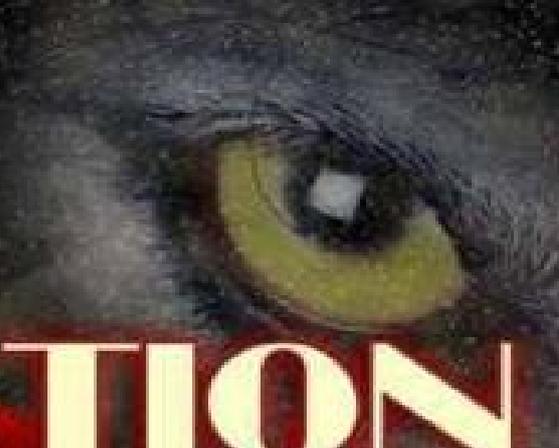


# BLOOD DOMINATION



CONNIE SUTTLE

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BLOOD DOMINATION  
Blood Destiny book 4  
by Connie Suttle

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For the usual suspects: Walter, Joe, and the readers who have stuck with me so far.  
Thank you.

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Other books by Connie Suttle

(Blood Destiny Series)

Blood Wager

Blood Passage

Blood Sense

Blood Domination

Blood Royal\*

\*Forthcoming, November, 2011

*There is a great deal of power in the universe, much of which rests within our minds. The ability to deny or accept anything lies inside us—CS*

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## Chapter 1

Jovana was beautiful. Xenides hated her. If not for a command given by his now-deceased sire, Xenides would have killed her long ago. Instead, Saxom had instructed his eldest to keep Jovana alive and hidden, as she might be useful in Xenides' war against the Vampire Council.

"You should do this for me—in our sire's memory and with no compensation," Xenides growled. Xenides sat on a Louis XVI sofa in Jovana's private quarters. Jovana's Paris apartment was tastefully decorated in antiques, many of which Saxom had given her. He'd collected many things throughout his lengthy life and now Jovana had enough to keep her into the next century. She wasn't satisfied with that, however. She had expensive tastes and only wore the best in designer clothing. Therefore, she often agreed to the odd assignment for Xenides. For a healthy fee, of course.

"Our sire is dead and compulsion is merely a joke to me," Jovana murmured, rising to gaze out the window. Evenings in Paris appealed to her and were the deciding factor in her choice of living quarters. Lucius had taken her for his lover long ago, and he'd never informed anyone that Jovana wasn't susceptible to compulsion. Saxom had known it anyway, and together he and Jovana had killed Lucius before Saxom made her vampire. She'd agreed willingly to the turn—after all, her beauty was fading away and she worried that Lucius would leave her behind. She'd risen a Queen Vampire, just as Saxom knew she would, and she'd created havoc at Saxom's bidding for more than two hundred years.

"Jovana, our sire left me in charge of his wealth for a reason," Xenides pointed out maliciously.

"So you could keep me under your thumb," Jovana snorted, turning back to her vampire sibling. "He knew I would walk away from you and your foolishness if he didn't."

"You could sell what you own and keep yourself for a very long time," Xenides snapped.

"Of course I will not sell my things. This is mine," Jovana swept out a hand. "And I deserved a fair share of our sire's wealth when he died. You refused to give it to me."

"I will pay for your services as always, Jovana," Xenides sighed. "How much this time for your assistance in capturing the little princess?"

"You should be glad I have no feelings for you, Xenides," Jovana huffed. "Else I would be quite jealous. You talk of her too often."

"You have no reason to be jealous. I only wish to utilize her talents, as you are so reluctant to do so."

"Of course I am reluctant. You fail to see the ignorance in this quest. You should allow me to kill the little bitch and be done with it."

"You will not kill her, and avenging our sire's death is not ignorance," Xenides hissed, his eyes turning so deep a red they were nearly black.

"No need to be angry, Xenides. I will do this for you." Jovana inspected a well-manicured hand.

"Six million will suffice until the next assignment."

"Then I suggest you don't spend it in one place, Jovana. As soon as I have the little female under my compulsions, you and I will part ways."

"Where and when?" Jovana ignored Xenides' threat.

"Don't worry; I'll bring her to you. You won't have to leave your precious city behind."

"What about the Council?" Jovana didn't bother to hide the contempt in her voice. After all, Wlodek always treated her coldly and ignored her advances.

"I have my own plans where they're concerned," Xenides replied. "I intend to kill Wlodek and then watch the others scatter like the frightened vermin they are. I will only contact you again if the situation becomes dire. You are dead weight to me, Jovana, and without your particular talents, you would be completely worthless."

"Please, see yourself out," Jovana snarled, turning her back on Xenides. "I shall expect the transfer of funds in two days."

Xenides didn't bother with a farewell; he merely slammed the door so hard on his way out that the wood split. Jovana cursed at his retreating back.

\* \* \*

"She hasn't looked at that."

Griffin glanced at Merrill, who leaned back in his chair. Griffin studied the Medal of Freedom lying in his hand, his fingers tracing the contours of enameled metal. Lissa received it from the President of the United States and hadn't bothered to look at it or to read the enclosed letter that the President had written. The commendation remained sealed inside an envelope and lay on a corner of Merrill's desk.

"I don't know that I blame her," Griffin sighed, settling the medal inside its case.

"She's down to half a pint of blood a day. Gavin almost refused to leave on assignment due to Lissa's depression, which angered Wlodek, of course. Wlodek is threatening to come here himself and place compulsions if she doesn't straighten up. Those are his words, not mine." Merrill picked up his new letter opener and examined it. Lissa had given it to him; it was a replica of a Roman sword and he had no idea if she'd known what an appropriate gift it was when she purchased it for him.

"Tell Wlodek he doesn't have to come," Griffin closed the velvet case and returned it to Merrill's desk with a sigh. "Let's go wake her."

\* \* \*

I have no explanation for Griffin, or why he shows up when he does. He was there, Merrill standing right behind him, when I woke one evening. It was five weeks after I discovered that Tony had taken my blood to use in experiments, consequently giving six men a fatal disease. He'd used me as a weapon. It was like stealing a gun and going out to commit a terrible crime. Only in this instance my blood was killing innocent people. That bothered me more than I can say and lowered me into an energy-sucking depression.

"Do you know that it's Sunday, June twenty-seventh?" Griffin smiled down at me and lifted a strand of hair off my forehead. That was the only thing that was going right at the moment. My hair was now more than three inches in length. If I'd been myself, I might have asked Merrill if I could go to a salon and get it cut and styled. It probably looked a bit shaggy.

Griffin's words depressed me even more. Those poor men that Tony and his research biologist experimented on had seven weeks to live. I had no idea how ill they might become before death came to claim them. How could Tony approve these experiments on humans so quickly? It made no sense to me. Now, six men lay in a hospital somewhere, fighting a disease they'd contracted with the administration of my blood. I knew they were suffering and that made me feel worse. Tony had only given a first name for the research biologist behind this debacle; he'd called him Larry. I thought

him as Larry the lizard, but that was giving lizards everywhere a bad name.

"~~Little girl, none of this is your fault. You need to stop thinking about that.~~" Griffin's fingers touched my cheek. His hands were so warm against my skin. I'd felt cold—very, very cold—for the past five weeks. Griffin's talent for reading my thoughts hadn't diminished or gone away, either. Normally, that would arouse my curiosity and I might turn my attention to discovering how he did that. Not now.

"We're going to fix that," Griffin smiled gently as light formed around the fingers touching my cheek.

