. He, too, was aware of the passing of time and knew his master would not want to waste it with traditional but trivially-unnecessary formalities. He got straight to the point with no prompting from the duke.

“There were three people here in this clearing, Your Grace, two women and one man. But the scent of this one,” and he held up Lliandra's cloak given to him by the duke at the beginning of the search, “is faint, hard to detect. That's why it's taken so long to find her. The scents of the other two are far stronger.”

“But she was definitely here?” the duke asked.

“She was, Your Grace. She was definitely here.”

“Where is the other female scent? Show me.”

Caine led his master to a spot in the clearing underneath the broken tree. The duke squatted on his heels, and lifted a handful of dirt to his nose, inhaling the distinct scent of a female woman. He recognised the scent, and it was not Lliandra's.

Impossible.

He stood, brushing the dirt from his gloved hands against his trousers.

Madeleine.

Madeleine's scent. That could not be. He had checked her coffin himself to make sure she was dead, and dead she had been, very dead. Seventeen years. That's how long it had been since he'd tasted Madeleine's blood. Seventeen years ago he had seen her dead in her coffin. So how was it possible she was here, now, helping her daughter escape him? Had she risen from the dead? He would not put it past her.

And then realisation struck. He laughed in the darkness. Clever bitch, clever.

“Follow the strongest scent, Caine,” he instructed his tracker. “The daughter is wearing her mother's clothes. The two scents will be entwined, but the mother's will be strongest. Who is the third?”

Caine shrugged. “A man. Don't know who he is. He left the clearing at its northern edge. The women . . . sorry, the woman left at the southern edge.”

“And the wolf?”

“Your Grace,” Caine said and hesitated, not sure if the duke would want to hear what he had to say about the wolf. He had no choice but to tell his master everything, though. “The wolf marked two trees, one on each side of the clearing.”

The duke frowned. “Meaning?”

“Meaning, it was easy to identify its entry and exit points. Too easy in my opinion, especially if its plan was to evade capture. We know exactly where it went, and we're having no trouble following its trail through the forest. I believe it is the wolf's intention that we find its trail and follow it. This is a trap.”

“I see. And she is the bait?”

Caine partly nodded and partly shrugged. “So it would seem.”

The duke nodded, briefly. “I do not doubt you, Caine,” he said quietly, his tone hard and full of malice. “The Fae are clever. They think they can outwit me, but they will discover the hard way I am not so easily outwitted. Trap or not, we continue. Follow their trail. I want to know where the wolf has taken her. And then I want her back.” He bunched his hands into fists and snarled, “I don't care what it takes, I want her back. She's mine. She belongs to me, and I would have her back.”

~ ~ ~

Lliandra stumbled in the darkness, again, and this time she rolled her ankle slightly, but enough to cause sharp pain to shoot from her ankle up her leg. She cursed loudly, sounding decidedly unladylike, and leaned her hand against the rough bark of one of the forest's tall trees while she waited for the pain to subside.

The gods dammit but it was dark. The wolf trotted easily through the forest, but she stumbled blindly through it, stumbled being the operative word. She had lost count of the times she had tripped and staggered. And more than once she had literally fallen to her knees, bruising them.

Whenever she fell behind, which was very often, the wolf would calmly stop and turn, waiting patiently for her to catch him up again, watching her in the darkness. And then he would turn and resume trotting, sometimes springing lithely over protruding roots or rocks on the path. Not that there was a path. He seemed to know exactly where he was going, but she could no longer tell in which direction they were walking. For all she knew, they could be going round in circles.

So much for the vision of a romantic flight through the forest from danger to safety, she thought cynically, as she leaned against the tree. This was her rescue – stumbling through a dark and scary forest without a clue as to where she was going, trusting in and following a mangy animal.

And why? Because the wolf had made her believe he was her knight in shining armour. He had convinced her he was her saviour, although not by himself, she reminded herself. Her own instinct and intuition had helped him convince her. That's why she'd been able to

answer Jeffrey so confidently when he'd asked her if she could trust the wolf.

But she had been following the wolf for hours and hours now, so that she had completely lost track of time. Her feet were burning with blisters, her legs were aching, her knees were hurting, her head was pounding, her body felt heavy, and she was tired, tired, so tired. And now her ankle was throbbing.

The wolf showed her no sympathy. He had not allowed her to stop. Whenever she caught up with him again after having fallen behind, he urged her onwards. She could feel it in his stare as he watched her catch him up, and it was obvious when he turned and trotted away, expecting – nay, demanding – that she follow.

Now, as she leaned against the tree, her ankle throbbing with pain, she scanned the forest in the darkness, and could not see him, although she knew he was there.

“I cannot go on,” she said loudly into the darkness.

And, then, she released the tree and sank to the forest floor, breathing heavily with upset and with the effort of holding back tears. She had left behind everything and everyone she was familiar with for this aching pain and despair.

He emerged out of the darkness of the forest – a dark shape against the darkness of night – and he touched her face softly with his nose. With contact came his thoughts as if they were her thoughts.

“We cannot stay here. They will catch us. We must keep moving.”

She had no need of being told who 'they' were. Nor did she need to have him explain how 'they' would know where she was. She knew well enough their ability to track a human by following the scent that human left in his or her wake.

Surely they had not discovered her absence so soon. But then, she thought, they would have known as soon as the wolf did not show up in the garden that something was amiss, different, wrong. Or, more importantly, *he*, her affianced, would have known. And once he knew, he would have acted quickly. He was no fool. On the contrary, he was determined, and he was clever.

She could not allow him to catch her, she simply could not, so she mustered up the energy, and dragged herself to her feet. The wolf turned in the darkness. She could barely make him out. Here, in the forest, the moon's light barely touched the landscape. The tall trees unwittingly kept the moon's light from penetrating the canopy formed of their leaves. So he appeared to her a darker shape among dark shapes, but she could see and sense his movement, and that's how she was managing to follow him.

She had no idea how long they continued to walk their path through the forest, she

hobbling painfully on her swollen ankle. At times she had to grit her teeth and make herself keep going, a relatively easy thing when she thought of the consequences of being caught. Fear and pure obstinacy spurred her on. She knew if the duke caught her it would not be so easy to escape him again.

But a far stronger incentive to push through the pain and keep going was the knowledge of his frustration and his rage at being thus thwarted. She could almost feel it, taste it, and she savoured the sensation. Losing her would only serve to make him want her all the more – a dangerous thing should he catch her – but the knowledge was somehow satisfying, and it even made the pain worthwhile.

The sound of running, rushing water filled the silence around her, faintly at first, but growing stronger the more they walked. And then, even before they reached the edge of the forest, she saw the landscape through the trees. The moon's light, without the canopy of leaves to prevent it, had, again, painted the landscape with its silver light.

And once they emerged from the forest, she had no trouble seeing the wolf. No longer a darker mass among dark shapes, he was again painted silver by the moon's light, and he was easily perceived in the darkness. He was again beautiful, and she was reminded of that other reason for following him, that reason unspoken of to Jeffrey, and barely acknowledged to herself.

She stopped briefly to glance up. The moon was a large, bright, luminous disk in the night sky. Beautiful, so beautiful, like a rare and precious jewel. Its light was soft, muted silvery white where it touched the landscape, and it covered the whole scene in a patchwork interplay of light and shadow. Beautiful.

At the stream, they both stopped, she and the wolf, and drank of its fresh, clear, ice-cold water. She knelt beside the water and cupped her hands, feeling slightly rejuvenated by the fresh water. But when it was evident they were to move on again, she struggled to get to her feet. Her limbs were stiff with the cold and pain.

They followed the stream for a while, moving up-stream, and then, at a point where the water was shallow, they crossed it, she stepping and stumbling on the rocks and pebbles that covered the stream's bed. She had reached down before crossing to slip her mother's shoes off her feet, not wanting to ruin them. The cold water numbed her feet and dampened the edge of her cloak and gown, even though she tried to hold both clear of the water.

Once they crossed the stream, she stopped to dry her feet on her cloak and put her shoes back on. And in stopping this time, she noticed the darkness surrounding them had

changed, slightly, subtly. She glanced up again, seeing, for the first time, the faint grey light that accompanies a new dawn. Despite her discomfort, she smiled. The duke's men could still track her and the wolf, but they could not, now, follow. They would be forced to call off the hunt, temporarily. She was safe for now, and she took heart from the knowledge. The duke and his men would be forced to wait until the darkness of night again returned to resume the hunt.

As she followed the wolf, she watched the landscape alter in appearance around her with the changing light of the new day. She had never before seen the landscape this close during the dawning of the new day. It was truly beautiful. Whatever else became of her now, she would always feel gratitude to the wolf for giving her the experience.

And, now that they had left the forest behind them, the landscape was changing in other ways, too. As the wolf continued to lead her through the changing landscape, fields and hills of grass and heather replaced the tall trees of the forest.

And then, in the distance, she saw a large house, and she knew the wolf was taking her to it. The closer they drew, the more clearly the house came into view, and she was able to study it. So, study it she did.

The house was enormous, red-bricked, with a sloping red-tiled roof upon which sat a row of chimney stacks, like soldiers standing at attention, standing guard. Comprising two obvious stories, both of which were marked on its exterior with rows of large windows, the house dominated the landscape, as if it knew its own magnificence and was clearly in command. It was nestled in and surrounded by neat, manicured rose gardens, and the gardens were full to overflowing with blooming, colourful flowers and dark, dark green leaves. The house and its setting were pretty, beautiful even, a far cry from the dark and cold stone castle that was all she'd known until now.

But why here? Why had the wolf brought her here of all places? What was it about this particular house that the wolf had singled it out as their destination?

The wolf led her across the driveway to the stone path that led straight to the large front door. At the top of the path, he stopped, and they both, she and the wolf, stared at each other.

She got the message. "Here?" she asked him. "This is where you have brought me?"

As if in reply, he turned and trotted away, leaving her standing alone in front of the house. She watched him disappear around the side of the house, and then stood staring at the spot she had last seen him, not sure if he was coming back or not.

Was that it? He had brought her here and now he was abandoning her. Would she



even see him again at all?

“You would just leave me here?” she whispered. “But what am I to do now?”

As if in reply, the front door of the manor house opened, and an older woman, perhaps in her mid to late fifties, filled the doorway. Her grey hair was caught on top of her head in a neat bun, and a pair of thinly-framed spectacles perched comfortably on the end of her nose. She wore a prim, white, long apron over a long, dark-grey skirt and a long-sleeved, dark-grey bodice, the collar of which was white, like the apron, and made of lace. The contrast of the plain grey of her dress with the pretty lace of the collar struck Lliandra as slightly odd.

She opened her mouth, thinking to explain her presence, although she wasn't at all sure of what she would say. But the older woman beat her to it.

“Oh, you poor dear,” she said in a kindly voice, and proceeded to bustle down the path towards Lliandra, as if it was an every-day occurrence that she opened the front door to find a strange young woman standing on the front pathway. “You must be hungry and cold to the bone. Oh,” she said as Lliandra went to move towards her and stumbled, “and your feet. Dear, dear me. Come, petal,” she said when she reached Lliandra, gently taking Lliandra's arm to help her into the house, “we'll get you in front of a warm fire, then we'll get some hot broth and fresh bread into you. You'll feel right again in no time.”

Lliandra allowed herself to be propelled towards the house. “Where are we?” she asked meekly.

“Why, this is Weatherfell Manor, petal,” the older woman answered amiably.

“Oh,” Lliandra said faintly. She'd never heard of Weatherfell Manor, so the old woman's response to her question had not enlightened her at all.

As she allowed herself to be guided through the front door of the great house, she frowned slightly, trying to ensure her thoughts remained her own, trying to hide her bewilderment and confusion. The older woman seemed to know she was coming.

