

Mystic Moon Press

The Eternal

Shiloh Darke

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~DEDICATION~

To my mother, Charlotte M. Holley, and friend Denise Bartlett, for reading, and re-reading my finished manuscript, and pointing out every single typo (per my request) I know you guys took a lot out of your own busy schedules to help me. I love you both so very much!

To my Husband, my heart, who always has faith in me, even when I can't find any of it on my own. To my children, who always teach me the importance of patience, and love.

Also, thank you to Jodie Headrick, Tasha Sims, and Joan Harris. For reading while I wrote, and waiting for the next

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

chapter with heated breath. Thank You for begging me to finish, even when I had given up on ever being able to.

And finally

In loving Memory of my Nana,

Hazel F. Jones

Thank you for always telling me I was meant for better things

Chapter 1

He made his first move at the close of day. At the sunset, his eyes fluttered open. A cursed man, born of the darkness, he was older than most souls could claim to be, yet his appearance led people to believe him no more than thirty. Long hair, worn well past his shoulder blades, hung nearly to his waist and had only the slightest hint of gray streaking through its lush ebony substance. Not a wrinkle marred his face, smooth in texture though gently tanned. It was doubtful he had ever known hard labor in the daylight of the sun.

Wearily, he raised himself from his dreamless, Cimmerian repose. A sigh escaped him as he moved to the mirror, the ultimate reminder of just how *not* human he really was. The mirror was tall, almost twelve feet high and another ten feet wide, its ornate frame trimmed in silver and gold lattice design. It was a finely crafted piece of art, one of the most extraordinary pieces he had ever had the pleasure of owning. His steel gray eyes traveled the length of the mirror, over every inch of the framework, as if searching for some flaw. Finally, he let his eyes rest on the glass of the mirror itself, staring blankly, devoid of any expression to behold only the reflection of the room, elegantly furnished in period pieces that would make any art or antique collector envious.

The canopy bed in the heart of the chamber was exquisite. Carved of ancient oak, the elaborate design of the wood was enough to inspire poetry in the souls of mortals. The headboard was etched in a motif of lovers entwined in each

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

other's arms, oblivious to the rest of the world. The four columns rose to the ceiling with yards of black silk spilling in elegant drapes from their crowns, falling in glorious splendor to the floor.

The rest of the room was a beautiful sight. An armoire stood in the corner, attaining a height that nearly matched the mirror. On the opposite wall stood an elegantly polished table with four imposing carved gargoyles for legs. The high back wooden chair behind it was also with a similar figure, its wings spread to form the chair's back. This place was truly a resplendent sight to behold. The room was utterly devoid of windows, but candles blazed warmly, placed strategically to light his quarters. Although he had allowed his home to be wired for electricity, he had staunchly refused to allow the work-men into this, his inner sanctum.

The absence of even one glowing electric lamp gave the illusion of crossing into the past when entering this sanctuary, this temple he had created, yet its effect, though romantic and gracious, was lost to him tonight. None of it could hold his interest, nor give him consolation; he was not even the slightest bit moved by it, for it was not what showed within the reflection of the mirror, which captured and held his gaze, but sadly, what was not. It had been over three hundred years since he had seen his reflection within the depths of any looking glass. Emptiness consumed him. In all his human life, he had never imagined that of all the faces he would miss seeing over all these years, his own would torment him the most.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Somewhere above him, a clock began to chime the hour. Tilting his head, he listened to the ringing. Six; the bell tolled, seven; it rang out, eight; the sound vibrated in his ears, nine; the hour of darkness. The nights did not last as long in the summer. It mattered little to him; in fact, he preferred it. The less time he had of shadow was less time he had was tormented by the emptiness of his lonely existence.

Moving to the armoire, he surveyed the choice of clothing before him. Although all the clothes were immaculate, there was not that much of a selection. Black and white silk shirts, black and gray slacks, blue and black jeans, and matching vests of suede or soft leather.

Choosing a soft white tunic style shirt, he pulled it over his head and tucked it into the black jeans he had left on from the night before. The shirt had a v-shaped neckline that exposed just a slight tuft of sable chest hair. Turning back to the closet he selected a black suede vest as an accent to the ensemble. Then moving to the bed, he sat on its edge as he pulled on the knee high boots that matched it, tied the strap to secure them at the top.

He stood to survey himself in the mirror, smirked, and then shrugged, knowing it was a hopeless gesture. It was staggering how some habits never died; he was like a maimed soldier who had lost his leg only to be plagued by the continual itching in a limb he could never hope to scratch. He imagined how he must look, his black mane of hair braided down his back past his shoulder blades. Having been told he was a beautifully handsome, dashing male, he was sickened by the thought.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Being handsome had become a curse to him. Once, being able to turn a young maiden's head was something that thrilled him. Now, he found himself wanting to warn them. *Stay away from me; I am cursed!* He remembered the time he realized just how deep of a curse his immortality was. Once again, he turned to the mirror, but this time, he didn't even truly see the structure. He was lost in the memory of losing the woman he loved more than he had ever believed possible.

* * * *

Robes of white silk covered the frail, withered body. Silver hair fanned out over the pillow. It was thick, luxuriously soft, hair that had once been blessed by the purest of golden color. Her breathing was shallow now. It was hard even to tell she still drew breath. He watched her sleep, knowing she was dying, found himself silently wishing he could die as well.

Her name was Lillian. He had met her when she was sixteen, an innocent who had found her way effortlessly into his immortal heart. She had stolen past the armor he had built around himself for protection from love, without even knowing it. Had he known the wound it would cause him would never heal, he would have fled far from her charm.

He had first encountered her one night deep in the forest, trying desperately to spring the traps her uncle had set for the unsuspecting deer that roamed his land. She raced around completely unaware of her observer, triggering the traps with sticks. He had watched her, thoroughly ensnared by the beauty of the girl before him. He only had watched her

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

then, an angel with golden hair and eyes that burned with the blue fire of sapphires. The moonlight made her seem almost like fae folk. A magical fairy, sent to lure him to her that was Lillian.

A part of him had wanted to go to her then. Yet something held him back, warned him. Now he sat with his head in his hands, his eyes burning from the tears his unnatural body would not allow him to shed. He wanted to turn back the hands of time. He found himself longing to be able to go back, to ignore the voice that had prompted him to let her remain human. More than anything, at this moment, he longed to have her young and healthy; beautiful, free of pain, beside him forever.

* * * *

Eighty-two years had passed since he had first seen her. Since that night, she had taught him to feel again, simply by being who she was. He had been blessed to share almost a century with her, but instead of being thankful for the little time he had received, he found himself craving, longing for more. He looked at her and watched the labor she went through to breathe. She was as beautiful to him then as she had been in her youth. His shoulders trembled with repressed grief. It had been so long since he had lost someone, for he had never let any that close before—not since the change.

* * * *

Her cold and trembling, frail hand touched his cheek. He looked up; his gray eyes locked on her bright blue ones.

Sadness made them look as dark as the deepest part of the ocean. She smiled weakly before drawing another ragged breath to speak. The voice he heard was weary, cracked with time, and husky with age as she said, "It is time, my love. You must let me die." She ran a soft, wrinkled hand through his hair. "My beautiful, ageless man," she said as she stared at him, "I shall take your face in my memory with me to heaven."

She paused, coughed painfully as a spasm wracked her body, then she dropped her hand from him, turned her eyes away. She stared at the ceiling, whispered, "I have loved you long. But now I find it is my mother's face I long to see." She looked back at him, holding his gaze for an eternity within an instant, and then she drew her last soft breath. Her eyes lost their fiery luster of life and the first look of peace he had seen on her face in years wrapped itself lovingly around her in place of the pain; she was gone.

Taking her hand in his, he squeezed it gently, placed a kiss on her palm, then reached up, lightly closed her eyes before pressing his lips softly to hers. Leaning back, he put her hand on the bed beside her, whispered, "Then, you must go to her, for if it is she who calls you, I have no right to ask that you stay."

The creaking of the door summoned him unceremoniously back to the present. "Shameer?" his brother Colin said softly, "Abigail has asked if you will be joining us for tea." Abigail and her husband Davis were the last descendants of the families who had served his own, eternities ago—when they were all still human.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Their loyalties had never wavered through the years and the trials that followed. Their children and grandchildren had become more like family than servants. Unfortunately, Abby and Davis were blessed with only one child, a dainty, beautiful girl named Angelica who had disappeared over two years ago. Shameer had tirelessly sought for months to find her, but to no avail. Finally Abby, having resigned herself to the inevitable perception deep in her soul that the girl was dead, begged him to cease, wanting nothing more than to let her soul rest in peace. As a result of their loss, Abby and Davis would be the last of the family line to serve Colin and him.

Shameer had always encouraged his servants to pursue their own dreams, to leave Colin and him and attend themselves. Abigail and Davis, like their parents before them, had gone to college to attain rich educations, but they returned to serve Shameer and Colin, sharing their wealth of knowledge. Angelica had just finished her third year at the university and was on her way home for a visit when she had disappeared. Shameer had cared for the girl much as an uncle might, listening with pride and joy when she shared her adventures, had even felt the stirring of more—the love a father might feel for his child. He closed his eyes, banished the disturbing memories that threatened to overtake him. Once again, he reminded himself of the vow he had made to Lillian after she died. He would love no other; he would never again torture himself by watching his love grow old and die. Was it a vow he had made to Lillian, or to himself? He really

didn't know; he only knew he could never let his heart be broken like that again.