\* \* \*

"Franklin and Greg are coming; I've made arrangements for Greg to receive his chemotherapy treatments at a nearby clinic," Merrill informed me. Griffin had done something and hadn't tried to hide it from me, either. He explained carefully that he couldn't bear to watch me waste away when there wasn't any need for it. I felt better and I didn't know whether I wanted to thank Griffin or curse him for that. Merrill handed a bag of blood to me afterward and they'd both watched me drink. Griffin never blinked as I consumed my normal two-thirds of a pint. He left shortly afterward and Merrill wrote a note for Lena, asking her to pick up an electric mattress pad for me in London the following week. Griffin knew I felt cold and passed that information to Merrill.

"Lissa, sweetheart, Charles will come tomorrow evening and drive you into London so you can get your hair done," Merrill touched fingers lightly to my strawberry blonde curls. If my hair is shorter, it curls. It only straightens out if I keep it longer and it had been long—past my shoulders long—before I'd attempted to kill myself in the sun last February.

"That sounds like so much fun for him," I grumped. There wasn't any way, though, that Merrill or any of the others would let me out of their sight without an escort.

"He finds it quite enjoyable; he has asked every other day if he could take you for an outing."

"Poor Charles. He needs to get a life," I said.

"Have you ever wanted a brother, sweetheart? Charles wants that role, I think." I blinked up at Merrill as he spoke those words.

"Really?" I'd never had anything like that. My face fell immediately. A brother was someone who would keep your secrets. I would never have that luxury with Charles.

"Lissa, most things you could tell Charles. He does not carry everything he hears directly to Wlodek, you know. Charles has an insatiable curiosity, but he also knows how to keep secrets."

He knew I wouldn't consider confiding in Charles from my expression. "My poor baby." Merrill gently touched my cheek. "Franklin and Greg will arrive on Wednesday. When you go to London, please purchase welcoming gifts from both of us." Merrill smiled and removed his hand. I still had my ID and credit card, plus a little cash, but Merrill had my cell phone and laptop again. I realized I didn't want any communication between Tony and me. Well, *I* didn't want any communication between Tony and me. What I did want, however, was communication with the Grand Master, Weldon Harper. I wanted to check in with him, thank him again for getting Paul the werewolf policeman to help with the child kidnapping case and see how his grandchild was doing. Daryl Harper, Jr. was curious as a button.

I also needed to contact my Packmaster, Thomas Williams, in Sacramento just to let him know I was still around. Merrill must have been on my wavelength, just as Griffin had been. "Buy yourself a new cell phone and computer, Lissa. Charles can help you with those things. He's technological inclined."

I nodded. Merrill and I were in the kitchen; that seemed to be the best place to have conversation for some reason. He and I were the only ones in the house—Lena had already left before I'd gotten out of bed for the evening. She was still doing housekeeping chores, but since Franklin had been out of the

country, she didn't eat dinner at Merrill's manor. Lena went home instead to her family in a nearby town, ~~between Luddesdown and London~~. The drive to London nearly every day had gotten to be too much so a move was made at Merrill's suggestion.

"May I borrow your computer?" I asked. I wanted to go online and get some shopping ideas for Greg and Franklin.

"As long as you don't attempt to contact Mr. Hancock." That brought a loud and indignant gasp from me. "I should know better," Merrill said and smiled.

\* \* \*

I still had the gift cards to the bookstore that I'd gotten for Greg and Franklin. I hadn't had the opportunity to give them away and Charles and I were now browsing through an electronics store for a new cell phone and computer after I'd gotten my haircut. The stylist had trimmed and shaped my hair consequently, my hair looked much better. Charles and I were currently examining laptops; Charles was completely happy doing this, I could tell. He and the sales geek were having an intense conversation over things that sailed right past me regarding the laptops on display.

"You'll like this one," Charles pointed out the laptop he'd been discussing with the sales kid—he looked like a kid to me, anyway. The laptop wasn't huge, was another Mac, (that was my stipulation) and cost around three thousand pounds. In my human life that would have been out of the question. Now, money just flew out of my hand, or Merrill's bank account, as it were. The cell phone was next; it was a replacement iPhone, and then we bought several computer games and a tablet that either Greg or Franklin could hold in their hands or set on the kitchen counter and play games and check email. I also bought a program for Franklin's laptop that would keep recipes on file and categorized so I could get to them easily, plus a shopping list option where Frank could put his grocery lists. I hoped he liked it.

Charles picked out a word processing program and a couple other things for my computer; we got the cell phone set up and the clerk got my new programs loaded into the laptop before we ever left the store. That was nice. Charles and I went to a bar for our usual glass of wine afterward and Charles called Bryan Riley on the way, asking if he wanted to meet us. Bryan walked into the bar shortly after Charles and I arrived.

"Bryan!" I was both surprised and pleased to see him. He took a chance and gave me a hug, then sat down next to me in the booth.

"I heard something, Charles, as I was leaving the studio tonight," Bryan said, before turning to tell the waitress what he wanted.

"What's that?" Charles ran a finger around the rim of his wineglass.

"It should hit the news tomorrow, but all the manufacturers of the flu vaccine are destroying what they've made up this year and are being forced to start over at the last minute. This will create a panic as you might imagine. In addition to that, we couldn't get a verifiable reason for the vaccine dump from our sources. We have feelers out for estimated deaths due to a vaccine shortage."

"I wish they could keep that quiet," I muttered. Xenides, along with his best buddy terrorist Rahim Alif, had succeeded in introducing vampire DNA into the flu vaccine, just as I said. Now, I hoped the people most vulnerable would be able to get vaccinated with untainted drugs. I shivered thinking about what might happen if they didn't. Health organizations across the globe were predicting a serious flu epidemic come the fall season.

"What do you know about that?" Bryan turned sharply to stare at me.

"Bryan, I wish I could tell you, but I can't," I sighed. "How many deaths worldwide do you think might be attributed to an insufficient amount of flu vaccine?"

"There's no way to tell for certain; flu season won't come for another two months," he shrugged. "September is the month recommended to get the vaccine. I've heard some serious numbers tossed

about, but they're only guessing at this point. And we don't know how much of the vaccine the manufacturers will be able to replace between now and then." Bryan thanked the waitress when she set a wine glass down in front of him.

"Crap," I said, rubbing my forehead. I was wishing at that moment that the wine I was drinking would have an effect on me. If so, I'd order an entire bottle of the stuff and get blitzed.

"Lissa, this is out of our control," Charles reached for my hand across the table. I hesitated for a few seconds and then placed my fingers inside his. He offered an encouraging smile. "Just repeat after me: *I can't do anything about this, so I shouldn't worry*," he said.

"That's easy for you to say," I informed him tartly.

"It is easy for me to say," he grinned. "Just watch my lips." He repeated his statement.

"Why are you worrying over this?" Bryan studied my face carefully—he was in the news business after all. He sensed a story; I just couldn't give it to him.

"Lissa thinks the world's troubles are hers," Charles replied for me, squeezing my fingers gently before letting them go.

"Not all of them," I said, sipping my wine. "I can't do anything about flying saucers or cockroaches. Or even flying saucers driven by cockroaches."

"Seen large alien cockroaches, have you?" Bryan was smiling, now.

"I've seen some pretty big ones. I saw some in Georgia that were filing complaints with the FCC. They were upset because their antennae couldn't get television reception after everything went digital. I hear lawyers are filing class action suits on their behalf." I hadn't felt like teasing anyone in a long time.

"Is that what they use their antennae for?" Bryan chuckled.

"That—and communicating with the mother ship," I said. We talked and laughed a little longer until I recalled something Bryan said when I'd first met him.

"Bryan, you mentioned the Aristocracy when I met you before," I said. "Can you explain that to me?"

"I can explain it," Charles offered. He looked around, just to make sure we wouldn't be overheard. "More than six hundred years ago, five hundred of the oldest and most powerful vampires decided to form the Council and hammer out the laws," his voice was hushed. "The wolves were reproducing faster than we ever could, and that was part of the reason we formed our own government. The wolves were already organized under a Grand Master and back then, they were based in Europe. The race we were was disorganized, at least on our part. The five hundred agreed that we would be annihilated if we kept up our habit of isolation. The Council was formed and the oldest known vampire became its Head. The original five hundred were known as the Aristocracy after that. Of course, some of the original members are dead, so the Council chooses vampires to take the vacancies when they occur. Gavin was one of the original five hundred."