Lliandra's forehead became a mass of tiny creases as her thought processes raced, despite her bone-weary fatigue. Had she been expected? It would seem so, and that raised a whole lot of interesting possibilities, the strongest of which, and perhaps the most interesting, too, was that of the wolf not working alone.

~~~

Revelations

“Who is she?”

“She is sister to the Marquis of Winthorpe, and the betrothed of the Duke of Sandhurst.”

“Dear, dear me. I am very sorry I asked. Those are powerful enemies, my lord.”

“Yes, Mrs Rupp, I am aware of that.”

They both, the lord of the manor and his housekeeper, Mrs Rupp, looked down upon their charge as she lay sound asleep in the big bed. They knew she was sound asleep because her breathing was deep, even and regular.

They were standing beside the bed, close enough to see and hear her deep, regular breaths, and both bothered neither to whisper nor to lower their voices. Their charge would not awaken any time soon, they knew. She had arrived at the house that very morning in a state of utter exhaustion. Once Mrs Rupp had taken control of the situation, her charge had barely been able to stand, such was her exhaustion.

“How are her feet?” the lord of the manor enquired of his housekeeper.

“They are a mass of blisters, and her right ankle is bruised and swollen. I bathed and bound them. They will be right again in a day or two. She will feel much restored after a decent sleep.”

He nodded. “Good. Have her come see me when she awakens.”

Mrs Rupp nodded. “Of course, my lord,” she replied, and there was the unmistakable hint of a smile in her voice. “The sooner the better, I think. She wasn't just exhausted this morning, you know, she was in a right state of bewilderment and confusion. She has many questions, methinks, and the sooner she gets some answers the better off she will be.”

He nodded, understanding. “Yes,” he said softly. “I would agree. In fact, she needs answers to questions she doesn't even know she's been asking. She's been asking them for many years, I think.”

“I see,” Mrs Rupp said. “Is that why she's here, my lord?”

A hint of a smile played with his mouth and sparkled in his eyes. “She's here for many, many reasons, Mrs Rupp. More than I care to count, in fact.”

“I see,” Mrs Rupp said again. She had no need of asking which of those reasons he referred to was the most powerful, or the most compelling. That she could easily guess

herself. "And what of that other business?" she asked him.

"Which other business would that be?"

"That other business of a certain powerful enemy hunting his bride?"

"Oh, that other business. Well," he said matter-of-factly, calmly, "we should prepare ourselves for a visit, I think. Actually, I strongly suspect we will be having many visitors. Tonight."

Mrs Rupp clicked her tongue twice in quick succession. "Dear me indeed," she said. "Yes, I thought you would say that. Well, I'd best go warn Sylvester to get himself ready, then, hadn't I?"

~ ~ ~

Lliandra stirred in the big bed, and moaned softly as she came awake. Opening her eyes, she frowned, not recognising the unfamiliar surrounds of the room.

After giving herself a few moments to come properly awake, she propped herself up on her elbows for a better look at the room. It was large with a high, ornate ceiling. Its walls were painted soft green, its floor was covered in a thick cream carpet, and one of the manor's large windows dominated the wall on her right, allowing in the afternoon sunlight so that the room was filled with light and warmth. It had its own fire place, opposite the bed, but the sun-warmed room had no need of a fire, so the fire place was empty.

In front of the small hearth, two oversized, comfortable chairs faced each other, and above it, an ornate mirror hung on a long chain. On one side of the door, opposite the window, was a large chest of drawers whilst on the other side a large, heavy wardrobe dominated the space around it. The bed she was in was large and very, very comfortable. She didn't want to move. The room was pretty and comfortable, welcoming, but luxurious at the same time. If this was to be her room, she thought, then she would be comfortable here.

Her room? What was she thinking? She could not stay here. She didn't even really know where 'here' was.

These people, whoever they were, had very kindly taken her in. She could not repay their kindness and generosity by bringing danger upon them all. And danger there would indeed be for them. Anyone caught harbouring her would bear the full brunt of his rage and displeasure – he to whom she supposedly belonged.

She pushed back the covers and swung her feet over the side of the bed, gingerly, carefully putting them to the floor. Before she had a chance to stand, though, a light rap on the door briefly preceded the door opening.

“Oh good, you're awake, petal,” Mrs Rupp said in her kindly voice as she came into the room and saw Lliandra sitting on the edge of the bed. “Now,” she said conversationally, “I'm laundering your own gown and cloak. Both will need some mending, too, so you are in need of something to wear, are you not? The lord's mother,” she continued without awaiting a response to her rhetorical question, “was shorter than you and not as slim, so I've made a few alterations. This should fit you now.”

Draped across her arms she held an emerald-green gown with a long, sweeping skirt, long sleeves, and an embroidered bodice. When she placed the gown beside Lliandra on the bed, Lliandra fingered the soft velvet material of the gown.

“It's beautiful,” she said softly. “Are you sure he will not mind?”

“Who, dear? The master? Why, no, of course not. Gowns are for wearing, are they not? It's about time they were worn again, methinks, these gowns. I'm sure he will agree.”

She helped Lliandra into the gown, lacing up the bodice tightly while Lliandra held one of the bed's posts for support. Once dressed, Lliandra sat on one of the oversized chairs in front of the fire place while Mrs Rupp twisted her hair up, pinning it into an elaborate, sophisticated bun.

“Let's see you then,” Mrs Rupp said when she was finished.

Obediently, Lliandra rose from the chair to face the manor's housekeeper.

“Well,” Mrs Rupp said, looking mightily pleased with her handiwork, “now you look like the lady you are. Come, petal,” and she offered Lliandra her arm in support, “I'll help you downstairs. The master wishes to speak with you.”

Having Mrs Rupp's rather sturdy arm for support as she hobbled along the long hallway gave Lliandra an opportunity to study the interior of the house. A far cry from the cold, dark stone castle that was her childhood home, the manor was opulent, even luxurious, and modern. Typically, for an old stately home, its ceilings were high and ornate, but its walls were colourful, its floor sumptuously carpeted, and paintings and portraits hung along the walls in gilded frames, decorating the colourful walls.

Two of the manor's large windows, one at either end of the long hallway, allowed in plenty of light, as did the atrium half way along the hallway where a staircase joined the upper and lower floors. The castle was dingy, filled with shadows, dark corners, cobwebs, creaking floors, and cold draughts of wind. Not so, the manor house. It was light, airy, warm, colourful, and comfortable.

As she descended the stairs, she ran one hand over the polished wood of the bannister, studying the many portraits adorning the atrium walls. She was entranced. She really

loved the house.

Leaving the staircase behind them, Mrs Rupp guided her to a door on the ground floor. After knocking and waiting briefly for permission to enter, Mrs Rupp opened the door and stood to one side, allowing Lliandra entry. Lliandra's first impression of this new room was that of rows and rows of leather-bound books – a whole wall of them, in fact, like a library. Very briefly, her eyes lit up at the sight of them.

And then her attention was caught by the man seated behind a large mahogany desk in front of the wall of books, obviously the manor's lord and master.

Only a couple of steps into the room, Lliandra stopped short, utterly shocked.

“Lord Nolan,” she breathed, hopelessly unable to keep the shock out of her voice and off her face.

She stared at him with her mouth slightly open as her heart, which had initially skipped an entire beat at the sight of him, now pounded uncomfortably in her chest. This was wholly unexpected. To begin with, she'd formed a subconscious image of the lord of the manor, picturing him as middle-aged, balding, portly, with perhaps an extra chin or two, and a kindly twinkle in his eyes, like that of his housekeeper. Instead, in place of this false image, was Jeremiah whom she had not seen for ten years and who looked absolutely no different at all from when she'd last seen him. His blue-grey eyes held his amusement at her reaction, and his dark-brown hair was still pulled back into an elegant ponytail.

He rose from behind the desk. “Lady Lliandra,” he said formally.

Although she had grown slightly since last seeing him, he was still almost a head taller than her, so she looked up at him as he walked towards her, around the desk.

“Well, then,” Mrs Rupp said amiably, either unaware of or choosing to ignore the undercurrents that suddenly filled the room, “you two obviously know each other, so I will leave you to talk and go see to dinner.”

When the door closed behind her, an awkward, heavy silence hung in the air.

“This is your . . . I mean, he led me . . .” Lliandra stumbled, her confusion and bewilderment of the morning back in full force. “He led me here?” she finished weakly.

“This is my house, yes,” he said. “We can dispense with the titles, I think, don't you? You may call me Jeremiah. So you remember me, then?”

Remember him! He would never know the truth. She would bite out her own tongue before she told him the truth.

“Of course I remember you,” she said somewhat tartly. “You were a friend of my father's, and when my mother died you were a good friend. I'm not sure what would have

become of him if not for you. And then, when my father died, we never saw you again.”

Although she tried to keep it out of her voice, mindful of the fact that he was, after all, her host, the accusation hung in the air between them.

He leaned against his desk and curled his fingers around its edges. “You think I abandoned you? And yet, I seem to recall making it very clear to you at your father's funeral that if ever you had need of me you had but to call.”

“And then we never saw you again,” she repeated flatly but definitely.

He pushed himself away from the desk. “Come, Lliandra. Sit.” He indicated the leather lounge opposite his desk. “May I offer you a glass of sherry?”

“Yes, please,” she replied, moving awkwardly on painful feet towards the lounge. As she sat, one question, just one, resounded in her mind over and over again. Did he know about the wolf?

Jeremiah moved to a cabinet on the other side of the door from where she sat.

“Your brother made it abundantly clear to me I was no longer welcome at Winthorpe Castle,” he said as he poured amber sherry from a crystal decanter into two small crystal glasses. “My hands were tied, so to speak. I could no longer visit you there.”

“Oh,” she sighed softly. “I'm sorry. I did not know. Although,” she added as she took one of the glasses from him, “I should have known, really. I watched him get rid of anyone who held the potential within them to threaten his vices. He holds onto those very tightly.”

“Yes,” he said as he took a seat on the other end of the lounge, next to her, and crossed his legs, making himself comfortable, “I know.”

A small silence ensued during which he watched her, studied her really, while she avoided his eyes by looking down into her glass.

“There are many things you don't know, I suspect,” he said as he watched her. “Things you need to know. Things you should've been told a long time ago.”

She was breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling with every inhaled and exhaled breath. He could feel her turmoil, and he was, he knew, about to make it a whole lot worse. That couldn't be helped. It was time she knew the truth. He wasn't sure if she'd been hiding from the truth deliberately, or if she had simply done what she could to survive. *That* was a truth he needed to know.

She, on the other hand, was fighting the urge to run. A maelstrom of mixed emotions vied for prominence within, and she was struggling to regain control and master her turbulent thoughts. The shock of seeing him again so suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, was almost more than she could bear. She had been given no time to fortify

her own defences, and without her defences, she felt vulnerable, struggling to regain her equilibrium. If only she'd seen him at the ball as she'd planned. She had been ready for him then, masked, contained, prepared, in control.

"Your brother is not nearly as ineffectual as you believe him to be, Lliandra," Jeremiah said, unwittingly slicing through her thought processes. "You were not so easily dispensed with as I was, were you? So he found another way to deal with the threat of you, did he not? He belittled you, ridiculed you, criticised you, put you down. How did you handle that?"

He knew the answer already. She had withdrawn into herself, locked herself up in her protective tower, and thrown away the key. But he wanted to hear her own answer to the question.

"I have as little to do with him as possible," she replied, deliberately answering him in the present tense. "Not a difficult thing given the fact that he sleeps most days."

And so, Jeremiah thought, having dealt with the threat of her, Kyle had closeted her away, at least in his own mind. How it must have rankled when he found himself in need of her, when he found it necessary to bring her out of the closet in his mind once again.

What would he do when he discovered she had slipped through his fingers? Or had she simply served her purpose as far as he was concerned? The duke would not think so. Her disappearance did not bode well for Kyle, whether or not he yet knew it.

Jeremiah took a sip from his own glass, his eyes never leaving her. Still, she would not look at him. Still, she kept her eyes on her glass, and she made no attempt to take a sip, even though he suspected the sherry might actually help calm her.

"Are you aware of the fact that your mother was wealthy in her own right?" he asked her.

She tensed, frowning. "No."

"Ah," he said, "so you would also not be aware of the fact that she left her fortune to you in entirety. It was her desire that you be independent, Lliandra, beholden to no man. She certainly wanted to spare you the necessity of having to marry for the wrong reasons."

Her frown deepened, and, at last, she looked at him. She was forced to alter her position on the lounge to do so, facing him more directly. "If that is true, surely I would know by now."

"Did you receive a letter from your father after his death? It was to be given to you when he died."

She shook her head.

"I thought as much. Did I not just tell you your brother is not as ineffectual as he seems? On the contrary, he is devious, ruthless, unscrupulous and manipulative. I can almost see him dropping that letter in the flames himself. 'Tis a pity because there were two very important things your father told you in that letter."

"What things?" she asked with difficulty. She was having trouble breathing, and she was struggling with a burning, painful lump in her throat.

He was not without sympathy. This was difficult for her, and it would get a whole lot worse before it got better. Uncrossing his legs, he leant forward and put his glass on the table.

"He told you of your inheritance, obviously. More importantly, though, he recognised his neglect of you following your mother's death, and he explained the reason for that neglect. He apologised. And he was truly sorry, Lliandra. I urged him so many times to talk to you personally, but he could not bring himself to do it."

She took a moment to respond while she tried, desperately, to master her emotions, to get herself under some semblance of control.

"What reason?" she whispered. "What was his reason for staying away from me?"

He inclined his head at her. "You really do not know? You are so like her, your mother, not just in your physical appearance, but, of course, in the energy of the Fae that is an innate part of you. You were a constant reminder to him of what was loved and lost, like salt on an open wound."

She closed her eyes as she lost the battle to master the pain in her throat, and the tears, as a consequence, escaped. She lifted a hand to wipe them off her cheeks.

"So I lost both parents on the same day," she said.

She'd long known the truth of that, really. Only, she had thought grief alone had irrevocably altered her father. Knowing, now, that his neglect of her was far more personal was too confronting. Her mind shied away from the knowledge.

Jeremiah removed a white handkerchief from the pocket of his coat and handed it to her. No wonder, he thought, as she took the handkerchief from him, remembering the cocoon he'd seen around her on the night of the ball. Father, brother, his own perceived abandonment of her, and now the duke. Had any man treated her decently as she deserved?

"Your father was no fool," he said gently, choosing not to address the comment she'd made about losing both parents at the same time. "He knew what Kyle was, and so he tied up the estate in such a way as to ensure Kyle would not ever have the power to bankrupt

it.”

She sniffed in surprise. “But . . .”

“The estate is not bankrupt, Lliandra, despite Kyle's assertions. Your father's lawyers are very good, and they were well informed and prepared. Kyle has spent the last ten years desperately trying to get his hands on the rest of the estate and on your mother's fortune, without success obviously. How it must have galled him to be so reduced, forcing him to beg, and from one such as the duke. Well, he is the duke's man now. The consequences of that are dire, of course. He will come to know in time, if he doesn't know already.”

She used the handkerchief to wipe her cheeks, dabbing at her eyes, trying to get herself under control. She was struggling to take it all in.

“Why didn't my father's lawyers try to contact me?”

“They did. Numerous times. Over many years, in fact.”

His words evoked memories of Kyle locked in her father's study. His study. She'd always thought he was drinking and had not the mind or the will for anything more. What a fool she had been. She saw him only as a drunk, nothing more, but that was not the case.

“Selling me to the duke,” she said slowly as full realisation dawned, “was easy for him, then. It was merely another step in a whole series of steps already taken.”

Jeremiah nodded.

“You knew?” she asked him. “All this time, you knew?”

“Knew what? That Kyle was manipulating you to this extent? No. I told you. He made sure I stayed away, and I would have continued to stay away if not for the ball. I've no idea why your brother suddenly decided to include me as one of his guests, but include me he did. And it was at the ball that I saw for myself what he was capable of. So I made enquiries of my own, and found out the extent of his duplicity. And now you are here.”

“That was me,” she told him, looking down again, away from him. “The ball, I mean. I sent you an invitation. Kyle did not know.”

“Ah.” Now it made sense. “I see.”

She frowned in confusion again and shook her head in a futile attempt to clear her mind as her thoughts collided with each other. She looked up at him, was powerless to stop herself, and her eyes held her confusion.

“What do you mean, now I'm here?”

His eyes narrowed briefly in response to the question. He was surprised she still did not understand. “That night I saw for myself the predicament you were in, and I took the steps necessary to aid you.”

“You saved me?” she asked him tentatively. “But . . .”

“But what?”

“But the wolf saved me. Did you send the wolf . . . ?”

He raised his eyebrows at her as he sat back on the lounge and crossed his legs again.

“The wolf?”

She looked at him at utter confusion. “A wolf led me here.”

She stopped speaking and stared at him instead. It wasn't the blue-grey of his eyes that brought the blue-grey eyes of the wolf to mind, nor was it the fact that the wolf had led her right to his doorstep. It was the calm stillness about him as he watched her, or the still calm within him that was identical to the inner calm the wolf radiated and that infused her whenever she was in the wolf's company.

But how could that possibly be? How do you ask someone if they are a wolf when they are sitting right next to you looking very obviously like any other human?

“A wolf led you here?” he repeated.

She leant forward to put her glass on the table in front of her, and wondered, as she did so, if he could see her hand shaking as much as she could.

“I can't stay here,” she said as she straightened again. “I thank you for your hospitality, but I cannot stay here?”

“Why not?” he asked calmly.

“Because my presence here will bring danger into your house.”

“And what if I was to tell you we are capable of handling the very danger of which you speak?”

She turned her head again to look at him. He was watching her, so their eyes locked, and she could not, for the life of her, look away. Her heart, already pounding, increased its thumping beat so that she thought herself in danger of it thumping right out of her chest. What would he do then?

“You're the wolf,” she said flatly, unemotionally. “It was you who led me here. It was you I spoke to in the garden. It was you I followed. It was you I trusted.”

“It was,” he said calmly.

“How . . . ? She swallowed nervously. “How is that possible? I've heard stories, myths and legends of werewolves and shape-shifters . . .”

“I am neither of those,” he said, cutting her off. “I merely take the form that best serves the Purpose for which I am here.”

“Here?”

“Here in this reality.”

“For what Purpose are you here?”

“I am here to defeat evil. To restore balance. And so are you, as it happens.”

She stared at him, barely registering his last words. How easily he had just turned her whole perception of her entire childhood on its head. Nothing was what it seemed, nothing. Nothing was as she thought it was. She felt as if the ground had given way underneath her, and she was falling, falling, falling.

“You are Fae?” she asked him.

“I am.”

“So you knew my mother was Fae?”

“Of course. I knew your mother long, long before I knew your father.”

Silence reigned as she tried, unsuccessfully, to process everything he'd told her.

“I think you hold a misconception about your mother, Lliandra,” he said. “And it is important I set you right. You believe it was the duke who seduced your mother, do you not?”

She nodded slowly, reluctantly, unwilling to admit to herself as much as to him that she thought her mother weak. Ever since the conversation with Jeffrey she had been trying to avoid confronting that particular truth, even though she'd known she would have to face it eventually.

“So what if I told you it was not the duke who seduced your mother, but, rather, your mother who seduced the duke?”

Having asked the question of her, he watched her closely. Now, now, finally, they were encroaching on territory she needed to traverse. In truth, it was *this* territory he had been painstakingly leading her to. He watched her digest and absorb the new possibility, and he watched her recognise the far deeper, far greater ramifications.

“You're saying she sacrificed herself?” she asked him, disbelief reverberating in the tone of the question.

He nodded once. “She did.”

“Did my father know?”

“No, he had no idea, either before she did it or after. She never told him. How could she?”

“But why? Why the hell would she do something like that?”

“She was a pleasure, the seeds of which, once sown, as was so with her, the duke was always going to repeat, one way or another. When a monstrous ego such as his samples a

pleasure like her, it wants obsessively, and it will do anything to have that pleasure again. After tasting the mother, he was always going to come after the daughter. Your mother made sure of that.”

Her head began to pound, suddenly, and she brought a hand up to rub at her forehead. “No,” she breathed. “I don't believe you. She wouldn't do that. She wouldn't put me in danger like that.”

“Are you in danger?” He fell silent for a moment, allowing the question to impact her. “I'm sorry, Lliandra,” he said after the moment's silence, “but she did what she did quite deliberately. You must realise, though, if you are to truly understand why she did it, that she did not do so in the same ignorance under which you currently labour. You may not know what you are, but she knew. She always knew,” and he frowned slightly, “even when I did not. And tonight, I intend to see to it that you are enlightened as to the true nature of your own power. Then, you will know why your mother did what she did.”

~ ~ ~

The Fae

Caine did not bother to knock. Instead, he turned the handle and pushed the door open. The duke was surrounded by attendants, all of whom were helping him dress.

"Where is she?" the duke asked without preamble when he saw it was Caine who had entered his bedroom.

"We followed their tracks to Weatherfell Manor, Your Grace," Caine answered.

"Weatherfell Manor? Never heard of it."

"It is the home of the Nolan family, Your Grace."

"Lord and Lady Nolan? Now them I *have* heard of."

"It's just Lord Nolan, now," Caine corrected his master. "There is no lady."

The duke scowled. "And what? So now he wants mine? Is that it?" And then he hesitated as an important thought occurred to him, something temporarily forgotten, now remembered. "What does this Lord Nolan have to do with the wolf, Caine?"

"Well," Caine replied matter-of-factly, "to the best of my knowledge at this early stage, I suspect the two are one and the same."

The duke shooed away his attendants, turning to give Caine his undivided attention. "Is that so?" he asked, his eyes narrowed as his thoughts raced, fed as they were with this new information. "So it is as I suspected. The wolf is human, after all."

"Human, Your Grace?" Caine questioned. "I think not."

"Fae, then," the duke responded, adjusting his earlier statement. "But a Fae that appears in human form. All the better to kill it. Take some of the men, Caine, as many as you need. End this tonight. Kill the Fae, and bring me back my lady."

Caine bowed deeply. "Yes, Your Grace."

Then he straightened, turned on his heel, and was gone.

"I, on the other hand, have another visit to make," the duke said, directing the statement to the door through which Caine had just disappeared, although, really, the statement was meant for none but himself.