He shook himself from his reverie, cleared his throat and said, "Tell her thank you Colin, but I must go." Turning, he followed the light spilling in from the entrance of the room.

He looked at Colin, wondering if his brother had ever regretted the choices the two of them had made, or if Colin resented him for the role he'd had to share.

Colin smiled, his eyes meeting Shameer's. Colin silently shook his head, replied to the unspoken question, saying, "I do not resent you, brother. The choices we made may have been big mistakes, but I made mine on my own, the same as you. I am as much to blame for my circumstance as you are for yours."

A staid hush fell between them for a moment before Colin spoke again. "I have no regrets concerning you, but I wonder at times if you have regrets because of me,"

The question hung heavy between them a moment, like a fetid over-ripe fruit left too long on the vine, then Shameer answered quietly, "I regret you must live—and age—eternally; I regret more that you are sentenced to hear all my dark thoughts and demented ramblings." He continued, "I worry sometimes that it might drive you mad to partake in my dark thoughts on the atrocities I must commit." He watched his brother's face, waiting for the answer to his tacit question.

Colin studied Shameer's visage, appraised the tumult he could see burning there, just below the surface, before speaking. "Aye, there is a certain inconvenience to that," he

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

said with a shrug. "I do not overly enjoy the images I receive on the nights you hunt." He paused for a moment, before adding, "But then, I do not think I would know you as well as I do, were it otherwise."

Shameer smiled sadly at Colin's words. The two of them were twins, bound to share much more than a family resemblance. Colin too, bore a curse, though it was not the same as the one Shameer suffered. Colin, was condemned to be alive through eternity, but instead of thirsting for blood as Shameer did, Colin was damned to age ever so slowly and to endure the imprecation of his clairvoyance, which forced him to see every evil Shameer must perform to survive.

During the three hundred years they had each lived with their afflictions, Colin had aged in appearance a mere thirty years. While Shameer still looked to be thirty-two, the age he had been when they had fallen victim to the witch. Colin had the appearance of a very fit sixty-year-old.

There would be no release from the curse for Colin; he would never die, but he would never cease to age, unless the witch herself decided to free him by killing him. She had told him he would not die even then, but would revert back to his thirty two year old appearance, and begin the whole aging process over again.

Anger made Shameer close his eyes at the thought of what had brought them to this. It had been a woman—a treacherous, evil witch.

* * * *

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

She was a gloriously beautiful woman with fiery red hair and amber eyes capable of searing holes in a man's soul. Hers was a magic, drew men to her like wild animals lured to a trap by the scent of fresh, red meat. She possessed which that magic within her, but it also ruled her, turned her into a malevolent creature that forced her to execute cruel deeds.

A gypsy, born under the sign of the soothsayer, she had an evil streak in her which gave her the taste for mercilessness. When she met the twins, beautiful, so alike in every way, she set out to possess both of them.

Both brothers were easily bewitched by her beauty. She had awakened a hunger that burned like an illness within them. She knew she had them under her spell and used their vulnerability to her advantage, taking turns seducing each brother, playing them both for dupes, until they were as addicted to her as to a drug.

Jealousy smoldered between them. The siblings who had once been so close to each other soon learned to despise one another, each almost to the point of wishing the other dead.

The anger brewed between them until one day, it exploded into violence. It was then that they realized how unhealthy their involvement with her was. Together they faced her, to break away from the hold she had over them.

Realizing she was being cast aside, her eyes took on an eerie green color as the seductress had spat out her angry curse. "You have both made a serious mistake!" she growled. "You believe yourselves too good to partake of all I can offer."

"Two brothers, so alike in every way!" she sneered as she continued. "Now you shall have an added similarity." Her

voice was barely above a whisper, but it echoed mightily inside their heads.

Pointing a forefinger toward Shameer, she spoke forcefully, "Beginning with the rise of the next full moon, you shall feel the change in your body." She paused and then added, "My love, you shall no longer be able to dance in the daylight." She smiled wickedly, "You shall be ruled by the night and hunger for the blood of mortals."

She let her gaze travel sensuously over his body, his broad shoulders, muscular arms and chest and narrow hips, before regarding his smooth glowing face, a gleam of lust filling her eyes. "Oh, yes, my beautiful man; you shall stay forever young," she said. Her eyes devoured him with her stare. Then she turned toward Colin, her eyes glazing a bit, a look of distaste crossing her features.

"And you, you gentle, docile fool," she thundered at him. "You may look the same as your twin, but you have neither his fire nor his passion." She scorned him openly, making Shameer fear more for his brother's curse than for his own. "Therein lies your malediction," she continued. "You shall watch your brother stay eternally young while you age little by little, while you hear and see what he thinks and sees when he is forced to feed. You will be privy to his every thought."

She smiled a vile, wide angry smile, said, "But you will not share in his youth. You will age through your immortality, you soft fool. Moreover, when you can no longer get up and move because the old bones just won't go, you shall still draw breath. You will never be able to die." A small look almost

akin to regret touched her features then she cocked her head to the side and spoke once again. "That is a little harsh, even for me. Hmmm..." She thought for a moment, then added, "If you can find a woman to love you enough, then she can set you free from the curse. She, of course, would have to love you enough to kill you. And once you have aged into a decrepit old man, there is little chance of your finding a young beauty who would have you!" Her laughter, harsh and cruel, filled the air a moment before she continued. "For every century, you shall age ten years. There, I'll give you a chance to find a woman worthy of killing you!" Her cackling laughter continued to roll in the air even after her body faded into the morning mist.

A shiver escaped Shameer as he remembered all the malice she had borne them. To this day, her look of hatred and madness still haunted him. He remembered too, how his distrust of women had come about after that; how every word any woman said to him from then on, he believed to be utter lies. He cared naught for them, until he found Lillian. She had won his heart that first night, scurrying around trying to save the defenseless animals her own uncle hunted and killed for sport.

Looking over his shoulder as he ascended the stairs into the upper part of the house, he felt as if he was leaving all safety behind by exiting the darkened room. At the top of the stairs was a statue of yet another gargoyle. It looked as if it guarded the place. *Watching, waiting. For what?* Shameer found himself wondering more times than he could count.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

As he looked at the carving closely, he thought about the similarities between himself and the creature the statue represented. Shaking his head, he whispered softly, "Yes, we are indeed brothers, my friend." He looked then toward the fireplace, where the painting of his beloved Lillian still hung, he continued to murmur to the gargoyle, "Both of us are truly cursed, oh beast of stone." The portrait no longer tormented him, over one hundred and fifty years after her death. The pain had ebbed to a dull ache. He still missed her. He still loved her. He was sure there would never be another to take her place within his heart. He kept the portrait as a reminder.

It hung as a reminder to him never again to torture himself by loving a mortal.

He had not closed himself off to other women completely. There were times when he had chosen to have passing relationships with women, just as a way to pass the time. It was a way to dull the loneliness he felt, despite his brother's constant presence. He squared his shoulders and sighed. It was selfish of him to think that way. He knew of the two of them, Colin's existence was far more sad and lonely. In fact, Shameer gave thanks silently for Colin's presence. *Eternity is not as unhappy with my brother here.*

He moved toward the door, felt relief that tonight he would truly be allowing himself to hunt. In all his years of existence as a vampire, he had surrendered to the need that drove him to feed on human blood, but once he had learned how to feed without killing, he had never again allowed himself to kill an innocent. He never took more than he needed to survive. The only time he was tempted to allow himself the kill was when

he found his victim another person's aggressor. Usually when he truly hunted, it was for rapists, murderers, and those who would do harm to children. He did what he could to keep such monsters from striking again. To him, it was part of his pact with God for being what he had no choice but to be.

Abigail moved out of the kitchen, her graying hair pulled neatly into a tight bun. She wiped her hands, looked knowingly at Shameer, "So ye won't be joining us then? Is it the hunger vexes ye so?" she asked in a compassionate voice.

He paused at the entrance of the fortress, looked from her to his brother, whom he knew would suffer tonight. "I am sorry, Colin."

His eyes met hers again and he forced a smile. "I would that it were not so," he whispered and lowered his head before turning to disappear through the door. "I shall be back by dawn."

* * * *

He slid through the darkness like a silent, slinking wraith, listening to the rhythmic throbbing of other people's hearts, each in its own pattern, each oblivious to his listening ears. Some even thought they were alone in this world of the night. As he walked the streets searching for his prey, he noticed a drunk lying beside the road and paused to draw nearer, to listen to the man's pulse.

The man's heartbeat was still vigorous; Shameer could feel his blood coursing through his veins. It would be so easy to take the small amount he needed from this poor, pathetic

soul. The man would not even notice Shameer's presence, would have no memory of the little amount of life force he had taken from him.

Drawing closer still, Shameer had almost reconciled himself to the taking of this man's life-blood when he heard what he had been originally looking for. His head whipped toward the sound that no mere mortal could have heard; at the distance he could perceive it.

