

Dust to Dust 1

Fangs For Your Memories

by Eden Crowne

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From the author

The *Dust to Dust* series was inspired by my book, *Fear Club: The Masquerade*. In *Fear Club*, the heroine, Lexie Carpenter, is seduced by a group of beautiful Soul Eaters called, The Club. She loses her soul to them and races against time to reassemble those five pieces before she turns to dust. Helping her is an apostate young Soul Eater called Julian Lake and a delightfully irreverent rock star half-daemon named Albert.

After finishing the first book I thought, what happens *after*? After a victim turns to dust, is that really the end? That inspired my character Tamsin West and this series, *Dust to Dust*. Here, I explore how the spirit survives this terrible transition even though the soul is lost.

Tamsin has used her time in the shadow worlds of the afterlife learning to jump into a body at the point of death. The catch is, that body can have no human soul. Because she is – *was* -- a human, Tamsin must transition into a supernatural body.

Everything has a soul but not all souls are created equal.

Chapter One

Tamsin and Drake

Death, like love, has many subtle and varied layers.

Breathe, she had to breathe. Lungs burning, Tamsin fought through the resistance, through the limbo of life and death. The old memories came rushing past. Not hers, the other's. On their way out, the life that had been lived.

The pain was terrible. Like being born again. If she'd had a voice, she would have screamed. Finally, with one last agonizing effort, she broke through the surface tension, into the body and back to the world of the living.

Tamsin gave a spiritual shrug as though trying on a new outfit that was a little too tight. Pushing herself into the edges, filling out fingers and toes. The body felt good. Not like some of the others. She focused on the heart, working the muscles, getting it to beat again. It took some effort finding the eyes. Ah, there they were. Opening them fully, she blinked her sight into focus. A man towered above her, looking down. Dark hair and darker eyes, his handsome face a mask of, what? Surprise? Horror? Horror, she thought, mentally nodding.

Definitely horror.

She recognized him. Or this body did. Those last moments before death imprinted on this mind's eye. She tried to speak and only then realized her mouth was full of water. She spit it out.

“Oh,” she gasped, finding her voice. “I know you. You're the man who killed me.”

In one swift movement, he pulled a bright, silver blade from a sheath at his belt, crouched into a fighter's stance and began to back carefully away.

Coughing up more water, Tamsin dragged herself up to kneel on the cold, wet concrete. She was inside some sort of bunker or something. No windows. A heavy steel door with a spinning handle, like on a ship, at one end. The only light came from a bright halogen lantern sitting on the floor near the door. There were a great many pipe outlets all steadily dripping water.

Though her muscles felt like jelly and the pins and needles of returning circulation had her gritting her teeth, Tamsin managed to rise more or less into a standing position. Swaying unsteadily, she gave her new body a quick glance, careful not to take her eyes off the dark-haired man for long. He watched her warily, still silent.

She was female. Thank God. Tamsin shuddered, remembering. Gender-bending was not an adventure she would like to go through again. No blood that she could see on the body. Given the amount of water she had retched up and the large puddles still draining away, drowning had been the likely cause of death.

Running her tongue over her teeth she felt pointed fangs, rather long ones. What was she this time? Vampire? Demon? She tried to feel what she – or this body – had been. Though she, *it*, had never had a human soul, there was a spirit trail of residual energy bouncing around. The energy burned a little.

“*Ouch!*” she winced. Burned a lot.

There seemed to be far too many hot, sharp edges. Metaphysically speaking. Perhaps she had not been a very nice *whatever*.

“I hope you had a good reason to kill me. I mean her,” was all Tamsin could think of to say to the big man staring wide-eyed at her.

He came at Tamsin with the knife so fast his body was a swift blur of continuous motion. She stepped aside, only just in time. He whirled, snaking the knife into the space between them, grazing her ribs. She gasped at the swift, sharp pain. It was too soon. She could barely stand, let alone fight, no matter what skills this body had.

She put out her palms in a placating gesture, “Wait, *wait*, I can explain.”

Shoving her hands aside, he wrestled her down onto the hard floor with bruising force, the knife at her throat in one hand, the other holding her wrists above her head. His expression was fierce, implacable.

“Please,” she gasped. “If she is your enemy, I am not what I was!”

Drake looked into her eyes. Deeply. They had been red before, red as blood. He hated those eyes. Hated her and her foul darkness. Now he thought he saw the darkness slipping away like the water running down the drains, revealing something – someone – very different from the lethal Prime Vampire. Not just her eyes, her whole face was changing. Softening. He reached out with his Fae senses. Careful not to open himself too much in case this was all an act.

Her heart was pounding. Not in anger, he sensed. Fear.

Fear? *Her?*

Tamsin was feeling the body's strength a little more now. Her attacker had relaxed his guard ever so slightly, perhaps sensing the change in her. This body had fighting skills. She might be able to take him, but there was something about the big, dark-haired man. Different. She wasn't getting an evil vibe. Not at all. In fact something quite the opposite. Still, he did have a knife to her throat.

She was tired of being afraid. Sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith.

“*Please!*” Tamsin tried to put all the honest desperation she could into that one word.

Staring at her, his eyes narrowed until his thick brows formed an angry 'V'. He seemed to be thinking over her plea. The knife didn't strike. At least not yet. Both he and the blade looked enormous from where she lay. And both equally deadly.

Still straddling her, he gradually let go of her wrists, though the knife remained poised and ready. They stayed like that for what seemed like a very long time: Tamsin's heart pounding; him staring down at her. He had a rough, outdoorsman look. Strong jaw and cheekbones, broad shoulders. She could certainly attest to his strength. Thick brown hair fell in waves over his ears, just brushing his shoulders. The sensuous curve of his full mouth told a different, more subtle story to the man.

Whoever she was, she must have been dangerous. He was dressed for battle in a black, complex Kevlar-style vest that stretched up to cover his throat. Across it rested a bandolier of knives and other sharp and very nasty- looking objects. A gun belt held more weapons.

“Who...who *are* you?” he asked at last, his voice deep, questioning.

She answered truthfully, staring back at him through this stranger's eyes, “My name is Tamsin and I have no soul.”

Chapter Two

Tamsin

Transition takes a lot of energy. And coffee. Lots and lots of coffee.

The man set down a tray with a large espresso Americano and a plateful of warm ham and cheese rolls. Tamsin eagerly took a swallow of one and a bite of the other. Oh, bliss. Pure bliss.

“You can see, perhaps, I am not what I was,” she mumbled around a mouthful of food.

“Yes, I can now, much more clearly.”

She sat back in the chair, openly curious, “What's changed?”

“Well, for one thing, I have never seen a vampire so eager to find a coffee shop. Your eyes practically rolled back in your head when we walked in and the aroma hit you.”

She moaned as another bite of the rich, salty, ham and cheese filled her mouth. “Is that what I am? Was? A vampire? It's been months at least I think it has, since I had a body.” She did a tiny seated victory dance in the chair for the sheer joy of moving. How good to be alive. Again.

He had put her into his car, a black beast of a vehicle that rumbled with power, parked outside the drowning pool on a cold, windy backstreet. She begged for coffee, her throat raw. He'd driven away from the darkened warehouse district to this boulevard full of shops and cafes crisscrossed by canals and bridges. There was a wonderful, real-time energy here that had Tamsin buzzing.

She asked him what city this was.

He answered, “Chicago.”

“Yes!” she pumped the air with one fist enthusiastically.

“And you're happy *because?*”

“I have business here. I hoped to get near, but in? This is great.”

He asked her no further questions and she was glad of the silence, absorbing the sights, sounds and smells of being back in the mortal world. This was her first time in Chicago and she had no idea where they were.

Time and space did not take the same form in the shadow worlds as the earth she knew. She could visit the real world – her home – as a spirit, though it was pointless. The real world had substance. She did not. As a spirit, she saw the magic – black, white and every shade of gray – overlaying this city's steel and concrete skin, blurring its contours. People, places, and things glowed with an ebb and flow of pulsing energy that burned day and night.

The kind of seeing had taken a lot of getting used to when she first transitioned. No wonder people had a hard time contacting ghosts. The ghosts were floundering around somewhere up in the ether going, “Where the hell is this and how do I get downtown?” The thought made her smile.

“You need to put your fangs away.”

One hand flew to her lips, hiding her teeth. She gave the man a desperate stare, “Oh spit! I don't know how! What muscles control teeth?”

He seemed to be trying not to laugh, the deep lines around his mouth quivering with the effort, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Just don't smile.”

“What was her name? This vampire of yours.”

“She was not mine, though she considered me hers,” he said with a cryptic smile. “Angelique. Her name in this world was Princess Angelique Duprey.”

Tamsin couldn't help the snort of derisive laughter that escaped, though she remembered to cover her mouth. "How very inappropriate. Angelique indeed. She was never an angel and I've met a few."

He raised his eyebrows and gave her an appraising look.

"Not human either. Everything works inside, you know what I mean? Not dead-come-back-to-life works like a turned vampire. I think she just preferred blood. Of course, you know that already, right? Why did you *drown* her?"

"Angelique was a Prime Vampire, not made, just as you said. Do you know about the Prime clans?"

She shook her head. Even on her accelerated supernatural learning curve, there was still much she didn't know.

"Primes live in Fae. They are a race, not the undead. Related to Faeries. Elder Blood, and thus nearly immortal. They can heal from almost any wound and their blood is a powerful elixir. Very rare in this world. Or they used to be. They can eat and drink like everyone else. You were right when you said Angelique just 'preferred' blood. Human blood to be exact. They absorb life's essence from it. A small amount is all they require. Nothing like the insatiability of movie vampires. Unless they just want to kill someone that way. Which they do, of course. Rather often." He paused to take a drink of his coffee.

Tamsin did not like the sound of these Primes. Not at all. Now she was one. Crap.

Wiping his mouth with a napkin, he continued, "They are the most powerful of all vampire clans. You can wound but not kill them with wood or silver. Daylight has no effect, though it does give them a headache. Beheading works well as a temporary solution. If you stitch the two parts back together, however, they will heal with uncanny rapidity."

He grimaced in distaste and Tamsin was sure her expression matched his.

“Their progeny – those made, not born – are more Fae than human. Fae DNA is a voracious predator. Few humans actually survive such a transformation. Those that do are quite powerful. Yet everything has a weakness. Primes are Elementals. Connected to the earth. Again, very much like Faeries. Their power is also their downfall. One of the elements: fire, water, air – the lack of it – or earth can also kill them. The trick is to figure out which one.”

"And Angelique's was water."

He nodded.

“Well, I didn't know that. I haven't jumped into many vamps. Are you a vampire hunter?”

He picked up his cup. Cappuccino. Tamsin, or rather, Angelique, could smell the milk and cinnamon. He took a drink, not meeting her eyes. “I hunt a lot of things.”

“Are you 'the nameless hunter'?”

He grinned at that, unable to hold it back. “Drake. Just Drake.”

“Well, just Drake. I am a hunter, too.” Her voice was light and joking, the joy of being alive again too much to contain. “First name Tamsin, as I told you. However, my parents could afford a last name. Tamsin West.”

She reached out one hand and Drake automatically took it. At her touch, a frisson of energy ran from her fingertips to his. Not vamp energy. No. Something entirely different. If it had a color it would have been silver. Shining and bright and eager. Tamsin did not seem to notice. She settled back in the chair, pulling Drake's heavy suede trench coat a little tighter.

Thanks to Drake, she had shed some of Angelique's wet clothes – the woman seemed to have a thing for leather and spandex. She'd wriggled out of the pants and jerkin and put on a thermal tee she found in the back seat

and one of the big man's shirts. It was January in Chicago, he was wearing several under the Kevlar. Given his size and her lack thereof, it worked as a dress. He pulled a green trench lined in wool from the trunk to complete her somewhat bohemian ensemble.

She kept on Angelique's high black motorcycle boots, wet as they were. This body didn't feel the cold like a human's.

"May I ask why, not to mention *how* you jumped into Angelique's body? Ghostly possession is one thing. *You* are something entirely different."

"I am, aren't I?" she laughed. "Well, let's see. I was human once upon a time. Now I'm tracking those who took my soul and left me to die. People I thought of as friends. Best friends." She shook her head, remembering the pain of that betrayal. "How ironic, you know? Wait, you don't know. How could you? The irony is I never even believed in magic. Or ghosts. And then, *surprise!* I was one."

She took a big bite of the ham and cheese roll, talking around the mouthful. "Soul Eaters. That's what they call themselves. Sorcerers. I don't know if they are human or not. They certainly have very little humanity. They divided my soul into five pieces like birthday cake, turning my body to dust in a terrible ceremony and dooming me to wander forever as a lost spirit. No soul equals no afterlife, at least as humans imagine it. Shut the gates of heaven right in my face. And I am not just speaking metaphorically. I spent quite a while moaning and feeling sorry for myself until I noticed the world of the paranormal is quite a vast and diverse place. And not all evil. Another soul seeker, a woman, finally helped me. Showed me how I could jump into others with no soul right at the point of death and live again."

"Only those with no soul?"

She nodded, her mouth full.

He shifted his long legs, “Angelique always struck me as a soul-less monster, though not in the literal sense.”

Tamsin swallowed. “Oh, sorry. I should have clarified that a bit. From what I've learned, and I admit it is pretty second and third hand, all souls are not created equal. There are human souls and other souls. Since I am, *was*, a human, I can only jump into a non-human at the point of death. Otherwise, the body just spits me out.”

“What about dogs? Can you jump into dogs?”

Tamsin gave him a sour look. “Doggy dogs, no. Certain kinds of shapeshifters, yes.”

“Cats? I bet cats would work.”

“The body has to be close to human. At least most of the time.”

“Monkeys?”

She made a sour face at him. “*No!* No monkeys. Don't be weird. We're talking sentient here!”

He gave an exaggerated shrug, “Who makes these rules?”

She inhaled a large crumb and whatever she was going to say got caught in a fit of coughing. When she finally got her breath back, she saw the little quirk at the corner of his mouth, laughter lurking in his eyes.

“You're teasing me,” she wheezed.

He gave a bark of laughter.

“As I was *saying!* At the point of death, when their 'non-human' soul has fled,” she put imaginary quotation marks around 'non-human' for emphasis. “I step in and reanimate the body.”

“Or you have no form?”

“Nope. None at all, though I have learned how to make my spirit alter the body I take. Making it subtly more 'me.’”

She had run into the bathroom here at the coffee shop when they first came in, curious to see who she was. A thin, angry-eyed stranger stared

back. Pale skin, high cheekbones, big, smoky eyes set in a pretty, narrow face, black hair falling like silk to her waist. Angelique had skull tattoos on her arms, throat, the back of her neck, both shoulders and, Tamsin peeked, practically down to the naughty bits. Nothing but skulls. Over and over and over. That was just weird, even for a vampire.

The big man interrupted her musing. “So you're searching for the pieces of your soul. That means you are looking for yourself, as it were?”

She nodded, savoring the hot, bitter coffee running down her throat. Savoring having a throat. *'Throats are awesome,'* she sighed to herself.

“What will happen when you get all the pieces?”

She liked how he said *when* not *if*. He was very calm and relaxed with her. This man Drake, whatever he was – and she was sure he wasn't human – had strength. Spiritual as well as physical. Her altered state let her see it, feel it. Plus he bought her food. She liked a man who knew to feed a woman.

“I'm hoping they will just sort of stick themselves back together like magnets.” Which was a lie. Engaging as he seemed, she must be cautious. She decided not to tell him that since her body had already turned to dust, her soul bits would not 'just stick themselves back together'. For that, she needed certain objects to facilitate a powerful spell. Four to be precise. Separately, each object contained a set of runes somewhere on it. Together the runes formed a complete summoning spell. Four very valuable objects other supernaturals would kill to get their hands, paws, or claws on. Maybe the kind of people, and she used that term loosely, that hired big, dark Hunters.

“There isn't a manual. It's taken me years of research. Trial and error. Rather an amazing lot of errors honestly, to get this far.” She gave him a bright smile.

“Then what? I mean once they've stuck themselves back together.”

She shrugged. “No idea.” Which was true. The four objects would allow her to bind her soul. The rest of the magic ritual still seemed a little hazy. “Maybe I go to the afterlife all the good boys and girls get. Or maybe I just live out the rest of my years in the body I reside in at that time and then die. I don't know.” Revenge more than resolution had been the driving force in her mission. Until she learned about the four rune objects. That changed everything.

He gave her a thoughtful look as though he could see there was more going on in her head than she was letting on. “Have you found any, um, soul parts?”

“Two.”

“Where are they?”

“In a Swiss bank vault.”

He choked on his cappuccino.

Leaning over, she patted him on the back while he gagged.

“You're joking?” he gasped out.

“No. I have a safe deposit box with a private bank in Zurich. Right off the Bahnhofstrasse, close to the lake. Because of the body-switching thing, valid I.D. gets complicated. I have an agreement with a very sweet Swiss succubus who is a partner in the bank.” She waved one hand in the air. “Though that's another story. Enough to say they are locked away, glowing in two little crystal vials as I search for the rest.”

Much to her surprise, he started to laugh. A deep, rumbling, good-natured laugh that had the other people in the coffee house turning and smiling with him, wishing they could share in the joke with the big man and his wide smile.

“What?” she asked. “What's so funny?”

He wiped at his eyes with the back of one broad hand, “I envisioned many, many ways this evening could turn out. Most of them involving

blood and terror. Sitting in a coffee house sipping cappuccino with a toxic Prime Vampire opposite me smiling away like a country girl who just hit the big city and talking about a sweet Swiss succubus. That was never on the list. Not even close.” He laughed harder.

Tamsin flushed. “Is that how I look? Just...” She tried to find the right words. “To feel everything again so fully back here in reality.” She took a sip of coffee and a big bite of the roll, sighing, “Plus, there are no Starbucks in the shadow worlds.” Though the words came out like *'mumble, mumble, garble'* because her mouth was so full.

Unless she successfully integrated into a host body, her spirit was nothing but a swirl of spiritual dust in this world. Those same rules did not apply to that *other* place. The shadowed land where her spirit fled when she lost a body. That dark realm was as real as this one. Though infinitely stranger. Full of equal parts wonder and terror. There, she had form just as when she was alive.

Still chewing, she looked longingly at the counter.

Drake correctly interpreted her expression. “What else would you like?”

“Do they have any almond croissants? I would kill for an almond croissant.”

He gave her a sharp look, his eyes flashing.

She made a face. “I didn't mean that literally. Whatever Angelique's appetites were, they are not mine.”

“Obviously, since you apparently have the appetite of a two-hundred-pound man.”

She nodded, still chewing. “Yeah, I've been that. Maybe two-fifty if you add in the horns, tail, and oversized testicles.”

Drake froze while rising from the chair and gave her a shocked look.

She laughed.

That laugh. As he waited in line, he thought about her laugh, her smile, those bright eyes shining out of Angelique's. Honest, direct, laughing at herself, at her terrible fate or in spite of it. Without defining it in so many words, he felt a subtle change in the direction of this very strange night. Strange even for a Fae hunter banished to the mortal world. That meant it had to be weird indeed, he thought wryly.

He was just turning away from the register plate in hand, when he sensed their presence.

Four of them.

Watching Drake's posture, watching him because honestly, this was a man worth watching in action or repose, Tamsin knew immediately something was up.

Returning, he set the croissants on the table and placed his hand on her elbow, pulling her to her feet. She stood, forcing her new senses into overdrive. Blood, she smelled blood and something else. More elusive, yet somehow familiar.

The four young men pushed through the doors. Two of them fair; two of them dark. A double set of twins. They were dressed in such cutting-edge fashion it was a wonder the men didn't slice themselves on the wool and leather couture seams and bleed to death right in the doorway. Their boots, handmade and stitched, jingled with metal amulets. If she focused her eyes, she could see each amulet in minute detail. Vampire vision rocked.

"Are the *Lost Boys* friends of yours?" She asked as he steered her towards a small alcove near the bathrooms.

"No, yours."

"Oh crap." That was why they smelled familiar. It was her smell as well. "There's no back door through here, you know that, right?"

He nodded. "I need to tell you something. About Angelique and the Primes. Her father, Prince Duprey, runs Chicago's Dark Side."

“Prince, not King?”

He waved away her question, “Primes take whatever title they like here. That's not the point. Immortality leads to a terrible sense of ennui, especially when their own lands in Fae are at peace, as they are now. To offset the boredom, Prime Vampires use the mortal world as their own personal playground. They create complex role-playing games as though this world was one vast X-Box game catalog for the supernaturally enhanced. They form alliances, join each other's games, or create new ones.”

He took hold of her shoulders, turning her to look into his eyes. “Most humans are nothing more than satisfying game pieces, as well as tasty snacks. Currently, Prince Duprey amuses himself playing a complex game of cops and robbers. Obviously, he's not one of the cops. You're going to have to find another body. Soon!”

Chapter Three

Tamsin

One of the fair men raised his head, sniffing the air. He looked directly at the alcove. “Angelique!” he called loudly.

No more time for talk. She stepped out into view.

“Don't smile,” Drake hissed. “Angelique never smiles.”

Turning down the corners of her mouth in what she hoped was an expression of fierce boredom, Tamsin faced them and motioned subtly toward the door, as though she wished to speak outside. She took Drake's arm and gave him a push in the direction of the exit. As they walked past their table, she grabbed the croissants and shoved them in the coat pocket.

Drake shot her a disbelieving look and she tried not to grin.

They walked out into the cold night, the buzz of traffic still busy even at this late hour. People on the streets were bundled up in coats and mufflers, out for a good time despite the fearsome wind-chill factor of a Chicago winter. Though this was her first visit, the severity of the city's weather was legendary. Even Tamsin, or rather Angelique, shivered. Nearby, a massive black Hummer limo stood idling, surrounded by a fog of exhaust, its bank of lights practically blinding.

The other vamps entered first.

As she and Drake stepped through the double doors, one of the dark ones, fangs extended, said in a bored tone, “Here, give him to me.”

In a heartbeat she was crouched inside the Hummer, all vampire, her teeth fully extended, hands like claws. It had been surprisingly easy to slip

into this mode, Tamsin thought. Angry was probably Angelique's default emotional setting.

"*He's mine,*" she hissed. "Touch him and I will tear out your hearts and eat them in front of you!" Malice radiated from her almost visibly, like heat off an open flame.

The fair-haired pair sat further back in the rich leather seats and stared. The dark ones did not seem quite so impressed.

"Angelique, Princess, daughter of my progenitor," said one. "What *are* you talking about?"

Tamsin thought fast. "Is there nothing sweeter than to turn an enemy? Make him a slave?"

Both sets of twins looked blankly at her for a moment, then at each other, then back at her.

"Why are you speaking like a character in a movie?" asked one of the dark pair.

"And Drake is Fae," his brother pointed out, speaking slowly as though to a child. "You can't turn him. You know that. You two have been frenemies forever and we're all just a little sick of it. All I meant was let him sit by me."

The other rolled his eyes, "Have you been doing Jell-O shots again? The red ones? You know how badly that turned out last time."

"Or those blueberry martinis. I bet it was that," said his brother nodding. "Dupreys and fruit-laced cocktails do not a happy mixture make."

They both shuddered.

Tamsin felt she was losing control of this conversation. "You dare argue with me?" Revving into vampire speed, she wrapped her hand around the nearest one's throat, the nails breaking his skin. She had no idea what she was doing but Angelique had been an uber bitch, she guessed. Might as

well play it for all she was worth. Or their lives might not be worth anything at all.

Unfortunately, he did not seem impressed.

“*Damn*. Chill, girl!” He pushed her back, rubbing his throat. There was a trickle of blood where she'd scratched him. “What is up with you? Take a Midol or something.” Wiping the blood away with his fingers, he held them out to his twin who licked each fingertip with slow – and to Tamsin, disturbing – care. “We've been trying to call and text you for hours. Your father has a meeting tonight with his lieutenants. That means you too, as you well know. He needs to decide what to do about that slimy sorcerer trying to muscle in on our territory. The bastard has redone the wards around several of the docks to lock us out and summoned a gang of Kelpies as enforcers. The damn things are as big as elephant seals. They ate an entire crew of longshoremen last night from one of our docks. The bastards. We crossed your scent a few streets back and followed it here.”