~~~

For the dozenth time, Lliandra stood and restlessly started pacing, walking from one chair to the other and back again, careful, even in her restless frustration, to avoid the window as instructed. At the chair she'd just vacated, she stopped and wrapped her arms

around herself, trying not to look at the door to her room, but failing hopelessly. Instead, she cast a longing gaze towards it. Oh how she yearned to disobey her instructions.

Earlier, she and Jeremiah had eaten dinner together in the manor's dining room, their conversation tense and rather stilted given the fact that she was overly aware of the dwindling light outside. She'd been unable to help herself. She'd kept looking out through the manor's large windows in the dining room. The last of the daylight hours were fast disappearing, and she knew, she just knew the darkness would bring with it the duke's men, probably quite a few of them.

Jeremiah, sitting opposite her at one end of the long table, he with his back to the window, she facing it, had seemed wholly unconcerned by the encroaching darkness. He'd made no attempt himself to turn and look at the dwindling light. Instead, he'd run his fingers up and down the long stem of his wine glass as he'd watched her watching the change in the light outside. He didn't bother commenting. He just watched her.

And then, when dinner was over, and the darkness filled the dining room windows, he'd instructed her to return to her room, and stay away from the window. He'd made it clear she was to stay in her room until someone came to get her. He'd been adamant. She was to stay where she would be safe.

Sylvester, whom she assumed was one of the manor's servants, had built and lit a fire for her in the room's fire place, so the room would be warm and full of flickering light. She had tried to question him as to just what he knew about how they would deal with the duke's men but had received only grunts in reply. So she'd given up.

Initially, she had accepted her situation, making herself comfortable in one of the oversized chairs, every now and then leaning forward to feed the fire with a new log as the hours passed. She had even relaxed to the extent that she had begun to doze.

But her relaxed acceptance changed when she'd heard a noise outside.

That first noise had been a faint but distinct scuffle somewhere in the garden below the window. Her eyes had flown open, wide, and she'd sat up straighter in the chair, every sense attuned and alert, honed in on what was happening outside, beyond the window.

After another long silence, during which she'd continued to sit upright in the chair, tense and alert, holding the chair's arms so tightly her knuckles turned white, she'd heard something smashing, shattering, like falling rain. Something large if the noise was anything to go by, maybe one of the manor's large windows.

The shattering was then quickly followed by a man's scream – a scream of mortal agony that was suddenly cut off, silenced.

She'd stood then for the first time, listening intently, her heart pounding. When she heard the distinct snarl of a wolf, *the* wolf, she'd started pacing, from one chair to the other and back again. So had begun a routine of standing, pacing, sitting again when the pain in her feet forced her to, standing, pacing, sitting, and so forth.