"No," the small voice pleaded in what was little more than a whisper. "I want to go home," the little voice begged. "Please, just take me home."

The child couldn't be more than six or seven years old, but that wasn't going to stop her kidnapper. Shameer could hear the evil thoughts the man had toward the child, could see with an uncanny sixth sense the scene as it unfolded.

"Shut your fucking mouth," he ordered, and then added with a glowering sneer, "You ain't going nowhere! I guarantee it. Your mommy ain't gonna know what happened to you for the next twenty years."

Sickened and angry at the explicit nature of the man's thoughts, Shameer took to the air, flying straight to the alley where the ruffian had the child held tightly by the throat, ready to snap her poor neck. The man, whose hand was fumbling with his belt, said in a hoarse, grating voice full of perverted lust, "Now, be a good little girl and please your newfound uncle and maybe I'll let you see your mom, *precious*." He leered at her with rotten teeth, added, "Yeah, please me and I might just take you home."

The child's eyes widened and she squeaked out another whimper, "You're a bad, bad man."

Shameer descended on them and faster than human eyes could have seen, he snatched the child from her would-be attacker and deposited her safely on the roof. Gently, he gave her mind just a hint of a suggestion, "Go to sleep child; when you awake, you will be safe in your bed." Immediately, her young psyche acquiesced to his hypnotic thought and she curled up on the rooftop to sleep.

Before the man could even collect his bearings, Shameer descended on him, dragged him off his feet and into the cold night air, high above the streets and the city below. The man uttered a half scream, half whimper as he looked down to see the distance he would have to fall to reach the earth. He stammered thickly, "What the ... who are you? What the hell do you want?"

Shameer raised an eyebrow, ground out a low, menacing growl, "You aren't so brave now, are you?"

"What the shit are you talking about, you crazy fuck?" The man's eyes widened as Shameer gave him a wide smile, showed the white expanse of his perilous fangs. "Oh God!" he moaned.

Shameer drew closer to the man, fixed him with his cold, steely gaze and said, "God may not have heard you threaten that poor, helpless child, but I did. Even now I can feel the souls of your other victims crying out for justice for what you did to them. So I think it is only fair you turn yourself in to the police."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

The man dared to laugh, "You *are* crazy! I'd get the death penalty if I turned myself in." He shook his head while he held fast to Shameer's arm, the only thing keeping him from falling.

Shameer smiled even wider, "Better them, than me," he said as he shortened the distance between them. "I would spend eternity torturing you, before I sent you to hell."

The man nodded furiously, cried desperately, "Okay, okay, I'll do anything you ask, just let me go!"

Shameer nodded at that, agreed, "Oh yes, you will; but first," he pulled the man's shirt away from his neck, "I'm starved."

* * * *

The man walked bewildered to the doors of the police station, a blank, vacant stare on his face. He didn't know why, but he just felt compelled to confess to the unsolved serial murders of twenty young girls, ranging in age from five to thirteen years of age. He had killed his first victim when he had been a mere seventeen. He never felt any remorse. He had never cared about their family's pain. It had never occurred to him that he should.

But for some reason he couldn't fathom, suddenly, he did care. Tears rolled down his face as he went to the desk and told the policeman standing behind it he wanted to confess to the unsolved murders. His last thought as they led him to his jail cell was of the strange archangel he had dreamed of who had promised him a lifetime of hell if he did not accept the punishment he was due from mortal man.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

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The child snuggled deeper within her covers when he placed her into her own bed. She had been missing for a week, and her mother had finally passed out on the couch from exhaustion. Shameer covered the little girl with her blankets, and laid her favorite stuffed teddy beside her.

When he walked back through the house, he planted the thought in the mother's head to check in her daughter's room when she finally got up to drag herself to bed. Smiling to himself, he felt as if he had done something good tonight.

The night is still young, he thought as he walked out the front door, checked to make sure it was locked and left the quiet neighborhood to its peaceful slumber. *Perhaps*, he thought, *I will go out to one of the clubs*. He was suddenly in the mood for a possible way which was not so glum to pass the time.

Chapter 2

Jessica awoke with a start. Cold sweat covered her entire body; she shivered and tried to calm her racing heart. Her whole body felt weak and worn, as if she had been running in a marathon. Throwing the covers back, she got out of the bed and began searching through her drawers for a pair of sweat pants and a tank top.

Her clothes found, she pulled off the nightgown that had been clinging to her, tossed it into the dirty clothes hamper. Going into the bathroom that adjoined her room, she sat on the side of the tub and turned on the hot water. She let it run for a few seconds to let the hot come up before turning the cold on just enough to keep the water from being scalding.

She pulled her long hair up and tied it into a loose knot to keep from getting it wet.

Then she turned the shower head on and stepped in, pulled the curtain around her like a shielding cocoon, as though it were more to protect her rather than the floor of the bathroom. The water was refreshing and she leaned into its warmth, letting the water soothe her aching nerves.

That dream. Always that dream. Why does it plague me? As she washed off with the washcloth, she willed herself to forget it, but it loomed again darker than before, taunting her, making her cringe all over again. It stuck in her head like a well-rehearsed song, a song that had haunted her regularly since she was sixteen.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Turning off the water and stepping out of the shower, she grabbed the nearest towel. After drying off, she stepped into the sweat pants, and then pulled the tank top over her head. Walking into the bedroom, she eyed the pair of felines that lay relaxed on the bed, regarding them with a dreamy affection for a moment. *Well, she thought, if I never get the chance to be a mother, I'll always have my babies.* The fact her *babies* were of another species didn't matter that much. Chuckling, she made her way out of the bedroom and down the stairs toward the kitchen.

She glanced at the clock on the wall, noticed the time with some shock; it was only a quarter to eleven. *So much for going to bed early,* she thought to herself. In the kitchen, she moved to the cabinet and got out a simmer pot, setting it on the stove, before crossing to the refrigerator to grab the milk. She poured about two cups of its creamy whiteness into the pot, she and set the stove to minimum heat.

As the milk began to warm, she opened the cabinet, pulled out the powdered cocoa mix, and added it to the milk, stirring until the mixture took on the appearance of a dark, heady chocolate. Reaching for a cup with one hand, she turned the stove off with the other and grabbed the handle of the pot. Pouring the hot cocoa into the cup, then she set the pan back on the stove.

Moving to the end of the cabinet, she pulled out a barstool and sat on it, stirring absently as she reviewed the dream which had awakened her. It wasn't all bad. There were parts of it that were wonderful. She could write a book from the

love story imprisoned in that dream. Why did she think of it as being an *imprisoned* love story?

Jessica had been born with a gift; the gift of second sight. She had always had the ability to predict the future and see things before they happened. Jessica had always had crazy dreams about a past that was impossible for her to know, with a *being* that could never have existed.. The dreams, when they came, would always fill her with a deep-seated joy, as if she was coming home to a place where she had always belonged.

There were also parts of the dream that were very disturbing,—evil things that haunted the lovers. Smiling a little, she thought to herself, *if it wasn't for the man in her dream being a vampire, I would think that maybe it was a past life memory.*

She smirked, shook her head, saying to no one in particular, "I don't even believe in all that crazy stuff." Her expression grew sad. There were parts of this dream life that were so real and left her soul longing more for the reality of her dream world, rather than the dream of her real one.

* * * *

Lillian walked down the darkened garden path feeling an uneasy kind of excitement. She had known him now for over six months. He had come out of the darkness one night to offer his help in springing her uncle's traps before another innocent animal became its victim. Tired of seeing all the carcasses of the creatures her uncle trapped for no reason other than the sport of it, she had started making nightly trips

out to the forest behind her uncle's keep a few months before she had met him.

She shook off the chill that struck her at the thought of her uncle, and continued walking, pulling the cape tighter around her shoulders as she secured the hood atop her head. When Shameer had first made his presence known to her, he had very nearly frightened her witless. But they had become fast friends and he had joined her every night since that first, though in the beginning she had been wary of him.

Because of the reaction most men had to her, she had learned never to fully trust them. Even her uncle had a habit of looking at her with lust in his eyes at times. She had learned early on in their relationship to avoid being alone in his company. Rolling her eyes towards the heavens, she thought of how many times she had been thankful for being able to bolt the door to her bed chamber. Yet, she still had the feeling there were times he could enter her room. There were times she roused, feeling as if he had been there just moments before, looking down on her as she slept.

As she hurried down the path now, she closed her mind to the nagging thoughts of her uncle; she was on the way to her love. The man she knew cursed or not, was her soul's mate. She had grown accustomed to having him to come to. When he had told her of the news of his leaving, how he had planned to go away without her, she had felt as though something good inside was gone out of her.

When she told him of her forced engagement to Sir Ravenmoore, Shameer had offered to take her with him. Now here she was, rushing to meet him, so he could take her

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

away from the fate of a loveless marriage. Being forced into an arranged marriage such as her uncle had made, to someone she couldn't like much less love, was something she couldn't even fathom. To be a woman in this century gave an unfair advantage to the man. They decided what a maid wore, what behavior was acceptable, whom she could marry. At the turn of the stars, they could ruin her as well. A woman could not show her affection without the holy union of marriage. If she did so and was found out, she was frowned on at best—or even killed for her infidelity or cast out and left to starve, at the mercy of the wolves and the elements.