“I bet she shoved her cell down someone's throat again and just left it there,” said his brother, pausing mid-lick. “God, Princess, you have no concept of time.”

“Or money,” the other sighed in agreement. “That's like the fifth one in as many months. iPhones do not grow on trees.”

The two fair ones who had until now observed the conversation silently, looked at each other, nodded, then spoke simultaneously, “That's not Angelique. She's a jumper.”

“Ah, damn,” Drake sighed.

The world slowed down as they all moved between time at paranormal speed. Tamsin was not shocked the Primes could pull this off. Drake, though, was moving right along with her. *Slipstreaming*, the supernaturals called it. That was a surprise.

He pulled two jagged-edged silver knives from hidden pockets on his vest and gave them to her. “She's good with blades,” was all he had time to say.

By normal standards, a Hummer limo is a big vehicle. Really big. For six supernaturals fighting for their lives, the interior was a little cramped. The driver, Tamsin saw out of the corner of her eye, wisely scrambled out the door and scampered away at the first spurt of blood.

Tamsin didn't think; she just let the body feel. She had done this many times before in many bodies. Muscles have memories, too. These vamp boys were not full Primes but they fought and struggled and a couple of times she thought she was done for. Finally, she took them out, the knives so sharp the blades nearly severed their heads. Unlike on TV, the blonds didn't burst into flames or poof into dust. They just sort of sprawled there on the wide leather seats oozing blood and looking very dead in their fashionable clothes.

She had been in a body much like a vampire twice before – and been killed in that form – forcing another transition. They hadn't been human on the inside, obviously, since the bodies would have spit her right back out. Maybe the true death differed from vampire-type creature to made vampire or even clan to clan. Or maybe they weren't *permanently* dead and just needed their heads sewn back on like Drake said. That was just too gross to contemplate.

It was hard to tell exactly what was going on with the others. There were arms and legs and blood and body parts everywhere at once and she scooted around trying to get out of the way. Certain rules of physics apply even in the paranormal and there just wasn't room for her to insert herself into the melee. In the end, only one rose from the blood-soaked floor.

Drake was breathing hard, “You fight really well, Tamsin.”

She gave him a rueful smile. “Those Soul Eaters I’m hunting don’t just give me back the pieces of my soul. I have to kill them – dead, deader, and deadest. Death having many layers as I am sure you know. All the bits of souls they’ve captured, the ones sustaining their immortal youth, are then set free. Including mine, if I’m lucky.”

He gave her a measuring glance which slipped into a grimace. The night was bright as day to Tamsin. She could see his face had gone very pale. He seemed to sag a little, as though gravity was suddenly too much. Tamsin smelled the blood soaking the hollow under his arm.

“Nicked me pretty good,” he wheezed. “Not a normal blade. Poison. Can’t seem to find my feet.”

Tamsin’s mind kicked into overdrive. Everything had happened so fast, she just hung on and ran with it. The transition. Drake. The vamps. Now, she had to make a decision.

A difficult one.

Drake and Angelique apparently had a long and extremely twisted history together. On top of that, some kind of paranormal gang war was brewing between the Prime clan and a new sorcerer in town. Their battles were not her own. It had taken a lot of effort to locate this body and she did not want to squander the opportunity.

Some months and several transitions ago, she tracked and fought a Soul Eater in Prague. Not just any Soul Eater. One of those who destroyed Tamsin’s life. Her name was Nicole. At least when Tamsin knew her. An antiques dealer. A dark French beauty and, Tamsin’s research discovered, once a favorite at the court of Louis the XIV.

In Nicole’s house, between the blood and dismembered limbs – it had been a hard, dirty fight – Tamsin discovered that first clue. Nicole collected far more than antique furniture and paintings. She was an archivist of arcane spells. Tamsin was always hunting for new spells that could be used

in battle. Shifting through the dead woman's many (*many!*) documents, she came across a reference to the four objects and the powerful runes they held. The clue that made her think the story more than just a legend was so insubstantial, she almost missed it.

That clue led to a sorcerer in Madrid, then a shapeshifter in Zagreb and finally, step by step, here to Chicago and the first of the four objects on her list. An ancient, demonic little statue from Mesopotamia that lay sleeping in a museum right here in this city.

She looked at Drake. His eyes were nearly closed and he was breathing in shallow gasps. Really, she owed him nothing; yet she couldn't just walk away. Tamsin sighed as the West family motto ran automatically through her head: no man, woman, dog, cat, or gerbil (the last had been added by her little brother one gerbil-filled summer) left behind. She supposed that included supernaturals. You'd think she would have learned by now being nice didn't get a girl very far in life. Or death.

Oh well.

She didn't need vamp emotional baggage to slow her down, she had her own. The museum and statue would have to wait until tomorrow.

“Tell me where to go.”

Chapter 4

Tamsin and Drake

Tamsin eyed the knife and the soft skin of her forearm with a sort of frightened resignation. This was going to hurt.

Cutting sharp and deep, she waited until the blood began to flow before prying open Drake's mouth and trying to dribble it in. Her body retained all its supernatural bells and whistles, as did any other body she jumped into. With the Prime this included super-fast healing, forcing Tamsin to reopen the cut several times.

Not fun.

They were on the south side, near a rough area called Englewood, in somebody's bolt hole. Somebody very paranoid. The little one-room apartment sat behind a false-front covered with graffiti and tattered adverts behind which stood a thick doorway of reinforced steel. Some searching through Drake's pockets produced a set of keys, one of which fit the massive lock.

The place was equipped with several other exits, rather like a fox's den. One in the bedroom and one in the bathroom. The doors led to dark burrows that must wind under the street. Every room was packed full of weapons spanning several centuries of human bloodlust at its finest: knives, crossbows, guns, rocket launchers.

'Who keeps rocket launchers?' she couldn't help thinking. And what do you fight with them?

There were also several jumbo sacks of sea salt and others full of a gray substance in the bedroom. The sea salt was every spellcaster's friend. Salt provided unsurpassed protection from dark and often murderous summons. Only sea salt. Try it with the mined variety and you were a goner. The gray powder gave off a distinct paranormal glow and Tamsin did not want to go anywhere near it. Corpse powder most likely.

She put Drake in the main room on an overstuffed couch complete with throw pillows and a fluffy cashmere blanket. The paranoid someone at least liked to be comfortable.

Tamsin had taken the Hummer to get across town instead of walking to Drake's car a couple of streets away. They were covered in blood and that sort of thing draws attention. Even in Chicago. And, to be honest, she'd always wanted to drive a Hummer. Just because the Hummer was an obscenely long one full of dead vampires did not seem reason enough to pass up this opportunity. Luckily the driver left in such a hurry he didn't take the keys.

The limo also had the advantage of a top-of-the-line GPS. With the poison racing through his system, Drake was not totally coherent. He was able to give her an address and very little else. That was enough. The Hummer's navigation system did the rest and they were on their way.

She left the vehicle a couple of blocks from their destination for safety's sake. By then Drake was only barely conscious and she was forced to carry him the rest of the way. Angelique the vampire had a lot of strength. Drake, however, was a large man. Large and heavy. Tamsin was a little out of breath by the time they arrived on the doorstep.

She dribbled the thick, scarlet drops between his lips, trusting he would swallow on reflex and not just choke. That would be ironic. Before long the power of the blood manifested. He stirred a little, turning his head, unconsciously seeking the source of healing energy. His mouth brushed the

sensitive skin of her inner arm and Tamsin's nerves jumped, buzzing as though a swarm of velvety bees had landed on the surface and begun dancing. The tenuous bond began to grow and spread, her vampire blood drawing them closer. At least in a paranormal sense.

Vampires, including Primes it seemed, were very attached to their blood. They felt it even inside someone else. Which was beyond strange, Tamsin thought with a shiver. Her body vibrated and the tickling, prickling, beguiling awareness of Drake grew. As he ingested more blood, the sensation increased, becoming more insistent, reaching out for her as she had reached to fill this body. The feeling flowed into her fingers, her toes, swelling her breasts. She felt hot, her face flushed. Restless hands seemed to be stroking her up and down. Looking at Drake's face, she saw his eyes were now open, the pupil's enormous as a cat in the dark, staring directly at her, unblinking.

Healing energy surged through Drake. The sensation of Angelique's blood and the response from his body intertwined, coiling and writhing. He couldn't tell where one began and the other ended. He licked his lips. The thick, red flow did not taste like blood. The flavor was spicy, richer than mulled winter wine. He could feel it going straight to his head; burning the poison from the vamp's blade out of his system and perhaps replacing it with something far deadlier. The feelings rushing through him weren't real. They couldn't be. How could he be attracted to her? And he was attracted. There was no hiding the response from his body. He was swollen, straining towards the vampire.

Angelique Duprey? What the hell?

Every time he looked at that face he wanted to reach for a weapon or run, or both. She was the one directly responsible for his shame and banishment from Fae. His exile to the Mortal World so long ago. She had followed him here. Unable to let the game just end. A world-class bitch;

bitter as winter bark. The threat of her capricious, vicious nature made him careful never to get too close to mortals. People he liked too often ended up dead.

After everything she did to him, it had taken much of Drake's strength not to give in and allow the hate for her to consume him utterly. He had pursued the Prime for years as she tormented him. Tracking the string of bodies she left behind wherever she went – just as Angelique intended. 'Catch me if you can!' Not exclusively, not *obsessively* tracking her, he reminded himself (often); but the chase had always been there.

A pursuit he thought finally ended tonight when he lured her to the drowning pool with the spell from that wretched little sorcerer. And here she was a few hours later, only inches away.

She was Angelique.

Yet at the same time, she wasn't.

His conscious mind knew that.

Drake reached up to touch her cheek. The cheek of that hated face. He couldn't stop himself.

What if, he thought, horribly, terribly, what if he was suffering from some sort of weird predator/prey psychosis? Like what hostages got sometimes. They ended up identifying with their captors. Angelique said she loved him. Many times, long, long ago. He'd said the same thing when he was young and knew no better. It had taken him years to understand he wanted no part of her cruel nature. What a fool he'd been. Better to have pretended love and devotion than suffer the fate that followed. Such was the story of his life. Why she hated him. What Princess Angelique wanted, she took. Or destroyed.

He had not died or languished. Exiled to the mortal world for treachery he did not commit, he'd carved out a place for himself in the supernatural

substrata. Learned and adjusted and grown to love this place and its fragile people. She hated that even more. How dare he be almost happy?

He and Angelique. Hunter and hunted. Though right until the end with the Prime, he had never been sure exactly which of those he was at any given moment.

Was there something there? Something more calling out to him, or was this just the vampire blood speaking? Did he somehow, deep down, in a sick, twisted way want the Prime? Or did he want this lost, doomed girl?

Just as quickly his rational self intervened. This was not Angelique. Even though it was her body. Tamsin smelled different from the vampire. She smelled wonderful in fact. Like honey. Staring into her eyes, Drake's Fae nature began to look beyond the physical to her true form.

He had to find out. For his own peace of mind if nothing else. Let go the past and embrace the future.

Tamsin wasn't quite sure how it happened or when. Somehow, they were kissing. His wide, sensuous mouth covering her own, his tongue seeking hers. Soft but insistent. His lips had blood on them. Her blood. She tasted herself and it excited her – or her body – at this point the divisions were becoming a little blurred.

He pulled at her clothes, the few she had on, and almost unconsciously she observed herself attempting to unbuckle his Kevlar vest with little success. There were far too many fastenings. He swept her hands away and began undoing the hidden catches and straps to release the vest, tearing at his clothes.

Those moments it took him to undress allowed Tamsin time to think.

Throwing the vest off and practically ripping at his shirt and jeans, he reached for her.

Tamsin pulled away, holding him at arm's length.

“This is crazy,” she panted.

The blood had burned away the poison and healed the wound. His Fae nature already held the ability to heal quickly and the Prime chemistry just ramped it up. Ramped it up quite a lot. He knew he was not fully in control.

“Absurd,” he whispered, his voice deep and husky.

“You hate Angelique or you wouldn't have murdered her,” she pointed out, very rationally she thought.

“I do,” he agreed, running his fingers through her hair.

“You hated her for a long time, right?”

“More than a century.”

“That's really twisted.”

“Isn't it,” he breathed, pressing closer.

Her hands moved of their own volition, slipping along the skin through the tickling, teasing touch of his chest hair, the thick, bunched muscles of his abdomen. “You don't even know me.”

“I don't.” He reached out to cup the back of her neck, his thumb stroking the impossibly soft skin of her throat, up and down.

“And I... I just met you.” She laid her forehead against his, closing her eyes, feeling the heat of his skin.

He inhaled her sweet scent. She smelled nothing like Angelique. Nothing. “That's right. You did.”

Tamsin pushed him away so she could look in his eyes. He needed to see how serious she was. Surely her expression showed she thought they were being ridiculous? “We have to stop.”

He nodded. “Absolutely.” And he crushed her to him so forcefully, he squeezed her breath out in a little gasping moan.

With Angelique's strength, she could have thrown him across the room if she didn't want him to touch her. But she did. So much. This wasn't only the vamp's super sense telling her everything about Drake tasted and

smelled so right. These sensations bubbling and boiling through her were entirely human. An instinctive, primal response.

And most of all, she didn't want to resist.

To be a woman again. If only for a short time.

Before she turned to dust, Tamsin had over-analyzed so many areas of her life. Self-doubt, self-loathing. She had it all. Then she died. And learned a valuable lesson. There was only this time and this place. *Carpe Diem*. Seize the day, the hour, the moment. Right now, here with Drake, the temptation of being able to forget the curse of her wretched existence was too beguiling.

Tamsin let go and opened herself to the big man with dark eyes.

Chapter 5

Tamsin and Drake

Drake felt Angelique's body go suddenly soft. A delicious sensation as the tension left her, replaced by voluptuous surrender. By desire.

For him.

She was soon naked except for the motorcycle boots. Which proved just too much trouble to take off. Though it was the Prime's body, in his mind's eye, the image of Tamsin as she must have been when she was alive began to take form. He gasped as he saw her, felt the transformation in his arms.

Angelique's thin contours melted away along with his doubts and all he saw was Tamsin.

She had been a tiny thing, just over five feet. Long, tangled blond hair, eyes gray as the North Sea of Fae, a little crooked nose, her mouth a round bow, breasts so full they spilled over both his palms. She had such small hands. It was those hands he felt sliding over his thighs to stroke him, taking hold of the desire knocking at his belly. This was the woman he felt behind that light, silvery laugh. The emotional truth hit him just as swift and sharp as the vampire's strike.

His need for Tamsin, the real woman there in Angelique's body, surged. It was as if these feelings had been there, just under the surface of his skin. Waiting for this moment. He could not get close enough, kiss her deeply enough. Grasping the round cheeks of her hips and pulling her to him, he let his fingers play over her skin; touching, stroking, slipping between her thighs soft and warm. Holding her tightly, he easily reversed their positions until she lay on the couch, the hills and valleys of her body beneath him.

Running his tongue and lips across her skin, teasing and tickling her with his touch, mouthing her breasts as she moaned.

He pleased himself and her.

His kisses were effervescent, sparkling. Tamsin's nerves jumped. No, they danced in response. A wild, crazy dance of anticipation. She reached around to grip his hips, moving her hands restlessly over the tight muscles bunched there. He had a band of sharp-edged tattoos running all the way around his waist and down onto his hips, she saw. They looked like daggers. Between two points, his desire pressed forward, rising up between the cut lines of his groin and abdomen. The indescribable sensation of velvet softness and iron strength exciting her as he pressed against her belly.

They fell to the floor, needing more room. He pulled one of the sofa cushions down and placed it under her head, bringing her mouth closer, her eyes never leaving his face even when he kissed her. He stared right back, drinking her in, savoring her flavor.

She wanted him inside her as badly as he desired to fill her. She held on, moving him back and forth between her thighs, her fingertips caressing. Touching herself and then rubbing the thick musk of her excitement onto him.

She raised her hips ever so slightly and Drake knew what she wanted. She moved her hands to hold his hips as he sought to part that soft valley. Tamsin gasped, moaning low and deeply, feeling him push his way inside her. The stinging pain, the delicious presage to entry, as he stretched the sensitive skin wide and wider still. Her muscles clenched around him and he groaned out her name, burying his face in her hair, nipping her neck and shoulders and finally, finding her mouth, thrust his tongue inside as he entered her fully.

She gasped, her body arching up to meet his, filled inch by inch with his hardness.

Together they danced to the rhythm of life. In tune, in balance with what is meant to be between a man and woman. Even a woman such as her. Everyone wants to be desired, no matter that they are only partly alive. And he did desire her. With his hands and mouth, his hips, he showed her how much he wanted her. How she excited him.

Holding him inside and out, she felt alive. Every breath, every sensation a gift. Tamsin would treasure these memories in the lonely, empty times that were sure to follow. It could not last. These bodies never did. Pushing that thought aside, she focused on the moment. Here and now. Drake and Tamsin.

They played with positions, back and front and in between. He was a tireless lover, and, to Tamsin's delight, he liked to kiss – and kiss and kiss. Tamsin, too, loved kissing. How a man kissed told a woman so much about how he made love. Drake's kisses were passionate and generous, giving as well as taking. She breathed in his rich musky scent, feeling the slight scrape of stubble on her cheek, his sensuous mouth pressing on her own, his tongue seeking hers.

Later, on top, she rose up, looking down into his dark eyes, pushing back the thick hair tangled and mussed around his face. His lips were swollen from the passion of their kisses; his body shining with sweat. Leaning close, she kissed his throat, tickling him with her tongue, careful to keep the fangs from extending – though the temptation to bite was almost overwhelming. Her vampire senses hyped up the sensations of smell, touch, and taste to almost overwhelming levels. She ran her tongue up to an ear lobe. He gasped as she pulled it into her mouth.

'Men and their ear lobes', she smiled to herself. She rubbed her hands along the hard planes of his stomach and chest, her hips never ceasing their motion, his manhood filling her so hard and strong it was almost painful.

Pressing her hips forward, she leaned back over his legs. He raised his head, watching as they moved in wonderful synchronicity. She clenched her muscles, clutching him fiercely. He reached out with one hand toward the silky flesh.

He caught his breath as he watched her face. Seeing the sensations and tension there building higher and higher. Her body completely open and vulnerable to him. Tamsin's muscles gripped him in their embrace of silken steel, tighter and tighter. Her thighs clenched as the feelings rose. Just before the wave crested, he grabbed her by the small of the back and suddenly she was under him. He held her down, thrusting hard against her. She cried out, the bliss burning through her. Bliss that went on and on as she held him, digging her nails into his skin, unable to let go, drawing blood. She smelled it and the scent excited her even more.

He pressed his lips to hers and she moaned in pleasure around his kisses as he subtly shifted his body and brought her to the peak again. He pushed his tongue into her mouth and she sucked on it desperately, though she could barely breathe through her excitement. Slipping both hands beneath her, he pushed himself at a higher angle and electrified her. The feelings shook her from head to foot, coming so strongly she thought it might throw her out of Angelique's body completely.

An agony and ecstasy.

Drake's moans joined her own. He roared his passion, moving his hands onto her shoulders and gripping hard. Together they came, so delirious with pleasure that Tamsin seemed to transcend the boundaries of the room and enter some other plane entirely. The weightless feeling stayed with her even as Drake shifted his body, his chin resting on the top of her head.

They lay together, both of them panting, hearts pounding, his arms around her in a fierce embrace.

She must have dozed off; she woke and felt Drake running the fingers of one hand through her hair, pulling at the tangles. She lay cradled in his other arm.

“Your shoulder must be so cramped.” Gently pulling away, she shifted her body around to the side, her back resting against his chest.

“Eat your hearts in front of you?” His voice was light and teasing.

She blushed. “Shut up. I was improvising. It's from some bad vampire movie.”

“No kidding!” He gave a deep-throated laugh and pulled her closer, reveling in the feel of her soft skin, the rise and fall of her chest. He could still touch the real Tamsin, the soft, round contours of her little body. There was nothing of Angelique, either in her or in him at that moment.

“Tell me how it happened.”

She knew, of course, what he meant.

“New city, new job. Making friends isn't easy for me. Not that I am – was – reclusive or anything. Real friendship takes time, at least for me. I got tired of going to the theater, museums, and movies by myself. It's funny, I can't even remember who told me about this local social group on a website. We exchanged emails and I was invited to an opening at the De Young Museum. That's where I was, San Francisco. The night was such fun and I clicked with a couple of the other women in the group. We started hanging out and they introduced me to their friends and pretty soon I had a social life. People I couldn't wait to see.”

“Men?”

She was glad the Fae couldn't see her face, the hurt and pain that flushed her cheeks, remembering. “Yes. Almost two years with them. Such fun. I cared about them and thought they cared about me. Apparently, it is

important to enrich the soul with love and attention, makes it tastier. The Soul Eaters play a long game. No rush, you know? Souls keep them virtually immortal from what I've learned. A lot like your Primes.” Tamsin took a deep breath, swallowing down the old pain. “We were at a party. The house of someone I didn't know. That's where my life went so very wrong. There are monsters in the dark. Real monsters. They devoured my soul and left me to die.” She shivered, not wanting to remember what came after. “Transition's a bitch.”

Feeling the old pain and fear running through her, Drake tightened his hold, his lips brushing her hair.

She sighed. A deep, sad sigh for all that had been. For her grieving family. For the hopes and dreams left behind. Even for all the deaths of the strangers through which she lived again. Being human, soul-impaired as those she jumped into were, did not automatically make you evil. Sometimes it was heartbreaking.

“Did you love someone, in your real life?” he whispered, pushing one hand between her thighs.

“Nobody who loved me back,” she murmured, urging his fingers to find her.

They fell together again slowly, sensuously. Intertwined. Giving themselves up to touch and pleasure, the sweetest balm for wounds of the body or spirit.

Chapter 6

Tamsin

Naked, Tamsin opened the fridge door and stuck her head inside. “I’m starving. Is anything edible in here?”

“From where I am, I can see the only thing I want to eat.”

She stood up, putting both hands over her bottom and, looking over her shoulder, made a face.

He made a face back at her and she laughed. The sweet, honest laugh that had beguiled him over coffee.

“Just for that, I’m putting on a shirt.” She located one of his shirts on the floor, the thick plaid one she had worn earlier, slipping the soft material over her head. The shirt smelled like him. She knew that now. A musky scent mixed with wild summer wheat. Tamsin still had on the motorcycle boots. Those must have left some bruises on Drake, she laughed to herself, remembering their energetic lovemaking.

“If I tell you which food is good, will you take the shirt off and lean over again? Waaaay over?”

“You are a naughty, naughty man.”

He gave her a slow, sensuous smile, “Just give me the chance. But leave on the boots, I like that.”

She crossed her heart.

A gurgling, rumbling sound came from her middle. “My stomach is growling big time.”

He gave his big, easy laugh, “Why am I not surprised? There's cheddar cheese in the fridge drawer, bread in the freezer. You can defrost it in the microwave.”

“Oh, yum. I'll make grilled cheese sandwiches.”

The day had come and gone as they slept and made love and slept again, curled together in a nest of cushions and blankets. She was stiff and sore in the best way possible. She wouldn't be able to cross her legs for a week, she thought with a laugh as she busied herself with the food. Or maybe vampires healed fast down there as well.

“What are you laughing about?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said over her shoulder, switching on the microwave and defrosting several slices of thick bakery bread.

Yawning mightily, Drake pulled himself off the floor to his feet. He ran his hands through his thick hair and headed for the bathroom.

Popping a slice of cheese in her mouth, Tamsin leaned on the counter to enjoy the view. And what a view it was.