It didn't surprise me a bit that Gavin was one of the five hundred. He was older than dirt, after all. And as Wlodek and Merrill were older than Gavin, they'd probably seen the Earth cool. "Does Wlodek have an official title?" I asked. "It's just so hard to say Head of the Council all the time."

"His Latin title is a little easier," Charles muttered. "*Sanguis Rex*." I hadn't been far off when I called him King of the Vampires. I knew what Rex meant.

"Blood King?" I made a guess. Charles nodded. "Geez Louise," I did a little muttering myself. "Does anybody call him that, nowadays?"

"Nope." Charles signaled for the waitress to bring our check. Well, I sure as hell wasn't about to call Wlodek that.

"Lissa, you should email me," Bryan coaxed as we said our goodbyes. I said I'd try before following Charles to his car.

"I wasn't getting you in trouble, was I, when I asked about Wlodek and the Aristocracy?"  
I watched Charles's face as he drove me home.

"No, Lissa," he turned and gave me a nice smile. "I was just happy to be able to give you information that sires normally pass on. Merrill would have told you, if you'd asked him."

"Sometimes I don't know what's acceptable to ask and what isn't," I said uncomfortably, gazing out the windshield again. Or windscreen, as Charles calls it. He was doing his usual—driving like a maniac. "Does the Aristocracy have special privileges, or anything?"

"You've already had first-hand experience with them," Charles snorted. "The annual meeting where they put you on display like the prize heifer."

"I would have said ewe, but you're pretty much correct," my voice held a bit of sarcasm. That's how I'd ended up engaged to Gavin. There were others offering with Wlodek's blessing, and Gavin was the one who frightened me the least. That didn't mean he didn't frighten me. He did and still does, for the most part. I'd said that aloud, before I even realized it.

"Lissa, I know that," Charles reached over and patted my arm. "Although I don't think he intentionally hurt you."

Maybe someday, Charles and I would have a talk about trust; something Gavin was forced to earn slowly. He'd placed me under compulsion and dragged me in front of the Council in the beginning, so they could decide whether I lived or died. My turning had been the result of a wager, and my sire had never intended to take responsibility for me. Which meant I was rogue (according to the Council) right from the start. Gavin was sent to kill me and was subsequently ordered to stay awhile since I'd been working for William Winkler. Winkler was a werewolf security mogul, working at developing software that would recognize criminals. The vampires were terrified the software might be used to hunt them down, so Gavin was instructed to keep an eye on me and watch Winkler at the same time. Then, when Winkler made the public announcement that the software didn't work and secretly sold it to the NSA, Gavin snatched me up and hauled me off to the Council, expecting them to sentence me to death. Gavin would have performed the execution, too, if he'd been asked. It was lovely to think about, especially since I was engaged to him. I fingered his ring while these thoughts ran through my mind.

"Lissa, you can't think about that," Charles admonished. Everybody else was reading my thoughts today, why not Charles?

"Why isn't Merrill on the Council?" That was another question I wanted answered. I had no doubts that it would be.

"He has refused several times. Any time there's a vacancy, they ask him. He turns them down every time."

"Do you know why?"

"Nobody does." Charles turned off the highway; we'd be driving over narrower roads as we made our way to Merrill's manor. I always liked this part of the trip—Charles drove slower and I was able to see the fields and small villages. "Wlodek gets investment advice from him too, although I'm not supposed to know that," Charles grinned. "If Merrill tells you to invest in something, that information is pure gold. And since I handle most of Wlodek's financials, I call his brokers to set things up. Then I make the same investments myself. I'm in really good shape, now."

"Cool," I said.

"You'll be a member of the Aristocracy, too, when you marry Gavin." Charles had gone back to the previous subject. "None of the human companions are allowed membership—it's against vampire law. They're not allowed inside the Council Chambers, either. If a male or female companion is questioned, only three Council members need to be present and it's usually done at a neutral site."

"That's not scary for them, I'm sure." My words made Charles clear his throat. He wasn't a member of the Council but it was a good bet he'd be at any questioning in order to take notes.

"Human companions are placed under compulsion," Charles admitted. "And they're instructed to tell the truth and not be afraid."

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I wasn't sure how I felt about that. "Why are they brought in?" I asked.

"Various reasons," he replied. "The worst ones are when their vampire has broken the law, or is suspected of breaking the law. The Enforcers go after the companion. They employ human investigators at times to capture the companion during the day. The human investigators turn those companions over to the Enforcers at night, just so testimony can be taken."

"So, even if the human loves the vampire and wouldn't normally testify against them, they have to?" I had mixed feelings over that information.

"Lissa, if there's nothing the vampire is guilty of, that comes out. The companion is released and sent back to their lover."

"What happens to the companion if the vampire is guilty?"

"The vampire is declared rogue and the companion is asked if they are involved with the crime or crimes, in any way. If they are, then they are executed, just as the vampire will be." Charles downshifted to turn a corner. He really liked driving his car, I could tell.

"So only vampires are allowed inside the Council Chambers?" It was a rhetorical question. At least I thought it was.

"There are other races," Charles said. If I'd been driving, that would have caused me to slam on the brakes. Charles was driving, however, so our trip was uninterrupted. My brain merely ceased processing information for a moment.

"What other races?" I asked breathlessly. "Werewolves?"

"Oh, a werewolf has never been inside the cave, either," Charles said. "I can't really talk about the others; some of them, it's impossible to talk about."

"Charles, I want to smack you for bringing this up," I said. "Now it'll bother me."

"What I can tell you is this—the last time someone of a different race was allowed inside the Council Chamber was four years ago." Charles smiled at the memory.

"Did they get out again? In one piece?" That worried me.

"Yeah," he replied. "They did."

\* \* \*

"What did we buy for Franklin and Greg?" Merrill asked after Charles helped me unload everything and drove away.

"Look at this." I showed him the tablet, all the games I'd gotten, plus the recipe software. I already had gift certificates to the bookstore, so they can buy what they want to read and I know that Greg and Franklin like to play scrabble," I showed Merrill the computer scrabble game. "And they talked about going to Las Vegas when I saw them in New York. They can use the video poker, blackjack and other stuff to sharpen their skills."

"This looks good," Merrill nodded at the pile of gifts.

"I'm going to leave it on the kitchen counter unless you want to do this some other way," I said.

"No, this is perfectly fine," Merrill smiled. "Your hair looks nice."

"Oh, thanks," I said, patting my hair a little. I'd nearly forgotten about the haircut.

\* \* \*

"Keep both pairs," Greg was saying over Franklin's shoulder as I made my way into the kitchen the following evening. Both were leaning over the tablet. Well, somebody had downloaded a poker app, looked like.

"Little girl, I blame you for this," Franklin said, looking up at me and smiling.

"I'm innocent, as usual," I said, putting on my best, innocent-looking expression before getting a hug from him and Greg.

"Your hair looks good," Greg gave me a hug and a kiss.

"Yours, too," I patted his head. Thankfully, he hadn't lost anything to the chemo yet.

"Have you seen the news today?" Franklin hugged me hard before turning serious for a moment.

"No, honey." Bryan's remarks from the evening before came to mind and now I was worried, too.

"They're trashing all the flu vaccine and rushing to make more, but that could take four to six months," Greg said. "Merrill suggests we stay away from the general population during flu season since we may not be able to get vaccinated."

"I know that sounds confining, but it'll only be for a little while, I hope." I was wondering what Merrill told them the real reason the vaccine was being destroyed. "What are they saying caused all this?"