Lillian pondered why it was acceptable for men to have as many lovers as they saw fit, even brag about it. Why did it not soil their reputations, especially when their actions undoubtedly were the cause of many a poor girl's undoing?

Cursing the era she had been born into, she looked up at the stars. Someday, she thought wistfully, women will be just as important to society as men. She debated asking Shameer to bring her across to his ways, to live only at night—never to see the light of day. The thought was appealing in some ways, but for all eternity? The thought gave her pause; she wasn't sure she had the strength or the courage to watch every mortal she loved die.

* * * *

Jessica jumped as the phone rang, knocked the stool over as she reached for the noisy intruder on her private reverie. "Hello?" she said a bit breathlessly into the receiver.

"Hey wench! Are you asleep?" the voice on the other end asked. It was Chelsea, her best friend and fellow Wiccan. They had been friends all through high school, and when Jessica had found out Chelsea's mom was a practicing witch, she had asked to be tutored along with Chelsea in the way of the Wiccan path.

Neither girl had actually followed the craft in a devoted way, although they both had unique abilities. They used crystals for meditation, and Chelsea gave tarot readings out of her mother's *Wiccan Way* Book Shop. Chelsea was a master of spells, while Jessica's talent had always been her powers of precognition. Sometimes Jessica could read through people's lies to know the truth.

"No," Jessica answered, moaning. "I *was* for a while, but ... I had another one of *those dreams*."

She could almost hear Chelsea shake her head. "No, I can't seem to get rid of this energy. Want to go out?" After a pause, she asked, "One of *those dreams*. That means you dreamt of your vampire, right? Man, Jessica, you could write one heck of a romance."

Jessica shrugged, "Nah," she said simply. "I'm not writer material. I don't have the patience," she added absently before asking, "So, what did you need?"

Chelsea giggled, "I don't need much, just some music, a dance floor, some cute dance partners, a pina colada, and a girlfriend to go with. Are you game?"

Eyebrows lifting, Jessica asked wearily, "And if I say no?" She sighed.

"You could never refuse me, could you?" Chelsea replied with her own question. "Come on, silly, let's go dancing." There was an impatience in her tone that told Jessica her friend would go whether she did or not. "You know you want to," she added.

Jessica sighed. It was dangerous to go out by yourself, especially where Chelsea wanted to go. Sixth Street was a fun hang out, but you just didn't go out there alone. Not when you were a pretty, young woman.

Jessica sighed, "Don't you have to work tomorrow?" Maybe she could talk her out of it.

"Yeah, so?" Chelsea laughed off the question. "Since when has that ever stopped us before?"

Jessica groaned, but knew her friend had a point. They had gone out and stayed out all night before when they had to work in the morning. *Oh well*, she thought, *it isn't like I was going to get any more sleep tonight anyway*. "Okay, give me half an hour," she said.

Chelsea giggled, said, "Great, I'll just walk on over. Open the door for me."

Jessica frowned, asked, "Don't you have your key?"

Chelsea cleared her throat, replied, "No, I lost it ... sorry."

Jessica let her jaw come unhinged; she shifted her weight to one foot, started to smart off, then thought better of it. That was the fourth key she had given Chelsea. Finally, she said, "That is the *last key* I am giving you." In another instant, she saw the key in her mind's eye, added, "When you get your car back, look in the driver's side floorboard!"

Chelsea blew Jessica a raspberry over the phone, complained, "I hate it when you do that! I can't get the car back till next week! It's in the shop."

Jessica put the receiver back in its cradle, threw her now cold cocoa down the drain. She grabbed the pot and poured its ingredients in the sink as well, then rinsed the pan and the cup and turned them upside down on the drain board. Before heading upstairs, she flipped the lock so Chelsea could get in and thought how many times she had been so astonished at her friend. Chelsea was worshiped by men, they threw themselves at her. For the life of her, Jessica couldn't understand why. Sure, her friend was beautiful, but it wasn't as if she were some sultry sex goddess. *Stop that*, she scolded herself inwardly. Chelsea *was* very beautiful, even Jessica had to admit it.

Back upstairs, the cats looked at her expectantly. "Oh no you don't," she told the felines. "It isn't time to eat yet. Go back to sleep." Then she opened her closet, surveyed her wardrobe, and selected a pair of jeans and a black tank top before she tossed her sweats to the bed. Sabbath, her black cat, pounced on it while Neeka, the calico, watched with her usual disinterested air of boredom.

Jessica pulled her pants and tank top on, then the sheer blouse she always wore over the tank top. Having dressed with a minimum of forethought, she went to the bathroom to apply a light film of makeup. Satisfied with her look, she walked back into the bedroom. She wasn't surprised to see on the bed petting the cats. "So, what took you so long?" she asked with a sideways grin.

Both the cats purred contentedly for Chelsea as she stroked their fur. She looked up at Jessica, said, "Ohh, girl, you look good."

Jessica smirked, said, "Yeah right." She knelt and pulled on her boots before standing back up to survey Chelsea, who was dressed in a soft pink silk blouse and a black mini skirt with matching black boots something like her own. "So do you," she told Chelsea. "Ready to go?"

Chelsea nodded. Setting the cats aside, she stood and dusted the cat hair off her skirt. "Bye, kitties," she mewed to them as she left the bedroom.

Jessica looked from her friend to the cats. "Traitors," she said with a smile to the cats, who both seemed content to clean themselves at that moment. "Keep the bed warm for me."

As she walked down the stairs, she prepared herself for the night ahead as she headed out the door and into the car.

As they drove, Chelsea bombarded Jessica with questions, "So, was this dream any different?"

Jessica tilted her head and thought about it before answering, "Not much different from the others," she answered. "It was another one of those dreams where I was someone else, and in love with a vampire who took my breath away." She smiled in Chelsea's direction before adding, "Sometimes though," she sighed, "sometimes it just *feels* so real."

Chelsea pondered what Jessica said about the dream. "Maybe it was, on some other realm of existence, it was?" she offered, her eyes searching her friend's face. "Vampires don't

exist here, but maybe they do in some other dimension,—and you are in communication with the soul of the other girl?"

Jessica smirked, asking, "But why would I see these dreams I have in first person? Wouldn't I just be an observer?"

Chelsea considered that, then nodded, said, "You are probably right. But it is a nice dream, for the most part, right?"

Jessica parked the car and locked it when they got out. As they walked to the club, she found herself wishing the vampire lover was real, at least on some level.

About two hours later, Jessica sat looking around the bar. Utterly bored, she wondered how she had let Chelsea talk her into coming here ... again. She never felt comfortable in places like this. It was just a sea of lonely, unhappy people, looking for someone to share a meaningless and usually disappointing night of sexual immorality, so they could brag to their co-workers about it the next day and then forget it.

Not that she didn't like sex. Or at least, she liked the kissing and playing that usually led up to sex, but since she was a twenty-six-year-old virgin, she was still indefinite as to how she felt about the deed itself. Her inexperience, coupled with the fact that whenever she had gotten into a sexual situation, she always got these weird premonitions about how her relationship of the moment was doomed. The feeling not only had the effect of ending the sexual contact cold right there, but it put her out of the mood and generally axed the entire relationship as well. *Face it; it was bad enough to know*

the sex was going to suck before it even happened, but to see how and why the relationship was going to fail? Why bother?

She smirked at her pina-colada as she stirred it yet another time and thought about her last failed attempt at a relationship. That had been a joke and not a very pleasant one at that.

He had actually been an interesting person, if you *liked* sadomasochism. He relished talking about how, when their relationship evolved, he was going to initiate her into the rites of sexual slavery. She cringed even now at the thought of how she would look—let alone feel—kissing a man's boot while he whipped her with a stick. *Do people really get off on that kind of thing?*

The one time they had been making out and he decided to spank her with the heel of his hand on her bottom, she had seen images of him spanking another woman in her own bed when she had let the creep stay in her spare room for a week because his apartment was being fumigated. After Jessica had left for work the next morning, he had called the *other woman*, and they had played in her bed. What kind of freaky sick dude was he, anyway, and why did she draw that kind of man to her?

The thing that still bothered her about that one is that she hadn't known about it at the time it had actually happened, but just incidentally *saw* it nearly a month later. She shook her head. She supposed a man had to have a mind before you could read it. Face it, some women just weren't meant to have a man. She had resigned herself to being one of them.

Her eyes moved to the dance floor, focusing on Chelsea, who was dancing provocatively to the music with a man that was extremely attractive as well. Jessica watched with a growing tension as the two of them moved as one, longing to be held like that made her feel empty inside. Men seemed a lost cause to her. It wasn't that she didn't like them; on the contrary, she was very attracted to the opposite sex. Yet, as was evidenced by her sitting alone while her friend was surrounded by at least five different guys at a time here in the club, they clearly were not attracted to her.