His skin was a honey bronze, crossed here and there with lighter colored scars. Quite a lot of scars. Strong, broad shoulders and wide chest, tight hips, long muscular legs tapering down to thick calves, the muscles bunched as big as grapefruit. His inky band of dagger tattoos almost made him look like he was wearing a weapons belt around his hips. His chest hair ran all the way down his belly, and between his legs, jackpot. Tamsin found herself going hot again.

What they say about men with big hands and feet was certainly born out in Drake's case. No wonder everyone wanted to run away to Faerie. If Drake was an example of the sort of men they had there, well, good *gawd*.

“Oh, hey!” she called as he was about to close the door. “Does this place have internet? Or is there a Starbuck's or something nearby? I need to google some stuff.”

He pointed to a spot behind her. “On the chair seat. There at the kitchen table. My laptop. The password is *werecat*.”

“Thanks.”

He gave a wave and shut the door.

Tamsin brought the laptop to the counter as she put together the sandwiches and heated up a frying pan she found in a drawer under the oven.

From the bathroom came the faint sound of water flowing.

Keeping one eye on her cooking, she swiftly looked up the Asian Antiquities Institute. From that ephemeral little clue in Prague, she had tracked the statuette to the museum's collection here.

She flipped out one sandwich and slipped in the next.

Hmmm, she could take a METRA train or CTA bus from downtown. Provided she could figure out how to get from here to downtown. Switching to a maps app, she typed in her location and the museum's and clicked on the 'bus' icon.

She jotted down the route on a paper towel. Angelique had money stuffed in the sole of her boots. Quite a lot. Still slightly soggy. A couple of hundred dollars at least. The water was still running noisily in the bathroom and Drake started to sing.

Could you fall in love in twenty-four hours, she wondered? Was this tumble of emotions just an overwhelming rush of pheromones and endorphins from fight, flight, and lovemaking? Or something more?

She gave herself a mental slap across the face. '*Don't go down that road, Tamsin!*' she scolded herself mentally. That was just stupid. Dead-gone-to-dust spirits do not find love and live happily ever after. He probably felt sorry for her, like a lost puppy. Or maybe he was playing out his fantasies for the Prime princess. That was much more likely.

She did like him, though.

A lot.

Why lie to herself?

She'd liked him immediately. Well, once he put the knife down. There was something special about the Fae. She took out the other sandwich and switched off the burner. What did it matter? This wouldn't last. Any of it. Somehow she would lose the Prime's body and be back in the spirit world searching for the next soul-less almost-corpse.

Time to go. No point in prolonging this.

Wrapping one sandwich in a couple of paper towels, she rummaged around in the couch until she found Angelique's underwear. A soft wool muffler and oversized sweater were hanging on the coat rack by the door. She pulled them on.

The trench she'd been wearing was stiff with dried blood. The only other coat she could find was the brown quilted one Drake was wearing last night. Somehow mostly blood-free except for the little dark patch under the arm where the Vamp's blade had caught him. She put it on. The fleece lining inside was thick and warm and the cut hung to just below her knees. Angelique could probably stand the cold but people would wonder why such a skinny young woman wasn't dressed for the wind chill. No use drawing unwanted attention. Though given her lean and hungry goth look and the skull tattoos, that was probably a vain hope. She promised herself she'd return the coat once she found something else. If she lived that long.

Shoving the sandwich in one coat pocket, she opened the door and, forcing herself not to look back, ran down the snowy street. Ran away from the handsome Fae hunter she had brought back to life.

Chapter 7

Tamsin

Several buses, many blocks and a lot of wrong turns later, Tamsin finally stood outside the Asian Antiquities Institute, shading her eyes against the brittle, late afternoon winter sun. Drake was right, the day gave her a headache. Sunglasses were definitely on her shopping list. And aspirin.

A laughing group of young women passed her on their way out of the museum as Tamsin walked up the grand steps sweeping to the columned entrance. She, or rather the Angelique part of her, watched them hungrily as they passed close by. They smelled wonderful. So indescribably delicious. A scent that both excited and energized her.

Drake said the Prime's didn't need to feed on blood. Instead, it powered them up. A paranormal energy boost. Dying, coming back to life, fighting other vamps and her unexpected romp with the Fae probably had Angelique running on empty. So very empty. Tamsin turned and started to follow the women down the stairs before she could stop herself. Their hearts were beating loudly, healthy and strong and full of life.

Flicking out a talon she dug it deep into her palm, stifling a little cry of pain. '*Control,*' she admonished herself silently, as she licked the blood away.

She took a deep breath, turned and walked away from the women, back toward the museum entrance. What she told Drake about Angelique's

appetites not being her own wasn't a lie. That did not mean she could ignore the demands of this body. A Prime needed blood and Tamsin would have to learn how to feed safely. And soon.

A blast of icy air tugged at her long hair and she pulled the big coat tighter. The coat smelled even more like Drake than the shirt. Deep and musky. Would he be angry with her for walking out? Blissful as the night had been, as much as she longed to see him again, there was no point. A chance encounter, that is all it was and all it could ever be. She was lonely and lonely people blew such things out of proportion. She pulled the collar of his coat around her face, inhaling deeply again.

Admission to the museum was free – yay Chicago! – though the guard did say there was only just over an hour before closing. The museum focused on art, particularly sculpture, from the ancient Near East. The object she sought was uncovered decades ago in Iraq on one of their own archaeological digs. Unlike many other museums of its kind, she'd read on the website, the Antiquities Institute preferred to hunt out its own relics rather than purchase them. Most of that digging was done long ago when maps and political affiliations were skewed very differently.

According to her sources, first in Prague and then elsewhere, a small symbol was etched onto the museum's figure of Puzuzu, a powerful human-animal hybrid demon from Assyrian mythology.

Tamsin easily found the disturbing figure on display in the second part of the Mesopotamia Gallery. What a nasty little thing it was, too, with feathered, double insect-like wings, claws, and a lion's face. She stared and the statue glared back, lips pulled into a snarl. It did not feel particularly powerful. She renewed her examination with fearsome concentration. Vampire vision rocked big time for something like this.

She didn't just use her eyes, of course. The body switching made it virtually impossible for her to carry any magical talismans. Her personal

grimoire, a book for spells, was stashed in the Swiss safety deposit box along with her little glowing soul vials. Switzerland, however, was far away. Between visits to Zurich, Tamsin kept any new spells she learned in her head. When she transitioned into a body, she immediately got an indelible pen and wrote all her important spells in a notebook or, if that wasn't available, directly on her skin. Not because she was afraid of forgetting. Many spells need to be in the spell weaver's possession in some form: a book, etched in stone or wood, as an amulet, whatever. That made them '*yours*'. Possession gave the user the ability to manifest the energy and thus send the spell on its maniacal magical way. To hold the spells' power until she could transfer them to her grimoire, she wrote them on something. *Anything*. Hers not to reason why. The system worked and that was all that mattered.

Stopping twice on the way to the museum, once to get a black Sharpie pen, a second time at a fast-food restaurant bathroom, she'd prepared to weave her own brand of fearsome magic.

She decided to forgo the notebook and write them directly on her skin. This body made her uneasy. From what the handsome vamp twins had said in the Hummer, Angelique lived a wild, hedonistic, and dangerous life. Better to keep the spells as close as possible. It was only when she rummaged for the damp cash she'd stuffed in the coat then she realized she'd taken Drake's phone. Almost at the same time, the cell began to buzz with incoming calls.

Damn. She would have to get this back to him soon. Somehow.

In the battered stall at the fast-food place, Tamsin laboriously drew the runes and sigils on her body right over the skull tattoos, with the most important symbols on her forearms. Unfortunately, the run-off from all this magical energy made the walls of the stall vibrate and set off the hand dryers and toilets, that just kept flushing themselves. A final flourish to a

particularly important sigil was just too much for the plumbing and the faucets exploded in showers of cold water. Muttering “damn” under her breath, she ran out with the other women as two staff members rushed in, staring and swearing in disbelief.

Outside, she hurriedly buttoned up Drake's coat. The result of her spell work meant she looked like the winning entry in the International Body Graffiti Olympics. Thank God it wasn't summer and tank-top weather.

Now, pushing up one sleeve of Drake's coat and shirt, she read the revealing spell the soothsayer in Madrid gave her. Perhaps 'gave' wasn't the right word. Been *persuaded* to hand over. Tamsin had been an alpha female Shadow Wolf at the time. Shadow Wolves could be very persuasive.

She popped her fangs and bit into her palm, swearing at the jab of pain as she let the blood run over her tongue. All magic demanded a price. Often blood. Luckily this was just a small spell. Focusing her energy, she spoke the incantation of revealing. Whispered words that burned her lips and took the tribute of blood in their passing. She waited for a burst of light, a glow, smoke, something from the statue to indicate she had hit her mark.

The angry little lion face of the demon looked blankly back. She tried again.

Nothing.

Damn it. Now what? She should have guessed retrieving the runes was not going to be simple. Maybe all the information she gathered together with so much difficulty was worthless. A distraction from her real focus of hunting the Soul Eaters.

One of the security guards walked by. She gave him a quick smile and waited until he moved to the next gallery.

Perhaps this wasn't the right figure at all. Maybe another Puzuzu statue sat somewhere in the vaults, not as perfectly formed and therefore not part

of the regular display. That would be bad. Tamsin had some pretty strange experiences in her resume by now. Breaking and entering museum vaults, however, had yet to be among them.

Tamsin heard a flutter of sound, no more than that, like a rush of wings in the air. A figure landed lightly beside her. The Prime reflexes kicked in automatically. She spun in a fighter's stance, fangs bared, claws ready.

A young man stood next to her, hands on his hips, an impish grin on his face as though finding a raven-haired, hissing vampire poised to strike vastly amusing.

“Hello,” he stuck out one hand. “I’m Theo.” He smiled more widely. “I heard your spell.”

She stayed where she was, not taking his hand, keeping her fangs in place. Her control over both fangs and claws had vastly improved since last night.

“Did you? I was being very quiet.”

“Oh, I have quite the eye for magic. I mean ear. Ear for music, no, magic.” He laughed, a light musical sound. “Too much coffee today. Or maybe not enough.” He laughed again.

The boy looked no more than eighteen. He smelled very good to the vampire part of her. Not in a tasty, blood cocktail way. Something else. Indefinably... magical. Faerie, maybe. He was lightly built, fair with a flush to his skin as though he'd been running. Dressed in slim, indigo jeans and a black V-neck sweater with no jacket. His thatch of dark blond hair, artfully disarrayed, fell in a sweep of bangs across one eye. His eyes were what gave the lie to his almost human form. They were enormous. Arctic blue and they glowed like beacons.

He stuck his hand out a little further and, withdrawing her claws, Tamsin decided to take it. They shook. “Tamsin, Tamsin West.”

“That's a very pretty name for someone as scary as you. And you are a very scary lady. You realize that, don't you?”

She nodded.

“You're looking for Puzuzu,” he waved one hand at the display case.

“That's not him.”

“I think it is.”

“I mean not the right him. He's hidden. The magic one.”

She said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

“The one you want isn't listed in any of the catalogs, only the secret archive. I can help you find him.”

What he said confirmed her suspicions. Still, that was no reason to trust the boy. “Why would you do that, Theo?”

“Because I need something from the demon as well.”

“And...” she let the sentence trail.

“And Puzuzu's vault is a two-person job.”

Ah.

“So tell me, Theo, do you just hang around the museum every day waiting for someone to stop at this case and radiate magic?”

“Pretty much.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and cocked his head to one side like a puppy, giving her a disarming smile. He seemed to have quite a repertoire of smiles. “Actually, I have a warding spell around the case that alerts me to any mage or whatever that comes close.”

Tamsin stared, “I don't see it,”

“Take my hand again.”

She did and felt his energy tingling through her fingertips and up her arm. A spiderweb of golden light appeared, arching up and over the case containing the small statue. Quite beautiful.

“Impressive,” she acknowledged. “Been waiting long? For a mage or whatever. Not too many supernaturals coming into the museum, I imagine.”

“No. Or is that yes?” He gestured impatiently with both hands. “What I mean is that's an incorrect statement. To be perfectly honest, they're drawn here like flies to honey. Or is that bees? You know what I'm trying to say. This stuff,” he waved a hand around the spacious gallery. “Absolutely packed with magic. The digging guys...”

“Archeologists?”

“Those are the ones. Them. Don't seem to realize there's a reason a lot of this stuff was buried. Really should have stayed in the ground. Deep, deep in the ground. Lots of magic in these halls. Lots and lots.”

“And Puzuzu? The other one you mentioned.”

“Yes, him.” The boy's eyes glowed brighter. “That is one demon who definitely should have been left where he was. He's the reason most of them come. And come, and come!” He rolled his eyes.

“Is he like a fount of magic? Spells or whatever just flow from him?”

“Oh no, nothing like that. Well, he could be, you know. Maybe. If anyone could reach him. They come and they try, though.”

“And then go away?”

He just smiled and walked out of the gallery, waving for her to follow. With a resigned sigh, she did. He had information she needed, obviously.

They walked away from the entrance, deeper into the museum.

“Are you hungry, scary Miss West with the tattoos? I bet they're not just on your neck, right? I have tattoos, too,” he laughed, stopping by a massive human-headed winged bull sculpture. “Tattoos too. That makes a funny sound. Want to see mine?”

Without waiting, he pulled up his sweater to show her the pale skin of his stomach and chest ringed with narrow spiral tattoos that wound around and around from front to back. Overlaying the rings were crosses connecting squares within squares. As she watched, the ink began to glow as brightly as his eyes. Mesmerized, she found it hard to look away as the inky spirals, impossibly, began to turn.

The boy tugged his sweater back into place. “Oops. Don't want to wake them up. Bet your tattoos can't do that!”

“I certainly hope they can't!” Tamsin shivered. Little inky skulls moving all over her body would be beyond gross.

“What was I saying?” Theo gave her an appraising stare. “Oh, I remember. You're hungry. In a Prime way.”

“How do you know I'm a Prime?”

“Glowy light thing,” he made vague motions around his head and shoulders.

“Aura?” Tamsin guessed.

“That's it! Good at auras, me.” He paused and frowned, “Oh, that was so not a grammatically correct sentence. I am good at auras. That's better. Primes are super glowy. You, however, are looking a little gray, if you'll pardon me for saying. Puzuzu explorers must be in tip top shape. Want a snicky-snack?” He smacked his lips. Without waiting for an answer, he shot down the hallway so fast he was only a blur of motion.

A few moments later she heard him calling, “Miss West! *Yoo hoo!*”

Walking quickly in the direction she saw him run, she passed many more ancient statues but no slim, blond boy. A hand reached out of nowhere and grabbed the sleeve of her coat.

She gave a squeak of surprise.

The hand tugged harder and she stepped into a shadow.

“You squeaked,” said the boy laughing. “I’ve never heard a Prime squeak.”

They were backed into a little alcove shrouded in shadow. Theo and someone else. A dark-haired, plump little woman security guard, tied round with a rope glowing as brightly as Theo's eyes. Theo had one hand over her mouth and she stared at Tamsin.

“Bite her, hurry up. Don't worry, no one will see.” He tugged at a clay pendant on a thin strip of leather around the guard's neck. “This is a shadowstone, linked to me. I'm dark magic and by that, I mean an absence of light rather than lack of moral compass.”

Tamsin stared back at the guard, not knowing what to do. Her fangs extended on their own and she felt her mouth watering.

The boy rolled his eyes, “Come on. She's scared and you're scaring her more. Bite her so she can relax and enjoy it.”

The muscle memories of Angelique pushed her forward, leaning into the woman's neck, breathing in the scent of the blood just beneath the skin. She was losing control.

“Come on! I can't hold this all day. You're not going to hurt her but you are frightening her and that's not nice.”

Something about his voice, his confidence, gave her the nudge she needed.

“Stop me if I take too much,” she said before slipping her teeth into the woman's soft skin. The Prime's tongue moved automatically to lick at the blood and flesh. The woman's sharp gasp of fear almost instantly turned into something else; a sigh of what could only be pleasure. She sagged and Angelique reached out to hold her up. The woman moaned as though in the heat of love's embrace, pushing herself closer, pressing her throat into the vampire's kiss.

The blood was like golden light trickling over Tamsin's tongue, down her throat and illuminating her body. Tamsin began to glow from the inside out, lighting up the dark space.

“Crap!” yelled Theo as the light started to leak out of his shadow magic.

In a few blissful moments, Tamsin felt satiated. Full to the brim. To her surprise, it was easy to stop and pull away. The guard, a beatific smile on her face, slipped down into a sitting position, her legs splayed in front of her.

“Better?” Theo asked as he removed the rope or whatever it was from the guard. He tied it around his waist, pulling the sweater over.

Tamsin nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She felt wonderful. All the aches and pains and fatigue swept away. And she had stopped.

“Why did she react like that? Like she was enjoying the bite?”

The boy gave her a sharp look. “Enzymes. Primes have enzymes in their saliva and blood that stimulate endorphins, the pleasure molecules, at an astronomic rate. Wow, I sound smart, and you,” he pointed at her, “sound clueless. Care to explain?”

Tamsin shook her head. “No. Will she be all right?”

Theo removed the clay tablet and handed it to Tamsin, “Put it on. Yes, she will be a-okay. Just a dreamy dream to her.”

As the pendant touched Tamsin's skin, she felt the mantle of shadow magic settle over her shoulders. Together, she and Theo tiptoed away from the alcove. The woman smiled and waved goodbye.

Chapter 8

Tamsin

The flavor of the blood kiss lingered on Tamsin's lips. She kept licking them, savoring the faint residue of the woman's golden glow. Theo crept silently along ahead of her in their shadowy shroud and Tamsin wobbled after. She felt drunk and euphoric at the same time from the blood's life-enhancing energy.

They crept across the courtyard to the opposite side of the museum, staying as close to the walls as possible, and into what was obviously the Egyptian wing. Tucked in a corner, in every way nondescript, near a display case of painted Coptic jars, was a small panel where Theo stopped. It looked like an access door, perhaps for wiring or plumbing.

Opening the panel revealed another door; this one made of metal with the dull gray sheen of steel. From the pocket of his jeans, the boy pulled a small, five or six-sided object. Tamsin couldn't quite see it clearly within the shadow magic. Metal, maybe? Theo slid the object into the door's locking mechanism and twisted. With an audible click and a nerve tingling groan of its hinges, the door opened. The steel had to be nearly six inches thick.

Theo switched on a LED penlight pulled from another pocket and motioned Tamsin in first. Following close behind, he shut the door though not quite all the way. A sliver of light peeked through.

The cramped entrance immediately gave on to a slightly less cramped hallway that still had them both crouching, shoulders hunched. Squeezing by, Theo took the lead and Tamsin followed, amazed at what she saw.

The walls were made of metal, much like the door, and covered in what must be ancient writing. The chicken-scratch style looked like one side of the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum, she thought. The walls hummed with energy and power. There were reliefs of figures scattered here and there as well, hammered into the metal presumably before it was laid on the wall. Tamsin caught glimpses of grotesque shapes in the flashes of the boy's light as he walked confidently ahead. Horns, scorpion tails, claws, hooves, and wings; the fierce, frowning faces seemed to follow her as she passed. In a setting such as this, Tamsin felt that might not just be a trick of her imagination.

There were several sets of steps and more heavy doors that Theo opened with the same metal key or amulet or whatever it was. The air grew colder as they descended until she could see her breath. A thin coating of ice on the last set of steps made for some slippery footing. One more turn of the key and they came into a large room, at least it felt large from the cold air that whooshed out to meet them and the echo of their footsteps on the hard floor. Near the door were stacks of big wooden crates. The place smelled like wood, cold metal, and something more. A musty sort of smell. Angelique's vampire nose singled it out. Dried up skin and bones. Both human and supernatural. That probably was not a good thing.

“Violins! No, wait. Voila! That's what I wanted to say.” Theo gave a wide, exaggerated flourish with both arms, “Voila, the secret vault of the old time digging dudes led by Professor what's-his-name.”

Tamsin let Angelique's eyes take over. The Prime could see well beyond Theo's flashlight even in this dark space. The room qualified as cavernous. Boxes of all sorts and sizes stacked on thick metal shelves or on top of one

another stretched into the darkness beyond. A bright light flashed in her eyes. Tamsin jumped up and backward, landing on top of a tall crate, a spell ready on her tongue.

“Sorry.” Theo held up a battery-operated lantern like campers use, waving it back and forth so the shadows jumped. “Didn't mean to freak you out. No one except me and mine come here anymore. The digging guys...”

“Archeologists.”

“I do know what they're called. I just like saying 'digging guys', *okay?*” There was just the hint of irritation in his voice.

“Fine, whatever.” She leaped down beside him.

“The ones who built the vault stopped visiting years ago. I don't know whether the secret to the chamber was purposely lost or they're just frightened.”

Tamsin looked around the room, trying to use all her senses to 'see'. “What's there to be frightened of?”

“Quite a lot, actually. Come on.”

He threaded his way in and out of the boxes and shelves coming to a stop in front of what looked exactly like a bank vault: giant metal door, lock handle, and gears. When Theo said 'vault' she assumed he meant the whole room. Guess not. There were little mountains of gray dust and piles of bones scattered here and there. Human bones.

She frowned at him.

Setting down the lamp, he held out both hands. “Not what you think. Well, I don't really know what you're thinking. You might be thinking vampire thoughts of, 'Yum, tasty snack of old bones'.” He smacked his lips. “Or you could be thinking, 'Gads, this lad has brought me here to kill me' or something.”

“Did you bring me here to kill me or something, little Theo who talks so much but says very little?” She allowed her fangs to fully extend.

“Not in the way you mean.”

“Is there another way?” she growled low in her throat.

“I brought you here to help me and by virtue of helping me, help yourself. To the little statue. You're looking for the runes, of course.”

She couldn't hide her surprise. “You know about them?”

“Everybody knows about them,” he said as though stating the obvious. “Supernaturals and mages, real and imagined, show up here on their rune quest. Including the occasional Soul Eater. Who, just like you, are chasing the four symbols to create the *whatchamacallit* sigil to stick together bodies and souls.”

Every nerve in her already overstretched nervous state jumped. It was hard not to leap up to the ceiling, dig in her vampire nails like a cartoon cat and cling there in surprise.

“Yeah, I know what you are. What the Soul Eaters did. Their magic lingers on you still. I can taste it. Very unpleasant. Going to need mouthwash later.” He frowned and stuck out his tongue. “Blech. Anyway... um, where was I? Oh, Soul Eaters and other assorted seekers of greater knowledge arrive and I bring them here. Just like I brought you. Unfortunately, not one of the lot has been able to get their hands on the casket Puzuzu is in. This happens,” he pointed at the bones. “Or worse. And then the cycle starts all over.”

He took her by the arm and propelled her over to the vault door. “You go inside, then I shut this. The vault door has to be closed for the next step. There's a large room with three doors and three locks.” He pressed an old-fashioned key ring into her hand threaded with three metal objects that looked more like medallions than any key she had seen. “These will open the doors. Okay? Big for the door on the left, bigger for the middle and biggest for the one on the right. All three have to be unlocked to release the inner bolts and enter the next chamber. Go through the door on the left.

Only that door. The other two are traps and you will die in horribly nasty ways. On the other side of the door on the left,” he looked significantly at her.

“Left,” she nodded. “Got it.”

“Okay. There is another large chamber, as big as this one. In that room is the statuette, little statue, whatever you want to call the stupid thing. Inside a wooden casket with a clay seal on top. Break the seal and open the lid.”

“And where will you be while I accomplish this? Here, courageously by my side?”

He dropped her arm and started turning the heavy door handle, “Nope.”

“Nope?”

“Nope. I am forbidden,”

“Forbidden.”

“F-o-r-i-b, is there another 'b'?”

Tamsin nodded.