Now, though, as the obvious sounds of fighting outside changed in nature, and increased in frequency, pacing wasn't enough. She was beginning to do battle with herself, wanting to leave the room to find out for herself what was going on, but wanting, too, to obey Jeremiah's instructions. What could she do anyway? She could not battle the duke's men. She had not the wherewithal to do that. Surely she would only get in the way. But what of Mrs Rupp and Sylvester?

And what of the wolf? What of Jeremiah?

Another scream of mortal agony generated a fresh ripple of anxiety within her, and caused tension to stiffen her limbs. She finally lost the battle she was conducting within. She could not stand here anymore and do nothing. These people were fighting *her* battle. She could not just leave them to do so by themselves.

But she took barely a few steps towards the door before she froze where she stood, hearing the unmistakable sound of the window sliding open behind her. Slowly, she turned. One of the duke's men was stepping easily through the open window. When he saw her standing in the room he grinned at her.

"Well, lady, so here you are," he said, straightening and putting his hands on his hips as he looked at her. "You've led us a merry dance, you know, for two nights, too." He threw his hands up in the air dramatically, like an actor in a stage play. "As if we have nothing better to do than track you down. Well, never mind. All will be forgiven once you are safely back with the master where you belong."

She took the couple of steps that would bring her back to the support of the chair she had just vacated. Standing behind it, she put her hands on its back. "Except that I am not going back," she told him.

His grin did not falter. "I beg to differ, lady." He held out a hand to her and took a couple of menacing steps in her direction, and his grin disappeared. "I have been given strict orders not to hurt you, but if I have to hurt you, I will. Either you come with me willingly or I will come over there and get you myself . . ."

"Creature of the night," Mrs Rupp snarled behind Lliandra, her voice harsh, fierce.

Lliandra, as tense as the drawstring on a bow, jumped with fright, and turned to see Mrs Rupp holding a crossbow steady in front of her face, aimed directly at the duke's man.

Having got the attention of the man, she released the first bolt. A sharp, loud twang, followed by a whoosh, filled the room. The bolt flew too fast for Lliandra to see it as it flew, but she saw it hit the duke's man in the shoulder. The force of the bolt hitting him sent him reeling backwards and pinned him against the wall. With barely a pause, Mrs Rupp released a second bolt, this one hitting him in the opposite shoulder. Pinned against the wall, he looked momentarily stunned as he looked down at the bolts protruding from his body, holding him in place. And then he looked back up at the women and began to laugh.

Mrs Rupp did a curious thing, then. She dropped the crossbow on the floor beside her and spun, round and round, too fast for Lliandra to see her properly. She became like a small whirlwind.

Lliandra watched the whirlwind move from just inside the doorway, past her, and over to the pinned man. The whirlwind was, to Lliandra, a blur of movement, such was the speed with which Mrs Rupp spun. And when she stopped spinning, she stood beside the pinned man. Only, Mrs Rupp had disappeared. In her place stood a woman who looked nothing at all like the middle-aged housekeeper.

Lliandra could only stare as the woman who stood in Mrs Rupp's place raised her hand and plunged a syringe into the man's arm.

"This is Fae blood," she said as she emptied the contents of the syringe into his arm, sounding nothing at all like a middle-aged woman. "You won't be laughing in a moment. I can guarantee it."

She retrieved the syringe, and took a couple of steps back to watch her handiwork.

Lliandra moved closer to the strange woman, not looking at the duke's man at all, but keeping her eyes on the woman who was, or had been, Mrs Rupp. She moved to the opposite chair and steadied herself by holding the back of it, facing the woman. The woman glanced at her.

"I assume Mrs Rupp is a glamour, then?" Lliandra half stated, half questioned.

The woman glanced at her again. "You assume correctly."

"But you play the housekeeper so well, even though she is nothing like you." A tone of awe underpinned Lliandra's comment. She was fascinated.

"Why, thank you. I've had a lot of practice. Sylvester and I have been with Jeremiah for a long time."

"How long, exactly?"

The woman raised her eyebrows at Lliandra. "Many, many decades of your time," she said.



“You work with him?”

“We do. We work with him and for him.”

Lliandra frowned as she tried, once again, to absorb and make the necessary adjustment to a thoroughly altered perception of what was, but her next question was forestalled by a low moan from the duke's man. While the women had talked, he had raised his hands and attempted to pull the bolts from his body, using all the strength he possessed, but without success. Now, he dropped his hands and moaned, and his head lolled forward. Both women looked at him.

“He does not look well,” Lliandra commented.

“He doesn't feel it either,” the woman said.

“But I thought they consumed nothing but blood.”

“'Tis human blood they feed on. Fae blood is poison to them. It may take a while, but the blood I gave him will kill him eventually.”

In response, the man moaned again and tried to raise his head, but seemed to lack the strength even for that.

Lliandra watched him deteriorate, remembering the moisture on her lip after the duke kissed her. “But, the duke tasted my blood,” she said, sounding uncertain. “Yet, he still lives.”

“The Duke of Sandhurst?” the strange woman questioned.

Lliandra nodded.

The woman looked at her, ignoring the man pinned to the bedroom wall. “He is an alpha. He is powerful enough to make the adjustment necessary to tolerate your blood in small doses. He will even have a degree of resistance to it now, in fact, if what you say is true.”

“An alpha?”

“The alpha is the source and the heart . . . sorry, wrong choice of word, but you know what I mean, of their coven. This one is a minion. He is like a worker bee in a bee hive. He serves the alpha. An alpha is powerful. A minion is not. Our blood is very effective in destroying minions, not so effective in destroying alphas. But if we do destroy the alpha, the coven collapses in on itself, and then scatters like rubbish in a strong wind. The coven does not survive without the alpha, and many of its members will not and cannot survive on their own, without the coven.”

“Oh,” Lliandra said, “so this is something you do often? Fight their kind?”

The woman looked at Lliandra for a moment without speaking, and Lliandra fought the

urge to look away, feeling as if the woman's strange golden eyes could see right into the heart of her, as if she was suddenly made of transparent glass.

“When we're forced to, yes.”

Lliandra frowned, slightly, as she digested this new information, trying, unsuccessfully, to reconcile what she knew of Jeremiah with what this woman was now telling her. Obviously, there was a whole lot more about him she did not know.

“What is your real name?” Lliandra asked the strange woman with the golden eyes.

“Liliana,” she replied. “But the boys only ever call me Lily. You may call me Lily, too, if you wish.”

The duke's man moaned again, louder this time. Both women ignored him.

“Lily?” Lliandra repeated, and a glint of amusement sparkled in her eyes.

Not at all offended, Lily inclined her head. “My name amuses you?”

“Actually,” Lliandra replied, “it really suits you. It's just that lilies, you know, the flowers, are pure white, and you are more black.”

“Ah, well, I wasn't named for the flower.”

“Oh.” Hesitation, and then, “Are you and Sylvester . . . ?”

“Twins? Yes.”

That figured, Lliandra thought. They looked remarkably similar. Both appeared to be only a few years older than Lliandra was, and both wore black leather trousers, black boots and sleeveless black leather vests. Both wore a strange amulet on black string around their necks, and both had strange markings or symbols on their upper arms. Both had pale, pale skin and jet-black straight hair, Lily's long, reaching her lower back, Sylvester's cropped short.

There were differences, too. Being male, Sylvester had a black beard, and his eyes were glittering, jet-black. He was also taller than his sister, a full head taller. Lily had a fringe that covered her forehead, reaching perfectly-shaped black eyebrows that framed her golden eyes. A cat's eyes, Lliandra thought, with a cat's grace of movement, too. Although strange looking, Lily was stunningly beautiful in appearance.

“You are Fae?” Lliandra asked, even though she knew she was stating the obvious.

“Pure Fae,” Lily answered, again ignoring the low, tortured moan of the duke's man. He was, now, virtually hanging by the bolts in his shoulders. He had not the strength to stand at all.

“What do you mean 'pure Fae'?” Lliandra asked.

“There is no human in us. We are here as we are.”

“Oh. Is . . . is that the same for Jeremiah?”

Again, Lily looked at Lliandra, and Lliandra felt, again, that those golden eyes could see right into the deepest parts of her.

“Jeremiah is different,” Lily said. “He, like you, was born here. He is, at least in part, human, although, unlike you, he is far more Fae than he is human. Speaking of which,” she said, “I know you have questions, Lliandra, understandably, but now is not the time. We'll leave this one here for now. Sylvester can get him later. We need you downstairs. There is something you must see.”

She moved to retrieve her crossbow, and Lliandra followed her. Lily waited at the door, holding it open.

“Do you need help?” she asked, watching as Lliandra limped towards the door.

All the frenetic pacing of the last hours had taken its toll. Lliandra's right ankle was throbbing painfully, but she didn't dare deny these people anything. Not that she was afraid of them. They were her protectors. No, it was more that they knew far, far more than she did, and they were, in truth, her own people, even if they did seem strange to her at the moment.

“Thank you,” Lliandra said in reply to Lily's offer of assistance. “I can manage.”

In truth, she wasn't sure she wanted this strange woman touching her, or not just yet anyway. She needed a little more time to adjust to the truth of who this woman really was.

Outside, torches had been placed around the edge of a paved arbour to give light to it. Wooden framework, covered in creeping, flowering plants, covered the arbour, giving the illusion of shelter. In any other context, it would have been pretty.

Lliandra followed Lily to the arbour. On the grass surrounding the arbour she could see bodies, some headless, some with their throats torn from their necks, like the two in the bottom of the castle's garden, and one with crossbow bolts protruding from his body like the one upstairs in her room.

In the middle of the arbour, one of the duke's men sat tied to a chair. Sylvester stood behind him, holding a strange weapon. It looked to be part sword and part axe – a large, elaborate axe. Its wooden handle was long and thin, and the undulating, curving blade attached to one end of the handle looked more decorative than lethal, like steel lace, although the blood covering it was a testament to its effectiveness. Sylvester held the strange blade in one hand, its handle on the ground, as if he was holding a flag. With his other hand he firmly held the duke's man in place.

Beside him, Jeremiah watched the women approach. He wore a cloak, holding it closed

in front of him from the inside, but his legs and feet were bare, and his hair, normally neatly held back from his face in a ponytail, was loose around his face. He looked wild, untamed. A bit like a wolf, Lliandra thought.

As she and Lily stood in front of the man on the chair, she looked at Jeremiah, raising an eyebrow, and had to ask, “Are you naked under that cloak?”

“As a wolf, I don't wear clothes, Lliandra.”

“Of course not,” she muttered. And then, “How many of the duke's men have you killed?”

Jeremiah looked around them at the dark shapes lying on the ground and shrugged.

“Nine, I think, maybe one or two more.”

“He won't be pleased.”

“Well, then, he should not have sent them, should he?”

“No.”

“Lliandra,” he said, “we kept this one alive because we need to show you something, but you must trust me. We need you to allow Lily to cut you. We need you to bleed. Will you allow that?”

She licked suddenly dry lips as she pictured the man upstairs and his obvious reaction to the Fae blood in the syringe. Her heart began to pound, but she nodded as she raised her arm, pulled the sleeve of her gown up, and offered her wrist to Lily, her fingers curled into a fist in anticipation of pain. Lily took her proffered arm and reached down to retrieve a knife from one of her boots.

“Are you sure?” Lily asked her, looking into her again with those strange golden eyes.

“Do it.”

“I will bind the wound afterwards,” Lily assured her.

“I know.”

Lliandra squeezed her eyes shut as Lily ran the knife over the flesh on the underside of her lower forearm. When she opened her eyes again, blood was dripping from a cut just above her wrist. Jeremiah nodded to Sylvester. Temporarily releasing the duke's man to lay his weapon on the ground, Sylvester then stood behind the man, tilted back his head, and held the head firmly in place so that the man could not move. The man looked suddenly terrified, and tried to move back against the chair, away from the women, as Lily guided Lliandra's arm closer to him.

He shook his head against Sylvester's strong hands. “Not her. Not her,” he said. “The duke warned us not to drink her blood. Not her.”

Ignoring his protests, Sylvester used his thumbs to prise the man's mouth open, and Lily guided Lliandra so that the blood from the wound on her wrist dripped into his mouth.