Oh, what a joy to be invisible, she thought wistfully. She always had been so inconspicuous she might as well be part of the furniture. When her friends had dates back in high school, Jessica had been a wallflower, more interested in her studies and in graduating than in boys. Since the boys who sought her out were the class rejects and nerds, it was no wonder she had no dates to speak of. Of course, there were a few of them who she had actually liked all right as friends, but to want any of them as a boyfriend, the sexual energy or chemistry was always lacking, sadly.

They always were plenty turned on at the prospect of being with her, but more times than not, the only part of her that turned, was her stomach. She shook her head as she watched how Chelsea enjoyed being surrounded by the men dancing around her. Chelsea was like a fish, swimming happily in a sea of men and loving every minute of it; she thrived on it.

Suddenly, Jessica found herself wishing she could be more like her friend. *Why should Chelsea always have all the luck,*

she asked herself, *even if she was gorgeous?* Chelsea had always been the beautiful, popular one. Her eyes were a celestial blue even the sky itself would be envious of; so different from Jessica's brown ones.

Their hair, on the other hand, was not that different. Jessica's was a dark shade of rosewood brown and fell in soft waves past her waist. Chelsea's was only somewhat shorter and almost as wavy, with auburn highlights throughout.

Biting her bottom lip, Jessica found herself wondering what Chelsea had that she didn't. Her look of thoughtfulness turned to one of slight disgust as she answered herself silently, "a smaller butt, that's what!" She rolled her eyes at the thought, rose to go to the restroom, but when she turned, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

Her power of premonition hit her full force with the face of the man from her dream—the vampire lover she knew so well from her dreams was there. In the bar, and he had seen her. In her mind's eye, she could see the look on his face. It mirrored her look of shock and confusion.

She searched instinctively for the gaze she felt burn through her clothes all the way down to her skin, leaving her feeling naked, but she was unprepared when her eyes met his. It *was* him. Although she had *seen* it, she still had dared not believe it. Jessica felt her heart start to swell. It was suddenly hard to breathe. Minutes passed as they simply stared at one another. Neither moved; neither's gaze wavered. Jessica felt as though he were caressing her, though they stood a world apart, across the room there from each other.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

She wanted his touch. More than anything, she wanted to feel his hands on her. Visions of lying beneath him naked as she had when she had been Lillian in her dreams took her breath away. Ashamed of the turn her thoughts had taken, her cheeks flaming, she turned and fairly ran to the restroom.

* * * *

Shameer sat stunned, his heart hammering heavily in his chest. He didn't know why, but something within him was drawn to her. Unable to stop himself, he rose to pursue her. This feeling was by far the most intense perception he had felt in over a hundred and fifty years. In more than a century, no woman had even kept his interest for more than a day, and even then, they hadn't had this effect on him.

Now, suddenly, this woman had not only captivated him, but had set his body and his very soul on fire in an instant. This was not what he had planned. He had been going to find a lady, who was perhaps lonely herself, offer her company, and perhaps have a mindless fling. This was not a girl he could do such a thing with.

This girl was one that called to his innermost heart. She was the one he knew he could not walk away from. He knew he should stop. He knew to follow her was against every rule he had set for himself since Lillian's death. But he was completely unable fight the force that drew him to her; his pace quickened. He had no choice but to follow her and follow, he would.

* * * *

Standing in front of the mirror, Jessica wet her hands in the sink, and then used one to dampen her forehead and the back of her neck. When she stood again to her full height, she stared into the mirror's depths, close to tears. *It's just in my head, it is just my imagination, she thought.* This was not one of her premonitions, she yelled at herself inwardly. *You are just imagining things from that crazy dream. He just resembled the man in her dreams. That wasn't Shameer. It couldn't have been. There was no way humanly possible. Shameer was a vampire, and vampires don't exist.*

"There is no reason for you to act so stupid," she scolded herself aloud. "He's just another pretty face." She nodded at her reflection in the mirror, trying to believe what she said. "Yeah, that's it. Just another completely, surreally gorgeous man, probably out looking to get laid."

"Excuse me?" the deep, slightly accented voice said to her, touched her soul like a gentle breeze, but shocked her nonetheless. She turned so fast she lost her balance and would have slipped on the hard floor, had his hands not caught and steadied her.

He held her, remaining close to her even after she had regained her footing. Once again, each looked into the other's eyes, feelings rushed unbidden between them. "My dear, are you all right?" he asked softly, holding her to him, almost as though afraid to let her go.

Her tongue slid across her dry lips as she nodded, afraid to attempt speech. Unexpected heat coiled through her as she stood locked in his arms. Images of her dream floated once more through her mind. They moved through her like a

whirlwind, turning into a shudder. Her breath escaped her as she felt his hand running through her hair.

Longing filled her at the feel of his other hand touching her cheek. She tilted her head back, closing her eyes.

His eyes moved to the exposed column of her neck. The vein pulsed, opened to him. He could take her; it would be easy; he could feel the beating of her heart like a drum with his own. It would be *so easy*.

He gently leaned toward her, placed a soft kiss at the base of her throat, before turning, and mumbling a hasty, "I'm sorry," as he moved away from her and back through the doorway of the lavatory, leaving her once again, alone.

Opening her eyes, she stared at the empty doorway, confused, surprised and disappointed. Her hand went up to the spot on her throat where he had kissed her. She felt the pulse beneath her fingers. Shaking her head, she looked back at her reflection, eyes going to her neck, checking. "Oh, now I *know* I am crazy," she said to the mirror, cursing at herself for being so stupid.

Before she could even start out of the room, Chelsea stormed through the door. Seeing Jessica, she visibly relaxed, "Hey," she sighed, "what happened to you? I was worried." Concern showed on her features. "Are you okay?"

Jessica bit her bottom lip before she spoke, resigned not to tell her friend about her dashed hopes. Instead she smiled brightly, said, "Me? Oh man, I'm great!" She hoped she didn't sound too pathetic. "I think I may even have started hallucinating!" Leaning closer, she smiled a little, as if sharing

a secret, "I just met the man in my dreams, no biggie," she rolled her eyes at how ridiculous that sounded.

Chelsea looked at her for a long moment, as if trying to decide whether to call her bluff or call for help. She started to speak, and then seemed to think better of it, and just nodded, putting a comforting arm around her friend as she asked, "Are you ready to go?"

Jessica nodded, answered, "Yes. Please, now?"

Chelsea opened her mouth to ask her what was wrong, but Jessica's hand flew up. "Please," she pleaded, "no questions right now. I will explain my madness later." Then, not able to keep it all a secret, she spoke again, "Remember what we were talking about earlier? My vampire?"

When her friend nodded, she pulled her to an unoccupied part of the bar, whispered, "I found someone who looks just like him."

Chelsea backed away a step, her eyes wide, whispered, "The *vampire*?" At Jessica's nod, Chelsea's eyes grew bright and even larger. "Show me?"

Jessica looked around, searching for the man. He was still there, she could feel him.. Somehow she knew he would not be standing anywhere out in the open. He was a creature of seclusion. She moved to a spot from which she could survey the shadows as her instinct led her to do, drawing Chelsea with her to where she could see him without appearing obvious.

Chelsea's jaw went slack as she stared in the direction Jessica had indicated. It didn't take long for her to hone in on him; only one man in the entire place could look like that and

she was staring at him. Oh, my! She *was* staring; she thought, then looked hastily back at Jessica and gestured toward him as nonchalantly as possible, asked, "*Him?*" At her nod, Chelsea fanned herself, eyeing Jessica. "Well, perhaps we should stay a while longer then?"

A wistful look on her face, Jessica shook her head, bowing it slightly. "No. It is time for us to go. We've both got work tomorrow," she stated resolutely. *And I have to let go of this fantasy*, she added to herself.

Reluctantly, Chelsea nodded. Shrugging she said, "You're the boss kid, but I don't get you!" Turning, she started for the door. Jessica stood affixed to the spot another moment before following Chelsea, feeling strangely robbed of her time with this man. She watched him, uncaring for the first time in her life whether a man caught her looking at him or not.

* * * *

Shameer took a deep breath to steady himself. Deep in the corner, away from the lights that might give away his position, he felt safe from anyone's eyes as he held the drink up to his lips. He held the shot of tequila, staring at it. The drink would not do his system any good. *In fact, it will hurt*, he thought as he debated downing the fiery liquid. Being immortal came with certain drawbacks. Food, for instance, could be eaten, but it never digested well. Most often, it would end up making him violently ill and weak. Liquor, as well, could never make him drunk. It did, however, have a similar effect to the food, in that it pulled his stomach out of

sorts. But it would take his mind off of her, and set it back to the task at hand. *Maybe.*

He raised the drink to his lips, prepared to down it, but stopped short as his eyes met hers. Confusion crossed his features. He had hidden. He had covered himself in shadow to divert human eyes from him, yet she had found him. He forced his glance away from her, a strange fury overtaking his senses over how this night was going.

He had entered the bar tonight to allow himself to find a woman to pass some time with. He had not, however, intended to find himself drawn to one of them so completely that all other thought besides the desire to be close to her would be abandoned. He chastised himself. He had no place in her life. To go anywhere near her was to find himself in the same predicament he had found himself in with Lillian.