“F-o-r-i-b-b-d-e-n. Can't enter the chamber here,” he pointed at the vault. “Until all three doors have been unlocked. And then can't get inside the one beyond unless the seal on the casket is shattered. That particular spell, the one on the casket, was there long ago. I mean *loooooong* ago. The idiots brought the magic with them when they dug all this stuff up and set the same seals in place.”

“They wanted to keep you out, not the digging guys. I mean the archeologists. Others. Ancients,” Tamsin said not very coherently.

“Well, yeah. They wanted to keep people like you out as well. So? The deal is, there's someone inside that last room who means very much to me and I want her back. Someone special.”

“Someone? In there?” That put a new light on the venture. This was personal for Theo. Now that made sense. She understood personal justice and vendettas very well.

She looked searchingly at him, trying to gauge if he was telling the truth. “Has it been a long time? Since you lost her?”

Theo didn't seem to care if she was looking at him or not. He swung open the heavy door. “In terms of the evolution of the universe? No, no time at all. On a more personal measure, very long indeed. I was trying to, let's say, accomplish something when the diggers triggered all the wards. I managed to get out but Kit...”

“Kit?”

“My nickname for her. That's sort of the English version. She has a very long, complex full name. Just as I do. She was always just Kit or Kitty to me.” He stepped behind Tamsin and started to gently push her towards the door. “Come on, come on. We are wasting time.”

Tamsin grabbed onto the cold metal of the vault door and dug in her feet. The smell of death was stronger. “Why has it been so impossible for anyone to get through and what makes you think I can? Judging by the carnage, this is obviously not as simple as it looks.”

He gave an exasperated sigh. “The issue is a soul. In order to open the small casket containing the statuette without dying, cause anyone can open it, really. But without the dying part, you must have no human soul. I think I'm the only one who knows that particular part of the magic. 'Cause the diggers kept opening the casket and dropping dead. You'd think they would have walked away right then and there but *nooooo*, didn't want to let go of their magical figurine. Built this crazy vault and hid it away. Thinking, I guess, one day they'd be able to open it.”

“Wait, you said the Soul Eaters have been after the image.”

He nodded.

“Soul Eaters are practically overflowing with souls. You knew they couldn't get in. That they'd be killed if they tried.”

His smile turned into something very different. “Yes, I did. I don't like Soul Eaters. Don't like them at all.”

Well, they had that in common at least.

“Go, okay? Go, go, go! Once you break the casket seal I can come in.”
He made shooing motions with both hands.

What choice did she have? Right now Tamsin felt she, or Angelique, could accomplish anything. Possibly that was still the giddy infusion of blood talking rather than common sense. At least Theo had a plan. Besides, the more she learned, the easier it would be to try again if she died. Though she would very much prefer not to. The statue and the runes were her reason for being here. It would be so great if she could accomplish that in just one body.

An image of Drake flashed into her mind as she stepped into the cold, steel vault. His wide smile and laughing eyes.

No.

That wasn't why she was in Chicago.

That could never be why she was here.

Chapter 9

Tamsin

Theo swung the massive door shut behind her and she heard the bolts slide home. Only then did she realize he had closed off the only source of light. The room was pitch black even for a Prime. There was a hum of generators and the air suddenly swirled and whirled, whipping her hair in her face. A circulation system of some kind, maybe?

The vault was about twenty feet across and double that the other way, she'd seen before Theo locked her in. The three doors directly on the opposite side. Each door was separated by around ten feet of space.

She was a Prime Vampire now, with other senses to call upon. Giving a little shout, she was thrilled to see, really *see*, the echoes of sound bounce off the walls. Maybe this was what echolocation looked like to bats as they tracked or dolphins as they swam; chasing a beautiful map of shining light stretching out into the darkness.

Trilling a slightly off key sort of “la la la” to find her way, Tamsin followed the light beams of sound to the first door. Her feet crunch, crunched on some kind of gravel or grit. Kneeling, she felt it. Sand. How did sand get inside a steel vault? At the door, she jingled the metal keys. Little bursts of silver light guided her to the lock; an oddly-shaped depression in the door. That made sense since the key was very oddly shaped as well. It was made to press into the lock like a puzzle piece. With

a little effort, she pressed the first pendant-shaped key in, feeling the metal click home.

Removing the key, a squealing sound behind made her spin, straining to see. The bursts of soundlight showed her panels or doors of some kind sliding down into the floor. The smell of death grew stronger as the hum of machinery behind the walls swiftly changed from a hum to a roar. The silver lights illuminated two massive propellers set into the wall. They began to rotate counter clockwise, spinning faster and faster.

In seconds, the whirling rush of air ramped up a hundred-fold into the force of a tornado. Not pushing out. Pulling in! The propellers were sucking the air – and anything else – out of the chamber. Tamsin was jerked off her feet as though the rug had been pulled out from under her. Her Prime reactions were blindingly fast and she grabbed the door handle to stop from being pulled into the spinning blades. As if sensing her resistance, the machines groaned into an even faster gear, doubling their speed. The roar was deafening.

Reaching with one hand, she tried to swing herself over to the next door. Bad move. She lost her hold and spun through the air toward the blades. Spreading her arms and legs wide, she caught onto the frame around one of the propeller vents, digging her claws into the metal and pushing against it with the soles of Angelique's motorcycle boots. The blades were only inches from slicing off her face. She watched helplessly as Angelique's long black hair caught in the blades until it had been pulled and chopped off to half its length. Muscles screaming in pain, Tamsin strained against the pull of the suction only realizing then that being chopped to bits wasn't her only problem. Soon all the air would be gone.

Abruptly the propellers slowed, squeaking and squealing to a stop. The metal panels slid out from the side and rumbled to a close. Tamsin let go and dropped to her feet. The machinery was still quietly humming; she

could hear it. Tamsin tried to take a deep breath and discovered there was almost no air to be had.

Making for the vault door, Tamsin tried to call out a word to soundlight the way. The word caught in her throat as nothing but a strangled gasp. Jingling the keys instead, she found the door and desperately tried to turn the crank.

Locked tight.

'No air, no more air!' Her mind screamed.

There was no choice except to go forward. Stumbling back to the three doors, jingling the key ring to show her the way, she fumbled for the key to the second lock. Her hands were shaking so hard the keys slipped out of her fingers and crashed to the floor, releasing a bright burst of soundlight.

Breathe, she had to breathe!

Any second now it would be over. She clawed at her throat, sinking to her knees, without even a voice to scream in fear. That's when she realized she was still holding her breath. Fighting the reflex to gulp the non-existent air, Tamsin pulled herself back to her feet. *Okaaay*. Still holding it.

Angelique was an elemental and lack of air couldn't kill her. She might also be able to manipulate it. If there was any air to control, which there no longer seemed to be. What an idiot she was. Maybe she could have pulled it back. Fought against the machine. She felt light-headed and nauseous. Just because she wouldn't die, didn't mean she might not eventually collapse into the vampire version of suspended animation. There are many degrees of near death without falling off the precipice. Tamsin knew that better than anybody.

Passing out would be very bad.

'Hurry, hurry, hurry!' her nerves screamed.

The keys were right there, by the door. Pulling herself up by the handle, she clumsily pushed the second key to the next lock, feeling for the hole with her fingertips. There. She pressed it in.

The vacuum's complete absence of sound was replaced by a rush of, what? It sounded like water. Air flowed back into the chamber, she could feel the touch of it on her cheeks. Enough for a breath at last.

Something whisper-soft flowed around her feet. Her sense of panic ramped up to code red and she jumped. Water? If it was water, she would drown. When she landed, Tamsin realized it wasn't water at all. It was sand. Sand pouring in; moving as fast as any liquid. Changing from a trickle to a torrent, piles of it rushed and roiled and roared, moving along with the flow. There was something else in the sand. Odd shapes. The noise was loud enough to create beacons of soundlight. Narrowing her vision, she realized they were bodies. Or parts of bodies to be more precise. Most dried and thin, others still fleshy. The smell of old corpses, human and otherwise, was overpowering to the Prime's nose. They must be what was left of Theo's previous helpers; caught up in the machinery and chopped, suffocated, or crushed.

She had her own skin to worry about. Within moments, the sand reached her knees. It was coming in too fast, there was no time to explore Angelique's abilities with earth, whatever they might be. Besides, she was in a locked, steel-plated and obviously air-tight room. There was no place for the sand to go. Gripping the last key, Tamsin waded through, trying to reach the lock. Only Angelique's vast strength allowed her to press against the massive weight. The grains were so fine she couldn't get on top of the pile, sinking in every time she tried to climb out. The sand was now up to her shoulders and still coming. She shoved her hand through, trying to find the keyhole. Her prime-style echolocation no help against this nearly solid wall.

Not there.

Damn.

Not there either.

Oh God, she couldn't find it. No. Wait. Against her thumb, a raised button, not inverted like the last two.

Desperately, she squirmed, digging the medallion this way and that to get it to fit. The sand swiftly topped her head and Tamsin thought the terror alone would stop the Prime's heart. She would be immobilized. If Theo didn't or couldn't open the door, she would be trapped here, unable to die and unable to escape.

With strength born of true panic, she tried to call on whatever elemental power might be hiding beneath the surface of Angelique's muscle memories. A shivering, shuddering energy flowed through her arm into her fingertips grasping the last key. A sonic burst sent out a shock wave that pressed just enough of the massed grains back for her to push the key onto the button and into place.

The rumbling engines abruptly screeched to a stop, leaving only the sound of sand grains skittering here and there. Tamsin tried to claw her way up and out. Perhaps it didn't fill the room all the way to the top.

Wait.

Angelique had control over earth and sand was earthy, right?

Pushing down her fear and pulling her concentration up from the toes of her boots, she focused on moving the sand away. She pictured a wall of energy around her and *pushed*. The sand shifted, moving an inch up and away from her face and chest. She took a deep, desperate breath.

As she concentrated on freeing her arms, the rumbling and grumbling of the machinery started up again. The sand began to drain away nearly as quickly as it poured in. The crushing weight began to release its grip. As

the back wall cleared, the propellers started up, sucking the room clean, taking the mangled body parts with it.

Tamsin hung grimly onto the door handle, feet dangling in the air, retching and heaving as her lungs tried to clear themselves. The pull did not have quite the same terrifying strength as before or Tamsin might not have been quite so lucky. In minutes the propellers ground to a halt and the doors slid noisily home. Tamsin sank to her knees, feeling a sprinkling of grit on the floor. That explained where the sand came from.

The two traps must have been what killed all the others. Lack of oxygen first and then, even if they brought breathing apparatus, the terrible pull of the propellers and the crushing sand.

That had been a close call. Immortal she might be, invulnerable she was not. It was a few minutes before she could calm herself enough to follow Theo's instructions and only turn the handle of the door on the left. She entered, or more accurately, fell through into the other chamber.

The engines screamed back into life and Tamsin scrambled like a crab back up against the wall wondering, '*what now?*' Overhead, several banks of fluorescent lights flickered to life, blinking sporadically. They must be on an automatic trigger for the door.

Lights. That's all, just lights.

Directly in front of her stood a towering wooden sarcophagus roughly shaped like a human, arms crossed. Similar in some ways to those of ancient Egypt, though it must predate those by many centuries if her memory served her right. The Assyrian empire was one of the first civilizations that pulled itself together in Mesopotamia.

Almost the entire surface of the object was covered in wide, painted blue eyes outlined in black. The flickering lights almost made them look like they were blinking.

Tamsin stared.

Oh spit, they *were* blinking.

Cautiously, she approached the thing. A few blinking eyes swiveled to look directly at her. More followed until they were all staring. The ceiling lights continued their electric light show, flashing on and off and fueling the creepiness factor exponentially.

There were no chains or ropes around the sarcophagus. Just a thick clay amulet nearly a foot across plastered near the top where the face should be. She had to stand on tiptoe to see that it was covered in the same chicken-scratch style writing as on the walls. Assyrian, presumably, given Puzuzu's origins.

Theo told her to break the seal on the casket. A casket was a coffin and a coffin by any other name was a sarcophagus. There were a great many boxes and crates scattered around the large room. Some painted, though none with the roving eyes of the larger one that she could see. This seemed to be the only truly casket-like object.

She heard the vault door swing open in the other room and a “whoop!” That must be Theo.

Now, to break the amulet. She didn't need a weapon; she was a Prime.

“Oh my garter snakes!” Theo shouted from the doorway. “I've never gotten this far. Never, ever, ever. This is so awesome...so... *my God stop!*”

Raising her fists, she brought them down on the thick clay, shattering it into dust.

The sarcophagus swung open revealing its hellish occupant: A man-size clay statue of the winged, lion-faced demon, Puzuzu. Opening its eyes, the same piercing blue as those painted on the sarcophagus, the demon gave a mighty shudder, shattering the thick covering of clay. The shards fell away revealing flesh, feathers, claws, and teeth.

Big teeth.

The monster leaped at her.

“Why did you do that?” screamed Theo.

“*Augh!*” shouted Tamsin running up and over the wall as the demon lunged for her throat, claws outstretched. “Why didn't *you* tell me what was in there!”

“No one has ever been stupid enough to open the sarcophagus before! I said casket. Casket! *Look out!*”

Beating its double, insect-like wings, the monster rushed at her with blinding speed. Tamsin kicked up and out with both feet, landing a hit squarely in its face, knocking the thing off balance. She jumped to the opposite side of the room looking desperately for some sort of weapon, the lights sputtering and sparking. A flash caught her eye. A crowbar. Reaching for the tool, she almost had it in her grip when a wrenching pull to her long hair jerked her back, right into the embrace of the demon.

Puzuzu's talons dug into her arms, tearing through the sleeves of Drake's coat and ripping into her skin. Tamsin head-butted him hard. Baring her fangs and claws, she sliced into the demon's flesh. The taste of its blood was vile to Angelique's body, making her gag. The demon roared in pain and let go.

“The casket!” Theo shouted. “Break the seal on the casket so I can come in!”

“What casket?” she shouted back, narrowly evading the demon's claws as she ran almost perpendicular to the floor along one wall.

The tears it had made in her skin were rapidly healing over. Damn, it was good to be Prime.

Theo jumped up and down in frustration, beating against the invisible barrier. “About two feet long, clay seal on top. *Oh, watch the teeth! Watch the teeth!*”

Catching her by the back of Drake's coat with its fangs, the demon jerked Tamsin off the floor. She flew through the air, right by Theo in the doorway and Drake.

Wait.

What?

She sailed by his astonished face.

“Tamsin! What the hell?” he shouted.

Chapter 10

Drake and Tamsin

Drake had been angry. Really, unaccountably, unreasonably angry to come out of the shower and find the lost soul gone. No note. Nothing except a grilled cheese sandwich rapidly cooling on a plate.

Throwing on some clothes, he stepped outside in case she just went to grab some air or coffee or something. He cast for Angelique's scent, one he knew well. It was already cold. She had been this way, though, her footsteps in the snow leading out into the street.

Stalking back into the hideaway, he slammed the heavy steel door, swearing under his breath, his mind racing. He'd wanted Angelique gone and now she was, in a sense. So what did it matter if the little soul-lost spirit had slipped away as well? She'd made him a sandwich which was more than most of his other liaisons had ever left him with.

He picked up the sandwich and swallowed it in a few bites. Damn the girl. Woman. Spirit. Whatever she was. Damn her and her bouncy breasts and laughing mouth. Damn those blue eyes and hungry kisses. Damn her soft skin and sense of humor and strength to face almost insurmountable supernatural odds. Damn her body and her lovemaking and the way her scent lingered in this dark apartment. Damn her Swiss safety deposit box full of soul bits and her smile when she sipped her coffee.

Damn her.

And also damn her for taking his favorite coat. He kept on damning her as he rummaged through the closet for another coat, finished dressing, and set off down the street to track her with his iPad and his damn good hunting skills.

Now, several hours later, he damned her again as he saw the lion-faced creature with feathered insect wings attempting to dash her brains out.

A slim boy with unruly hair stood hovering in the doorway of a very sandy steel vault intently watching the mayhem. Sensing Drake, the boy turned and sketched him a jaunty salute, "Hello there. You smell like her. Or she smells like you. Are you after the demon as well?"

Drake grabbed him around the throat and started to shake.

Still gripping the coat, the demon flung Tamsin around in circles like a track and field athlete in the hammer throw. This time round she saw Drake seemed to be throttling Theo who shouted "Help!" as she whipped past. Flashing her claws, she ripped at the sleeves of the big coat, tearing them easily and out she sailed through the air to land hard in the doorway, practically at the dark Fae's feet.

He dropped Theo. "What have you done to my coat?"

Stepping through the doorway, apparently the magic border did not affect him either, he pushed her to the side. Pulling out a wide, curved blade, he charged the demon.

Flapping its wings furiously, the demon fluttered away from them both. The demon raised its arms and screamed out a spell that made Tamsin's hair stand on end. Tamsin felt the same tug of wind as in the vault, throwing her hair into the air. In a heartbeat, the tug turned to a pull and the pull to something far more deadly.

She flung her eyes up to meet Theo's.

"God of the East Wind," he choked out in answer to her unspoken question, rubbing his throat. "Well, one of his avatars."

“You have *got* to be kidding.” Was all she had time to say before the wind howled and spun creating a maelstrom of chaos that had her hanging on by Angelique's long fingernails to the door frame.

Drake was trading blows with the demon who had picked up the crowbar. The demon was roaring and Drake roared right back. They seemed unaffected by the winds. Standing in the eye of the storm perhaps?

Tamsin held tight as smaller objects flew by or bounced, painfully, off her, caught up by the storm. She cursed Theo with every epithet she knew.

Theo pointed at a box tumbling through the air. “That's it, that's it! The casket with the statuette, grab it!”

Zeroing in on the box with vampire vision, she realized she'd have to let go to do as he said. The wind caught her immediately. She was pulled into the windstorm, tossed and tumbling, turning up and over.

Air was one of Angelique's elements. Tamsin had almost forgotten that in the vacuum of the vault. Now she would use this demon's wind power to her advantage. She let her fangs and claws extend, willing herself to vamp out. The thrill of the Prime's true power spread out into every nerve. Around her the air took on a visible quality, the energy painted with bright, glowing colors that took on form and substance. She felt the ephemeral threads of air thicken in her hands. Grasping the strands, Tamsin pulled herself slowly closer to the little wooden casket. The wind's grip tried again and again to push her back. Once summoned, Angelique's power could not be brushed aside so easily.

Flicking her eyes toward Drake, she saw he had cut the demon deeply again and again. Each time the wounds healed over immediately.

Their eyes met briefly and she heard him shout, “What the fu...” before the wind snatched his words away

The casket was almost in reach. She had to tear through several painted – and probably priceless – scrolls that were rapidly unraveling, to finally grasp it.

“Break the seal!” Theo shouted, his voice cracking.

And she did. Shattering it as she had the one on the sarcophagus.

A seismic ripple of energy shot out in waves from the casket bringing the storm to a sudden, complete halt. The wind subsided and Tamsin, along with everything else suspended in the maelstrom, fell heavily to the floor.

With a cry of triumph, Theo sprang through the doorway, grabbing the casket out of Tamsin's hands. Flinging away the top, he pulled out a clay statue identical to the monster she and Drake were battling, though no more than a foot tall. Roaring, the demon pushed by Drake and threw himself at the boy. Theo jumped nimbly out of the demon's reach, raising the statuette over his head.

“No,” screamed Tamsin, springing to her feet as she realized his intent.

Even slipstreaming she was too late; Theo just that much faster. He smashed the clay demon to pieces against the metal frame of the vault.

Puzuzu's avatar froze in mid-stride, claws reaching. Opening its mouth, the demon began to scream. A horrifying scream that rose to an unbearable level. Drake grabbed the crowbar out of its claws and smashed the iron bar into the monster's chest. The avatar shattered into jagged pieces exactly like the statue, crumbling to dust before their eyes.

She rushed to Theo, gripping him in a hammer lock, one arm around his throat. “I needed that statue,” she growled in his ear. “I needed it very much.”

“*Awk,*” Theo choked out. “*Awk, awk.*” He waved one hand in front of her face.

She loosened her grip and he wheezed, “The head. You just need the head.” He showed her the head of the small statue gripped tightly in his hand. She let him go and he dropped it into her palm.

Backing away, the boy doubled over, trying to catch his breath. “God, what is it with you guys and the choking!”

She took a step closer and he scrambled several feet away from the look on her face.

“The runes you want are very small. Etched on the back of his head. Look!”

She narrowed her eyes and saw them right where he said. Running a finger over the ancient markings she felt a shadow of their power. Unclenching her jaw, she let go of the breath she didn't even know she'd been holding. Thank heavens.

“Now if you don't mind, I have to find Kit.” Still rubbing his throat, Theo ran to the other side of the room, tossing the wreckage aside to reach some large crates way at the back that had escaped the full force of the windstorm.

Drake was wiping smears of blood off his face and breathing heavily.

Tamsin faced him. “Why did you come?”

He drew a deep breath and pointed at the coat, his coat, on the floor where it had fallen.

“Your coat? You were worried about your coat? Well, gosh, sorry. I apologize for causing you coat-separation anxiety.”

He stood to his full height and stared down at her, “I was worried about what was inside the coat as well.”

She felt herself flush and nervously ran one hand through her now ragged mop of hair, pushing the tangles back from her face. “That wasn't necessary, Drake. I can take care of myself.”

“Never said you couldn't. But the question was, could you take care of my *phone*? You took it with you.”

She swallowed, “Yes, um, well. By the time I realized I had it... kind of awkward to go back. I was going to get it to you, I swear.”

He gave a disbelieving snort and turned away. He searched through the mess of broken objects, art, and other assorted flotsam and jetsam pulling out first one, then the other ripped sleeve. He held them up in the air and made a face at her.

She found Drake's torn coat and slipped it on. He handed her the sleeves and she stuffed them into one pocket. Reaching into another, she pulled out the crumbled almond croissants from the coffee house. She'd transferred them from the bloody green coat to this one on the way out. Beneath the pastries was his cell phone. Sticky crumbs covered the screen. Tamsin cringed as she handed it over.

He frowned at her.

She said brightly, “Phone back, yay!”

His frown turned more severe.

“Um, it was buzzing for a while. Earlier.”

“I'm surprised you could hear it through the pastry.” He flicked off several bits of almond paste. “Who was calling?”

He flicked on the screen. The phone shone brightly for all of about ten seconds before blinking off. Drake gave an exasperated sigh. “And now the battery's dead.”

“Hope you didn't have any pressing appointments.”

He gave her a look.

“Oh.... my bad. How did you find me?”

“Well, I am a Hunter.” Holding the phone up like a trophy, he struck a pose, chin high.

Tamsin laughed, “No, really.”

He frowned. "I'll have you know I am a very good Hunter and you should learn how to cover your tracks. You forgot to clear the history on my computer. Be careful about that. Figured out from your research you must be coming here to the museum. Out the door I went only to discover my car was not there." He glared at her. "When I got back to the coffee shop, I learned it had been towed. Thank you very much, Miss West. If I may ask, why did you take the limo?"

"I didn't take the limo here."

"No, last night. Why did you take the limo last night?"

"Oh. Car navigation system. You were a little out of it and possibly dying from a poison dagger wound so pardon me for thinking time might be an issue."

He looked at her skeptically. "You wanted to drive the Hummer, didn't you?"

She adopted a rapper-style pose, "Busted. It's a pimpin' car, bro!"

He burst out laughing. "Okay, I'll concede that. After an expensive detour to the impound yard and some tedious paperwork, I finally got my ride back. Then I had to drive here, creep into the museum through the staff entrance, etc., etc."

"Yes, but, how did you get through the tunnels and all that to here."

On the other side of the doorway, he picked up a black leather messenger bag. Throwing open the flap, Drake pulled out an iPad. "I have a 'where's my phone' app. I followed you."

"Did you really?" She laughed, "Damn you new fangled modern Fae!"

"The doors in the corridor weren't locked. My guess is they only lock from one side on the return trip."