Leaning over him, Lliandra watched her blood disappear into the man's mouth. They forced him to consume far more than just the few drops the duke had taken from her, but still, the reaction was both instantaneous and violent. He started coughing and gagging, trying to spit out the blood rather than drink it, and he began to shake in the chair.

At first, he trembled as if with a fever, but then he began to rock on the chair, back and forth, quickly, violently, so violently the chair would have moved if Sylvester had not been standing behind it, holding the man in place. Both Lliandra and Lily were forced to step back as the man convulsed so violently Lliandra thought he would break the chair underneath him.

And he screamed. Lliandra could only watch in fascinated horror, resisting the urge to cover her ears and block out his screams.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, it seemed to be over. The man stilled, slumping in the chair, his head lolling forward on his chest.

In the sudden strange silence that followed, Lliandra felt decidedly queasy. "Is he dead?" she asked uncertainly.

Sylvester lifted the man's head back, and they all saw his staring eyes.

"He's dead," Jeremiah said.

Lliandra swallowed her nausea. Her blood had done that. Her blood had killed that man in less than a minute, violently.

"Lily, take her inside," Jeremiah commanded. "We'll clean up here."

Lily nodded as she took Lliandra's arm to guide her back inside. "There's another one upstairs," she told the two men. "Don't leave him up there, Syl. It's really not a good look having him pinned to the wall, certainly not conducive to a peaceful night's sleep."

~ ~ ~

The duke didn't knock as he entered Kyle's bedroom, and, just as he knew would be the case, he found that Kyle was not alone.

He stood beside the bed for a moment, waiting for the lady, who was on her back, to notice him. When she did notice him standing beside the bed, she screamed and instinctively pushed Kyle off her, away from her. So much for being in the throes of ecstasy, the duke thought cynically. These women could turn ecstasy on and off at will in the mere blinking of an eye.

"Get out," the duke said to her, his eyes hard, his voice even more so.

The woman did not wait to be told twice. She got out of the bed, on the opposite side from where the duke was standing, and paused only to gather her clothes, holding them against her as she made a determined bee-line for the door.

Kyle rolled over in the bed and looked at the duke, appearing bored. "Thanks a lot," he said, sounding annoyed. "That one was free. Was," he repeated. "Now you've scared her off."

"You and I had an arrangement, I believe," the duke said, ignoring Kyle's whining complaint. "You have not held up your part of that arrangement. Lliandra, your sister, my betrothed, is no longer in your custody. She has escaped you and gone to the house of another."

"How is that my fault?" Kyle asked belligerently. "It's not my problem you can't handle your women, keep them under control."

The duke moved swiftly, a blur of movement. He reached over the bed, grabbed Kyle by his arms and hauled him out of bed. Holding him by his upper arms, the duke brought Kyle's face close to his own just so there would be no more misunderstandings. Kyle blinked with the shock of the movement, and swallowed nervously as he was forced to look into ice-cold, blue eyes, at last, too late, realising and recognising the danger he was in.

"You had but one obligation in return for payment, just one," the duke said, his voice steely, his eyes cold. "You had only to keep her here until such times as I could fully claim her. You failed in your obligation, and, therefore, you have failed me. You are yet to learn those who fail me only ever do so once. Now, tell me, Kyle, what is the one thing you cannot live without?"

Kyle was so frightened he couldn't think. The hands gripping his arms were so strong they were holding him slightly off the ground, and he could see it was costing the duke very little in effort to do so. "Ah . . ." he stumbled, not at all sure what the duke was alluding to.

"Shall I help you out?"

Kyle nodded quickly.

"You desire the escape, the oblivion of the haze of alcoholic stupor above all things. Now, you will know what it is to live without that escape. I will take it from you. Never again will you find the escape you so yearn for in drunkenness."

Kyle didn't understand. "I don't . . ." he started to say, but the duke silenced him.

Again, in a blur of movement, the duke lifted Kyle further off the floor. Barely understanding what was happening to him, Kyle felt pain in his neck, unbearable pain, and all he could do was throw his head back and scream.

When the duke was finished, he dropped Kyle where he was like a piece of discarded rubbish. Kyle fell and crumpled to the floor like an empty sack. The duke spat out the remnant of blood that was in his mouth.

“Your blood is foul,” he said.

He stood for a moment, looking down at Kyle. “You will find you have trouble bedding women from now on, Kyle. You will find, in fact, there is something you desire more than sexual release. You will thirst for their blood, and given your weakness of character, I doubt you will possess the self control necessary for keeping them alive. I hope, for your sake, you do not mind bedding corpses, because that is what you will have to do from now on.” He leaned over Kyle. “You serve me now. When I call, you will come. And you will have no choice in the matter.”

He straightened then and stepped over Kyle. Before he opened the door to the room, though, he stopped, turning to look back at Kyle, a crumpled mess on the floor beside his own bed. “As I said, no one fails me twice.”

~ ~ ~

The manor's kitchen was warm, and the fire in the large hearth filled it with flickering light and undulating shadows. Lliandra held her wrist on the table while Lily cleaned the wound.

“I'm going to put a couple of small sutures in it, just to bind it. Is that okay?” Lily asked gently, softly.

Lliandra nodded.

“You know,” Lily said while she worked, talking in an attempt to distract Lliandra from the pain of the suturing, “my blood took how long to kill that one upstairs? An hour, maybe longer. We won't know because we left him there. Your blood took how long to kill that one outside? A minute, maybe less.”

Lliandra just looked at her without saying a word.

“Our people,” Lily continued while she worked, “have no need of governance, not the way humans do. Humans have hierarchical structures in their societies they all desperately try to climb, one way or another, and they are always ruled in one form or another. They need laws to keep them civilised, and punishments when those laws are broken. Our people have nothing like that, no social structures or hierarchies, no laws to break and no punishments for broken laws, and no rulers or governments. We do have a council, but anyone may sit on the council if they so choose. And, we have our own . . . well, they're more like a priest-king and a priestess-queen in one sense, but only in that

they care for us and energise us. They are our beating heart. We do not serve them, nor do they expect us to. If anything, they would say they serve us. We may seek guidance from them, but they invariably refer us back to ourselves.”

Lily glanced at Lliandra to see if she was listening. She was, despite herself. She was listening intently.

“We call them Usha and Ushara, our king and queen – Lord of Light and Lady of Light. They are powerful, Lliandra, so powerful. In fact, so powerful is their Light that darkness simply cannot be in their presence.”

She snipped off the last of the gut against Lliandra's wrist, and then, as she began wrapping the wrist in a white linen bandage, she continued.

“Were they to come here and take human form, the Light in their Fae blood would completely dominate the human part of their blood. And their Fae blood would kill a creature of darkness stone dead . . .” and she looked at Lliandra, her golden eyes glowing, “in less than a minute,” she finished.

Lliandra stared at her. “What are you saying?” she asked, the question little more than a strangled whisper.

Lily inclined her head. “I would've thought that was obvious,” she said.

~ ~ ~



# *Reflection*

Lliandra leant forward, putting a couple of logs onto the fire and stoking it back to life, glad to have something practical to do to occupy her hands, if not her mind. Lily had helped her up the stairs, and then stayed to help her undress, undoing the ties on the bodice of her gown. When they stripped the gown from her, Lliandra had looked down at her bound feet, particularly her right one, and at her bound wrist.

“I seem to be getting a rather impressive collection of bandages,” she observed.

Lily didn't smile. “We'll make sure you don't add to that collection tomorrow. I promise.”

“But this is not over.”

“No, it's not over, but a promise is a promise. You will see.”

Dressed in a long white nightgown, Lliandra had allowed herself to be put to bed, and then Lily had sat on the edge of the bed looking down at her.

“Are you sure you'll be all right?”

“I think so,” Lliandra replied.

Left alone, though, Lliandra knew she would not sleep, and so she got up, out of the bed, and hobbled over to the fire, seeking its warmth.

Now, satisfied the fire had, once again, taken hold of its new wood, she sat back, one leg curled under her, the other in front of her, the knee raised so she could rest her chin on it and wrap her arms around it. She was trembling like the man on his chair downstairs, and even the warmth from the fire did little to alleviate it. She was cold, and she could not get warm.

She heard the rap on the door but didn't answer it. Jeremiah came in anyway. She raised her head to glance at him briefly as he sat in the chair, and then she returned her chin to her knee. He was dressed again in trousers, boots, and a white shirt, the sleeves rolled up and the laces untied. His hair was again in its ponytail, and he smelled of soap. He looked more like the Jeremiah of old – the Jeremiah she knew, or thought she knew.

“Lily told me she put you to bed, but she didn't think you'd stay there,” he said.

“Sleep is impossible. Besides, I was cold. I can't seem to get warm.”

He could see for himself she was trembling, not with cold, though, but with shock. He stood.

“Do you trust me, Lliandra?”

She looked up at him as he stood over her. “Yes. I followed you, didn't I?”

“You did. But a lot has changed for you today. Come.”

He held out his hand to her, and she looked at it, hesitating.

“I know what ails you,” he said. “And I know how to make you feel better.”

She turned, then, untwisting her legs, and placed her hand in his. He helped her rise, and then led her to the bed. Leaning down, he removed his boots and got into the bed fully dressed.

“Come,” he said again.

She got into the bed, too, beside him. It seemed natural to just move into his arms, and so she did, laying her head on his chest, feeling his arms come around her.

She closed her eyes as they lay together in silence. The warmth from his body, and his own unique inner calm infused her, calming her, so that her trembling gradually lessened, and then ceased altogether.

But though she was calm of body, her thoughts raced. As a girl, she had dreamed of this, being in his arms. Every single night, she had fallen asleep imagining what it would feel like to be in his arms, although always, in her dreams, she had imagined a different context. In her dreams, it wasn't comfort she had sought and he had offered, it was something else.

“Were you in love with my mother?” she asked against him. She hadn't meant to ask the question, fearful of altering the mood between them. It just came out of its own volition.

“Why would you ask me that?”

“Well, because everyone was, it seemed.”

“She was truly beautiful,” he said. “Irresistibly so to some. But I was never in love with her.”

Again, they lay in silence. And then he added, “If anything, it was her daughter I was interested in, although I did not understand that interest at the time. You were so young, a developing consciousness. I had to allow you to develop your own way, in your own time. You had to find your feet as your own person, your own identity, without interference or even influence.”

She tensed against him. “Is that why you stayed away?”

“Yes. And why I left it to you to contact me. Only, you never did.”

“I sent you the invitation, didn't I?”

“Ah yes, so you did.”

Again, silence ensued. She could hear the faint hiss and crack of the fire as it consumed its wood. She had thought never to tell him the truth, but given the circumstances of this rather unique and strange day, and the role he had played throughout, she thought she owed him the truth. Or maybe she just wanted no secrets between them, nothing hidden or protected.

“When I was a girl,” she said, “I used to think I was in love with you. When I knew you were coming to the castle, I would hide so I could watch you without being seen. And I used to want you to talk to me, so badly, but I was terrified at the same time. And terror usually won out over desire, so I avoided you.”

He made no comment, and so, once again, they lay in silence, but she could feel a slight tension in him now and didn't understand it. She was afraid, thinking she might have pushed him away by confessing her teenage fantasies to him, so she changed the subject in a futile attempt to distract him from what she'd just told him.

“You deliberately left a trail for the duke's men to find, didn't you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You wanted to lure him here?”

“Yes.”

“So you can defeat him?”

He didn't answer immediately. Now she could feel tension in herself as well. Eventually, he answered her.

“It is not I who will defeat him.”

She sat up, unconsciously pulling away from him, looking down at him in the dim light. Her heart had increased the tempo of its beat. He lay looking up at her, his hand resting lightly on her arm.

“What do you mean?” she asked him nervously.

He sat up, too, so that their faces were close and they could look at each other, eye to eye. “Did I not tell you I would show you how evil can be defeated?”

She licked dry lips, and saw him notice the action. He looked at her mouth, and his breathing quickened. She sensed it as much as saw it. “Yes, you did,” she said, “but, I thought . . .”

Leaning on one hand, he raised the other to caress her cheek and run his thumb over her lips. “What about now, Lliandra?”

“What about now?” she repeated, not understanding the question.

“Are you still in love with me?”

She shook her head, and he thought she would say no, but, instead, she said, “Nothing's changed. I wanted to know. That's why I invited you to the ball. But I saw you only briefly and from a distance. Then Chirstof told me you had gone.”