"Some sort of taint in the eggs used," Greg told me. "But Merrill gave us the real reason. He also told us who figured it out." Greg put his arm around me. "Lissa, while many people might die of the flu, many more might have died otherwise."

"It may turn out to be six of one, half a dozen of the other," I grumbled. "Either way, the bad guys will win."

"Where do you think the bad guys are right now?" Franklin asked, pulling me away from Greg. He stood next to him; he was sitting on a barstool at the island. I put both arms around him and leaned my head on his shoulder.

"Honey, I don't know. And I have to tell you, I killed four misters while I was in the U.S. Somebody knew what to look for when they were turning vampires."

"That's what Wlodek and I both think," Merrill walked into the kitchen. "We just can't seem to put our finger on what that is."

"The other thing I wonder is if Saxom managed to turn any females," I added.

"That's a frightening thought," Merrill said. "I'm hoping it's unlikely, since they're so difficult to make."

"Our Lissa, one of the few, the proud, the boobed," Greg smiled.

"Like you don't have nipples?" I went after him.

"I don't have to wear a bra unless I want to," Greg huffed, hopping out of my way.

"Those are free range nipples, then," I said, trying to tickle him.

Merrill and Franklin were both laughing while I half-heartedly chased Greg around the kitchen. No way did I want to tire him out.

"Want something to eat?" I asked when things settled down.

"I want pancakes and bacon," Greg said, plopping down onto the barstool next to Frank.

"Coming right up," I said. Greg and Franklin got pancakes with strawberries and whipped cream along with crispy bacon. While they ate, I went to send a few emails on my new computer.

*Weldon*, I wrote, *how's the baby?* I thanked him for getting Paul to help on the kidnapping case and told him I wouldn't mind meeting Paul someday, if the opportunity came along. The email to Thomas Williams was just a quick hello to him and his family, letting him know I was fine. As fine as I could be, anyway. At least I wasn't wallowing in self-pity now and my appetite was back. I have no idea what or how Griffin does what he does, but it works. I even sent an email to Winkler, asking how he was and how things were going. Kellee was five months pregnant now and had to be showing. It probably irked her, since she was pregnant with twins and might be huge before it was all over. When Winkler knocked somebody up, he was serious about it.

The last thing I did was call Gavin.

"Cara, are you feeling better?" I hadn't been doing very well when he left.

"I feel better," I said. "I'm still worried over what's going to happen to all those people, but there's really nothing I can do about it now. I did as much as I could do already."

"Those people would have died," Gavin agreed. "Now, there will be a shortage of vaccine and on the high-risk cases may get it, but it will be better than it might have been."

"I know." I sighed a little.

"Cara, if you will go down to the bedroom where my things are and look in the top dresser drawer you will find the gift I purchased for you," Gavin went on. "I didn't give it to you before because you were not in the proper mood."

*Proper mood* was Gavin's tactful way of saying depressed funk, I guess. "I'll go down there now while you're on the phone," I said, and trotted down the hall to the bedroom that Merrill had given him. Of course, he only used the closet and the chest now; he spent his days in my bed while he was here.

There was a small box inside the drawer, and I lifted it out. "Is it the little box?" I asked.

"Yes, cara. Open it." I opened it. Nestled on the satin was a beautiful sapphire ring. It wasn't huge and wasn't just for dinner parties or special occasions—this ring I could wear every day. It had small diamonds surrounding the oval sapphire. I pulled it out and slipped it on my right hand.

"I love it," I said. "I can wear this all the time and not just once in a while." I admired the ring for a moment.

"That is what I wanted when I purchased it," Gavin said. "Now, I have a question for you. I did not mention this earlier, since you were not in a good place."

"What is it, darlin'?" I asked.

"Did they mix up my money clip with someone else's, when you bought it? These are not my initials, although the clip is very nice."

I nearly slapped my forehead; I'd just handed the box over to him and hadn't explained anything. "Honey, that's your money clip," I said. "Those are the initials I asked the jewelry store to engrave *LLM*, right?"

"That is what is engraved on it," Gavin acknowledged.

"It means *Lissa Loves Me*," I said. "In case you forget."

Gavin didn't say anything for a moment and I figured I'd offended him or done something truly dumb. Finally, he chuckled. "Cara, I would never have figured that out," he said. "But now, it will be a reminder."

"Do you like it, otherwise?" I asked.

"Very much. My old one was asking for retirement." We talked for a while longer, and he told me he loved me. I told him I loved him, too, and missed him. He likes to hear that, I think.

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"I cannot have him killed—for obvious reasons," Wlodek paced behind his desk. Merrill sat in one of Wlodek's guest chairs. Wlodek's Monet was back on the wall after a lengthy and expensive repair job.

"He has done everything in his power, in an attempt to bring her back," Merrill said, holding Lissa's old iPhone in his hand. It contained voice mails and emails that Anthony Hancock had sent her. Her old computer had also been in Merrill's possession and he'd destroyed the thing himself.

"Kenneth White has informed me that each of the six subjects was infected not only with her blood, but with the ash of two others. A dead vampire cannot perform a turn, as you know," Wlodek growled. "And a full turn is the only way to save any of them now. If it had only been Lissa's blood introduced into their systems, I might have looked into their backgrounds and made a decision on an individual basis, even if it is unorthodox. As it is, with another vampire's DNA in their systems, it is impossible. They are doomed. Lissa cannot successfully turn any of them."

"That's not the only reason Hancock wants her back," Merrill said. "He claims he loves her."

"We have enough trouble with her attempts to trust Gavin, after what they have been through. The

is too much. I fear for her emotional stability."

"~~She is stronger than you think, in that respect. She became depressed when she discovered that~~ six innocent men had been sentenced to death, using her blood as a weapon." Merrill watched his six pace. Wlodek had no idea, when he turned Merrill, just what Merrill would wake as or that Merrill would never be susceptible to his or any other vampire's compulsion. A true Vampire King had that ability; along with the power to place or remove compulsion on any human or vampire, except a Queen. Wlodek had known, however, shortly after Merrill woke as vampire. Merrill had such a strong sense of right and wrong, along with the capacity to see justice done without letting his emotions play a part. A Queen was notoriously emotional. That was why they were good together, two halves of a whole, for the most part. In the history of the vampires upon the Earth, there had only been two pairings, a King and a Queen, living at the same time.

"You're thinking of Sarita," Wlodek stopped pacing and faced his vampire child.

"Sarita loved you," Merrill said. "She was never mine, as you know."

"And you did not want her, as I recall. Nevertheless, you did work well together."

"We did work well together," Merrill agreed.

"And I did love her, just as she loved me," Wlodek sat down in his chair. "That did not prevent her from giving herself to the sun."

"She was three hundred years old," Merrill said. "Not old at all, for one of our kind."

"She always wanted children," Wlodek toyed with his gold pen. "She would never have taken a human child to turn it, but she watched so many children over the years, and I think that's what eventually destroyed her. Perhaps she was turned too young, Merrill. She was barely twenty-three when we found she wasn't susceptible to compulsion. It was either the turn or death for her."

"She lived for three hundred years," Merrill reiterated.

"Old and young, at one and the same time."

"As you say." Merrill inclined his head.

"I worry—not so much about Hancock, he is easily dealt with," Wlodek changed the subject. Sarita was a sore topic for him and he didn't speak of her often. Many times Wlodek wished he'd been the one to turn Sarita, instead of his eldest child. Things might have turned out differently if he had. "What I do worry about is the information I am receiving from my Enforcers and Assassins," Wlodek forced his thoughts away from his last lover. "Radomir questioned Liam before beheading him in Barcelona. Liam could not reveal the name of his sire, but he did tell Radomir that Xenides and others are actively searching for Lissa. Our suspicions are correct; he desires to use her as a weapon."