A high-pitched wowl echoed out of the back of the room. Drake set down the bag and iPad and pulled out his knife again. Tamsin bared her

claws, heart pounding, ready for battle. Theo rolled by yelling, locked in an embrace with what could only be a leopard.

Drake was already moving towards them, blade outstretched, when Tamsin grabbed his arm. She understood at last.

Theo jumped to his feet and the leopard leaped into his arms.

“Look scary Prime lady! This is my one and only Kit Cat Kitty!” He said it triumphantly and gave Tamsin a massive and very joyous grin.

The adrenalin rush drained away and Tamsin slumped to her knees, her face in her hands. “All these years, all these bodies, because you've been trying to get back your *cat*?”

“Who's a good kitty,” he cooed. “Those idiot digging guys triggered one of the protection wards with their excavations while we were inside. Like I said, I got out. Kit became trapped. Sealed in the tomb and transformed into a painted stone statue from Puzuzu's stupid protection spell for his stupider avatar. She got packed away with everything else and brought here. The digging guys were not as blockish as they seemed. After I tried several times to get her back, they set up a very effective ward in the final vault thinking – mistakenly – I wanted their lethal little demon. Not likely! Now she's back; back with me. Kitty, kitty, kitty.”

The leopard pushed against the boy, licking his face again and again with her wide tongue.

Drake leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. “Explanations would be nice right about now.”

“Drake, this is Theo. Theo, Drake the Hunter who tried to strangle you.”

Theo waved and gave the big Fae one of his bright smiles, “No hard feelings.”

Drake scowled.

With Theo interrupting, Tamsin explained her visit to Chicago was to find the Institute's ancient demon statue containing a set of magical runes and that's how she met Theo.

The boy jumped in, saying he had been guiding supernatural “riff raff” as he called them, down to the vaults again and again, each time hoping they would be the ones to break the seal.

“Now, Theo, that's not entirely true.” Tamsin wagged a finger at him.

“No, really... *okay*, I mean 'really' in a fluid sort of interpretation. Soul Eaters are dicks. Getting rid of them was just a fun perk. Honestly, it took several decades before I figured out the key element to opening the casket was the lack of a human soul. A long time with a frustratingly high attrition rate. It wasn't all murderous intent from the beginning. In fact, some of them managed to get through the traps in the vault and all the way here. Then they touched the seal on the casket and *blam*, hello dust bunny! All the doors and locks automatically reseal themselves, so I would have to start all over again. The keys are copies; I have dozens of them. Anyway, finally I understood my nefarious plotting needed a Prime to break the seal – and the curse – on that little jack-in-the-box of death.”

“Surely there are other vampires,” Drake pointed out. “Besides Primes.”

Making a face, he shook his head. “Don't tell me you don't know this either? Most turned vampires originated as human, not Fae. They think they have no soul and that's just not true. Until their spirit has fled upon the true death, that soul is firmly in place. There's a rather complex metaphysical chemistry that excludes turned vampires from my guest list. Primes, however, are Fae and thus kitted out with very different sort of flavor.” He struck a pose.

Neither Tamsin nor Drake smiled.

“Yeah, well. Primes have their own games, as we all know, and never want to play mine.” He made a pouty face and the leopard licked him lovingly on the cheeks. “Then Miss West showed up. Not only is she a Prime, she has no soul at all. So, just in case I was wrong and Prime souls could go poof as well, she was truly an empty vessel. I figured I'd picked a winner at last! And it worked. I got Kit and she has her rune.”

In one hand, Tamsin held the head of the broken statuette. She gripped it tightly and finally allowed herself to feel a little thrill of triumph. She'd done it. Somehow, she held the first rune when so many others with far greater skills had failed. It was almost too easy. She remembered the airless vacuum and suffocating sand. Okay, maybe not *easy*.

“Theo it seems sort of coincidental that I come to town looking for Puzuzu and there you are with all the answers.”

He gave her a narrow-eyed stare, “*Ha!* I say. *Ha!* Coincidence? Not to me! I've been hanging around this city for bloody decades waiting for the right combination of powers to walk through the museum doors and into that gallery. I was beginning to lose hope. This isn't your story, it's mine.”

She nodded, “Good point.”

Drake reached for her hand and without thinking, she took it. Together they walked to the doorway of the steel vault.

Over her shoulder, she asked one last question. “Oh, Theo, how did you know earth, by that I mean sand, and air, the lack of it, wouldn't be the elements that killed me?”

He hugged the leopard and kissed the animal's furry head. “I didn't.”

Chapter 11

Tamsin and Drake

They made their way out through the garbage collection area for the museum, *slipstreaming* into speeds so fast only a blur would show up on the security cameras positioned here and there. Drake insisted they also wind their mufflers around their faces, “just in case.” The wide doors opened outward, apparently only locking from the outside for safety's sake. With Drake in the lead, they sped away from the museum and into an alley about a block away.

There, the Fae took off his coat, turning it inside out to reveal a reversible dark plaid pattern. The knitted scarf could be turned as well from navy blue to deep burgundy. He pulled his hair back into a tight ponytail tied with an elastic loop from around his wrist and finished up with a pair of thick, black-rimmed glasses stashed in a zippered pocket in the jacket. He looked in every way different from the large fellow who entered and exited the museum so feloniously.

“We were moving fast enough I doubt they could pick up a clear image. Chicago isn't my town and I don't plan on staying now that my business is done. Still, it pays to be cautious. Everyone is on camera these days,” he explained. “Come on, let's see if we can disguise you a little.”

His big suede coat had hidden secrets. A black knitted cap came out of one pocket and safety pins in another. They used them to pin the coat sleeves back in place. She tucked Angelique's mangled hair up inside the

cap. He looked at her critically, “You're like a bad video from 1980 come to life. All we need are synthesizers playing in the background.” Reaching into a side pocket he pulled out another pair of specs. “Here, take these. Don't worry, they're just glass.”

She slipped them on.

He nodded, looking slightly more satisfied, “Better. Maybe. Sort of university student pretending to be grungy. There will be more cameras,” he explained. “Traffic cams, ATMs and what not. I checked their location once I realized exactly what getting my phone back was going to entail. In fact, it would be better if we didn't head for the car directly. Blurred or not, they are going to figure out someone was running around the museum after hours. The police may check in-and-outs from the pay lots in the area. What with your body switching, a police record may be something that doesn't concern you. I, however, try to stay off their radar. Are you okay for awhile or do you have some other magical assignation I am not aware of?”

His tone was light and bantering. His eyes, though, told a different, more thoughtful story. Almost without realizing what she was doing, she reached up to stroke his cheek, the stubble tickling the tips of her fingers. Her hand lingered on the strong line of his jaw. She had never expected him to hunt her down. Missing coat and cell phone or not. She, too, felt the connection between them. All day the longing to see Drake was tugging at her heart. Pulling her back to that fortified little bolt hole. She had fought it and been proud of herself. Now, here he was. Against all odds. And she had no idea what she should do next.

Forcing a smile, Tamsin tried for an oh-so-casual tone, “I'm starved. How about pizza? Deep dish. This being Chicago and all. Let me buy, to say thanks for your help.”

“How? You don't even have a wallet as far as I know. Or did you take mine?” He gave himself an exaggerated pat down. “Nope, what a surprise, still got it.”

Tamsin punched his arm, “Don't be a dick. I apologized about the phone and I am offering you food. Your ex-nemesis Angelique had some money secretly tucked away.”

He took her hand again as though it was the most natural thing in the world and they moved out of the alley, “Don't tell me where. I don't want to know. Wait.” He spun her around and gave her a slow, half smile, “Or maybe I do. Last night... I... you... that was... nice. Didn't you think we were nice? Together?”

She didn't know how to answer him. Their hot, passionate hours entwined in each other's arms had been light years beyond nice. More than anything she wanted to turn back the clock and make it last night all over again. His mouth on hers, his hard body pressing her down. Later, held tightly in his arms, feeling his strong heart beating, pushing away the dark edges of her isolation and loneliness.

“Tamsin, what is it? What's wrong?”

Her face. She had let too much of what she was thinking show. Turning away, she said only, “Nothing. I'm fine. Come on, food!”

Drake used the WiFi on his iPad to find a place within walking distance. No frills and no fuss, just ice-cold draft and deep-dish pizza piled high with vegetables and meat.

Conversation should have been so easy. Both of them had a vast reserve of supernatural misadventures to entertain the other with if they wanted to. Tamsin was talkative by nature and having someone to talk to a rare treat. Drake was actually less reserved than he might appear.

Yet there they sat, tongue-tied.

Beer and food eased the tension a little, as food does, giving them something to do besides stare around the room or at the floor or anywhere besides into each other's eyes. Drake asked her about the runes on the statue and Tamsin gratefully launched into a more detailed explanation of her quest.

Drake only half listened to her talk of hidden runes, Prague, sorcerers, and soothsayers. In his mind, he stood a little apart from himself and tried to analyze his feelings for this woman. That only took a few seconds as he found he couldn't analyze them at all. None of this made any sense. The murder of Angelique and her body's possession by Tamsin. His ability to transcend her outer form and see what was truly beneath. It had happened again, there under the museum. Moments after seeing her in that vault, Angelique's form melted away with only the smallest effort on his part, revealing the Tamsin he made love to the night before. Her long, tousled, dark blond hair and little heart-shaped face. Here in the warmth of the restaurant, she smelled so good; sweet as summer honey. He could easily single out her soft, sensual scent.

This pursuit was very unlike him. He had liaisons, of course. Just that, though. No "relationships" as they defined the word in this world. A Fae's heart was a slippery thing. No woman he had met in exile had been able to hold onto his.

And yet, he had taken off after Tamsin. The phone was an excuse he didn't even attempt to justify. He could easily afford another. All his contacts were backed up several times over. He tried to tune back into here and now and realized he had lost the thread of Tamsin's conversation. "Wait. What did you say?"

"I said, and then the pirates kidnapped me and took me to Dragon Island where I married their pirate king."

"What pirates?"

She rolled her big eyes, “You weren't listening to me! Why did you ask if you didn't want to hear the story?”

Drake's face betrayed him and he acknowledged the truth of it. “Sorry. I was... thinking.” He sat back in the booth, crossed his legs, uncrossed them and then leaned forward again.

Tamsin waited. He was working himself up to say something. Probably “goodbye and thanks for the romp and the pizza.”

Pushing aside the remains of their dinner, he leaned very close. “I was thinking about you. Us.”

Okay. That's not what she was expecting.

Tamsin put both hands on the table and met his eyes squarely, “There is no us, Drake.”

“Isn't there? I think there could be. Weird as it appears. I'm Fae. We do weird pretty well.”

“No. There is no 'us' because there isn't really a 'me.’” She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice. “Tamsin West is only a stream of consciousness eternally lost in a swirl of dust and spirit. This,” she indicated Angelique's body, “Will soon, somehow be gone. I can never keep them very long. A few months at best. Then I am alone in the shadow world again looking for the next almost-corpse.”

“Tamsin.”

He reached for her hand but she pulled it back. “I should go. Thank you for helping me with the demon. I'm sorry about all the trouble with your phone. I..”

She couldn't finish her sentence because Drake leaned across the booth and taking her face in his hands, kissed her. For a moment she resisted and then, she couldn't. All day she wanted to feel his lips on hers again, the touch of his hands. Wanted it so very much. Even if only one more brief time.

Drake inhaled deeply, her honey scent filling his nostrils and flooding him with desire. No trace of the Prime in her touch or her kiss. Stepping out of the booth, he slid onto her side and pulled Tamsin on his lap, kissing her deeply. They stayed entwined in each other's embrace for some time. When they finally broke off, people at the booths and tables around them clapped and hooted. Tamsin burst out laughing and Drake smiled.

“Come on.” He pulled her to her feet.

“Where?” She looked up at him. The strong, masculine face. His dark, intense eyes staring back, the thick brows drawn together making deep wrinkles in his brow.

“Do I have to say it?”

Chapter 12

Tamsin

“Are you tired?”

“Physically, emotionally, or spiritually, Drake with no last name?”

“All, I guess. You are, aren't you? Tired, I mean.”

Tamsin nodded, staring out the window as the bright lights of the city flashed by.

Drake drove them back to the fortified bunker and Tamsin let him. She shouldn't have, she knew that. Knew that letting him take her back meant surrender. Not physically. Though that was obviously on the table after last night. All those hours ago she thought she could handle giving in to the temptation for touch. The sweet, sublime touch of man to woman. *Carpe diem* and all the other justifications she had fed herself before the plunge into ecstasy.

What an idiot.

Sitting here in his big car, the engine rumbling like the growl of a large animal, she realized she had forgotten. No, that's not right. She'd *made* herself forget how absolutely compelling those feelings could become. Tamsin was dangerously close to surrendering far more than her heart. She might be giving up her sanity.

After her transition to spirit, Tamsin went slightly mad. Lost in a strange, terrible world of ghosts and monsters. A phantom existence most human minds were not equipped to navigate. She clawed her way back up

the ladder to sanity rung by rung. To keep herself sane against the dark madness of the afterlife, Tamsin forced herself to look ahead. Never back.

Make allies where and when possible. Enjoy the little pleasures every day being back in a body had to offer and *always* keep moving toward her goals: Find the Soul Eaters. Destroy them one by one. Locate the lost pieces of her soul and hoard them for the future. That list had recently been expanded to include assembling the four runes to create a sigil that might possibly, if the legend was true, restore body and soul.

This man with the wide smile and thoughtful eyes threatened that hard-fought equilibrium. In fact, he'd already unbalanced her into a wobbly roll she was not sure she could recover from.

Without putting it into so many words, Tamsin knew no matter what body she took from now on, she would always look over her shoulder hoping, somehow, Drake would be there.

Love is a physical and emotional safety net for the human spirit.

But not lost spirits.

How could he catch her when she could never predict where and when she would fall back to earth?

Inside the dark bunker, Drake took his coat from her, grabbed a thick blanket out of their nest and wrapped it around her shoulders. Quickly putting the sofa cushions back where they belonged, he easily picked Tamsin up in his arms and laid her down, tucking in the edges of the blanket.

He was careful not to say or do anything that would increase the turmoil so clearly raging just below the surface. Kicking off his shoes and removing his coat, sweater, scarf, several pieces of body armor, two knives and a small, obviously enchanted axe, he settled in on the other side of the couch with another blanket. He pulled her feet onto his lap and didn't try to touch her further.

Tamsin's eyes closed and her breathing quickly became light and even. Drake felt his own eyes growing heavy; his heart remained unaccountably light. It felt good being together like this. Natural.

What an odd thing life was. With that thought, Drake slipped into the soft well of sleep.

He awoke, turned sideways, precariously balanced on the edge of the couch. With no outside light, it was impossible to tell the time. Somehow Tamsin had squeezed in next to him, her head and arms over his chest, the blankets tumbled around them both. He saw through Angelique's form to Tamsin with no effort at all. The hollow-cheeked, angry face of the Prime disappeared and there the lost spirit was. He wanted to kiss her very much. Feel the smooth touch of her skin against his mouth. From this position, he couldn't quite reach her lips so he brushed her forehead with his kiss. Lightly, trying not to wake her, inhaling the warm, sleepy smell of her hair and body.

Tamsin gave a sigh and snuggled closer.

A surge of emotion welled up inside his chest as he tightened his arms around her. Surprising in its force; revealing in its depth. The force took him by surprise. He cared about her. There was no point in lying to himself. He wanted to protect her, even though she had done pretty damn well all these years without him! Today as he traveled the city in search of her, his mind kept veering towards her quest and how he could use his tracking skills to help hunt down the Soul Eaters. In fact, he wanted to hunt them down. Find, catch, and most of all, hurt them like they'd hurt this light-hearted girl.

Tamsin opened her eyes, blink, blinking herself awake. Enjoying the lazy, languid feeling of being wrapped in a soft, warm blanket. Beneath her, a heart beat strongly, broad chest rising and falling.

Broad chest.

Heartbeat.

Oh, damn it.

She sat up abruptly, her ragged hair in her face, looking down at Drake.

Drake lost his balance, rolled off the couch and fell with a thump to the floor. “Ow.”

“I fell... um... asleep.” Tamsin stumbled over the words.

Drake sat up, “Me, too.”

“I didn't think I would fall asleep.”

Climbing back onto the couch, Drake slid one arm around Tamsin's waist and pulled her close, blankets and all. It seemed exactly the right thing to do. To be near her. With his other hand, he pushed her hair out of her eyes. “You can sleep some more, go ahead.”

Unconsciously Tamsin eased into his embrace, fitting into the curve of his arm before she caught herself. “No, Drake, I can't. This is pointless.”

“I don't think it is.” His eyes searched hers. “You must be able to tell I feel something for you.”

“For Angelique...” she started to say.

He put his finger over her lips before she could continue, “No. For you. You have been very much alone in this afterlife, Tamsin. That doesn't have to continue. Things can change. They can get better.”

She said nothing.

“I could wait for you,” he whispered, his lips just touching the soft skin of her throat. “If, when, something happens to this form. I have time.”

In her mind, the white flag began inching up the flagpole. Surrender as inevitable as the heartbreak sure to follow. He didn't mean it. He couldn't. He was just a man and men said a great many things they didn't mean. Or so was her experience. Maybe she would let herself believe it. Just for a few more hours.

They made love slowly, softly. Savoring each kiss, each caress. Exploring all the curves and hollows of each other's body in blissful detail. The cushions, back again on the floor, were arranged and disarranged in artful patterns as their bodies followed the twists and turns of their passions.

She learned that running her tongue along the lines of his throat sent the Fae into shivers of pleasure.

He learned kissing her back made her moan and press against him.

Together they rode the surging waves of pleasure, pressing deep and deeper into one another. Until, satisfied and satiated, hot and slippery with sweat, they fell back, panting into their nest of cushions and blankets.

After a time, Drake went to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of cold water. Twisting off the cap, he offered it to her. Gratefully she took a long drink.

“You must be feeling the lack of blood. You're going to need a boost eventually, to stay strong.”

“I drank a little at the museum.”

His eyebrows shot up very high.

“Theo helped me. I didn't hurt the woman. Quite the opposite. She seemed to enjoy it immensely and I only took a little. Maybe a cupful?”

“She would enjoy it. Beg for more if you let her. That chemical Prime's secrete in their saliva is positively orgasmic. You could drain humans dry and they would thank you for it with their dying breath. In fact, that happens.”

“That's sort of the impression I got. Kind of weird.” She handed him the water and waited as he drained the bottle. “Oh, did you ever get your messages?”

He gave a quick bark of laughter. “Damn, completely forgot to check. Other things on my mind.” He smiled. “I did plug it in to recharge.”

Yawning mightily, he walked over to an outlet near the door and began thumbing through the screens. “Give me a second, I need to make one call before this sorcerer has an aneurysm. He's left like a hundred messages, I swear.”

“Sorcerer? Is he a client?”

“Sort of. He's the one I got the beguiling charm from to trap Angelique. A bit of a snake, I think. Not to be trusted. He's got the touch, though. Big time. We made a bargain. Speaking of which, we need to talk about you and the Duprey's and what is going down right now here in town. The wizard is involved. Just let me make this call.”

Climbing out of the blankets, Tamsin grabbed Drake's shirt and pulling it over her head, walked to the bathroom, stepping into her boots on the way. The floor tiles would be cold and no matter what Angelique felt, Tamsin hated for her feet to be cold.

Drake's back was to her when she came out, the faint glow of the screen illuminating that corner of the apartment. In the bathroom, Tamsin remembered the tail end of their conversation from the coffee shop and what she had been meaning to ask him before events kept interfering. “Drake, back at the coffee place when you said I had to change bodies again, is that because of the Primes or the sorcerer?”

There was no answer.

“Drake?”

Silently he walked to the front door and began sliding back the steel security bar.

Tamsin's skin crawled. She had a sudden, awful premonition there was something waiting on the other side of that door. Something bad. Slipstreaming into vamp speed, she flew across the room, determined to push it shut again. Drake side-stepped directly in front of her and she ran

full force into his back. His very broad, strong back. Ramming speed didn't even budge him. Tamsin was thrown off balance, onto the floor.

He drew the bolt and turned his face towards her. She gasped. The Fae's eyes had gone milky white, his features completely blank and expressionless.

The door opened fully.

A sibilant hissing echoed off the walls.

The little alcove in front of the door was full of something. Writhing, slithering, sliding, surging forward. Tamsin's hand flew to her mouth to keep from screaming. Snakes. Hundreds of them. Their eyes glowed green, forked tongues flicking in and out.

She called to Drake's name but he never moved, staring straight ahead with his dead, white eyes.

Angelique's reflexes took over. Back-flipping to her feet, she leaped across the room, grabbing the knife, still on the kitchen counter from yesterday, and attacked. They hissed and struck at her, lightning fast.

She cut them again and again. Like the Hydra of mythology, for every head she sliced, two grew in its place. Snakes were bad enough, but spell-bound snakes? Come on! She was not going to catch a break with this body. Some transitions were like that.

Drake stood blocking the door. Swiftly she remembered the other bolt hole she'd found in the bedroom, the one behind the bags of scary gray powder. That was closest. Muscles cocked and loaded like a pistol ready to fire, she jumped, only to be pulled so hard to the floor the impact made her head swim. A huge constrictor had slipped lightning fast to circle the ankle of one motorcycle boot.

The creatures swarmed over her. Angelique's body was not in top form, Tamsin could feel it. She'd used a lot of energy in her battle to reach the Puzuzu statue. Her museum guard snack seemingly all used up. Normally

Tamsin would just have ignored those urges. Like Drake said, the Prime could eat normal food like a human. The blood, though, was a catalyst for energizing vamp powers. Red Bull for the bloodsucking crowd. Vampires had enormous skills by human standards, yet they were not supermen. They could be captured like any other adversary if you knew how and timed it right.

Relentlessly the snakes wound their long, hot, sinuous bodies around and around, pinning her arms and legs tightly together. They bound her with their master's magic, gripping her as tightly as chains. The vamp in the Hummer had spoken of Angelique's father. This might be his doing. She was a Prime, which meant he was as well. Perhaps he didn't appreciate having his limo, not to mention his daughter's body, hijacked. Tamsin swallowed. Things were going to get messy.

Drake stirred at last, coming toward her. He moved not with the smooth, lithe walk she had observed but a sort of jerky response, as though he was being remote-controlled. He grabbed his jeans and pulled them on before picking her up and slinging her over his shoulder, snakes and all. He walked barefoot out into the cold darkness.

Through the wriggling, squirming mass of snakes, Tamsin saw they were heading for the Hummer. Maybe her shroud of snakes wouldn't easily fit in the back of his car.

The limo sat where she'd parked the enormous vehicle what must be two days before. From the little she had seen of this neighborhood, that meant the Hummer had to be loaded with warding charms or it would have been long gone.

He tossed her in with the vamp corpses, onto the floor sticky with blood. The icy cold had acted like a refrigerator, the bodies almost literally frozen. Angelique's senses reacted to the human smell of the turned vamps

instinctively, her mouth watering. The spellbound snakes reacted just as fast, constricting so tightly she moaned in pain.

Drake checked the rearview mirror as he turned the lumbering vehicle away from the curb. His eyes registered the two black Escalades pulling out at the same time. They were no concern of his. He had his orders. The cell phone rang several times during the drive, the voice on the other end giving him directions. The Escalades disappeared sometime around Jackson Park and Drake drove on, unimpeded to the dockyards on the rapidly freezing shores of Lake Michigan.

Chapter 13

Tamsin

“There are few coincidences,” said the man swirling the amber liquid around in a crystal glass big enough to keep a goldfish comfortably. “The attraction of particles applies to souls and spirits as well as the periodic table of elements. You were looking for me and I was looking for you and here we are.”

The little man standing before her was not what Tamsin expected to find at the end of her journey with Drake.

Not at all.