I have to protect her, from me, he thought. He wasn't sure if he could keep himself from bringing her across if he let himself fall in love with her. Unfortunately, something inside him recognized something within her.

He shook his head, and looked down into his lap. *I am a vampire, an immortal, cursed to an existence that I could never bring her into.* He would truly be a monster if her were to force anyone to become what he was, although, he wasn't the worst being on the planet.

He had made it his goal in his immortality to save helpless victims of others' hateful rages. In fact, reasoned to himself, what he had done tonight was a way he could help keep innocents from being victimized by those with evil hearts. But even if he was a protector of mortals, that still gave him no

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

right to try to seek companionship with one of them for more than just one night. With any other woman in that club, he could have had one night, and walked away. But with her, he wanted more. Oh, so much more.

On first entering the club, he had seen her, sitting at a table, discontentedly watching her friend dance, while she sat alone, pondering her reason for coming to such a place. Her thoughts had come through to him, amazingly as clear as his own. That in itself had drawn him to her. He never experienced absolute mind linking with anyone, not even Lillian. Of course, he could read emotions such as fear, joy, and excitement. Sometimes he could divine the simplest of thoughts, but never had he been able to hear every word as it formed in a person's brain, except when he had been listening for it, as he had done with the man in the alleyway with the child earlier.

Colin had been the one given the gift of telekinesis and telepathy. But Colin had owned the gift to some degree, even as a mortal, his years of immortality only heightening his inborn talent. But Shameer could not get her off his mind; perhaps that was why he *heard* her thoughts so clearly. He had hurt her. Her feelings were fragile and she was insecure, despite her beauty. He knew it was a result of someone's pitilessness in years gone by.

He returned the shot glass to the table, readied himself to return to her side. To do what exactly, he wasn't sure. Apologize for leaving so abruptly and explain. *Explain what?* He thought irritably; *that I'm not worthy of her time?*

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Looking up, he saw he had anticipated his next move a little too late. He watched as she left the club behind her friend. His sigh of relief was cut short as he saw two men following fast behind them, an all too easily recognized purpose in their quickening steps.

Nearly jumping out of the booth, Shameer headed out after them, silently cursing himself for not recognizing the attraction. The reason he had been so drawn to that girl was because she was the target of ill intent. *Of Course! She and her friend are in serious danger.* Angrily he headed out the door behind them, fury burning deep within him. His eyes took on an iridescent glow as he prepared to turn again into the *hunter*.

Chapter 3

Jessica walked beside Chelsea, silently wishing the man she had encountered in the club had really been the man from her dream, but she still believed that was impossible. Never before had she felt so affected by a man's touch as she had with him. She could still feel his hand on the small of her back; still smell the scent of him as if he still stood beside her. She still sensed the caress of his lips on the base of her throat. Shaking herself mentally, Jessica willed his memory away.

Chelsea gripped her arm and slowed her step. "Okay, fess up," she demanded. "What gives?"

Jessica looked back at her friend, startled, "I don't know what you mean," she lied. Chelsea harrumphed at that one, shaking her head. She had a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach. Something was about to happen, but she wasn't sure what. The only thing she could tell was it wasn't going to be good.

"And here I thought we were friends," Chelsea complained. When Jessica still gave nothing, Chelsea added, "Oh, come on! You are shaking like a leaf; your face is flushed like you just got out of an orgy! You can do better than that! What *happened?*"

Jessica shook her head, meeting her friend's gaze and said, "I already told you everything." She looked around the darkness, drawn to a sound somewhere behind them, where two men were walking in a steady, but swift pace towards

them. She shook her head, met Chelsea's eyes and asked, "Can this wait?"

Chelsea glanced over her shoulder, then looked back at her friend and agreed, "That sounds like a good idea." Both girls moved faster. An image of Chelsea, lying in the parking lot, stripped naked by a big burly stranger, hit Jessica. Suddenly she regretted not paying for parking, but it had never been an issue before. The car park was just a few blocks away and usually well lit.

Tonight however, it seemed dark, menacing. No birds sang; not even the usual city sounds interrupted the silence of the park, *which tonight has an almost an impenetrable stillness that took on a presence of its own*. Glancing behind her, Jessica saw the men gaining on them. An image of Chelsea beneath the larger one, crying for help went swiftly through Jessica's mind again. She gasped at the vision as the two strangers pressed ever closer to them. She shot a glance at Chelsea, who had seen them too, grabbed her hand said, "I think we should get the hell out of here!"

Chelsea nodded, pretended to joke, though there was little mirth in her reply. "Oh, no, ya think?" She matched Jessica's hurried steps. Although she had expected them to give chase, it still made her blood run cold to hear their hurried footsteps behind them turn from a brisk walk into an all-out sprint.

When they had almost reached the car, Jessica fumbled for her keys, but dropped them as she saw another image hit her, this time of a wolf watching the men that were advancing on them. A big wolf with huge fangs and eyes bespoke an

eerie familiarity. She was shaking with fear as she bent to retrieve the keys, swore, "Christ."

"Hurry, Jess," Chelsea's frantic call came to her as though through a haze of jumbled and confused other sounds and images. "They're coming!" Chelsea screamed a warning, her voice betraying her panic. "Oh God! *Please?*"

Finally, Jessica's fingers curled around the key chain, she bolted towards the car, but just as she reached the auto, she felt a painful grip on her hair, and then she was flying backwards. She heard Chelsea scream as the other man reached her and began his assault on her.

Jessica landed on her back and had the air knocked out of her momentarily as she felt the ripping fabric of her blouse. Gasping for air, she began to beg for mercy, only to be interrupted by the steel of the man's knife cutting into her pants, leaving her with only her underwear as protection from his invasion. She felt the bile rise in her throat as the man's hand closed over her lace-clad breast and squeezed menacingly. She realized for the first time she was about to be raped. *No*, she screamed out silently. *This can't be happening. The first time is supposed to be a wonderful, memorable occasion. Not like this*; she felt the tears on her cheek, *Not like this*, she pleaded inside her head.

Then her thoughts turned from what was happening to her as she heard Chelsea begging, "Oh, please, you don't want to do th..." Her plea turned into a wail of pain as Jessica heard the resounding slap. She closed her eyes. Her heart went out to her friend. Chelsea had never been abused. Men had always treated her as a precious treasure, as if she were a

fragile porcelain doll. *This should not be happening to her*, Jessica thought as she turned her face away from the foul smell of the man above her his teeth wreaked of beer and rotting meat.

Suddenly, the weight of his body was knocked from her. Rolling away from him as fast as she could, she turned to see where her source of rescue had come from. She could do nothing but gawk as she caught sight of a huge gray wolf. His forepaws rested on the man's shoulders, pinning him to the ground. Fear and shock contorted the man's face and Jessica heard him shriek with terror.

The wolf growled, bared its exceptionally long fangs. A shot rang out, Jessica spun to see the other man, gun in hand, aiming for the animal. Chelsea saw too and sprang to her feet, and surprised her assailant by lunging at him, throwing him off balance and to the ground.

His other hand had wielded a switchblade, but in the unexpected turn of events that ensued, he had no time to shield himself and the force of the fall which threw his head against the knife still grasped in his hand. The blade plunged deep into his eye and he convulsed but a moment before he lay stone still in an expanding pool of blood.

Jessica reached Chelsea's side where Chelsea had fallen after catapulting herself at her attacker and knelt, pulling her into a sitting position. For a moment, both women stared at the wolf with widened eyes. Still standing atop the first aggressor, he looked toward them. His cool penetrating gray eyes met Jessica's brown ones. He seemed to will her and her friend to leave. She comprehended his warning. "It's *him*,"

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

she murmured without comprehending her own words. She felt herself staring at the beast, and then forced herself to break eye contact. At last, she looked back at Chelsea, helped her to her feet and said, "Come on, Chelsea, the wolf is waiting for us to leave so it can kill him."

Jessica led Chelsea on weak and shaky legs to the car. As she climbed inside the automobile, she looked one last time at the wolf. Its eyes seemed strangely familiar to her,—the color, the shape, and the way they met hers; she had seen those eyes many times. Suddenly, the face of the man in the club flashed through her mind. She cocked her head to the side, as a wild thought racing through her head. The wolf and the stranger she had met in the club had the same eyes,—but what she was thinking would be impossible, wouldn't it? She looked again at the wolf, took a deep rocky breath. The animal held her gaze for a moment longer, then bowed its head low, turned its attention back to the man below him, growling menacingly once more. Not wanting to wait another second, Jessica started the car and pulled out of the park, away from the terror they both had narrowly escaped.

* * * *

Once the car was out of his sight, Shameer allowed himself to change. The man below him shuddered, not fully understanding what he was seeing, and cursed under his breath. "Oh, Holy Mother of God!" he cried.

Shameer shot him a glance that turned him cold, saying, "What? Do you actually think after what you and your friend just tried to do she would lift one finger to help you?" He

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

leaned down then, whispered for only the man's ears, "Trust me, I have *her* blessing!" Shameer's bared fangs silenced the man's next scream before it could even escape his throat. It was the first time in over a century that he took a life, without feeling remorse.