He leaned forward and kissed her, silencing her. She closed her eyes, surrendering completely to the sensations stirred in her body by his kiss. She had not responded to the duke's kiss, standing like a stone statue in front of him while he plundered her mouth. Now, she opened her mouth and kissed Jeremiah back as passionately as he was kissing her. Without conscious volition, she raised her hands to hold him, pushing her fingers into his hair. He moved her, pushing her back against the bed and coming with her so that he lay partially on top of her, partially beside her, and his hand slid up her leg, pushing up the material of her nightgown. She moaned softly against his lips. By the gods, how she wanted him.

He broke the kiss and raised his head to look down at her. “Let me in, Lliandra, and in return, I will let you out. I will set you free. Open your heart to me.”

“How?” she asked him. “I don't know how. My heart has been closed for so long.”

“Let yourself love me, and I will love you in return.”

He didn't wait for her reply. He kissed her again, deeply, passionately, breaking the kiss briefly to take off his shirt and help her take her nightgown off. While he kissed her again he removed his trousers with one hand, and then, without the barrier of clothes between them, and the feel of his body against and then within hers, she was powerless to resist the desire that burned in her body, could only surrender to it completely. She opened herself to him body and soul, gasping, her body arching in ecstasy, holding onto him tightly, when the tide of their desire peaked.

~~~

Caine was supremely irritated as he searched the crowded room for his master. The light in the room was dim, courtesy of the few candles burning in sconces on the walls, and a dull grey smoke haze hovered over the centre of the room, clouding more than just his vision. His sense of smell was affected, too. He had wasted valuable time tracking his master even this far, but he wasn't sure if the duke was still here or if he had left for some other place, some other pleasure.

Finally, he saw the duke sitting in the corner of the room. He was not alone, but when he saw Caine, he pushed the girl off his lap and stood up.

“Come,” he said. “This way.”

Caine followed his master out of the room, through a dark corridor and into another, smaller room. This one was well lit with dozens of candles on the mantle and the cabinet opposite it, and a small but healthy fire burning in the grate of the small fire place. This room was classy, sophisticated, offering different pleasures from those offered in the larger room outside – a box of cigars, a decanter of port, a pack of cards sitting in the middle of the round table in the centre of the room.

Once alone in this smaller room, it was a measure of his extreme irritation that Caine neither bowed to his master nor greeted him formally.

“What is she, your lady?” he asked the duke angrily. “What is she?” he asked again, all but shouting.

The duke moved to lean one hand on the mantle, not looking at Caine, but looking instead into the flames of the fire. “Why do you ask, Caine?”

“Because I saw them feed her blood to Zeibel, and it killed him, violently, painfully, inside of a minute.”

“She is Fae . . .”

“Ye gods,” Caine said as he started pacing, running a distressed hand through his hair, and failing, completely, to realise he'd just cut his master off mid-sentence – something he'd never before done – something he'd never dare to do in a calmer state of mind. “I know she's Fae, but I ain't never seen Fae blood do that to a man.”

The duke straightened, watching him pace. “What of the men you took with you?”

“Dead, to a man.”

The duke's lips tightened almost imperceptibly, the only outward expression of his supreme displeasure. “How many?”

“Ten.”

“And, yet, here you are to tell the tale.”

Caine stopped pacing to glare at his master, his anger palpable. “I'm a tracker, not a fighter. And I felt it prudent to stay out of the fight anyway so there *would* be someone to tell the tale. Your lady remains in the custody of that . . . creature, that creature that killed four of your men.”

“Caine,” the duke said harshly, “calm yourself. This is not your fault. I do not hold you responsible. The fault is mine. I should have gone myself, a mistake I will rectify tomorrow night. How many Fae are working with the wolf?”

“Three, counting your lady. That's four in total, including the wolf.”

The duke nodded as he leaned again on the mantle. “Tomorrow night,” he said, more to

himself than to his man, his free hand balling into a fist, “I will kill the damned thing myself. Strong it may be, but it will find itself no match for me. As for Lliandra, I will decide her fate when I see her again. I might just kill her, too, and be done with it, this stupid obsession.”

“For that,” Caine said quietly as he watched his master, “I will fight. I will help you kill this lady. She is too dangerous, methinks. She must be dealt with.”

~ ~ ~

Confrontation

“Wake up, sleepy heads.”

Lliandra stirred in the bed and opened her eyes, coming out of a deep sleep. Lily was standing beside the bed with her hands on her hips. Instinctively, Lliandra reacted to cover herself, pulling the bed covers up to her neck.

“The Fae have a different sense of privacy than do humans,” Jeremiah muttered sleepily beside Lliandra, amusement ringing in his words, despite the fact that he was still not fully awake. “That is to say, they have no sense of privacy. At all.”

“Privacy?” Lily echoed. “There's no such thing for us. We have no secrets. How can we? We're all connected telepathically. That's why Sylvester never bothered to learn to speak human language, although he understands it. If you want to speak *with* him, rather than *to* him, by the way, Lliandra, you'll have to speak the language of the Fae. Which,” she added when Lliandra opened her mouth to comment, “you speak very well, doesn't she, Jeremiah?”

Jeremiah chuckled softly beside Lliandra. “Yes, Lily, she does.”

Lily raised her eyebrows at Lliandra, saying, “I told you so” without words. But she added verbally, “You just have to learn to let us in.” And she tapped a finger to her head, indicating the mind.

“Don't I already?” Lliandra asked.

“No. You're very good at locking us out, actually. It just takes practice to open your mind to others. I'll show you how today if you wish.”

“I would like that,” Lliandra said, and then asked, “What do the symbols on your arms mean?”

Lily raised her right upper arm to look at the markings. “This arm says 'One cannot . . .' no, I mean, '*You cannot fully know yourself*.'” She dropped her right arm back beside her and raised her left arm. “And this arm says '*If your heart is not open*!'.”

Lliandra looked at her, trying to gauge whether or not she was making mischief, whether she was joking or not. “Are you serious?”

Lily looked surprised. “Why wouldn't I be?”

“Well, it's just that . . . well, that's very appropriate for me right now.”

“Ah,” Lily said, grinning. “Well, it's appropriate for everyone, petal. That's why I've

permanently marked my body with it.” And then she looked meaningfully at Jeremiah who, turned on his side, was lying with his head on one arm, watching the interchange between the women with interest. “I think you’ll find your heart is more open than you realise, petal.”

Lliandra smiled, and Lily returned it.

“I came to see if you two want breakfast,” Lily said. “It’s late, you know. I thought you’d be hungry.”

“How late?” Jeremiah asked.

“Mid morning.”

Jeremiah groaned, but it was Lliandra who responded. “It was a long night, Lily.”

“Yes,” Lily said, grinning again, “I can see that.”

“Give us another half an hour,” Jeremiah requested.

“Okay,” Lily said as she turned and walked to the door. “Half an hour it is.”

Left alone, Lliandra turned in the bed to face Jeremiah and spoke before he had a chance to move his arms, as she could sense was his intention.

“There’s something I want to ask of you. Given the fact that you are naked already, could you show me how you turn into the wolf?”

He looked at her in surprise for a moment, his eyebrows slightly raised, and then he rolled onto his back, sat up, and pushed the covers back on the bed. She watched him walk around the end of the bed, and then she, too, got out of bed, retrieving her nightgown from the floor and pulling it over her head. He stood in front of her, beside the bed.

“All right,” he said.

She watched as he crouched, leaned forward on hands and knees, and then in a blur, as if her eyes lost focus for a fraction of a second, the wolf was standing in front of her. She smiled and fell to her knees in front of him, reaching for him, and sinking her fingers into the fur behind his ears. She hadn’t seen him since he’d left her at the manor’s front door, and, strangely, she had missed him.

But then, in a blur and a fraction of a second again, Jeremiah was crouching in front of her. Surprised, she took her hands from him so they were suspended in mid air. He straightened, kneeling, so that, once again, they faced each other eye to eye, chest to chest, both on their knees. And he reached for her, sliding his hands around her lower back and then lower so he could pull her against him.

“I don’t want you to get too attached to the wolf,” he said as he held her against him with one hand whilst pulling up the material of her nightgown with his other.

“Why not?” she asked as she raised her arms so he could pull the nightgown over her head.

He threw the nightgown on the floor behind her, pulling her against him again, and then he kissed her. “Because,” he said between kisses, “I much prefer being in human form when I’m around you.”

She smiled against his lips. And then her smile disappeared and her breathing quickened as his hands moved over her body.

~ ~ ~

Sighing as she lay back, she closed her eyes to savour the feeling of being immersed in hot water. There was no such thing as a bath, or a bathroom, for that matter, in the castle. Baths were a modern convenience the castle was yet to have installed. So this was her very first experience of a hot bath, one she was fast getting used to. Bathing at the castle was a chore, an inconvenient necessity, really, that one finished with as soon as was physically possible. Being immersed in a hot bath was an entirely different experience, a luxury.

“Need a hand?”

She opened her eyes. Jeremiah was crouched beside the bath, leaning his arms against the edge of it.

“Thank you, but I can manage,” she said.

“Pity.”

A hint of a smile sparkled in her eyes. “You could always join me.”

He stood, taking off his coat as he did so. “Ah, yes,” he said, “so I could.”

“In that case,” Lily said, materialising beside Jeremiah with a large iron cauldron in one hand, “you’ll need more hot water. Mind your legs, petal.”

Jeremiah chuckled at the expression on Lliandra’s face as she sat up and pulled her legs up so Lily could tip the cauldron of hot water into the bath. Lily had dispensed with the black leather trousers and vest. In place, she wore a simple, long-sleeved, scoop-necked, homespun green dress, its skirt long. Simple though it was, she still managed to make it look pretty. After tipping the water into the bath, she walked out of the room, pulling the door shut behind her.

“Have fun,” she said before the door fully closed.

“Naked of body, naked of mind, naked of soul,” Jeremiah said as, stripped of his clothes, he stepped into the bath behind Lliandra. “You’ll have to get used to that.”

“So I gathered.”

She leaned back against him and wrapped her hand around his raised knee beside her.

“Hand me the sponge,” he requested.

She complied. “So, just how old are you, or would you be if you were completely human?”

“Eighty or so, give or take a few years.”

“You look very good for your age,” she observed. “Although, really, you are ageless, are you not, because the soul does not age?”

“Very good.”

He held her with one arm while he squeezed the sponge, emptying it of water over her shoulder so that the water ran in rivulets down her body, front and back.

“Were your parents Fae?” she asked him as he repeated the process.

“No.”

“Did they know you were?”

“My father didn't. He died when I was young, twenty years or so. My mother knew on some level of her, but she would not consciously admit it, so we never spoke about it. She adored Lily and Sylvester, but she never asked about them, never asked where they came from, or who they were. She was happier not knowing, I think.”

Lliandra tilted her head to one side as he rubbed the sponge over her shoulder. “So how did you know my mother then?”

“We were both born into the nobility. We mixed in the same circles.”

“So I gather she, too, was older than she seemed.”

“Of course. We were of a similar age, at least in terms of the number of years we'd been here.”

Lliandra had about her now that strange stillness that comes with realisation. “Where is she now?”

“She would have returned to her people, our people. She performs a very specific function among our people.”

“And that is?”

“She is *Shahimbwa*, a high priestess of our people.”

Lliandra absorbed that for a moment, remembering many of the things her mother had taught her when she was a girl, including the deeper meaning and purpose of the pavilion in the castle's garden.

“Jeremiah,” she said and then hesitated, not sure if she really wanted to ask what she was about to ask. But she needed to know. “Can you read my mind?”

“Not when I'm in human form. You don't allow it. But as the wolf, yes. You let me in

then.”

“What about now?”

He stilled, his hand holding the sponge in mid air. Then he moved again, squeezing the water out of it onto her again and rubbing it over the skin of her arm, down to the bandage on her wrist.

“You have realised the transaction between your brother and the duke is and was null and void, based as it was on an invalid assumption – that of your brother owning you in the first place and having the right to sell you. And in realising this, you have also realised that you temporarily gave them both the power to behave the way they did by believing they had the power to control you, or sell you, one to the other. You've rectified that, thank the gods, and by making the necessary adjustment you have negated, or neutralised, any power they thought they had over you.”

She tensed as she listened. Yes, she had realised everything he'd just told her at some point during the night. The realisations had even penetrated her dreams.

“You are accepting of your circumstances,” he continued, “both the one you find yourself in now and the one to come tonight. You have accepted the fact that you will have to face him, but you still don't believe you have the power to defeat him. Why face him then, Lliandra? Why not just let me deal with him?”

She entwined the fingers of one hand in his, the hand that held her. “Because,” she said, “you know more than I do, and I trust what you know. And I would know it all, Jeremiah.” She sat up and turned in the bath to face him, kneeling in front of him, between his legs, sliding her hands around his neck. “I want to know who I am, what I am.”

He sat up straighter, too, and slid his hands around her lower back.

“Then,” he said, “know this. The duke exists only in the physical, material plane. It is from this that he sources his power. He does not know and he cannot see anything else. If you only existed there, too, then your strength and power would, indeed, be no match for his, and he would overpower you. But you do not just exist on the physical plane, Lliandra. In fact, you truly exist on a higher plane, and it is from this higher plane that your power comes. You want to know what you are? You are Light. Tonight, let yourself burn brightly. Let yourself be.”

“How do I do that?”

“Believe.”

She bit her lip.

“Visualise your own Light if you have to,” he said. “See it radiating out of you, and picture it touching him. Wrap it around him, like a blanket of Light, so that he is obliterated. That is how you will defeat evil. As darkness, he cannot be in your Light. And the very thing he so obsessively wants whenever he looks at you is the very thing that will be his demise.”