Drake dragged her and the snakes out of the Hummer, deaf to her pleas for help. Through the snow falling thick and fast, he walked into a large, multi-story warehouse balanced right on the edge of the water. The snakes kept wriggling up and over her face blocking her vision. Despite the cold, the place was hot with magic. Angelique's senses switched on their super-imaging radar. She could see other bodies, creatures, *things* she couldn't even identify, moving within the building by the heat they gave off – or lack thereof – and the sound waves. Were they vampires? She couldn't tell. There was none of the familiar smell from the four vamps of the other night.

Up they went in a big freight elevator, down a short corridor, in through a set of double steel doors, and then she understood. Understood and damned her naïveté.

Drake stood her up and she balanced precariously in the middle of the floor on a Chinese carpet of pale blue silk.

The room did not look like the rest of the building. It was painted, paneled and furnished in traditional full English-manor style right down to flower arrangements on the side tables and ceramic dogs smiling from the marble mantelpiece above a brightly burning fire that sparked and crackled.

Bartholomew Knightly, Soul Eater and all-around bastard, stood before the fire grinning at her.

Her heart sank through her chest, back down however many floors they'd traveled up to thud into the ground below. "Drake works for you, Bartholomew?" She managed to choke the words out from between the snakes hot, scaly sides.

Knightly took a sip of his brandy and snapped his fingers.

Tamsin's eyes flew to Drake's face.

His sight cleared and blinking, he looked around the room, obviously puzzled, until he saw Tamsin. Only her eyes and mouth were visible beneath the hissing coil of snakes.

His body rippled with tension, the muscles bunching. He tried to spring towards her.

Knightly said only, "Stop."

Drake froze where he stood.

"Do you work for him? Did you know all along?" She couldn't keep the tremor of emotion from her voice, her heart breaking at the thought it had all been lies. All of it. She had wanted to believe he cared for her, no matter what lies she told herself. She wanted it so much.

Drake tried to speak, but no sound came out.

Knightly rolled his eyes. "Go on, you can talk. For now."

He looked straight at Tamsin, "No. Never."

“Tell her the whole story. The irony delights me no end.” Knightly moved to the side table to pour himself another brandy.

If looks could kill, the Soul Eater would have fallen stone dead from the anger in Drake's stare.

“Angelique has, *had* tormented me for more than a century with her sick games. She was the reason I had to leave Fae and make a new life for myself here. She followed. I hunted her. Which is no doubt what she wanted. Yet she always got the better of me. Finally, I said 'enough'. I needed a beguiling charm to lure the Prime into a lethal trap. Something very much out of the ordinary. Knightly was recommended and an introduction arranged. Angelique's clan, the Duprey's, run Chicago's dark side. I told you that. Knightly is looking to carve out some territory and we worked out an accord. He created a lure just for Angelique. Something irresistible that acted like super-charged catnip on a kitten. She lost all sense of self-preservation.” He turned back to the other man, “You lied to me.”

“I never did,” Knightly looked affronted.

“You said when I killed her our bargain would be fulfilled. I assumed you wanted her dead for reasons of your own.”

Setting the glass on the table, the Soul Eater ran both hands through the long, auburn hair falling to his shoulders, smoothing the shining locks. A habitual gesture that Tamsin knew well. He was a vain little man. Slim and good looking with boyish features despite being at least six centuries old. To think, Knightly used to be one of her group of friends back in San Francisco. Friends, what a joke that was now. Clever, intelligent, with an encyclopedic knowledge of so many subjects. He was always regaling them with amazing tidbits from history, the sciences, or the arts. The thought of how she had enjoyed his company with the others filled her with revulsion now.

"First of all, Drake, never assume. What I said was 'when her body is no longer animated', then your bargain with me will be fulfilled. You interpreted that to suit yourself. Honestly, you Fae. So proud. Never reading the fine print on the contract."

Tamsin had reanimated Angelique's body, laying the big man open to Knightly's control spell.

"I don't know why you look so surprised, Drake. You got exactly what you wanted – Angelique has met the true death. Only her body is animated. Now I am going to get what I want as well."

Tamsin spoke to Knightly in Angelique's voice and the room seemed suddenly very cold, "I'm going to kill you as you have killed so many others. Maybe not today. But soon."

"Oh, I'm shaking!" Bartholomew gave a high-pitched laugh as he picked the oversized glass back up. "You didn't even know I was in town, little fool. I'm the one who brought you here. I led you to Nicole in Berlin knowing you would locate her eventually anyway. She was not half as clever as me. So I laid my plan around that little inevitability of collateral damage. After you killed her, you would find a clue to the legend of the runes. Not that it isn't true. Those runes and the sigil they will create are the real things. That clue, though, would lead to another and another. Just difficult enough to make you congratulate yourself on your cleverness and not suspect a trap."

He sipped at the brandy and smiled. "The timing had to be carefully calculated. I have been making a study of the Duprey's and knew of the Princess' and Drake's twisted history. Angelique's demise would make a sonic boom in the spiritual world. A big bang that could not fail to pull your dusty spirit in like a rip tide. Waiting for you was the hunky Fae Hunter with a debt to me he can't refuse. It's not my fault you so obviously fell in lust with him." He gave the Fae an appraising stare, "Though I have

to say I admire your taste. *Yum*. I am going to have such fun with this servitude.”

Roaring in rage, Drake sprang for the Soul Eater. Knightly snapped his fingers. The Hunter froze in place, his eyes once again opaque. A word and he was himself.

Knightly did this several times, letting Drake inch a little closer and a little closer, apparently finding the game immensely amusing.

“I can make him bark like a dog, want to see?”

“Stop it, Bartholomew.”

He gave a derisive snort. “You used to be more fun when you were alive.” Walking over to Tamsin, he circled her, chuckling under his breath. With a malicious look, he gave her a little push. She tumbled heavily to the floor. The snakes hissed loudly, biting into her flesh.

“This has turned out so much better than I planned. I did not think you would recover the runes etched onto Puzuzu's demonic little head. No one I have sent has survived their encounter with the Institute's wards or Theo.”

“Is he your minion as well?”

He looked appalled, “Good God no! What are you thinking? I stay as far away from that imp as possible. Now, not only are you and your homicidal intentions off my back but by keeping Angelique animated, that means you,” he kicked her viciously, “in there, I get Drake indefinitely as my Hunter in residence. And whatever else I want him to be. Come!” He snapped his fingers at Drake and the Fae walked stiff-legged to the sorcerer's side. “Hand it over.”

Reaching into his jean pocket, Drake pulled out the clay head of Puzuzu.

“Give it here, that's a good boy.”

He dropped it into Knightly's outstretched palm.

“I have the first rune, I have the first rune,” Knightly sang the words, taunting Tamsin, waving the head where she could see.

His plan made terrible sense. At least in the strange logic of the paranormal. She came to Chicago seeking the runes. Her focus equally on the statue and a body to step into. Tamsin thought she was the clever one and subconsciously all she did was help the Soul Eater bring it all together.

The body she jumped into was tied to Drake and Drake to Knightly. Her feelings for the Fae the only wildcard in a stacked deck. ‘Be careful what you ask for’ indeed. If she escaped this encounter, she would have to be more cautious about her focus.

Knightly nudged her with one foot, “You know I don't enjoy what I do, Tamsin. Taking lives. I am not a sociopath.”

She wriggled and struggled until she had freed her face enough from the squirming bodies to speak again, “No, you're a megalomaniac and you glory in every minute of it.”

He set the little clay head on the mantelpiece, adjusting it just so, admiring it before he spoke. “You're wrong. What I want is knowledge. One lifetime is not long enough to learn all I wish to. What a waste for a mind like mine to die. Some lives are worth far more than others to this world.”

“What are you searching for? The cure for cancer? New crops that can feed the poor and hungry? No. You're a pompous, selfish ass, Bartholomew.”

“Sticks and stones, Tamsin. Sticks and stones.”

Calling out, he summoned several large men in uniform into the room. They carried a wide plastic sheet. With a snap, they flipped it over the carpet and rolled her and the snakes on.

Gracing her with an evil little smile, Knightly said, “Don't want to stain the carpet.” From the pocket of his dressing gown, he pulled a dagger, the

tip curved in a wicked point. “The best way to weaken a vampire is to drain them. Can't have you trying to get away.”

The snakes shifted and he thrust the dagger into her shoulder. Pain shot through her and she couldn't keep back the cry of anguish.

Knightly put out one finger, swiping it through Angelique's blood. He sucked on the drops and smiled. Her blood flowed thickly only for a few moments. The Prime's nature meant the wound would quickly seal itself. Knightly thrust the knife in again and again, a different place each time, enjoying her pain, taking an obvious delight in the process. Monster indeed.

The blood pooled on the plastic sheet. So much blood. Everything seemed to spin and Tamsin closed her eyes against the vertigo. The snakes gradually released their grip, slithering down to lap at the scarlet streaks with long, forked tongues.

Eventually, through the haze, she felt herself being dragged to the elevator and into a different room. The men sat her in a hard metal chair. Instead of snakes, chains burning with a glacial cold were wrapped around her body. One of the men brought up a thick, metal baton. She saw it coming at her head and nothing more.

Chapter 14

Drake

Knighly made Drake watch, frozen in place, eyes burning, unable to even blink. Every time the sorcerer plunged in the dagger, he would glance at Drake and smile. Once he blew him a kiss, his face mocking. Drake raged silently in a futile battle against the magic binding him. What an ass he had been. He should have known, guessed there was more to the wizardly bargain than it seemed.

Drake's work as a Hunter for hire brought him into contact with all manner of humans and supernaturals, even vampires on occasion – though never the games of the Duprey clan. His was a shifty, shaky sort of moral ground at times. He had his own standards, though. They might not always be human standards but they worked for him. He was good at what he did. Mentally he shook his head, obviously not as good as he thought. Knighly was dangerously close to the truth with his comments about Fae pride and fine print. His desire to be rid of Angelique once and for all had made him careless. Too eager.

The knife cut Tamsin again and she cried out.

Drake didn't enjoy killing. It was a necessity, never a sport. He was going to make an exception in Knighly's case. He contemplated the little sorcerer grimly. Drake would kill him slowly, an inch at a time.

Tamsin was hardly out of the room, the mess cleaned up and snakes bagged, before there was a *knock, knock, knocking*. Drake still stood,

unable to move. He automatically shifted his eyes towards the door before realizing the sound was coming from somewhere else.

Knock, knock.

Not from the door. The opposite side of the room?

Knock, knock.

But they were on the top floor.

Knock, knock.

Drake shifted his eyes again and saw three figures floating outside the huge plate-glass window, arms crossed in front of them. Each man wore a beautifully-cut business suit and tie. Though Knightly tried to hide it, he was obviously surprised. Drake stared, knowing exactly who had come calling. He only wondered why they hadn't shown up sooner.

Knightly pouted at the figures, "I'm not inviting you in."

The man, well, vampire, in the middle looked through the glass impassively. His words came through softly, clearly, "You don't have to. Only humans get the privilege of threshold magic in the mortal world. If I am not mistaken, you gave that status up some centuries ago, Mr. Knightly."

Several bodies in black fatigues – it was hard to tell how many, since they were in pieces – fell in as the double door to the study opened.

Knightly made a face as the blood spilled over his beautiful silk carpet.

A vampire glided by Drake and the sorcerer as if they were not even there and stood by the window. The room had been part of the warehouse before its transformation. The vampire lifted a metal latch and twisted a dial on the wall. Once the lock was turned, the wide window rolled back on steel wheels. The others stepped through; an icy blast of snow following them in.

The supernaturals stood together, silently staring at Knightly.

Knighly stared back, hands behind him, rocking on his heels. “You could at least introduce yourself.”

The man who had spoken looked like the VP of marketing for a major corporation. Impeccably groomed, executive good looks, black hair cropped close. He raised one eyebrow. “Taylor.”

“Why are you coming after me, Mr. Taylor? I didn't kill Angelique.”

“Who said anything about the Princess? Yet it was you who enabled that spell since we are on the subject.”

Knighly made a sound of exasperation, “That's like throwing a sword in prison because someone fell on it. Come, let me know how I can make this right? We are reasonable men.”

“Yet we are not 'men', you and I, Mr. Knighly. Not at all.” The vampire raised one hand and languidly smoothed the silk on his already perfectly smooth tie, straightened the collar of his perfectly straight shirt and brushed a few errant snowflakes from the fabric of his immaculate suit before he continued.

“Chicago is a mob town. Always has been; always will be. In its current form, this city belongs to the Duprey's. Specifically, Prince Duprey. At least until he grows bored playing here. If there is a supernatural game to run, favors to be offered and collected, or anything more substantial than a love charm or a fever cure, it comes through my master and his agents. Threat levels are carefully managed. Who disappears and how. You ignored our primogeniture, Knighly. Without even so much as an introduction, you tried to take the docks.”

While the others stood silently, hands still crossed in front of them, the vampire named Taylor walked to the side table, picked up the brandy bottle and another glass and carefully poured himself a measure, inhaling the aroma and taking a slow swallow. “You are a fool. Worse, you reek of

hubris. The gods do not like excessive pride, Mr. Knightly. This is our town. Chicago will never be yours as long as the Primes want it."

Knightly raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Mistakes were made, I concede. Nothing that cannot be mended. Let me be part of the team. I am a Soul Eater. There are not many of us in the mortal world or any world for that matter. My powers are not without merit."

Bartholomew was fast on his feet, Drake had to grant him that.

"We are vampires. Our Prime masters are Fae. Souls hold only marginal interest for either of us." Taylor gave an indifferent sort of shrug, as though already bored. He finished the brandy. "What it comes down to is this: the Prince doesn't like you."

"He doesn't even know me!"

"Oh, he does. He has met you several times to take your measure. You just didn't realize."

With an animal-like snarl, Knightly shouted a spell. His hands already raised and ready. A flash of energy zig-zagged out from his palms striking two of the vampires. The lightning threw them across the room to smash hard against the wood paneling on the walls. The paneling cracked and in the silence that followed, Drake heard the distinct sound of fabric tearing as the vampires slid to the floor.

"Now you've done it," sighed Taylor. "Those suits are brand new."

The men shook off the blows. Fangs extended, faces contorted into the stuff of nightmares, they sprang.

Chapter 15

Tamsin

Tamsin awoke. Death in a charcoal gray suit and tie stared down at her. “Did you kill my daughter?”

The Prime stood not more than a foot away, straight as a rapier and far more deadly. There was a darkness around him. A halo of power that did not so much burn as engulf. He had a fine-boned face with a hawk's beak of a nose, narrow eyes and sharp brow. Angelique looked very much like him, except for the nose. That must have come from her mother. For which she probably had been profoundly grateful.

Tamsin could not move. She was still chained to the chair. The chains eating into her skin made of thick ice, she saw, covering coils of cables and cords within. There was the hum of a generator behind her, keeping the ice frozen hard. Knightly was certainly ingenious. She was finding it hard to catch her breath, but that had nothing to do with the ice.

“Did you kill my daughter?” he asked again, his voice far colder than the icy bonds holding her down.

“No,” she said truthfully, meeting his eyes. “I did not.”

He stared at her for some time, saying nothing. The two of them were alone in what looked like a large, empty storeroom. From elsewhere in the building came screams and shouts, random gunfire, at least one explosion, and some unidentifiable roaring that sounded like a large beast. The Prime

and his progeny must have decided on a little debt collection from Knightly. Chicago style.

Tamsin chafed at her bonds, she needed to get free and find the Soul Eater. Find him and kill him. If the vampire did not kill her first. There was every possibility of that she felt.

The Prime stepped even closer and Tamsin couldn't help shrinking back in the chair.

"Many people have wanted to kill Angelique. Even me at times. Greedy and impatient, she was not an endearing child." He gave a deep, very fatherly sort of sigh. "Was it Drake?"

Her bloodline, or rather Angelique's, compelled that she answer him truthfully. Tamsin gave the tiniest nod.

"Yes, I thought so. Her schemes on Drake were ill-formed and completely unnecessary. She would not accept that love cannot be coerced. He was never cruel to her back in Fae; she was nothing but. Now she has paid the price." His deep voice had a curious, rhythmical lilt to it. "What is your name?"

"Tamsin West." Her breath came out in a cloud of vapor. The room colder than a deep freeze.

"Miss West, as far as I understand, it was neither your schemes nor machinations that led to Angelique's death, though you profited from it, you will admit." He paused as if waiting for confirmation.

Tamsin nodded. What choice did she have? He was right.

"You attempted to kill two of my vampires the other night by cutting off their heads."

"Self-defense," she said weakly.

He nodded, "That, I am willing to concede. Ours is a world of sudden violence. These things happen. The dark brothers were easily brought back to life. Drake is a gentleman and merely incapacitated them. The blond

pair, however, remain impaired by their ordeal. Those boys were never the strongest thinkers at the best of times and being separated from their brains for several days has rendered them all but useless. Not to mention they will be wearing turtlenecks for quite some time. I abhor turtlenecks.”

Turning his head to one side, he regarded her stonily, his eyes narrowed to slits. “You owe me a blood debt for them and for…” He indicated Angelique's body with a wave of his hand. “Are we in accord on this matter?”

Owing a favor is what landed Drake in servitude to Knightly. Unfortunately, Tamsin had little choice. Unless she wanted the Prime to kill her. That would free Drake immediately, of course, which was her intent one way or the other. Inwardly, she shivered. There were deaths and deaths. She would prefer very much not to die at the Prime's hands – or teeth.

She swallowed her fear and tried to meet his eyes, “Agreed.”

A shimmer of charcoal gray and before Tamsin even had time to be surprised, the vampire broke the thick ice bands holding her. Water must not be his weakness. He stepped back, allowing her to rise and rub some feeling back into her hands and feet.

Tamsin could feel the warmth emanating from him in waves of heat. He must be using some of his control over the air to warm the space around him. Handy skill. The Prince waited while Tamsin endured the pain of returning circulation. He was very still, motionless in a way only supernaturals could achieve, staring at her unblinking. When he finally spoke, Tamsin jumped in surprise.

“I have never met a soul seeker. A jumper. What a strange life you lead, Miss West,” he laughed. A very honest sort of laugh. “Even to someone like me, it seems strange! Can you believe it?” He reached out to smooth

the chopped fringe of bangs away from her face. “Whatever have you done to Angelique's beautiful hair?”

It took immense effort for Tamsin not to flinch as he reached for her with those long, tapered fingers. In fact, it was taking a lot of effort not to run screaming from the room with her arms over her head like a little girl. She wasn't sure if the Prince was always cloaked in this shroud of fearsome power or if he was producing the effect especially for her. Primes, Drake said, were Elder Blood. Like faeries. Faeries were fey, deeply dangerous creatures. Tamsin had encountered them on several occasions and come out the worse for it. Which is pretty much how all encounters with faeries went, she'd been told.

Compared to the vibe she was getting from the Prime, though, they seemed positively benign. She sensed there was much going on behind that regal, ancient face. Her connection to Angelique let her feel it but was not deep enough to help her analyze the situation.

His fingers slid down her arm to take her hand. His palm warm and dry. “Would you like to forget the past, Miss West? I could make you forget all the pain and regret. Become this body fully. You could make her a better person, my Angelique.”

Tamsin suddenly felt light-headed and fell, more than sat, back down in the metal chair. His offer was unexpected, to say the least. She had no doubt the Prince could pull it off, whatever his ulterior motives might be. And with Elder Blood, royal or not, there had to be hidden motives. Even in her limited experience, she was sure the Primes were a deeply devious race.

Duprey's offer... It made her catch her breath. Never had she confronted so much power in one person. Soul Eaters used magic. The Prime *was* magic, right down to his bones. Angelique must have similar power, the same deep magic as her father. There were still shadowy places in this

body that Tamsin could not feel. Perhaps the power was hiding there, just under the surface, only a little out of reach.

Everything around her faded away as she considered his words.

To forget.

All of it.

And become what? Would she be Angelique or Tamsin or some sort of hybrid? Instinctively she sensed she would not be the person sitting right here, right now. Tempting. Very tempting. No more searches for corpses-to-be. Body and at least spirit, if not soul, together. What would happen to her sense of purpose? There was more than herself at stake in this deep game of dark enchantments. The Soul Eaters would go on with their warped spells, dooming innocent people to dust. Every one of them she killed enabled someone else to live. She had made a vow to fight them, to take down as many as she could and maybe put herself back together in the process. That purpose should not change, even for this.

The room came back into focus and filled once again with the sounds of battle raging on the other floors.

The Prime seemed to understand her decision without any words passing between them. Gracing her with a courtly bow filled with old world courtesy, he helped her to her feet.

“Let me say goodbye to my child.” The mantle of dark magic melted from him revealing for a moment exactly what he was in that room, a father grieving for a lost daughter.

Leaning forward, he grasped the back of her head and kissed Angelique tenderly on both cheeks, murmuring softly in a beautifully rhythmical language Tamsin did not understand.

They stood like that for some time as he spoke. His embrace was warm. She hugged him back without thinking, murmuring, “I’m so very sorry.”

He pushed away to look searchingly at her, his steel gray eyes wide in surprise, “I believe you sincerely are.”

The clock was ticking.

“I must go,” was all she could think to say. “I have to help someone. My friend.”

“Drake. Of course. How very ironic.” He released her. “Until we meet again, Miss West.”

There was an undercurrent to his words that made her understand they would meet again. Very definitely. Shivering inwardly, she could only hope it wouldn't be too soon. Resisting the temptation to look back over her shoulder, she fled the room to find Drake and Knightly.

Death in the charcoal gray suit watched her go, standing silently for a long time in the empty room.

Chapter 16

Tamsin and Drake

Chaos reigned up and down the warehouse. Stairs, storage rooms, offices: all had been turned into a battleground. Knightly had a frightening assortment of supernaturals on his payroll apparently. The vampires, silent and implacable, however, were a formidable force. So far the two sides appeared evenly matched. At least judging by the bodies and gore.

Tamsin was grateful the vampires left her alone as she ran zig-zagging through the mayhem. The place had looked large from the little she saw of the outside, but not this large. She couldn't seem to get her bearings. Everything swam dizzily in front of her. Hopefully, Drake was still in Knightly's sitting room. Although she wasn't sure exactly where that was.

She moved warily on floors slippery with blood. Oh, for just a little lick, the Angelique part of her whined. A sip or two of the sweet, red nectar. Desperately she sniffed at the scarlet streaks and made a face. Neither vampire nor human. No good to her. Angelique's body was weak and getting weaker. She was a Prime, surely she had reserves of power tucked away? What secrets was Angelique holding back? She had called on the power of air before. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be a particularly helpful element at the moment and she was so very tired.

A body plummeted from above, sprawling practically at her feet. She wrinkled her nose at the smell, sickening to the Prime: shapeshifter. Glancing up, her heart leaped to see the face staring down.

“Drake!”

“Wait there, don't move.” He leaped from impossibly high to land softly on his feet.

With a grace that belied his size, he was beside her, bruising her mouth with the strength of his kisses.

She held him tightly, with the same passion if not the same strength. A volley of gunshots brought them back to the dangers of here and now. He pulled her with him, their backs flat against the wall. They were both breathing heavily, though not from exertion.

“This place is like an M.C. Escher print,” he panted. “The stairs and hallways seem to lead everywhere and nowhere all at the same time.”

Tamsin nodded. “Some kind of wards or spells. I can feel them buzzing.” She slipped her hand in his. “How did you get away?”

Squeezing her hand, he gave her a small half-smile, “The Prime's public relations committee paid a social call. Knightly became, shall we say, distracted.”

A chorus of screams echoed further along the corridor, coming closer, then fading away.

“Can't blame him.” Drake leaned away from the wall to scan the corridor beyond. “If I was under attack by the Duprey clan, I'd have a hard time focusing on anything besides running like hell! Which is pretty much what I've been doing trying to find you in this maze.”

“I met Angelique's father.”

His brows arched up.

She nodded, “Exactly! Terrifying man.”

There were more gunshots, this time very close.

“I'm thinking we might want to wait outside until the field of battle becomes a little less crowded. We can make sure Knightly doesn't slip away before it's our turn.”