"If we had been given information by the Grand Master, Xenides might not be completely aware of her talents—and her weaknesses," Merrill agreed. "I understand that Weldon Harper allowed the young werewolf to travel with them in order to keep an eye on him and to follow his contacts, but he would have killed him immediately. This has placed Lissa in much danger. It is fortuitous that she managed to escape the one sent after her in New Mexico."

"Agreed," Wlodek sighed. "Had they captured her, we would now be facing a terrible crisis. Not only can Lissa slip inside any home or building, no matter how well protected, but she can also talk to others with her. World leaders would die easily and unsuspecting. Others could be captured and turned to add to Xenides' army. This is more frightening than anything I have ever seen."

"Do we need to hide our girl, now, to protect her?" Merrill asked.

"I am afraid this must be so. I cannot have her and Charles followed discreetly every time they go out. We need our Enforcers and spies elsewhere. Everyone I have is out tracking Xenides and his contacts."

"I have a proposition to make in that respect," Merrill said.

"And that would be?" Wlodek asked, a rare bit of curiosity in his voice.

"Griffin is asking for her help."

~~Wlodek held his breath for several seconds. He knew about Griffin, as well as what he was.~~  
heard he was retired."

"He is. He wants her to help one of the others, now. There is something of a crisis going on elsewhere, and her talents might be utilized for that."

Wlodek watched his vampire child's face. Griffin was as close as any brother to Merrill, and the friendship had spanned more than fifteen hundred years. Merrill provided assistance to Griffin when they'd first met and now, as a favored friend, Merrill reaped benefits from that friendship. Wlodek only suspected what some of those benefits might be and had never questioned Merrill about any of them. He didn't need to know everything, after all.

"How long?" Wlodek asked. "And will he guarantee her safety?"

"I don't believe he would deliberately place her in danger, and you know time and distance have no meaning to him or his kind. He says he can have her back in a week, our time, if you want."

"Make it a month," Wlodek made a counter offer. "We can hope that Hancock will be satisfied with what he has and go forward with that. Perhaps Xenides will be thrown off the trail as well. We will use this time to decide what to do with Lissa when she returns."

"Hancock's lucky we aren't pulling our vampires away from him," Merrill snapped. "And if Lissa asked, Weldon Harper would pull his wolves away as well."

"Kenneth White drew that to his attention, I believe," Wlodek almost smiled. "I'm thinking about asking Dalroy and Rhett to offer their services. They are my hidden Enforcers inside the U.S., you know."

"I suspected as much," Merrill nodded. "Griffin will come and pick up our girl in two days. He will explain as much as he can to her then. She is curious about him anyway."

"Lissa, Griffin is coming to see you tomorrow," Merrill informed me the following evening. It was July fourth and Franklin, Greg and I had just had a friendly argument over how tacky it might be to celebrate Independence Day in Great Britain.

"Why is he coming to see me?" I asked. "He's your friend and I'm doing okay, I think."

"He'll explain that when he arrives," Merrill said. "And he's not just my friend. I believe he likes you very much."

Honestly, I had no idea what to do with that information. Griffin seemed like a very nice man, but in an older, fatherly sort of way. No, he didn't look old; he didn't look any older than Merrill did and Merrill appeared to be in his mid-twenties. There was just something about Griffin that gave off the same vibe to me. Not to mention the depth of knowledge and experience in his hazel eyes. I couldn't explain my feelings about him any better than that.

"I've known Griffin all my life," Franklin got in on the conversation. "You can say anything to Griffin. Tell him anything. He'll only have your best interests at heart, Lissa."

"Fine," I said. "At least I won't toss and turn in my sleep, worrying about why he wants to see me."

"Too bad we can't shoot off fireworks," Greg grumbled, turning back to the holiday. He was missing the celebrations back in the states.

"Want to go flying instead?" I asked. Greg stared at me as if I were crazy for a moment before the light came on.

"You can do that?"

"Are you afraid of heights?"

Greg snorted. "Not at this stage of the game," he said.

"What about you, Frank? I can take you both at the same time."

"I've never done anything like that," he said. "Greg and I kicked around the idea of going skydiving. This will be better, I think."

"Good. We'll go. And as an added treat, we'll go through the ceiling and out through the roof." Greg looked as if he was a little worried over that, but I grabbed his arm and then Frank's and we were out in a blink. Ignoring Merrill's call to be careful, we did go through the ceiling and then through two more floors plus the attic, coming out over the roof of the house and then zooming off toward the coast.

"I'm sorry I never asked you to do this before," Franklin said as he and Greg watched the ocean wash up on a beach covered in pebbles not far from the port city of Dover. We could see the white cliffs down the way, shining under a waning crescent moon. Greg and Franklin had their arms around each other, so I just sat down off to the side and allowed them their moment together. They let me know when they were ready to go home.

\* \* \*

"Little girl, I have to ask you to trust me," Griffin said the following evening.

"Frank said I could," I told the tall, brown-haired man. He did have a nice smile, I'll give him that.

"I'm retired, now," he informed me. "But I used to take on some pretty nasty things. That was my job. Others are still doing that job and I need you to help one of them. This is going to involve some major travel. Don't worry, we'll have suitable clothing and such waiting when you get there; you don't need to pack a bag," Griffin held up a hand. "The thing is, I can only get you so far and then someone else will meet us at that point to take you to your destination." I watched Griffin closely; he was excited about this, I could tell. I just didn't know why.

"What about blood and things like that?" I needed a food source, after all.

"That will be provided," Griffin assured me. "I've talked this over with the Liaison, and he's quite excited about it, too."

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"To whom are you taking her?" Merrill asked, uncharacteristically curious.

"Dragon," Griffin grinned. I stared at Griffin, my mouth surely open in surprise. *Dragon?* The name was somebody named Dragon? That didn't sound promising. Who named their kid Dragon?

"What sort of help does he need?" Merrill's left eyebrow lifted a little. Right then I was wondering what Mr. Spock might have looked like with piercing blue eyes. Griffin snickered.

"Hey, get out of my head," I grumped. "Will I be able to phone Gavin? You know he'll want to know where I am."

"Your communication devices will not work where you're going," Griffin informed me. He sounded almost happy about that fact. "Wlodek will let him know that you will be unavailable for some time."

"You want me to do this?" I turned a puzzled gaze to Merrill.

"I think it will be good for you," Merrill said. Well, I'd heard *that* before.

"Come with me, little girl. It's time you saw the wider universes." Griffin took my hand before I could protest and just like that, we were *gone*.

\* \* \*

Griffin and I were standing in a spacious kitchen, with twenty-foot plate glass windows overlooking a rocky beach far below the house. It was evening wherever we were; a full moon hung low over the water. Either we'd gone back or forward in time or we weren't on planet Earth any longer. I was staring at the moon in shock, trying to determine just where the hell I was and how Griffin had managed to get me there when a two-year-old child ran past me, screeching. "Justin, slow down!" a woman's voice shouted and I whirled in a blur to see whom it was, receiving another huge shock.

Griffin placed a hand on my shoulder just to calm me a little, I think. Here was the woman from Merrill's photograph, alive and in the flesh, with long, pale blonde hair and blue eyes. And she was drop-dead beautiful on top of that. I'd thought she looked gorgeous in the photograph on Merrill's bedside table, but the reality was so much better. No wonder he was head over heels for her. No way could anyone else compete with that. No way. The sad thing, though? Her husband was standing right behind her. She had a ring on and so did he. *Poor Merrill*. Griffin squeezed my shoulder again. The child was now standing before me, staring at me curiously with gray eyes. His father's eyes. I saw that right away.

"Hello, young man," I knelt down to his level. He reached out and patted my face.

"Carry me," he demanded.