~~~

“Are you nervous?”

Lliandra took a moment to answer, slightly distracted, as she was, by the effect of the flames of the fire on Lily's golden eyes. “Afraid would be a better word,” she finally answered. “And, yes, I am. Are you?”

“No. I've done this before, remember. Your fear comes from your ignorance – your ignorance of yourself more than anything. Tonight, you will see, and you will know what you are, and then, you will not fear anymore. Given your situation, though, Lliandra, I think you are very courageous. No one would really blame you if you ran from this.”

Lliandra smiled, although her smile was tight with tension. Her stomach was a churning cauldron of fear, anxiety, nervousness. “Yes,” she said softly, “perhaps, but then I would never know, would I? Or, I would just have to confront this same situation again at some point. Might as well get it over with now. Besides, I have to confront him to honour the choice my mother made. She sacrificed herself so that he would be destroyed, ultimately. This would not have been possible if not for her.”

Lily nodded and leant forward to cover Lliandra's hand with her own – an age-old gesture of comfort.

The two women were sitting, cross-legged, on a large rug in front of the fire place in the lounge room, the manor's largest room. They had chosen the lounge room as the site of their confrontation with the duke because of the size of the room and the fact that it was well lit. Sylvester had built and lit a fire in the fire place, and its light was augmented by the light emanating from the dozens of candles in candelabra around the room. They had removed the table in front of the lounge, and pushed the lounge back, so there was space and light all around the two women as they sat facing each other, waiting. They knew, or thought they knew, the duke would come looking for Lliandra first. It was a small gamble, a toss up between his hatred of the wolf and his obsession with Lliandra. They had gambled on obsession winning out over hatred.

Lliandra wore another one of Jeremiah's mother's gowns, this one sapphire blue, but Lily had donned, again, her black leather in anticipation of a fight. Beside her, on the floor,

one hand rested on a long, curved sword in its scabbard. Lliandra had no weapons. She wouldn't know how to use them anyway, but if the other three were to be believed, she didn't need one. Jeremiah and Sylvester were outside. They would take care of any men the duke brought with him. So, for now, the women were on their own, and that is how they would face him, the duke, when finally he came.

Before leaving her in the lounge room, Jeremiah had raised a hand to caress Lliandra's cheek with his thumb, his hand on her neck.

"Tonight," he told her, "it is not what you will do that will matter. It is what you are. Remember that. You could stand in front of him and say nothing, nothing at all, and you will still defeat him. You confront him not on this plane, this dimension, but on a higher one. And there, he is no match for you. No match at all. Know that."

She had nodded slowly, silently, her heart beating, her mouth dry, her stomach churning, all of which he had felt. He'd smiled, then, and leaned forward to kiss her lightly on the lips, his hand still encircling her neck.

"I will see you soon," he said when he raised his head.

She'd watched him leave, letting him go, and forcing herself not to call him back.

"Lliandra," Lily said quietly, looking into Lliandra again with those strange golden eyes, "no matter what happens tonight, I will not leave you. I will be here, with you. We will face him together. Remember that."

Now it was Lliandra's turn to nod, and this time, she covered Lily's hand with her own – an age-old gesture of gratitude.

And so, concentrating on each other, as they were, they did not hear anyone come into the room. Not that he made a lot of noise. His tread was silent, somehow. Silence of movement was yet another of those strange collection of skills and abilities possessed by his kind.

"Hello, Lliandra."

The two women both got to their feet, facing him with the fire behind them. Neither of them spoke as they watched him come to stand on the edge of the rug, a small distance from where they both stood.

He was wearing his long, black cloak again, and, when he stood on the rug in front of them, he arrogantly removed his black leather gloves, one by one, one finger at a time, only briefly glancing at Lliandra as he did so.

"You did not really think you could escape me, did you?"

Lliandra watched him, realising with sudden insight, that everything he did and said

was affected, deliberate, as if he was performing for an audience, or as if he was the lead actor in a macabre stage play and wasn't about to share the limelight with any of the other actors on stage with him. As such, he was fabricated, contrived, artificial. There was almost nothing about him that was real – his appearance, his demeanour, his conversation.

The insight fortified her, strengthened her, and gave her courage. She thought it time their conversation, which, to date, had been dictated by him, got a little more real. How would he cope then?

“Well,” she answered him nonchalantly, shrugging her shoulders exaggeratedly. Two could play his game. If they were to share the stage, then she could be as dramatic and as affected as he. “Escape implies some sort of hold in the first place. You have no hold over me. Nor did you, ever.

“I did tell you,” she continued smoothly, “did I not, that you would never possess my soul? Well it turns out I was more right, then, than both of us could have anticipated. You know, of course, that the arrangement between you and my brother was never valid. I was never my brother's to sell. I cannot be bought. I cannot be owned. I cannot be controlled. And it is only a very great fool who would attempt all three, as you did.”

The duke looked at her, almost against his will, his eyes narrowed. She had changed. He could see it. She had about her, now, that strange inner calm, that eerie stillness, that characterised the Fae. It heightened both her beauty and her power, and it served only to make him want her all the more.

It was a pity, he thought, that he would have to kill her eventually. He knew that now. He could not allow her to live for long, although he would take pleasure from her first, of course, maybe play with her for a while.

“It matters not whether you were Kyle's to sell, or not,” he said. “You are mine because I say you are. Speaking of which, perhaps this is as good a time as any to tell you your brother is one of us now. A just punishment, I think, for him anyway, in failing to uphold his end of our deal. I paid. He did not deliver.”

Even knowing, as she did, that he told her about Kyle deliberately, with the sole intent of destabilising her, Lliandra still looked down at the rug they stood on to break eye contact with him.

Oh Kyle, she thought, remembering him as a boy. What a weak, foolish man he had turned out to be. He'd had no real notion of what he was dealing with when he petitioned the duke for financial aid. All he'd seen was the money that came his way – money that would ensure his addictions were financed well into the future, or so he'd thought back

then. What an irony, then, that even though he had the money, he no longer had the means of assuaging his cravings. *Craving*, she corrected herself. His craving was, now, singular, and he did have the means of feeding that. But at what cost?

While the duke and Lliandra had spoken, Lily had moved, silently, with the stealth of a cat, to stand behind him. Only the sound of the sword she held being removed from its scabbard drew his attention. He turned his head to look over his shoulder at her. Lliandra, too, looked up again, to watch. Lily held the sword steady and raised in front of her with both hands, her golden eyes on the duke.

“Don't worry,” she said to him, “I will only use this on you if you ask me to, or if you are dead and will not feel it. Or,” she added when she saw the malevolent intent in his ice-cold eyes, “if you attack me.”

Lliandra felt it prudent to regain his attention, and she knew exactly how she would do so.

“Lynden,” she said.

The duke swivelled towards her again, his eyes narrowed at her. “How do you know that name?”

“It is your birth name, is it not?”

“It is a name I no longer have need of. You will not use it again.”

No longer ice cold, the use of his name had aroused his red-hot anger.

She inclined her head at him. His anger masked his fear, and she could see that fear, clearly.

“Does that name remind you of a time when you were not so in control – a time when you were less adequate than you are now?”

She watched his hand curl around his gloves, squeezing them as if they were her neck and he could squeeze the life out of them. She suspected he didn't know he was doing it.

“Ah,” she sighed, “yes, I see. Your father. Everything you are now is the opposite of how you believe your father saw you, or, rather, of how your father made you see yourself.”

He snarled at her, and his appearance was transformed by the snarl. He looked ugly, no longer immaculate. His facade was slipping, that image of physical perfection he presented to the world.

“Leave my father out of this,” he commanded, his voice hard, his eyes even more so, both fists balled now. “He has nothing to do with anything anymore. I left him behind the night I snapped his neck and made him pay . . .”

“I beg to differ. Your father has everything to do with who you are, Lynden, both now

and in the past.

“Very well,” she conceded, holding up her hands as if in supplication or surrender. “Let us speak of something else, then, shall we? There is a question you wish to ask me, I think, something that has puzzled you greatly these last few days.” She dropped her hands and awaited his reaction.

Again, he looked at her with narrowed eyes. How did she suddenly know these things about him? He'd not thought of his father in centuries, and the fact of her raising the subject was taking him back there, to the past, arousing old feelings of inadequacy. He knew, then, that Caine had been right when he'd said she was too dangerous to be kept alive. His obsession be damned. He had to kill her now, tonight. There would be other pleasures, other Fae.

“Lynden?” she prompted him. “Don't squander this opportunity. The question you hold within you is important because the answer will allow you to understand why 'tis you in danger here, not me.”

He didn't respond nor did he move, as she half expected him to, so she gave him both question and answer anyway.

“You wonder why, given the mix of my father's human blood and my mother's Fae blood, I am more powerful than she was, not less so. If I was just a physical being, that would indeed be the case. But, of course, I am far more than just a physical being. You ask the question because you do not understand what I am. I am Light, powerful Light. And it is my Light that predominates, no matter the form of an incarnation I take.”

As she spoke, she saw her Light, just as Jeremiah had suggested she do. Only, she didn't try to see it, she just saw it radiating outward, wrapping around him. And her Light exposed the shadow within him. She could see right into the heart of him.

“There is a black hole where your heart should be, Lynden,” she told him. “'Tis a black hole that has sucked everything into itself. You do not give at all. You take. You bleed others in more ways than the obvious one. And you do not realise how much you have hurt yourself in doing so. Really, it is your father you punish, over and over and over again, although it is you who will ultimately suffer.”

He would have responded, and, in fact, tried to do so. He took a step, wanting to reach out to her, put his hands around her neck and squeeze the breath out of her, anything to shut her up. But his vision blurred as he looked at her. He couldn't see her properly.

And, then, he did something he'd not ever done, even as a human. He staggered as if he was drunk. Unconsciously, without realising it, he dropped the leather gloves onto the rug



beside him. Suddenly, he felt dizzy and stiflingly hot, as if he'd wandered into the sun's light without realising it, without being aware. Swaying on unsteady legs, he loosened the tie of his shirt.

And then, without warning, his knees buckled under him, no longer able to support him. He fell to his knees, and then fell forward, holding himself up with his hands, so that he knelt on hands and knees.

Lily moved silently to stand near him, her sword at the ready, and Lliandra watched him, fascinated.

"What are you doing to me, bitch?" he ground out, raising his head briefly to look at Lliandra. "I have not tasted your blood."

She didn't move. She just watched him. But she responded to his question.

"If there is still good in you, Lynden, you may yet live. I think, however, there is only darkness left in you. Did I not just tell you I was Light? And is it not a fact of dark and light that darkness cannot exist in Light? I did warn you, did I not? If you play with fire, you *will* burn."