Drake gave a quick nod of agreement. “Let's try the upstairs windows, they seem less guarded by spells. The vamps came through the one in the study with no problem. We could climb down the outside of the building.” He looked to the stairway, “If we can find it again.”

“Up or down?”

“You pick.”

She gave a tired sigh, “Up. It was up, wasn't it?”

If she had been in full vamp form, the spells would have proved no impediment. She could have tracked Drake's scent back the way he had come. To her, he smelled fresh as a field of summer wheat. Unmistakable. But she wasn't and she couldn't. Several floors up they found a set of steel doors that looked familiar. Throwing them open, they ran in, full of hope. It was indeed almost identical to the drawing room, decorated in a very similar style including the big plate glass windows overlooking the water below and the dancing flames of the fireplace opposite. They gave each other high fives.

This room had something the other hadn't: a pair of Fire Tigers crouched and waiting in one corner. Very big ones. Their long, striped tails whipped back and forth and they bared their teeth in anticipation of a meal. As they sprang – one at Drake, one at her – the big cats burst fully into flame.

The impact threw Tamsin to the floor. She brought her legs up, pushing against the beast's belly with her boots, both hands gripping the throat and jaws. It roared in her face; topaz eyes searing into hers through the flames. The heat coming off the beast took her breath away. Desperately trying to keep the monster's teeth from her throat, it was a few heartbeats before she realized her hands weren't burning.

A horrible, howling scream and the other Fire Tiger fell nearly on top of her, jaws agape, eyes already clouding over in death. Drake loomed above her, his arm raised for a killing blow with an iron poker from the fireplace.

Primes were linked to elemental powers and only *one* element their downfall. That meant Angelique must have control over fire.

“Wait!” She screamed, “Don't kill it yet.”

Letting Angelique's body take over, she felt the flow of fire run up her arms and over her chest. Drake's flannel shirt began to smolder. This body, Angelique's body, literally drank up the heat. The fiery air tasted sweet. Every ripple of flame filled her with power; feeding her hunger. The beast struggled to be free, recognizing a predator stronger than itself. Tamsin, with the vampire's fingers, hung grimly on until the tiger fell from her, a blackened, drained husk.

So much power.

Tamsin didn't stand, she levitated up from the floor.

She was nearly naked, the clothes burned to threads. Even Angelique's sturdy motorcycle boots were smoking at the edges.

Drake stared at her floating there, willing Tamsin's form to appear. All he could see were the thin, hard planes of the Prime's body covered in her mantle of skull tattoos.

“Tamsin?” He couldn't hide the hesitation in his voice.

She didn't hear him. The world slowed to a stop. Primes seemed to be able to move between time almost effortlessly. Never more so than now. Drake was as still as a photograph, so fast had she become. The fire was a drug revving up her heart, her mind, everything she was or had ever been. Her past swam before her in a dizzying kaleidoscope of images. The weaknesses and vulnerability. The monsters who had taken that weakness and lured her to her death and the ephemeral spirit she had become.

Nature versus nurture is not just a concept for a Soul Seeker. You had to know where you ended and the new body began – metaphysically speaking. Otherwise, you could lose yourself. Right now, Tamsin didn't want to know where those limits lay. She didn't care. This body was amazing; the energy surging through her like rocket fuel. She hadn't felt like this with the air or sand. Fire must be special to the Princess. Her element of choice. To be able to manipulate flame! The feeling was almost as strong as the rush from the blood in the museum.

The Prince had already more or less given her his permission to keep the body. Maybe this is what he meant. Becoming one with Angelique's powers.

She looked at Drake. If she couldn't kill Knightly, then she would have to die to free the Fae.

Angelique's vampire blood had the ability to beguile. She could seduce anyone, anywhere, anytime. Perhaps for Drake, the passion of these last days had been just that: the Prime's blood taking control. Was he worth giving up all this power for? Did he really care? Did she? She could just walk away from all of them.

Drake pushed his Fae powers to the limit, slipstreaming into time, right beside her. He focused on reaching the flaming figure vibrating almost invisibly three feet off the ground.

This would be just like Angelique; he thought viciously, leaving exactly enough spiritual residue to contaminate the unprepared. The woman tainted everything she touched.

Reaching for Tamsin, knowing her new powers could kill him, Drake ran his hands along the bony line of Angelique's back and hips. Her skin was searing hot and she was breathing far too fast, sucking at the air in quick, shallow gasps. He kissed her, though her mouth singed his like hot coals, murmuring the words, “Come back, Tamsin. Come back to me.”

Tamsin felt him even though she didn't really see him. His lips were cool and the clean, pure taste of the Fae brought back their hours together. Her fingertips had already memorized the feel of his face beneath them, the smell of his skin, the tickling tease of hair on his chest and belly as his strong body pressed her down. She had been so free laying between his legs, his heat upon her. For the first time since her death, she had felt whole again.

Whole as Tamsin.

With that thought, she broke the fever of Angelique's possession. She was Tamsin West and she was stronger than this. Heart strong. Better than any evil vampire princess, Prime or not. Her breathing slowed. Tamsin blinked and she gave a little cry, as though waking from a nightmare.

Under his hands, Drake felt the bony contours of Angelique swell and soften. Her breasts pressed against his chest and the hard line of Angelique's mouth became round and soft and sweet. She was Tamsin again, in his arms.

"Tamsin, I thought I'd lost you." He buried his face in her hair, kissing the top of her head, then her eyes, cheeks, and throat. "I have to tell you something," he murmured into her ear, his breath on her skin.

"*Shhh*," she raised her face, laying a finger to his lips. "You don't have to say anything. It's just the blood talking. I know. I understand Angelique's powers better now. You were, *are* beguiled by the Prime. Her blood. She's the one you made love to. You don't have to pretend. Knowing that doesn't change anything for me."

He looked at her dumbfounded, his eyes staring in disbelief. "You think I made love to Angelique? That I said those things and felt those things with *her*?" He took both of her hands in his. Immediately he felt Tamsin's little fingers and palms, not the sharp talons of the Prime. "I made love to," he paused, his voice hoarse. "I see a small blond woman who's long hair

seems forever tangled. Who looks back at me with eyes as gray as a stormy sea. She has a little crooked nose and round mouth set in a heart-shaped face, one bottom tooth just a tiny bit in front of the others. She makes me smile. She makes me laugh.”

Tamsin was astounded. For a moment she couldn't breathe. “That's, oh God, that's me. You saw the real me! As I was before. That *tooth!* I had the straightest teeth except for that little flaw. My mother said I didn't need braces and I begged her for them. We fought about it all the time when I was in high school.” She gave a laugh that turned into a ragged sob, “How could you see me?”

“I don't know. Maybe I was meant to find you or the other way around. Magic has an awful symmetry to it. Whether the Gods are toying with us or helping I have never been able to decide.” He rested his fingers in the little valley between her breasts. “Your human heart, that is what I felt beating next to mine. I made love to you, Tamsin.”

She didn't know vampires could cry. Drake held her close, running his hands over her bare skin.

“I thought I was gone forever.”

“Not to those with eyes to see, Tamsin. I will look for you. Always. I promise.”

His eyes turned opaque and he froze.

Knightly had found them.

Chapter 17

Tamsin

The Soul Eater was bloodied and battered, the elegant silk dressing gown in tatters. She did not think the battle with the Prince's vampires was going well. In one hand he held an amulet that glowed with power, in the other a short sword, completely black, that seemed to be made of crystal. He shut the door, sliding home thick bolts.

“Take the sword, Drake.”

Raising one hand, the Fae easily caught the weapon as Knightly tossed it to him.

“Defend the door.”

Drake stood silent sentinel, sword up and ready. The door shook as whatever was on the other side started to batter its way in.

Tamsin wasted no more time. She recited a spell held ready on the tip of her tongue. The magic caught Knightly full on, throwing him up to the ceiling, then smashing him back to the ground. As though held by invisible strings, he soared to the opposite side of the room. Tamsin slipstreamed beside him, grabbing his hair. She smashed his forehead onto her upraised knee. Fresh lines of scarlet ran from his ears and eyes.

“Did you think I came unarmed, Knightly? I've learned a few tricks.”

He didn't struggle. He laughed. There was an edge to it; sharp as a knife. “Parlor tricks is all you know.”

He aimed the amulet at her.

A volley of razor-edged spells ripped through the air. Tamsin called on her body to react and she ran between them, whirling and dancing with the doom. She levitated, rising up to the ceiling where she crouched, upside-down like a spider.

The door shattered and three vamps burst in. Tamsin could smell them, the same familiar smell as the others. Each vamp soldier had iron claws as long as daggers attached to heavy bands at their wrists. They swung them like battle axes. Drake spun, meeting every blow. The black sword was everywhere at once, blocking, attacking, defending. The blade seemed to absorb the energy from the vampire's attack and the battle was eerily quiet.

Not so her and Knightly's. Their spells screamed at one another like banshees, ripping gaping holes in the walls and ceiling as the two of them *slipstreamed* around the room in a blur of motion, everywhere at once. She deflected one black rune that ripped so deeply into the ceiling, a desk and chair set came crashing down from the room above.

The furniture landed, just as it had stood, in a cloud of cement and dust in the middle of the room. A Dire Wolf, or something much like one, stood crouched on the desk, apparently shocked into silence by the sudden fall. It gave a puzzled look around and both she and Knightly paused in their fight to stare back.

There were voices from above. The monstrous beast's whiskers twitched and its lips curled into a snarling growl. With a mighty leap, the wolf turned from them and jumped back up through the hole. A fresh round of screaming started.

Tamsin tuned it out, focusing on her own battle. Drawing on her new powers, she summoned fire from the dancing flames in the fireplace, shaping them into the form of a blazing dragon. Jaws gaping, it whirled and spun, snatching up the Soul Eater to hold him in the air where he danced in an almost comical fashion. The sorcerer slashed at the dragon

with his emblem, cutting through the spell beast's jaw. Knightly fell to the floor, singed and burning. His long, shining hair stood up on his crown, nothing left but a smoking thatch. He felt it with one hand and howled in rage.

Grabbing a vase of flowers, he tossed them, spilling the water. He brought his palms together in an exaggerated motion. The water swelled into a flood. Cresting into a wave, it washed over the fire dragon. Hot, thick clouds of steam filled the room.

Knightly was not entirely correct when he said she had nothing but parlor tricks. She had learned a lot in her years searching for the Soul Eaters. Even with this body, she did not know quite enough. They were too evenly matched. Each raging spell canceling the other's out. She could not beat him one-on-one in a game of magic. Not yet.

With an evil smile, Knightly used his not-so-secret weapon.

“Drake, attack Angelique.”

She had feared this, knew it was inevitable. Her feelings for Drake and his for her obvious.

The Fae had disabled two of the vamps. Still holding the other off, he came for her, staring with those dead, white eyes.

Tamsin had been told by other supernaturals if she wished to succeed in her quest, she must be unemotional and calculating. “Become as cold as your enemy,” was their advice. Everyone in her way should be nothing more than collateral damage. Like Knightly said of Nicole.

She could not consign Drake to that category. Not him. She would regret it forever. Quite literally in her case since she could never die the true death without her soul. As a lost spirit, she would live in another body again and again. Drake had only this one life. And life was so terribly precious.

She danced away from the black sword. Her heart constricting with regret, she had been hoping for more. More time to explore his revelations that he could see her. More time in this body. More time with him.

That's what everyone thought in battle.

Just a little more time, please.

Carefully positioning a counterspell to move Knightly into position, she ran towards the Soul Eater. Up the wall, faster than the eye could see, across the ceiling, flipping backward and coming down directly behind. She grabbed him and using the momentum, just kept going. Angelique's great strength propelled them both through the giant plate glass window overlooking the water below. The glass shattered into large, jagged pieces and they were reflected, locked together like lovers, over and over as they fell.

It seemed to take forever, that fall. The freezing air whipping past them, slipping through the thick flurries of snow. They struck the water at last with bone-jarring force, breaking through the thin layer of ice that had formed in the night. The shock of the impact cracked Knightly's concentration as she hoped it would. Tamsin could feel the energy field waver as she held him tightly.

The lake closed over them both. Looking up through the freezing water, even as she struggled to hold the sorcerer, her vampire vision zeroed in on Drake's face. He was staring out the broken window, the look of horror in his eyes mirroring the one she had seen when she first awoke in this body. Was it only a few nights ago? So much had happened. She sank deeper, watching helplessly as he climbed up on the shattered frame, realizing he was going to jump. Try to save her. His legs tensed for the leap. That's when she saw the shimmer of charcoal gray.

The Prime stepped out from between time. Faster than any *slipstreaming* she had ever seen. His beautiful, tapered hands gripped the

Fae's shoulders and they were gone in a single heartbeat. The current took her and Knightly and she saw no more.

They were dragged under the ice. The water so cold it burned like fire. Water filled her lungs and she finally lost her hold on him – as she knew she would. This had been a delaying tactic only, keeping him busy saving himself instead of his Faerie bargain. Breaking away from her, Knightly kicked desperately up toward the surface. Angelique's weakness was water. The liquid swiftly leached all power from her, leaving her helpless.

Death, as Tamsin had observed, has many subtle and varied layers. But dying is never easy. No matter how many times you've done it. Tamsin fought blindly at the end, the panic overwhelming her. Desperate to die and desperate to breathe in equal measures. She called out Drake's name in her mind.

As she sank into the freezing black depths of Lake Michigan, she almost thought she heard him call back.

Chapter 18

Drake

March is still cold in Chicago, though much of the snow was gone.

Drake was on Michigan Avenue, right in the middle of the Magnificent Mile. A sunny Saturday that everyone seemed intent on enjoying. The hint of spring encouraging enough today that the terrace of the coffee house was full even if the little tables were still clustered around several large tower heaters.

Drake sat apart from the rest, a mug of cappuccino warming his hands, his eyes unfocused, thoughts turned inward. He'd been spending a lot of time like this since he lost Tamsin. Her sacrifice had freed him from Knightly's bargain, as she intended. Funny, he didn't feel very free these days.

Chicago was not his town. It belonged to the Duprey clan and that was one family he went out of his way to avoid. The well-fortified bolt hole was just a temporary arrangement, on loan from an acquaintance. Drake had made a home for himself in the southwest. Reveling in the vast empty spaces of the Arizona desert and New Mexico. As unlike his lush, green homeland as could be imagined. Perhaps that was exactly why he liked it. Nothing there reminded him of Fae. He only stayed on in this cold, windy place to take care

of unfinished business. Matters of life and death.

Sipping his coffee, he glanced at the people strolling back and forth. It took him a moment to realize one of the passing throngs had stopped on the other side of the terrace railing. A woman with white-blond hair, masses of it piled in curls and ringlets, was staring at him. Her clothing was a frothy confection of cape, dress, lace petticoats and shawls in an assorted palette of pastels. The ensemble was topped incongruously by a large and extraordinarily ugly knit cap in orange and green with a pompom that had seen better days.

Much better days.

“Do they have almond croissants here?” she asked, her head cocked to one side. “I’d kill for an almond croissant.”

He looked in her eyes. They were enormous. The palest of blue; the lids tattooed with curling black lines making them appear even larger. Then he looked deeper.

When he spoke, his voice was barely a whisper, “I’ve been sitting in coffee shops for a month and a half all over this damn city hoping you would find me.”

“I will look for you as long as you will look back, Drake. Oh crap!”

'Oh crap?' he thought.

A furious barking broke out behind her and Tamsin took off running, skirts and petticoats kicking up behind her. A pack of dogs – purebred and mutt, big and small – came running around the corner, paws pounding the pavement. Barking joyously, they took off in pursuit.

Drake watched his soul lost girl disappear in a fluffy blur of lace around the corner.

“What the hell?” he said out loud.

Abandoning his coffee, Drake hopped over the terrace railing and ran after Tamsin and her petticoats and the pack of dogs.

He rounded the corner and could not see her. He heard the dogs, though, and took off in that direction. Criss-crossing the busy streets past iconic brand-name stores along the Miracle Mile, Drake gave chase. They were moving very fast. Tamsin zig-zagging back and forth and in and out of stores. She wasn't that hard to follow since he mostly just asked groups of staring pedestrians which way the impromptu circus parade had gone.

Some blocks away from their starting point, a furious whisper made him stop in his tracks. “Drake, Drake!”

He was by the water. Straining his eyes, he looked left and right.

“Tamsin?”

“Help!” came a squeaky voice from somewhere near his feet.

Leaning over the low wall of the river walk, he saw a poof of petticoats and the wretched looking pompom and cap over a large amount of hair.

One-handed, Drake reached down and pulled Tamsin up and over.

“Darling...” he started to say, his voice husky with longing and, truth be told, a little hoarse from running.

“Shush!” she held her finger to his lips.

The noisy pack seemed to have temporarily lost the scent. They were some distance away, on the other side of the canal if his tracking instincts were correct.

She slumped against him, her chest heaving. "I think I lost them. What did you say?"

In answer, he swept her up and off her feet, into his arms, his mouth on hers. He pulled this stranger to him, frothy petticoats and all, knowing Tamsin was inside. Dogs be damned. When he kissed her, there she was, kissing him right back. That little bow mouth and the crooked nose, the gray eyes staring unflinchingly into his.

"I missed you," he mouthed the words around her lips, unwilling to let go.

"Me, too."

People passing by on the riverside walk smiled and looked at each other nodding, it was nice to see people in love.

He held her close and she was content to snuggle next to him, breathing in his scent, her fingers restlessly stroking his cheeks.

"I thought I might not find you. I thought... maybe, you... that..." her voice trailed off into silence.

"That I wouldn't be here? Looking for you? That it was just the words of a man. Words of convenience."

She nodded.

He turned his head so she could see his eyes. "All the creatures of Fae are passionate. Far too passionate for our own or any mortal's good. We fall in and out of lust at a moment's notice. But deeper feelings? They are frightening even to us. One of the

reasons we prefer not to get entangled is because we fall very hard. I haven't been able to get you out of my mind since that chaotic night at the sorcerer's. When you jumped into the water, I knew what you had done. For me. You gave up the power of a Prime. Power you needed.”

There was a catch in his voice and for a moment he turned away to compose himself. “Remember your sweet Swiss succubus and the safety deposit box? You had me hooked right there, though I didn't know it then. If you do not want to be with me, Tamsin West, I am not sure how I will be able to go on.”

Theirs was a strange world without absolutes. Tamsin wasn't quite sure if his speech translated to 'I love you'. Yet it was close enough. She had missed him desperately. They might not have a happily ever after but they had here and now. More than that, she could not hope for.

“And I want to be with you too, Drake without a last name.”

He smiled and there was no more talking for quite a while after that.

Somewhere nearby a dog barked and Tamsin jumped in his arms.

Looking her up and down, he was able to take in the size, thickness, and color of her head gear. To say it was very out of place with the fairy-tale femininity of her outfit was a vast understatement. “My dearest, darling, soul-less little Tamsin. As much as I have missed you, I have to say that is a very ugly cap.”

She lifted it just high enough so he could see a pair of little,

white, curling horns, like ram's horns, high up on either side of her head.

His eyes grew very big indeed, "What are you?"

She gave him a rueful grin. "I seem to be a cross between Little Bo Peep and one of her sheep, which I find profoundly disturbing. If I start to bleat, you must gag me."

His eyes took on a sly gleam. "Sounds like fun."

She gave him such a look that he was unable to hold back the laughter that burst forth. Tamsin being Tamsin, she couldn't help laughing as well. She laughed so hard her eyes watered and then, much to her surprise, the tears began to fall in earnest. It had been so very hard to get back to him. All the while wondering if he would even be there, looking back. Drake held her while she cried, whispering words of comfort, kissing the tears away.

When she calmed down enough, he had to ask, "What is up with the dogs?"

She made a face. "I don't know! They just keep chasing me. Is it the shepherdess thing or the sheep thing? They don't want to hurt me. The crazy mutts just fall all over me licking and licking. There hasn't been time to go through the spells I've learned and see if I have one for repelling packs of adoring dogs. Somehow I don't think so. Hasn't been a top priority, you know?"

He laughed. They had not spent much time together, however, he felt this was the sort of situation Tamsin found herself in rather often.

Still holding her, he leaned against the low wall as the

afternoon turned to evening. Stayed as the dogs continued to bark in the distance, questing for her scent. Stayed until even Drake could not ignore the growling demands of Tamsin's stomach.

“Hungry?”

She nodded vigorously. “Starving.”

“Why am I not surprised.”

She smiled and kissed him.

“Come on, we’ll get something nice for you.”

Drake set her down on the street and together they walked arm-in-arm towards the familiar logo at a coffeehouse on the corner. Tamsin cast a worried look up and down the street, watching for wagging tails. She was thinking they might need a quick getaway.

“Inside or out?” Drake asked.

Tamsin motioned outside in case she needed a running start. He said he would fetch the coffee and food if she wanted to sit.

She shook her head and holding his hand, stayed by him. At this moment she could not bear to have Drake out of her sight.

March nights in Chicago are not meant for outdoor tables, generally. The terrace here was full anyway, thanks to its prime location and the generous number of heaters glowing warmly.

Tamsin insisted they choose seats by the railing to keep an eye on the street. Even by the heaters, it was chilly and Drake took off his thick, brown coat to wrap around her as he pulled Tamsin onto his lap. It was the same one Tamsin had walked out in. She pointed this out and he said he'd had it mended by a skilled goblin tailor he found online in the Dark Pages – the information web for

the supernatural substrata. It was good work. You couldn't even tell the sleeves had been ripped off

Drake smiled as she *ooohed* and *aahed* over the coffee and pile of croissants, the crumbs falling on his coat, just as before. He watched her eat, his arms wrapped around her little waist.

“Oh, I've got something for you.”

He reached into the inside pocket of his coat, which happened to be resting next to her breast since she was wearing it. He let his fingers linger before pulling out an object.

“I thought you might want this back.”

Tamsin's heart beat hard in joy and surprise. The angry little face of Puzuzu stared up at her from Drake's hand.

“Knightly left it just sitting there on the mantelpiece after things turned, shall we say... hectic?”

“Oh thank you, thank you so much!” She kissed him and there was no more talking.

Sometime later, out of the corner of her eye, even distracted as she was by Drake, Tamsin saw a black shadow. The shadow flowed out of nowhere, over the railing to crouch by their table. The darkness shimmered and an enormous, gray dog-like creature popped into sight. The beast grinned at Tamsin showing rows of teeth and licked its whiskers with a bright red, forked tongue.

She gulped and tried to rise, automatically reaching for the dagger hidden in her voluminous skirts.

Drake pulled her hand back, “Take it easy. No cause for alarm. This is a new friend.”

The beast reached out one massive paw for her to shake. Tamsin automatically took it.

“Desmond, Tamsin. Tamsin, Desmond.”

“The dog thing's name is Desmond?” Even with everything Tamsin had seen since she turned to dust, a giant shadowy dog looking very much like an Irish Wolfhound with nearly twice its mass and named Desmond was just a little odd.

“He is a Capelthwaite. From Fae. Like me. We met in the aftermath of the Duprey's raid on Knightly's HQ. Dez has a score to settle with that little man just as we do.”

The hound nodded and grinned even more widely, licking his teeth and savagely flicking a long, barbed, prehensile tail.

“He's sentient.” Tamsin realized, saying it out loud.

“Very much so.”

Capelthwaites lived along the rocky shores of Faerie seas, Drake explained. Their dark gray fur grew matted and hard as a rhino's horn, impervious to arrows, swords, tooth, and claw. When aroused to anger, their bodies flared with a heat that could sear skin and set wood aflame. Their understanding was great but they had no form of speech the Fae races could mimic. Instead, the dogs relied on a simple form of sign language to communicate. Their nimble clawed paws, which aided them around the steep cliff-faces they called home, formed easily into gestures.

Tamsin offered one of the croissants on her plate to Desmond. Using his clever tail, he took it and held it to his mouth, licking his lips.

Looking around, she couldn't help noticing, no one seemed to be staring at this dog the size of a pony.