"You get your way a lot, do you?" I asked, smiling and tapping his nose. He laughed so I lifted him up. He seemed happy to sit on my hip and was now toying with my hair. Griffin was about to make introductions when a giant appeared next to us, scaring the bejeezus out of me. Reflexively, I mistimed at least twenty feet away in the blink of an eye, the child still in my arms.

"Holy shit," the blonde's husband swore.

"Lissa, it's all right, this is Pheligar, the Liaison," Griffin was trying to reassure me. Nobody else seemed to be having a cow and the kid, Justin was his name, I guess, loved the fact that we'd just gone across the room in no time flat.

I put Justin down carefully and sized up the Liaison. Not only was he around eight and a half feet tall but he had blue skin, blue eyes and close-cropped, wheat colored hair. He wore loosely woven clothing—a tunic over shapeless pants—plus sandals. He looked like a huge, blue hippie. The skin and eyes were what amazed me, however.

"Is he safe?" I glanced at Griffin.

"He is," Griffin assured me. I walked over to the Liaison and stood before him, looking up at him.

face. He looked down at me. We stood like that for several seconds.

"Honey," I finally said, ~~"I don't want to offend you or anything, since I don't know what your customs and culture are like. But I have to tell you, your skin is like a summer sky. Your eyes put a~~ that to shame, though. They're like the bluest northern sky, the blue that you almost can't believe of the days you actually get to see it." I hadn't seen daylight in a long time and I missed it. And this guy He was like a walking sky to me.

Who knows whether I offended him or not? He reached down and lifted me up so I'd be on a level with his face, frightening me so much I nearly misted out of his arms. Something held me back though, and it wasn't any of my doing.

"I am doing this," he said in perfect, unaccented English. "I have not received a compliment this magnitude before. I appreciate your words."

"Uh, you're welcome." My words were almost a squeak. How many people can say that they, grown adults, were picked up by someone that was nearly twice their height?

"Lissa, this is Pheligar, the Liaison between the Powers That Be and the Saa Thalarr." Griffin now stood beside the blue giant. I was officially in a science fiction movie. Powers That Be? Who were they? And the other words—Saa Thalarr? What language was that? I definitely needed to take language lessons.

"Neaborian is not available on any language discs or in any books that exist in this time frame." Pheligar informed me, picking the thoughts right out of my head.

"Pheligar, if you'll set her down, we can introduce ourselves," the blonde said, sounding a bit snippy.

"You smell like sunlight," I said to Pheligar as he settled my feet on the floor. That brought a slight smile to his lips. "Larentii feed on sunlight," he said as he let me go.

"Then you are truly lucky," I said. "I wish I could see sunlight. Nowadays it just fries my skin."

"We know you're vampire," the blonde's husband remarked as they led Griffin and me toward the sitting area behind the kitchen.

"If you'll lower your shields, Lissa might tell you something of yourself," Griffin observed dryly. I had the idea that he wanted to laugh with glee, but was holding it back for some reason. Pheligar came along behind us; he'd picked up Justin and was allowing the child to pound him on the chest.

The blonde looked at her husband, who shrugged and then lowered his shields. The scent almost overwhelmed me when it came. Power. That's what I smelled. Along with the tiniest bit of vampire. I knew that as surely as I knew anything. He wasn't that old, however. Not for a vampire, anyway. Less than three hundred would be my guess. Now I knew whose apartment it was that we'd borrowed in London.

"Merrill said the apartment belonged to a friend," I said. "It has your scent all over it. I smell your power. A lot of it. You were vampire; I still smell a bit of it around you. Less than three hundred years old, I think."

"Holy fuck." The blonde woman was staring at me now, as was her husband.

"This is Adam Chessman," Griffin said, patting my hand. We'd sat on a comfortable sofa across from the blonde and the former vampire Chief of Enforcers, Adam Chessman. I'd heard his name, here and there. Someone told me he'd disappeared. Here he was—alive, well, and now something other than a vampire. What I also knew was that whatever he was, his smell was very similar to the extra scent that Merrill carried. Don't get me wrong, Merrill was still mostly vampire. But the other part of him was something wondrous. The first time I'd smelled Merrill, it reminded me of a fresh breeze blowing through a field in springtime.

"You've heard of me?" Adam asked. He was a handsome man, no doubt about it, with gray eyes and nearly black hair. Merrill might be more handsome, but Adam was the one married to the blonde.

"The vampires talk about you, sometimes. Said you took Saxom down and then disappeared," answered.

"I did destroy Saxom," Adam nodded and put his shield back in place. It made me wonder about the shield around the woman and the ones around Griffin and Pheligar.

"I am Kiarra, First among the Saa Thalarr," the woman introduced herself. Her name rhymed with tiara, the way she pronounced it. "You know about Saxom?"

"I know next to nothing about Saxom," I answered honestly. "I'm getting to know his turns very well, however. I've killed several of them so far, and most of them have been misters. If the Vampire King and his court would turn me loose, I'd take out the rest of them."

Kiarra was standing now and staring at me, a hand over her mouth. "Enough about Saxom," Griffin whispered next to my ear. I nodded. The topic was obviously upsetting Kiarra.

"Have you always been able to turn to mist that quickly?" Adam asked, covering the ensuing silence.

"Not always. The first time I did it, it took five minutes, I think. My time improved after that until it's instantaneous." Kiarra sat down again as I explained my misting talents. Adam rubbed his back solicitously. Something about Saxom, even the mention of his name, sure upset her in a hurry.

"You've seen her take Justin with her," Griffin said. "Lissa can transport just about anything or anyone," he added.

"I was never able to turn that swiftly, until Kiarra offered her blood," Adam said. "And I could only transport myself. This is more than interesting."

"She can mindspeak, too," Griffin went on. "She's perfect for this assignment."

I turned to stare at Griffin. He was going to have to explain things to me, some day. Adam mentioned getting Kiarra's blood and then being able to turn to mist faster. I wondered what else her blood had done for him. At least one of those things was present—he'd fathered Justin. The boy looked exactly like him.

"Pheligar, do you wish to place the implant or would you like me to do it?" Kiarra asked, turning back to business.

"I will do this," Pheligar stood and handed Justin off to his mother.

"Implant?" I squeaked. All the alien stories were about to come to life for me. The tales about experimentation on board spaceships crowded my mind; I was just about to panic and go to mist.

"Lissa," Griffin turned to me and took my face in his hands, "it is alien technology, but it's a shield that an advanced race created. It will allow you to stand in full sunlight without being burned. You'll be sluggish if you wake, that's just your nature, but you won't burn, little girl. I promise."

"How long will it last?" I asked. I sure as heck didn't want to be tossed into sunlight, only to discover the batteries had run down.

"It has a normal lifespan of a hundred years," Griffin replied. Well, somebody was way more efficient than we Earthlings.

"Is this going to hurt?"

"See for yourself," Pheligar knelt before me, holding a small, flat disc in his hand. His hand was so large it made the disc appear microscopic. "It goes here," he placed the disc on the tip of a finger and pressed it against the back of my neck. When he pulled his finger away, the disc was gone. "It has been placed," he said. "Did you feel pain?"

"Uh, no," I said, surprise in my voice. He could do that without causing pain? That was exceptional. "Where were you when I got bitten by werewolves?" I blurted.

"Possibly on the Larentii homeworld; I would have to check the timeline just to make sure," Pheligar replied. Well, nothing got past him. I could see that right away. "I am giving you the required communication skills as well," Pheligar tapped my forehead with a large, blue finger. I stared at him.

in shock after my eyes refocused from the bright flash he'd created. Communication skills? What do that mean?

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"Pheligar will take you to Refizan," Griffin stood.

"Wait, aren't you going to explain this a little more?" I asked. "Where is this Refizan place? What am I supposed to do there? Who's going to take me home when this is over? Where are you going?" I was panicking—this was happening much too quickly.