* * * *

Tears slid down Chelsea's cheeks as she sat silently in the passenger seat. She was in a state of shock after the night's ordeal. Jessica drove, her fingers wrapped tightly around the steering wheel as she concentrated on the road. Thoughts of the wolf kept returning to her. Visions of those eyes intruded on her thoughts, haunted her, made her want to turn the car around and go back to set her mind at ease. She found herself slowing down twice to do just that, but reasoned with herself it would not be wise. It was *him*. It had to be. How else could anyone explain a wolf in the middle of downtown Austin, let alone one of that size and magnificence?

Her friend interrupted her thoughts with a soft, "Jess?" Jessica could hear the tears in her friend's gentle voice. "Can you, uhm ... can you pull over? I think I am going to be sick," Chelsea whispered.

Jessica pulled over and Chelsea was almost out of the car before it reached a complete stop. Chastising herself for not thinking of her friend, Jessica got out of the car and went to the other girl's side. "Chelsea, are you alright?" She asked as she knelt beside Chelsea and pulled the opening in the front of her blouse closed with one hand. With her other hand, she smoothed Chelsea's hair away from her face.

Seeing Chelsea's ashen expression, Jessica drew a deep breath, realized that of the two of them, she had been the one to receive the least damage. Chelsea was almost completely naked, her panties gone, her breasts bare and bruised under her blouse. The place on her face where the man had struck her was swelling and turning blue. Anger mixed with tears as Jessica said, "Let's go to the hospital."

The words were scarcely out of Jessica's mouth before Chelsea was expressing objections. "No! I—I'm okay, Jess," she sputtered. "I just—I just need a shower. I've got to get his smell off of me," Chelsea paused to turn pleading eyes on her friend. "Please?"

Jessica looked at her friend, worrying over her. "We really need to.—"

"No!" Chelsea fairly screamed and cut her off sharply. "That is just too much. What happened tonight already was enough." She wiped her eyes furiously. "And besides," she added after a moment, "there's a dead man back there. What are we gonna tell them—that some *wolf* came to our rescue?" She shook her head. "That would be it right there! Wolves? In this part of Texas? They are liable to send us to the State Hospital for the criminally insane, and then burn the place down just to be sure we never get out!" Her eyes searched Jessica's, pleading.

As much as Jessica hated to admit it, the story did sound crazy; besides, there were really *two* dead men back there, she thought. "It *does* seem far fetched doesn't it?" she asked quietly.

Chelsea nodded, saying, "I saw it, I *know it happened*, and I think it's crazy!"

Jessica watched her a moment longer, then nodded and said, "Okay, but you are staying with me tonight." As they made their way back to the car, Jessica heard Chelsea mumble under her breath, "Stay the night? Hell, I'm moving in!" Reaching the car, they both got in and locked the doors. Jessica drove to her house, thankful her night would not be spent alone

* * * *

As Shameer carried the body to the lake out behind his home, he felt only the slightest bit of distaste over the meal he had just had. He placed the man into the box, the bottom weighted with concrete; Shameer already noticed the change beginning to come over his victim. He leaned down, wrapped an arm around the man's neck, and with the simplest twist and pull, severed his head effortlessly. "Sorry, but you don't deserve to live," he said with a sigh, "even in such an accursed form as this."

Then he dropped the dismembered head into the box, pushed the lid in place, and secured the chains around it. Hefting the box onto his shoulder, he used strength no mortal man had to throw the box into the center of the lake. "That ought to keep you for a few years. By the time they find you, dental records won't even be good enough," he said in disgust before turning to walk back up the hill toward his uniquely hidden home. Built into the side of the hill, it was

camouflaged enough that only those with the keenest of senses could find it on their own.

Shameer lived far enough out in the country that most people would not even take the time to try to find it. It was an old, strange dwelling; had been even when his brother and he had acquired it. After all the years they had been there, they were still finding new rooms that hadn't yet been explored. It truly must have belonged to someone very eccentric for Colin and him to find it strange. The thought made him smile. *What could be more outlandish than us?* he asked himself.

The inside took up the entire interior of the hill. The stairs in the entry led down, down, down. From there, it turned into a fortress. There were stairs leading up into the upper rooms of the mansion. The stairs that went down led to lower apartments and from there, the last staircase led into the caverns. It was deep in those caverns in what seemed the very bowels of the earth, that Shameer made his sleeping quarters.

Now, as he descended those stairs that led to his own inner sanctum, his thoughts turned once again to the girl who had so effortlessly captivated him. He remembered everything about her; her hair, softer than newly spun silk and softly scented of lavender, and the warm inviting deep brown color of it. Her eyes held all the innocence of those of a newborn fawn, and were the same, rich color; a lush chocolate tone that had stared straight into his soul. When he had come to rescue the two women, his eyes had met hers and he had almost lost control of his shape shift and changed

back to his true form to let her see him. He had barely caught himself in time and had sent the message, willing her and her friend to leave.

He felt sorry for the friend. He had been given only enough time to save one of them from the hurt the men intended. He just had to spring and hope it would cause enough of a stir to draw the other man's attention. It had worked, but not before her friend had been compromised.

A moment of anger hit him as he wished he had attacked the men before they had reached the park. Something had held him back—fear of being caught? He wasn't sure, but for some reason, he knew there had been another person there, watching. What their intent had been, whether to help or also harm, he hadn't been able to tell. The bloodlust had set in after that and he had cared not at all if he had been watched. He had feasted fully on both men tonight, severing the head of one who he had killed, to prevent the change.

He had only killed the one; the other had done himself in when he fell against his own blade. There was no need to cut off the head of the one who had already been dead. His blood had still been fresh enough to be of use to Shameer, but because he was already dead, there was no danger of him turning.

Now, the renewed energy he felt would allow him to stay a few hours in the daylight, if he so chose. The blood he had taken tonight would last him for almost two months, if he used the energy sparingly, yet something told Shameer he needed to rest. Conserving the energy was what he needed to

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

do, for something unexpected awaited him; he could feel it. This whole thing was not over yet, somehow.

He stripped and slid beneath the silken sheets completely naked. The feel of the cold, smooth bedcovers against his skin drew a sigh from him. Closing his eyes, he let the deathlike slumber overcome him, taking thoughts of her with it.

* * * *

Anger coursed through the *other*. This was not supposed to have happened. He had paid those two bungling idiots to kidnap the women, not attempt to rape them! *Damn it!* Fisting his hand, he drew back and smashed the glass of the window he had been staring out of. He had wanted a simple task done. He had made the mistake of depending on humans to accomplish it without delay. They would have completed their task, had it not been for *him*. In his rage, he gritted his teeth, dug his nails into his skin. He had searched for centuries for her soul. He wanted her dead! Not hurt, not raped, but a dry husk; mutilated beyond recognition and once again out of Shameer's reach. Why should Shameer have anything that would make him happy, even for a moment?

However unpleasant the fact, it only proved his belief that if something was to be done right, it had to be done by the one who wanted it done. He forced himself to relax, closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. He listened to the fearful panting that came from the far corner of the room. His minions had brought him a treat to try to quell his anger at the failed attempt for his true desires. He turned and met the

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

eyes of the flaxen-haired woman tied to the bed, a gag in her mouth.

Hands behind his back, he moved to the bed and studied her tear-streaked face. Her bright blue eyes held his warily, as though she feared at any moment he would pounce on her. Slowly, he began to let his fangs extend. He was *not* a vampire; he was a *necromancer*. He had all the qualities of a warlock with the power to summon demons to his bidding. He had no physical need for the blood of a mortal, but it gave him a feeling of power. It also gave him satisfaction, on some small level, to know he was able to drain the blood of his victims completely without the least remorse, something Shameer was too squeamish to do most of the time. It also fueled his ego to know that *he* could cause great pain for his victim.

He smiled at the thought. He would cause pain tonight. He let his fangs protrude over his bottom lip and half sneered at the audible gasp of his victim, bound tightly to the bed. He sat on the bed and watched her try to squirm away from him, chuckled low in his throat. "Oh no, little one," he whispered softly, "there *is* no escape. You will be my exercise to keep from losing my cool with my helpers for their failures this night."

He pulled the gag away from her mouth and let her see the red color of his eyes as he leaned in closer, said, "I will leave nothing of you but an empty shell." He smiled cruelly as his hand traveled down to the snug-fitting negligee his minions had put on her when they rid her of her clothes. His

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

hand curled around the neckline of the silk gown and swiftly ripped it from her, leaving her exposed and naked before him.

The scream of this tasty morsel made his blood run faster as he prepared to take her life, "Oh, yes, darling, *do* scream for me," he said softly. "That makes it so much more pleasurable when I kill you." He leaned down, his hand held her in place while his lips found the pulse in her neck. The other hand fondled a breast roughly as his teeth sank into her jugular vein. He drank, felt himself grow stronger as he fed on her lifeblood. She became the one he had actually wanted dead this night and his bite became even more vicious as he imagined the sweet torment he would put her through when he did finally catch her. It was, after all, only a matter of time.