“Are you or is he,” Tamsin pointed at the dog-thing, “holding the glamour over us? Because there has to be a reason no one is staring.”

Drake put his hand up, “Me.”

A scream of tires, screeching brakes and crunching metal had Tamsin up out of Drake's lap like a shot. Her adoring pack of dogs came running across the street heedless of the traffic, barking, slobbering and baying as though they had found their hearts' desire.

“Oh crap!” Tamsin and Drake said simultaneously.

She cringed. Everyone was certainly staring now, magic or no magic.

Paws on the railing, muzzles, heads and forequarters pushing through the gaps, the sight of her set off a seismic wave of tail wagging.

Gathering her petticoats, Tamsin prepared to make a run for it through the coffeehouse.

Desmond the Capelthwaite reared up on his hind legs and put out a paw as though to restrain her. Turning with a big doggy grin, he confronted the pack and for lack of a better word, talked to them. He didn't really bark. The creature's voice was rhythmic and melodious, rising and falling almost like a yodel. To Tamsin's great and utter relief, the pack quieted as if on command and very shortly turned around and trotted down the street.

She and Drake looked at each other, then back at Desmond.

Taking a bite of the pastry still clutched in his tail, the animal signed to Drake with his long, clever paws.

“What did he say?”

“Says you're a charmer.”

Tamsin waved away the compliment, “Oh, that's really sweet. What about the dogs, though?”

Desmond rolled his eyes and signed faster.

Drake laughed. “Not charming, a Charmer witch! Your little Bo Peep persona charms animals and people as well. She must have been in animal-charming mode when she died and you just picked it up and ran with it. Literally.”

Tamsin felt the blood drain from her face. Sometimes it was hard to think about the life lost even though it allowed her to live again. Whatever she had been, this body had a life. Places to go and people to see.

Drake put his arm around her shoulder and kissed her forehead, “I know Tamsin, I know. This is hard.”

The big dog made a sound that was like a human clearing his throat. Apparently, he hadn't finished speaking.

She watched as the beast rocked back on his hind legs, uncurling all the claws from the thick pads on both front paws. He moved the claws and his tail in swift, strong gestures.

Tamsin waited quietly as the two had their 'conversation'.

Drake stood abruptly and the Capelthwaite jumped back to the sidewalk, “Come on, we've got someplace to go.”

“Does it involve getting naked? Very soon?” she whispered,

her lips brushing the lobe of his ear.

“No.” He lifted her to her feet and jumped over the railing as lithe and silent as the great beast. Sweeping her up and over, he set her on the sidewalk, pulling her close. His lips brushing her ear now, he said just as softly, “I mean, yes. We will arrange that quite as quickly as possible.” He pressed against her so she could feel her affect on him.

It was her turn to give him a sly smile, “Naughty man.”

Hand in hand, they followed Desmond down the street.

“Well, then, does it involve food?” she asked hopefully.

“Are you never not hungry?”

She shook her head.

“No, it does not involve food.”

She made sad sounds of disappointment.

"Knightly?"

"We've got a lead."

They walked briskly on, Tamsin trotting to keep up with Drake's long strides, her wide skirts swishing. Up ahead she saw the Capelthwaite stop by a row of brightly lit shop windows. His twisty tail was standing up behind him curled into what looked like a question mark, head cocked to one side, watching them. Though he was in shadow form, she could see clearly through the glamour now.

Drake stopped as well and taking Tamsin's shoulders, turned her to face him. “What we have to do first and foremost is this.”

He paused and she looked up at him expectantly.

“Get you a new hat.”

And she laughed.

*To be continued in Dust to Dust 2: Witch You Were Here
Keep scrolling for a preview of Tamsin and Drakes next adventure.*

Preview: Dust to Dust 2: Witch You Were Here

Dust to Dust Book 2t: Witch You Were Here

By Eden Crowne

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Chapter One

Tamsin

The necromancer gave Tamsin a come-slither stare from across the crowded room. He was devilishly handsome, or maybe handsome devil was a better description. He had mahogany brown hair and eyes the color of an alpine lake. The artful shadow of stubble on his face highlighted strong cheek bones, a fine-shaped jaw and dimpled chin ever so slightly off center. Unfortunately, the aura he projected was gray as old dry bones.

Tamsin, or rather her new body, knew what he was. Unbidden, she saw his energy turn from a gray glow to a thick soup of fog as she approached. Faces peered out, young and old, features twisted in silent screams. Clearly a necromancer; carrying his dead with him.

As their eyes met, a cold shiver of dread slid down her spine. She did not like necromancers and their obsession with death. Which was ironic, considering she was dead.

A gang of Soul Eaters sliced and diced her soul up into five pieces, leaving her nothing but a swirl of spiritual dust. Dust, as she found, is not

the end. There are many worlds beyond the borders of the afterlife. In the Shadowlands, Tamsin found a mentor. She learned how to jump into a body on the verge of death and live again. Live to hunt her killers.

She was currently borrowing the body of a Charmer. A witch with the power to beguile just about anything with a pulse: human, animal, and those *whatever's* in-between. She had only been in this body a few days and was still learning her secrets. The witch was Faerie, not human. Otherwise, Tamsin couldn't have jumped into the body upon the woman's death. The universe imposed rules even after losing a soul. One of the strictest: she could only jump into the fresh corpse of a non-human supernatural or the body just spit her back out again.

Giving her white knit cap a coquettish tilt – and making sure it covered the little spiral horns on either side of her head – Tamsin swished and swayed her way through the champagne-drinking, art-buying group of men and women, masked and costumed for the gala Museum Charity Ball. She ramped up her charm-o-meter as she passed the dance floor, wondering if it worked on sorcerers.

Charmer magic certainly worked on humans. Without exception, every single man and woman turned to smile as she passed, their eyes sparkling with interest behind jeweled masks, raising their glasses in greeting. A tall man reached out from the graceful whirl and twirl of the waltzing couples trying to pull her into the dance. She narrowly eluded his grip and wished she had access to some of this magic *before* she was murdered.

Tamsin was currently inhabiting the body of a Charmer. A witch with the power to beguile just about anything with a pulse: human, animal, and those *whatever's* in-between. She'd lost her last body, a Prime Vampire Princess named Angelique, saving her lover Drake from Bartholomew Knightly. Knightly was one of the Soul Eaters who had doomed Tamsin to

dust. She'd been planning to kill him to take back the piece of her soul he held. The plan had not gone quite as expected. Knightly escaped and she died. Again.

She'd only been in this body a few days and was still learning her secrets. The witch was Faerie, not human. Otherwise, Tamsin couldn't have jumped into the body upon the woman's death. The universe imposed rules even after losing a soul and turning into a swirl of spiritual dust. One of the strictest: she could only jump into the fresh corpse of a non-human supernatural or the body just spit her back out again.

Tamsin was still wearing the clothes she'd transitioned in. A frothy confection of layered petticoats, skirts, overdress, laced bodice and little cape, all in a cascading palette of pastels. Her feet in old-fashioned eyelet ankle boots. She had more hair than several women combined, nearly white, piled and curled on her head. The up-do was looking a little disheveled since Tamsin was not particularly skilled in the artful arrangement of ringlets. Luckily the outfit was not out of place here in the costume ball.

She'd meant to get a change of clothes except her Fae lover, Drake, had been so busy getting her *out* of her skirts, petticoats and stockings at every opportunity following their long separation, there just hadn't been enough time. Or energy. An image of his muscular, hard body, the black, dagger-like tattoos ringing his waist and emphasizing the sharp, cut-lines of his hips popped into her mind's eye and she felt her legs go wobbly.

Dead or alive, this whole love thing was very intoxicating.

She bumped into one of the uniformed serving staff nearly knocking over a tray of Beluga caviar-topped crackers.

And distracting.

The sorcerer licked his lips at her approach.

Earlier in the day, someone rang Drake's mobile from a blocked

number. They were in his borrowed, fortified bolt hole in Englewood on Chicago's rough east side. Drake's cell phone ringing was not unusual. Exiled from Fae over a century before, he carved out a new life in the mortal world as a Hunter. Tracking all sorts of odd things for all sorts of odd people. He had a website. Who didn't these days? Though it was only accessible through the heavily encrypted Dark Net.

A computer-generated voice over the phone said only to go to the door as an invitation was being delivered. There they discovered a pair of enormous ravens standing on the step, a scarlet ribbon dangling from the shiny black beak of one. At the end of the ribbon hung a square white envelope pulsing with magic. After the ravens passed on the missive, they looked Tamsin up and down with a critical eye, cawed once, and flew away.

The paper was heavy with the scent of power. Whoever sent it would have to be very strong indeed to get this close to the threshold wards surrounding the little one-bedroom hideout. Nervous, they stood on the scarred stoop, scanning the envelope with several revealing spells to no effect.

It was cold, it was early and frankly, in this part of town, neighbors did not look too closely at what anyone was doing. Tamsin insisted on laying out a magic circle right there in the street and opening the envelope within. That way any magic would be trapped inside.

Trapped inside with *her*, Drake pointed out dryly.

Tamsin waved away his fears and made the circle with cedar ash from Drake's stock of goodies. To a mixture of disappointment and relief, nothing paranormal popped out and tried to bite as she tore open the envelope.

Inside was a gilt-edged invitation to the Museum Charity Ball and a handwritten note in elegant silver script. It read: '*The Charmer is in*

possession of something promised to me. I would like it back. In exchange, I have information regarding the sorcerer Knightly. Please attend me at the Ball tonight sans bodyguards.'

Instead of a signature, hidden within the resonance of the magic was an image. Unmistakably the man now standing in front of her.

He turned his head ever so slightly in acknowledgment, “You have something of mine.”

Raising her eyebrows, she gave him a quizzical look, saying nothing.

“That body you have stolen was promised to me.”

Gulp. *'Play it cool, Tamsin'*, she thought. “Was it indeed?”

“Yes. For services rendered.”

“Yours or hers?”

The screaming faces surged closer, forcing Tamsin to take a step back.

She didn't know how the young witch died. The unmistakable pulse of death energy had echoed up through the ether and Tamsin just dived in. Opening the body's eyes, she found she was lying on her back in a scorched crater of earth. The trees, grass, and shrubs ringing her still smoldering. Around the rim of the crater lay several charred corpses crumbling to ash in the chill wind of a March night. Impossible to recognize who or what had been involved in the battle. Her new body was not burned. Nor was she bleeding or broken. Transition's magical prestidigitation healed all wounds remarkably quickly. Nevertheless, Tamsin could usually figure out the cause of death. Not with the Charmer.

Even her outlandish clothes were untouched by the inferno. Tamsin hadn't lingered at the time, grateful there was no one about to jump her with a knife. That's what happened in the body before this, when Tamsin opened her eyes and nearly got sent directly back into the dust of the spirit

world.

That body belonged to Angelique Duprey, a Prime Vampire Princess, drowned like a rat by the man who had become Tamsin's lover, Drake. It had been a close thing and only his inherent kindness and her desperate, honest plea, saved her.

She wished he was next to her now. When the Necromancer said to come alone, he meant it. Neither Drake nor their new companion, the giant, silver-furred Faerie hound Desmond, had been able to cross any entrance to the grand ballroom despite all their efforts. The borders remained firm; sparking and crackling with green spectral flames. Over Drake's strong objections, Tamsin insisted on going alone. She needed this information very badly.

A band of murderous Soul Eaters ripped her soul from her, stealing her life and afterlife. The sorcerers divided souls up between them, using soul energy to power their spells of eternal youth. Jumping from body to body, Tamsin hunted her murderers and the five pieces of her soul. Over the course of many years and corpses, she had managed to recover two pieces. Knightly held another precious portion. If she was ever going to put her broken self together again, she *needed* that piece. The two of them had fought almost two months ago when she came to Chicago searching for a powerful rune. That was when Drake became part of her quest. And her life, such as it was. Unaccountably, unexpectedly, unbelievably.

Tamsin's pride led to a trap set by Knightly just for her. In a battle to save Drake from the sorcerer's control, she lost Angelique's body and been forced to wander, searching for a new host. During that time, Knightly seemed to have completely disappeared. She could not just walk away.

Facing the necromancer's dead, she wasn't so sure she made the right choice ignoring Drake's warning.

“So you killed her?” This man was probably more than capable of dispatching a witch without a mark, Tamsin thought.

“No, I did not,” his deep voice had a slow drawl to it, lingering on the vowels. Almost like he was from the South. Which was odd since he wasn't even human. Drake said the magical signature of the invitation had a distinct Dark Elf edge to it. “For my spells to work I can have no physical hand in the body's death.”

“That doesn't mean you can't set it up.”

He said nothing, letting his eyes speak the truth for him as he sipped his champagne.

Tamsin was feeling in need of a little liquid courage herself and motioned to one of the waiters to bring a glass of bubbly. The necromancer waited as she took a drink, favoring her with a slow, sly and somehow disturbing smile. He looked her appraisingly up and down.

“What an intriguing manifestation you are. Death becomes you, Miss...”

“My name is not really relevant.”

“As you wish. Death is a process I know very well. You are certainly not a ghost. Nor are you a demon.”

He sketched a sigil in the air that glowed with a pale green light.

Tamsin brought up her hand, ready to sign a protective ward.

“Just checking,” he said by way of explanation, waving the mark away. “No. No demon in there. Good. They damage the body. Sometimes beyond repair. I have gone to rather a lot of trouble to secure her in mint condition for my client.”

Even though Tamsin did not know the young witch, she felt, now that she was inside, somehow protective. Thinking of the nasty hands of the necromancer working black spells over the girl made Tamsin unaccountably angry.

“You're going to have to wait a little longer. What do you know about Knightly? He seems to have disappeared.”

“Ah, the Soul Eater. What a pompous little man,” he made an exaggerated face of distaste.

“He belongs to me.”

The necromancer raised his glass as if in a toast, “And your body belongs to me. So, our common ground is death. Assuming you wish to kill him, of course.”

Tamsin met his eyes in an unwavering stare, “I have killed other Soul Eaters and I will kill him.”

“More power to you then. They remove one of the prime spiritual organs worth trapping in a human body. That ephemeral piece of real estate contains vast reserves of power.” He waved one hand languidly up and down, “As you well know.”

“Knightly?” she prompted again, setting her empty glass on a passing tray.

The necromancer looked over her head, staring at something beyond. His lips flattened out into a hard, thin line. Tamsin shifted uneasily. Stealing a glance, she saw only the crowd of people, their features hidden by masks. At this moment, her magical senses were focused very much on the man in front of her. Hard to zero in on anything else through the white noise of the dead swirling around him.

He shifted his attention back, narrowing his gaze, blue eyes glowing just a little in the dim light. “I do not care about Knightly or the antics of Soul Eaters. My employer wants you, and I want that body.”

Placing his drink on a side table, he reached out as fast as a cobra striking to wrap his fingers around her wrist, cutting into the soft flesh as his nails lengthened into talons. With a whispered incantation that coiled around her, he pulled Tamsin towards the dancers. Bright drops of scarlet

from her arm marked their path along the polished marble floor.

Couples were waltzing, stepping gracefully in time to the music. Laughing, smiling beneath their masks both fanciful and grotesque. He forced her into the rhythms of the dance. She followed, unwilling to make a scene yet, matching him step for step. They twirled in time to the rise and fall of the music, then faster and faster until the colors of the elegant dresses and sparkling jeweled masks became a bright, continuous blur. The necromancer's dead danced with them, gray hands reaching through the fog, screaming faces pressing closer. The room disappeared as she and the necromancer fell into the *slipstream* of supernatural speed where you can live a lifetime in the blink of a mortal eye.

The necromancer let his *glamour* drop, his face changing, growing pale and gaunt. His eyes became enormous, his ears lengthening ever so slightly to points. Dark Elf in form, now.

His dead, too, came horribly into focus. Men, women, children. Their black eyes stared from faces gray as ash. The rotting smell of the grave reached out with them, and Tamsin gagged. They clutched at her with bony, hungry hands, wanting to seize the life within her and rip it out.

Tamsin struggled to free herself from his hold. Laughing, he held tighter, sharp nails pushing deeper into her flesh. They whirled around and around, the floor falling away beneath them.

Tamsin was not inexperienced in the wily ways of sorcerers and the black arts on the flip side of light magic. She had been in many bodies on both sides of that magical divide. Before entering the ballroom, she prepared several nasty spells empowered with her own blood and held ready on her tongue. Hidden within her, the spells easily crossed the necromancer's threshold magic.

She spit the first of the deadly barbed words directly into his face. The symbols sprouted clawed arms and legs and raked the smooth,

beautiful features of the necromancer. Screaming in anger and pain, he let go with one hand to swipe at the tiny monsters. That was all Tamsin needed.

Within the pretty, puffy sleeves of her shepherdess outfit was a polished iron knife on a spring trigger, courtesy of Drake. Luckily the Ball did not have a security sensor or she would have set off every alarm in the place. Triggering the release, the blade shot into her palm. She brought it out and down, slicing through the necromancer's tuxedo and deeply into his chest. On the upward swing, she stabbed into his wrist forcing him to release her other hand. Iron is deadly to the people of Faerie. Not instant death as many stories implied, but the metal made it much harder for their super-healing processes to kick in.

Trance jumping, she leaped to one wall where she clung using a resonance spell. Scientists would be so very surprised to learn how much the physics of resonance played into magic. You could tear a man apart with the right frequency, or a building.

He leaped to meet her head-on. Their magic clashing in an explosion of power. They rushed at each other like eagles locked in combat. Punching and fighting, more brawlers than magicians as their spells fought with them.

Snarling in rage, he pushed away from her, calling out a spell that hung tangibly in the air. Tamsin pushed after him only to bounce painfully off the incantation, solid as a brick wall.

Crowing in triumph, he flung the spell at her and in the infinite time of *slipstreaming*, she could see behind the words to the true form of the magic. A beast of many legs and more teeth. From the sides of its body, long tentacles waved restlessly, each covered in rows of suckers. Cross a lizard with a giant squid and this might be the result. She could see the name of the spell written across the leathery hide, glowing as brightly as

hot neon. *Devourer*.

The spell-beast sprang, knocking her off balance. A dozen tentacles attached themselves to her. Each touch burned like hellfire and Tamsin couldn't help crying out. The incantation pushed her to the other side of the room as the suckers lining the tentacles attached themselves to the bare skin on her thighs, forearms, throat, and face. They began to pulse. A horrible, sucking, swallowing sensation.

A spell as powerful as the Devourer surely would have consumed the life force of the Charmer, truly eating her alive. Tamsin was much more than this single witch. Her personal magic was the sum of many diverse supernatural creatures. Tamsin called upon the still powerful remnant of shapeshifter magic she had learned two bodies ago. A gut-wrenching, vertigo inducing, mind reeling, over-the-drop roller coaster spell that forced her body into agonizing contractions and changed her internal structure into something else entirely. Though it lasted bare seconds, that was enough.

Shifters were pure poison to most supernatural beings. The Devourer had been created specifically by the necromancer for the Charmer. To suck the life force from her and leave the body untouched. Perhaps this was how the girl originally died. Unfortunately for the sorcerer's schemes, the altered life force of the shifter contaminated the spell entirely. The Devourer pulled away too late, the rubbery skin shifting from blue to inky black. The tentacles flailed out spastically, whipping this way and that and nearly braining Tamsin in the process as she scrambled away. Bouncing off the ceiling and into the wall, the creature convulsed, nearly turning itself inside out. Until, with a great shuddering, shake, the tentacles hung limply and it spun away, dissolving back into the void.

The necromancer could not hide the dismay in his face. He obviously had been very sure of this spell. Screaming curses, he launched

himself at her, a wave of the dead charging before him.

Her shapeshifter magic was already dissipating. Tamsin tensed her legs and sprang from the wall directly in the wave's path, pulling a round mirror from another pocket with her free hand. There were hidden pockets all over the fanciful dress ensemble with secret magical goodies stashed inside. Tamsin had spent her spare time these first few days cataloging all she could find.

Placing the knife before the mirror, she called on the light of every white magic spirit she could think of and plunged into the seething mass of mist and bodies. At first, she was surrounded only by inky darkness, the stench of corpses all but overwhelming. Forcing herself to keep calm, Tamsin centered her power, feeling the heat build within. Channeling that energy, she transferred the spell through her fingertips into the mirror. The talisman lit up like a spotlight, exposing the twisted, horrifying faces of the dead all around her.

Their screams of anger, pain, despair and rage were deafening. They clutched at her, ripping and tearing her clothes. She felt the little knit cap snatched from her head along with a thick lock of hair. Tensing her muscles – magical and physical – she said the other spell she had prepared. A *word*. A very hot, bright word.

Razor-edged brilliance blossomed first around the mirror and then her entire body until she glowed brightly as a saint in a Caravaggio painting. The hands of the dead touching her caught fire, flaring like oily rags. Screaming, the spirits jerked away. She blazed through the press of wretched corpses, burning her way closer to the necromancer.

As the dead began to fall back, cowering, two faces loomed before her. Beautiful, ageless features, strong narrow nose, and long brows. Their eyes were black hollow voids. A man and a woman. They opened their mouths, and Tamsin saw the fangs. Primes.

Time slowed as she passed, time enough for them to speak.

“Find me,” said the man, his voice dry as dust in her ear.

“Find me,” said the woman.

“We are lost,” they cried together. “So lost.”

Tamsin pushed forward, forcing them back with the rest of the dead.

The necromancer raged at his slaves. Several times he called out, ordering them forward. Each time they cowered further away from the white light of Tamsin's power.

She rammed into him in a bone-shaking body slam and thrust the iron knife into his abdomen pulling it high until the blade scraped bone. With her other hand, she thrust the blazing mirror into the open wound. The light burst from his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth and he screamed, a high horrible sound of pain and terror. She dragged him into one of the little galleries that lined the high walls of the ballroom, pressing him against the wall as his blood flowed over her dress.

“Tell me what you know of Knightly!” she shouted.

The dead had retreated from them, hovering nearby. Tamsin thought she saw them smiling at his pain.

“Tell me!”

“Nothing! I know nothing about him. Those who promised me this body told me to use that name to draw you out,” he gasped.

“Who ordered you?”

“Saints or Sinners, I do not know.”

“What do you mean saints and sinners? What are you talking about?”

“The one who hired me. Primes and witches are at war in this city. The witches,” he gasped again, giving a sharp cry. “They negotiated a truce some months ago. Not everyone is happy with that.”

She said the *word* again, louder, and the light became incandescent. “Are you saying a Prime hired you? Or the witches?”

He howled.

The dead, who had been at arm's length, were suddenly all around her – which is what happens when you take your eyes off reanimated dead spirits. Their power was growing as the sorcerer's diminished. They threw Tamsin aside, forcing her to pull the mirror from the ragged hole in the necromancer's abdomen. As she did, the dead rushed in to fill the void.

A horrible, grinding sound and a sudden, intense absence of light, plunged them into total darkness. The necromancer screamed again as an explosion of energy blew Tamsin off the gallery and into the air.

The sonic boom from the dispersal of magical energy tumbled her over and over, petticoats flying up in her face. She fell out of *slipstreaming*, slowing down to slip back into the pace of real time. Something sparkling came into view. Tamsin dropped the knife and reached out automatically, just managing to grip it with one hand as she tumbled by. Shaking off the concussion of energy, she tried to focus.

She was wet, she realized. It seemed to be raining very hard. Blearily she saw something solid receding and getting closer, receding and getting closer.

What the hell?

She stared harder. A wall, she realized. That was the wall of the ballroom. Why was it moving? And why was she wet and getting wetter? Shaking her head and tightening her grip, Tamsin took a deep breath, looked around and understood.

She was hanging one-handed from the giant crystal chandelier of the ballroom, swinging precariously back and forth high above the dance floor. All the emergency sprinklers were going full blast and every dancer, every partygoer, every waiter had stopped to stare above their heads in

astonishment. At her.

“Oh crap,” Tamsin groaned.