He collapsed where he was. He simply fell forward onto the rug, and then lay, at first shaking, quivering, as had Zeibel when they fed him Lliandra's blood, only not as violently, and then he convulsed, his body, his limbs, contorting.

Then, suddenly, he lay still, silent, his eyes half closed, staring at nothing under the half-closed eyelids. Lily stood right over him and raised her sword. Lliandra turned her head, looking away, so that she heard the sound the sword made as it severed his head from his body, but did not see it.

"Pity," Lily said, yanking the sword from the rug where it had, briefly, become embedded, "I liked that rug. Oh well, plenty more where that one came from."

Lliandra turned her head again, and although she tried to look just at Lily, she couldn't help but see the body of the Duke of Sandhurst and the severed head that lay beside the body. There was blood on the rug, but not much, not nearly as much as there would have been had he been human.

"So there endeth the life of a true monster," she observed quietly. "One I very nearly married."

"You were never in danger of marrying him," Lily said. "You would not have allowed it. You could never be yoked to darkness such as his. This all went exactly the way it was supposed to.

"By the way, that was a particularly clever piece of psychology, using his real name. It

weakened him every bit as much as did the power of your Light. How did you know it?"

Lliandra shrugged. "I have no idea. I wanted to get his attention off you, and the name was just there."

"Interesting," Lily observed, looking right into Lliandra again. "Very interesting. You saw his fear, all of it. I mean, you saw the fear that filled him to overflowing and determined everything he did, everything he was. And you called it out, brought it to his attention, to his very great detriment given the fact that he obstinately refused to see it for himself and acknowledge it. You saw into the heart of him, and then used his fear against him, although it didn't have to be that way. That was his choice. This ability of yours will, no doubt, come in very handy in future encounters."

"So," she said, smiling, and changing the subject, "what say you now about the power of your Light?"

"Ummm." In truth, Lliandra hadn't quite come to terms with the outcome of this particular confrontation, and so she was at a loss for words. She would have to process it a little more.

Lily laughed. "Help me roll him up, petal. You can answer my question when you've had more time to think it all through."

~~~

Home

“Lily, why are there not more Fae here?”

“Here?”

“Here in this reality, this dimension.”

“There are quite a few here. You just haven't come across them. Or maybe you have without realising it.”

“Oh.” Lliandra thought about that. Surely she would know if she'd come across the Fae. But then, she had completely fallen for the illusion of the middle-aged house-keeper, had she not?

Lily, knowing full well what was in Lliandra's mind, grinned.

They were both curled at either end of the lounge in the manor's lounge room, the furniture having been pushed back into place. They were alone in the house.

Earlier, Jeremiah and Sylvester had come back to the lounge room, Sylvester holding his strange weapon, and Jeremiah still in the process of tying his hair back. Once again, having easily dealt with those of the men the duke had brought with him, there was a collection of bodies on the grass outside the house, next to the harbour. They needed to dispose of the bodies, but they'd both known there was one more to add to the collection.

They unrolled the duke's body, partially to satisfy themselves he was truly dead, and then rolled him up, once again, stood, and hauled body and rug onto their shoulders. Then, with those of his men, they had burnt the body. By the time they'd finished, a good part of the night was over. But their work, in terms of the duke and his coven, was not yet finished.

“We need to strike while the iron's hot, so to speak,” Jeremiah had told Lliandra before he and Sylvester left to ride like the wind to the duke's palace. “We have to hunt down the remaining members of the coven. In a very real sense, what's left of the coven will be at its most dangerous without the alpha's control. We can't allow them to wander the night at will.”

“I will come with you,” she'd said.

“No. We will move faster without you. Lily will stay with you. I don't want you here alone, just in case some of the duke's men are still hanging around. I'm not sure we got them all.”

“Jeremiah,” she said as he’d walked out of the room, and when he stopped and turned back to look at her, added, “Kyle is one of them.”

He bowed his head. “Ah. I thought that might happen.” And then he looked at her again. “I’m sorry, Lliandra, I know you are worried about the people at the castle, with good reason, but we cannot ride to both the duke’s palace and the castle. It is either one or the other. We will have to deal with Kyle tomorrow.”

She had nodded, understanding, but still, she knew her concern for the people at Winthorpe Castle would prevent sleep, so she hadn’t even bothered trying.

And now, with neither the inclination nor the will to sleep, she and Lily were sitting in the lounge room, in front of the warm fire, every now and then talking, but mostly sitting in silence.

“It is not easy at all for the Fae to be here, Lliandra,” Lily said, continuing the conversation Lliandra had started. “This dimension is one of darkness, and the Fae exist in and as Light, as now you know from very personal experience.” Lily fell silent as she watched Lliandra, gauging Lliandra’s reaction and response to the comment. “This reality is brutal to the Fae. They do not come here if they don’t have to. So that is why there are not a lot of them here. But that will change soon, very soon, actually. More and more of them will come in.”

That interesting collection of comments did elicit a reaction. Lliandra turned her head to look at Lily, her eyebrows coming together in silent question. Lily merely smiled at her, not bothering to elaborate. In truth, she knew there was actually not the need to do so.

~~~

Standing outside the door of Kyle’s bedroom, Sylvester behind her, Lliandra held Jeffrey’s hands in her own.

“No matter what you hear, do not come in, Jeffrey. Please, promise me. It is too dangerous. He may hurt you.”

“What about you then?” Jeffrey asked, concerned. “You think I’m letting you go in there after a comment like that?”

“Sylvester will protect me. Kyle will not hurt me. He cannot.”

“Why? Because you are a beloved sister to whom he will show mercy?”

She smiled. “No. Because I’m Fae, and he is not.”

Jeffrey capitulated, reluctantly. “All right. But if I hear you scream even once, I’m busting the door down. And I ain’t moving from this door while you’re in there.”

Again, she smiled at him. “Agreed.”

Releasing his hands, she turned, exchanging a look with Sylvester. He lifted the latch and pushed open the door. Swallowing nervously, afraid of what she would find, she followed Sylvester through the door.

The room was full of darkness and the smell of death. She brought a hand up to her nose, taking a moment to adjust to both. After a moment, she could just make Kyle out. He was naked, curled in the foetal position in the middle of his bed.

At first, she thought he might be asleep, but then he groaned and stirred on the bed.

“Take the light away, stupid bitch. Don't you know light hurts my eyes now?”

She and Sylvester exchanged another look, speaking their own silent language, neither needing to see each other properly to speak it. Neither he nor she held a lantern or a candle, and neither had as yet touched the drapes that were very effectively blocking out the light of day. So what was Kyle seeing? Her Light? Sylvester's? Or perhaps both. She was mildly surprised by his ability to see their Light. But, then, she thought, her mother's blood ran in his veins, too.

She walked over to the bed and looked down at her brother.

“I cannot let you live, Kyle. You have become a danger to the people here at the castle. But you need to know. Your choices led you to this place. It didn't have to end like this. Your life could have been very different.”

Uncaring as to whether or not he heard her, or whether or not he comprehended what she'd said, she exchanged another look with Sylvester. He nodded briefly and went to haul open the drapes covering the first of the bedroom's windows. Daylight came streaming in through the uncovered window. Kyle screamed at them to close the drapes, covering his face with his hands, and cursing them, calling them every name he could think of.

Ignoring him, Sylvester moved to the next window and hauled open its drapes. Kyle's screams became pitiful, more like an echo than actual screams, and then they ceased altogether. Within but a handful of mere moments, he was nothing but a pile of ash in the middle of the bed.

“Jeffrey,” Lliandra called. “You can come in now.”

Jeffrey took one look at the ash on the bed. “Oh no,” he said, his eyes full of sadness. “When did this happen? I mean, when did he become one of them?”

“I'm not sure,” Lliandra responded. “Two nights ago, I think. Who is she?”

Daylight filling the room, replacing the darkness, had revealed a pale body on the floor beside the bed. The woman was naked, with dried blood on her neck, and from the look of her, she'd been dead for longer than a night.

“One of Kyle's whores, I think,” Jeffrey answered Lliandra's question. “I saw the two of them arrive, and I wondered why I didn't see her leave.”

Lliandra nodded, relieved he hadn't felt the need to check on Kyle before this morning. Thank the gods, when Kyle chose to sleep the day away, the staff at the castle usually allowed him to. And if his bedroom door was shut, they invariably left him alone. He emerged, usually, only when it suited him to do so.

“The fact that he fed on her,” Lliandra said, pointing to the body of the dead girl, “means he did not feel the need to feed on anyone here at the castle. She unwittingly saved your lives, I think, thank the gods.”

Jeffrey sighed again, a look of profound sadness on his face, and he ran a distressed hand through his hair. “Ye gods, little lady, but I am glad your mother never had to see this. Or your father, for that matter. Heck, I'm glad she never had any idea of how he'd turn out.”

Lliandra offered what little comfort was hers to offer. “Me, too, Jeffrey,” she said, putting a hand on his arm. “Me, too.”

~~~

Lliandra stood still, like a statue, in front of her father's desk in the castle's study. She couldn't make herself think of this room as Kyle's study. To her, it was and always would be her father's.

For reasons she couldn't quite fathom, this room had most powerfully, out of all the other rooms in the castle, come to symbolise the bad memories of the past. Perhaps it was because both her father and Kyle had shut themselves up in this room, each with his own and different reasons for doing so, and each, in his own way, shutting her out.

When first she'd come into the room, she had opened and tied back the heavy drapes so that light had flooded the room. And the light had exposed the dust, everywhere. A fine layer of it covered everything. Kyle had much to hide, it seemed. He had allowed no one in here, not even Jeffrey.

Well, all was exposed, finally. And now that Kyle was gone, they could clean this study up, restore it to its former glory.

She didn't hear the door open, but she felt Jeremiah come in and stand behind her.

“My father's sister's son will inherit the title now,” she told him, her voice flat, emotionless. “And the castle with it. He is a scholar and a theologian, like Christof. He's studying to be a priest, actually. I'm not sure he will welcome this change in his life, but he will be good, nonetheless. He will take good care of this place. He is a good man.”

Jeremiah frowned as he moved to stand beside her. “Why are you contained again?” he asked her, ignoring what she'd told him about the castle's new marquis. “Why are you shutting me out?”

“Because,” she replied, “Lily said something last night, and it's made me think. I know I could just ask you. But I'm sick of asking. I want to know for myself. I know I know, too. I just need to remember that I know.” She glanced at him. “It has nothing to do with the way I feel about you. And, yet, at the same time, it has everything to do with who you and I are, both together and individually, I think.”

“All right,” he said, moving to half sit, half lean against her father's desk so he could look at her properly. “I'm listening.”

She looked at him, folding her arms across her waist. “Knowing what I know now about you and I, who and what we are, I think we did not come here just to destroy one alpha and his coven.”

“Ah, I see. No,” he said. “We did not.”

He stood, then, and moved to stand in front of her, close to her. First, he unfolded her arms, placing them around him, and then he lifted his hands to her face, his thumbs caressing her cheeks. And he looked deep, deep into her, just as Lily did.

“We came here to change the very fabric of this dimension, this reality, such that it will be impossible for alpha's and their kind to exist here in the first place. We won't need to destroy them. They just won't be here. They won't be able to be here.”

“Ah,” she sighed, so softly they both barely heard. She lifted her hands to cover his. “Is that what Lily meant last night? She said many more Fae would come here now. Is that because we will play our part in restoring balance – the balance between Light and dark.”

“It is.”

“So we have much work to do, then?”

“Yes, we do. So, will you stay here now?” he asked, needing to know what her intentions were. He knew where she belonged, but he would not force her to be anywhere she did not want to be. She had to come to him willingly or not at all.

She laughed softly. “Absolutely not. This place holds nothing but bad memories for me. I don't belong here anymore, if I ever really did. You, Lily and Sylvester are a family, my family. You are my people, and I want to be with you, all of you. But you, Jeremiah, are my lover. We cannot be lovers if I stay here.”

He smiled into her eyes and leaned forward to kiss her, but she stopped him by pulling back slightly.

“Besides,” she said quickly, “there is another very important reason why I can no longer stay here.”

“And what is that?”

“The castle has no bath.”

“Ah,” he said. “You're right, it doesn't.”

They exchanged smiles, and this time, when he leant forward to kiss her, she met him half way. When he raised his head again, she said, “Take me home, Jeremiah. Please, take me home.”

~~~

*The End*