I should have saved my breath; Griffin disappeared and Pheligar had me out of there in a blink, landing me in a smaller apartment with fewer windows and not nearly so nice a view. There were two men there, waiting for me. One was around six-three and wider across the shoulders than Gavin. He had Asian features, wore a scowl on his face and had long black hair, braided down his back. His arms were also folded across his massive chest, as if he disapproved of me right off the bat. I was going to have to take lessons from Wlodek and get that non-expression thing going. I needed it more and more often, nowadays.

The other man was around six feet tall with light brown hair, hazel eyes and was mostly human-looking but didn't have much of an expression going, either. If I expected Pheligar to make introductions, I was very wrong. "Here is the girl," he said and promptly disappeared.

"Fuck," I muttered. I wanted to shout it, but didn't know how much trouble I'd be in if I did. That was their plan—just to dump me somewhere and leave me to my own affairs?

"They sent a vampire," the brown-haired man declared. Well, it was nice to meet him, too. He was dressed in something that looked like surgery scrubs—in blue. The Asian man was barefoot and wore dark, loose pants with a long-sleeved white shirt. He might have been handsome—I mean *real* handsome—if he'd get rid of the scowl plastered on his face. It didn't look as if that might happen any time soon.

"They told me I'd have clothing and blood supplied," I said, since neither of them seemed willing to speak after the vampire comment. At least brown-haired guy hadn't called me a fucking vampire.

"Down the hall, second bedroom on the right," the brown-haired man said, jerking his head in that direction. Okay, maybe I wasn't supposed to know their names.

"You will not be biting either of us, if you wish to keep your life," the Asian-looking man finally said something. All righty, then.

"Honey," I said, "as hard as you are, I'd probably break a fang." I stalked away from both of them, going to the designated second bedroom on the right. The Asian-looking guy had to be Dragon, I thought, as I checked out my bedroom. At least Griffin had been correct about the supplies—there was a full-size refrigerator contraption, with cold blood in the bottom half, frozen blood in the top. Clothes were in the closet—the styles differed from Earth; I saw that right away. Loose trousers, loose tunic. Pheligar was dressed better for this place than I was. The shoes were fabric, with rope soles on most of them. A couple pairs had hard rubber soles and there was a pair of rubber rain boots. I'd need those if it were wet out.

Pheligar hadn't lied about communication—there was a stack of newspapers lying on the bed that I could easily read, with plenty of articles about a religion imported from another star system (yeah, said star system) that was attempting to take over. I sat down to read, and the more I read, the angrier I became. The rogue religion was attempting to take over the entire planet, looked like. Journalists were being killed, along with politicians and public servants, or just about anybody who disagreed with these guys or stood in their way. But the priests and such were so sneaky and slick that nobody could pin the crimes on them or their church. And there were tales that they had a lot of law enforcement, either too frightened to arrest them or paid off in some way. These were only rumors at this point, which served to unsettle the population and terrify everybody.

The religion called itself Solar Red, whatever that meant. Maybe my translation was too literal.

The other thing that drew my attention in this particular newspaper was that these Solar Red priests were rumored to practice human sacrifice. Why didn't somebody go and shut them down? I grabbed the newspaper and stalked out to the living area. Nobody was there, so I walked into the kitchen.

"Is all this true? About these Solar Red assholes?" I shook the newspaper I held at the brow of the brown-haired man. "Are they really killing people?"

"Yes," he shrugged indifferently, scrubbing a mug. He had his shirt sleeves rolled up and was washing dishes.

"How much night do I have left?" I watched as he rinsed the mug and placed it on a draining mat.

"Around six Earth hours," he grumbled.

"Good. Where's the nearest Solar Red temple?"

"About two miles that way," he pointed to his left, not really looking at me.

"Good. See ya before dawn," I said, dropping the newspaper on the kitchen table and turning a mist right in front of him. I then went straight through the wall. The city I flew over that night was as large as many Earth cities, and was lit half as brightly. I'd already discovered that Refizan was solar powered. Like any city I was used to, it had its share of tall, rectangular buildings. A few Refizani had gone wild and built something circular or in a pyramid shape. I guess geometry is the same, no matter where you are.

The brown-haired guy was right; I found the temple about two miles away. The guards posted outside had guns and looked to be serious about shooting trespassers, but my mist didn't set off any warning bells. I misted inside and found a gathering of priests, all dressed in formal, dark red robes. They smelled evil, and the fact that they were taking bites out of a human heart before passing it on to the next guy didn't improve my opinion of them. Well, I'd misted over a river on my way to the temple. Too bad nobody was there to see what I did next. I had sixteen heads lopped off sixteen priests in about thirty seconds. Then I hauled them as mist to the river; it was flowing swiftly as I hovered above its surface. Sixteen bodies were dropped into the dark waters with a quiet splash. My clothes were bloodied afterward, but at least the job was done.

I made one more trip to the temple, found the Refizani equivalent of a garden hose, dragged it outside and washed down the marble floor. Then, taking the hose with me, I shredded it before dropping it into the river. I could smell the ocean five miles away and hoped that the priests would end up there or in a shark's belly before it was over.

\* \* \*

"Where the hell have you been?" Dragon guy demanded when I showed up at the apartment again with my clothes covered in blood.

"I did a little worshiping at the Solar Red temple," I said, brushing past him and heading toward my bedroom, second door on the right.

\* \* \*

As messages go, mine was received loud and clear; the news program I heard when I walked into the living area the following evening was abuzz with it. I was the only one in the apartment, so I drank my dinner as I watched the news on a flat, built-in screen on the wall.

"And to worsen the insult, the perpetrators washed the floor of the inner temple before leaving without alerting any of the others to their presence. There are no leads or explanations as to what happened to these priests," the reporter said. He sounded almost gleeful, to be honest. "The remaining six hundred priests in the temple on Red Street are threatening retaliation of course, but that has been their stance for months now."

I waited an hour but Dragon dude and no-name didn't show so I went out to the street after dressing in my local, non-sexy, shapeless duds. I could go back to the temple, I suppose, but they'd be on their guard now and I didn't know anyone that I might trust to yank a bullet out of my body if

were shot. I roamed the streets instead. I heard whispers of where retaliations might take place. The consensus seemed to be the poor side of town, wherever that might be.

"Where is that, what you're talking about?" I asked one man, who didn't seem to worry whether I was overheard or not.

"The pity streets?"

"Yeah." I guess I gave him the Refizani equivalent of an Earth "yeah."

"If you go to the southeastern edge of the city, you'll find them," he replied. "Are you a journalist?"

"Yeah. That's exactly what I am," I lied. I went to find a deserted alley. That super dude had phone booths; I had alleys. Not a bit of glamour in my less than super-hero changing place. I went mist and flew over rooftops, going right through tall buildings instead of leaping them if they were in my way. I found the pity streets. Strange lingo these Refizani had. Very strange.

Normally, I think children might have been playing in those narrow, brick-lined streets. This was a very old portion of the city, with crumbling facades lining the uneven walks out front. I smelled feces throughout the place. Misting overhead, I passed over buildings that had scraps of laundry drying on lines hanging across rooftops. Somewhere, perhaps a mile away, bells rang out to mark the hour. Refizani days were divided into twenty-eight hours. Around second bell, I heard the noise; a car was coming down one of the narrow lanes. So far, I hadn't seen one of the solar powered cars anywhere in these neighborhoods. I misted toward the sound, eventually flying over the thing. It looked like a van of some sort.

It pulled up outside a house and three men, dressed in the red uniforms of Solar Red guards and armed with rifles stepped out silently. They didn't smell pure to me and were certainly up to no good. "Grab them," one whispered to the others. "If the man fights, kill him. We'll dump the bodies elsewhere." I didn't like where this was going one bit. Those fuckers didn't get a chance to knock on the apartment door; I knew by scent that a man, a woman and five children slept inside. No way was I going to take chances with babies' lives. Or their parents, for that matter.

Hauling three frightened, gun-toting men across town was no picnic let me tell you, and the farther I hauled them the more frightened they became. What I did learn, though, was that they couldn't fly. I dropped them from about a hundred feet up, right over the street that ran in front of the temple. Then I went back for their van.

\* \* \*

"You mean she figured everything out this quickly?" Kiarra stared at Pheligar of the Larentii as he reported the latest events on Refizan.

"The first night, after reading the newspapers Dragon left on her bed," Pheligar replied. He seldom smiled, but a corner of his mouth quirked slightly, surprising Kiarra. "We took a chance, hoping she would take the initiative without our interference," he added.

"Dragon and Karzac are there for our enemy. They can't go against Solar Red without violating the rules," Kiarra nodded. "Remind me to thank Merrill and find an appropriate gift for allowing this," she added.

"I fail to understand how the Reth Alliance allows Solar Red to remain in operation," Pheligar offered a rare opinion. Larentii seldom expressed their judgment or condemnation on anything.

"I agree—somebody should get rid of them. Some days I hate that no interference rule," Kiarra grumbled, patting Pheligar's back absently. He blinked at the unexpected contact before his slight smile widened.

\* \* \*

"The van appears to have been dropped from a great height, although that in itself is impossible," the journalist declared. I was watching the news again while I had my usual for dinner. Footage was

shown of the van in question; it was crumpled up in the same street where I'd dropped three armed men. There wasn't any word on those guys, though. Maybe the temple didn't report it when their men came up missing. I went to shower and dress.

\* \* \*

"May I buy you a drink?" The man seemed nice enough and didn't smell evil, but I wasn't interested in a date and nobody had bothered to give me any money so I could reciprocate. Hell, I didn't even know where in the universe I was, for Pete's sake. If nobody came to retrieve me eventually, I could be stuck here forever. I'd just have to hope that didn't happen. I'd been hanging out near the bar, expecting to get a little more information, but these Refizani were tight-lipped tonight.

"No, but thank you for the offer," I was as polite as I could be before moving down the street. The street reminded me of one I'd seen in Paris in what might have been a lifetime ago. Merrill, Franklin, Greg and I had gone there to find a dress for me to wear to the annual vampire meeting. Cafés and restaurants lined both sides of the street and plenty of people were wandering toward a nearby wharf we weren't far from a particularly scenic loop in the river.

"I heard they were bringing them downriver," someone said quietly. My ears immediately perked up.

"If you can't find locals to sacrifice, you pull some in from elsewhere," his companion observed. "An entire family disappeared last night. The local authorities claim they're searching for them." The man snorted as if that was the last thing he might believe. The two men were sitting at a tiny table outside a café, drinking something that smelled like tea, only a kind I'd never scented before. I trotted away as quickly as I could.

Where do you go if there are people coming down the river to be sacrificed? There weren't any flashing neon signs anywhere, proclaiming where that spot might be. Surely, there were landing spots somewhere. I'd seen ships and boats on the first night but they'd been far away when I'd dumped my dead priests into the water. I misted toward the river.

There was a huge landing area about three miles past the spot where I'd dumped my priests and about a half-mile from the temple, thanks to a bend in the river itself. There were priests and more gun-toters waiting in a van at one of the slips. Another good-sized ship was tied to a dock nearby and sailors were unloading crates and glaring at the priests while they did it. I had an idea. I'd already carried one van as mist. Why not one loaded down with priests and thugs? I heard the sailors calling out and shouting as the van simply disappeared before their eyes. These Solar Red guys got a trip to the ocean that night; I dropped the van from high enough that I had time to mist inside the van, kill all six inside it and then mist out again before it ever hit the water.

When a boat pulled up later at the same dock, seven priests and four guard thugs came off the boat searching for their escort. They turned this way and that, surprised that nobody was there to meet them. Except me, that is. The sailors and the other boat had left already, so there weren't any witnesses this time. The priests died; I then dumped them in the river half a mile away. Rushing back afterward I went looking for the prisoners they'd brought with them.

A man, his wife, and their four and six-year-old children. Why were they attacking families? Was it to make everybody afraid? To tell the population that no one was safe, no life sacred? What kind of religion was this? "I don't know where to take you," I told them as I cut the ropes that bound them and took the gags from their mouths. They'd even gagged the kids. If I'd known that before, I might have shredded their kidnappers instead of decapitating them as I had.

"We have family here," the man said softly.

"Do you know where they are?" I didn't know one street from another—or the city's name. I also hadn't seen Dragon in two days, or the no-name guy. I didn't even know if they were still alive.

"We can find our way," the man said. "I don't know how you did this, but we thank you."

"Well, honey, I can't have you remembering me." I placed compulsion on all four of them to forget me. I told them that they'd been abandoned by the priests and gotten loose by themselves.

Dragon and no-name were both waiting on me when I returned to the apartment two hours before dawn. They stood at the hallway entrance, blocking the way to my bedroom.

I started to shoulder my way past them; I wanted a shower and a little more blood before going to bed. Hauling a van five miles to the ocean, even as mist, is harder than it sounds.

"Wait," Dragon dude said, reaching out a hand to stop me.

"What?" I didn't sound very friendly, honestly. But then they'd been less than receptive when Pheligar dumped me in the apartment and just took off. The only nice thing I could say about them was that at least they hadn't called me leech, bloodsucker or fucking vampire.

"I am Dragon," he held out his hand. He was introducing himself? That was a shock.

"You'll stoop to shake hands with a vampire?" I asked sarcastically.

"I deserve that," he said, still holding out his hand.

"Lissa," I said, and grasped his fingers with mine.

"Karzac," the other man held out his hand. "I am Dragon's healer and this is my home planet."

"Honey," I said, shaking Karzac's hand, "your planet has gone to the dogs. I've dumped a bunch of priests and several of their thugs into the river, after they had their heads removed, of course. Another three were dropped in the street in front of the temple. Too bad they didn't know how to fly; they might have gotten away. Two vans are in the river and a third was dumped in front of the temple. If I had longer nights, I might be able to get more of them."

"You've done more damage than that; they're frightened and they have no idea who could do this sort of thing without our enemy feeling the power signature," Dragon almost smiled, his dark eyes lighting up a little.

"I'm just a force of nature, I guess," I said. "You say they can feel a power signature?"

"Our enemy, who is not Solar Red, can. That's why Karzac and I are so tightly shielded—prevent him from locating us. He is allied with Solar Red, but we are not allowed to attack them. Our power to combat the enemy was given to us—it is not natural. Yours on the other hand, is. Attempting to detect you would be like searching for a single blade of grass among other blades of grass. We have no idea what Pheligar was doing when he dropped you in our apartment. Any other vampire would have been easily seen by Solar Red and would certainly be unable to do these things."

"I'm special," I grumbled.

"You don't sound pleased about it." Karzac examined me carefully. His eyes were a green-gold. He had nice eyes.

"Right now I'm pooped," I told him. "I'd really just like a bath and a little more blood before I pass out."

"Are your supplies adequate?" Dragon asked, standing aside and giving me a clear path to my bedroom.

"There's enough in there for two more vampires, I think," I said. "I'm glad I don't have to hunt for my dinner."

"If you have need of more, let me know. I will send mindspeech to Pheligar," Dragon offered.

"He can hear mindspeech? Wow. Maybe I'll send him mindspeech myself and let him know that as instructions go, his are non-existent. Goodnight." I started down the hall toward my bedroom.

"You have mindspeech?" Dragon was surprised again.

*What do you think?* I sent to him.

*I think your voice comes through quite clearly,* he replied. *Pleasant dreams.*

*Would that it were possible,* I returned, shutting the door of my bedroom behind me.

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