* * * *

Chelsea had taken an hour long shower upon reaching Jessica's house. She had cried too. Once she had cleansed the smell of him off of her body, she drank the cocoa Jessica had offered, and then excused herself to go to bed. Once in the sanctuary of the guest room, she lit candles Jessica always kept handy and used them to form a circle of protection around the perimeter of the room. Once the circle was cast, she sat on the bed, knees drawn up to her chest. She chanted to the goddess for healing and protection. She had been raised in a cross between faiths—Wiccan on her mother's side; Christian on her father's. They had raised her to believe both faiths were actually pieces to the one real truth.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

With that combination of creeds strong inside her, she used her beliefs to help her call to the goddess for healing of her body. And she beseeched the God of All for the protection she somehow knew she and Jessica were now in need of.

* * * *

Jessica had listened to Chelsea cry in silence, worried over her friend's pain. She hoped time would heal her wounds. And Jessica blamed herself for dropping the car keys. If she had just been a little faster, this would have never happened. Once Jessica had taken her shower as well, she got into her bed, turned out the light and tried to let herself relax enough to sleep. Thoughts of the man she had seen so often in her dreams plagued her. Seeing him in that bar frightened her. *I'm going to wake up now*, she told herself. It was all just a dream. But even as she willed herself to believe it, she knew better.

Her hand reached and found the spot on her neck where his lips had touched. She had wished, more times than she could count, her dreams could be real. Sometimes, she had thought, maybe on some level, her dreams had been reality, even if it was on some unseen realm that she could never reach. But tonight, he was there. He had stood inches from her. She had felt his breath on her cheek. She had seen his face, looked into the depth of his eyes. He was *real*. She knew now, he *did* truly exist. Seeing the wolf simply reinforced her belief in his existence.

She knew she could not tell Chelsea what she believed. Her friend, however open-minded she was, would have a hard

time buying into Jessica's opinion that a real vampire had rescued them. The eyes of the wolf had met hers with an intelligence that reinforced her suspicions.

Jessica grew still as she listened to her friend in the next room. The sounds of Chelsea's sobs ripped at her heart. Tears welled in her own eyes as she rose from her own bed and moved to go offer what little comfort she could to the friend that would have offered her own shoulder to Jessica, had she been the one to have endured such a violation.

In the bedroom next to hers, Chelsea was stifling sobs with her pillow, trying to keep quiet enough that Jessica would be able to sleep at least. She was mildly shocked when the bedroom door opened and Jess had walked in, carrying a pillow. Her best friend climbed into the bed beside her. She looked up at Jessica, said, "I'm sorry."

Her voice drifted off as Jessica put her arms around her and cradled her. She gave up at last and let the pain she felt pour from her. Jessica just held her and let her cry. No words were spoken. Nothing could be said. It was just time to let the pain out.

* * * *

It was after four in the afternoon when they awoke. Both girls felt as if cotton was stuck in their eyes from crying so much the night before. Getting dressed, Jessica tried to be encouraging. "I'll make us a late lunch or an early supper, whichever you prefer," she said with a smile. "Then maybe we could go to a movie, or shopping?"

Chelsea smiled, replied, "I'm not sure I want the movies, or shopping, but food sounds good,—almost." She cleared her throat and wrinkled her nose.

"Fine, then we will just stay in and watch TV," she affirmed. At Chelsea's nod, she switched the television on and started for the kitchen. The sound of commercials echoed in the room. As Jessica reached the kitchen, the news report began.

"This morning, the body of an unidentified man was found in the downtown parking lot off Congress Avenue. It appears to have been a stabbing mishap."

Chelsea sunk to the couch, a look of shock registering on her features as the two women looked at each other. Both sets of eyes turned on the television as the lady on it continued, "Details are being withheld at this time, pending notification of next of kin."

Both were speechless, for a time. Jessica moved to the couch and sank down on it beside Chelsea. Suddenly, she had no desire to cook, but looking for something to say, she chose, "Well, if they are both dead, then we know it is over, right?"

Her friend, nodded slowly. "Yeah, but they only mentioned the one body," she said softly. "We don't know if the other one is..." Her words trailed off as she sat there silent for a few moments.

Peering at Jessica, she said, "Maybe we could go to a movie after all? I don't think you really want to cook anyway now, I don't want to chance listening to the news again."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Jessica nodded her agreement, grabbing her keys. In her mind, the burning question was, but what about the wolf? What had happened to him? She hoped silently *he* was okay. A certain amount of relief the other man had not been mentioned made her breathe easier, though she wasn't sure why.

* * * *

Abigail watched as Colin paced the floor, waiting for Shameer to awaken. He had been fretting all night over what he had seen, but had collapsed in exhaustion before Shameer returned home. Finally, she spoke softly. "It will be dangerous to bring them here," she ventured to say. When he swung back to face her, she added, "And possibly very painful to both of ye."

He shook his head, countered, "Abby, you can't mean we should just leave them defenseless."

The usually merry older woman replied, "No, Colin. I don't." Her face for once showed the lines life had put there. "I just think you should realize this will be no grand adventure fer ye."

"Don't you think I know that?" he fumed, wounding her with his stare. "I must admit having them here will not be an easy thing." He shook his head, looking away. "But I can't take their deaths on my conscience."

Davis moved into the parlor, watching the exchange between his wife and his friend. When it was apparent Colin's mind was made up, he cleared his throat, interjecting, "Abby,

the decision is not yours. This is between Colin and Shameer."

She turned, met his gaze, nodded once and said, "I know." She moved to her husband's side, seeking comfort. "I just hate to see them to suffer."

Davis nodded, wrapping his arms protectively around her. In lowered tones he said, "Perhaps they will bring joy back into the masters' lives, if only for a time."

A silence fell between them. Abby looked from him to Colin. Mixed emotions ran through her as she said, "Do you think one of them might..." she left the rest of the question unasked as tears began to fill her eyes.

"Shhh," Davis cautioned, rubbed her back in a gesture of affection. "At this point, if one of them offers Colin a release from his suffering, it might be a blessing."

Abigail nodded, realizing the truth of his words. "I know," she whispered. "I just don't know if I am ready to witness such a thing." She remembered both Colin and Shameer being like beloved uncles when she was young, then like brothers as she had grown older, then finally friends in her older years. Some part of her had always believed she would die before Colin would search out the opportunity to find a possible release from his curse. He claimed merely to be worried for the women's safety. But on some level, Abigail believed he was seeking a possible love to release him from the bonds of his painful life.

She glanced at the clock, knew Shameer would be rising soon. If Colin found a way to convince Shameer that the women were in danger and must be brought here for

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

protection, she would have new people in the house for the first time a very long while. Forcing herself to cheer up at the idea of making new friends, she sat in ease next to her husband, and waited.

* * * *

His first thoughts when he awoke were of her and his desire was to go to her. He knew she thought of him as well. Rising up, he found himself wishing to be near her. It was an almost overpowering urge, one he nearly lacked the willpower to fight. He had to draw on his memories of losing those he loved before to keep himself from searching her out. Although he had too many things on his mind at the time to hear her thoughts of him, he knew she had recognized his eyes, had remembered their exact color, though they had been changed slightly by his wolf form; she had sensed his thoughts when he had willed her away. He had to admit, he was impressed with the power he saw within her.

She was a very intelligent woman. It radiated from her, intimidating most normal men, who felt threatened by women with more common sense than they themselves possessed. Chuckling, he thought, *who am I kidding?* Most men felt threatened by women, period. He knew the reasons. Women were the ones who really had true power on the earth. A woman could give life. She was closer to nature and most of them had natural healing abilities because of that nearness to all creation.

Because of that, men had always exploited them in one way or another, violating many of their basic rights out of sheer jealousy of the talents God himself had given them.

All because man had lied to him, convincing him that women were the weaker sex. Shameer had a feeling that if women handled powers of government, there would be no wars because the countries could sit down like civil people and discuss problems openly to find solutions that would benefit all involved. Unfortunately, he suspected such a day would never come. Too many men were power-hungry, chauvinistic pigs. He doubted they would ever relinquish the power they thought they had.

Pulling his black silk robe on over his nakedness, he moved to the stairs, called out mentally to Colin as he ascended. He was surprised to find Colin standing there waiting for him. A look of anger mixed with pain clouded his features.

"Shameer," he said, deceptively calm, "you must bring them here." Abigail and Davis sat behind him on the couch. Her expression was serious when she looked from Shameer to Colin, then back again

Confused, Shameer shot a glance at Abigail before regarding Colin. He asked, "Who, Colin? Of whom are you speaking?"

Colin fired him a look of pure fury, his body, though ancient, showed strong muscles as he flexed his fists. "The women from last night," he spat. "The one lady needs to heal. She was hurt more than they are yet aware."

Colin was still attractive; his winsome looks belying his true age. Whenever he chose to travel into public with

Shameer, they passed as father and son. Shameer studied Colin's set expression, said, "That is out of the question, Colin, utterly absurd." He was furious his brother would even suggest such a thing. Turning, he started to move away, adding, "Besides, we don't have any rooms prepared."

Abigail cleared her throat, said in a small voice, "I prepared the two rooms on the fourth level while you slept, sir. I have already been to the grocery store and restocked the refrigerator and cabinets. It will be no problem to add their care to my daily routine."

Shameer studied her for a moment before looking back at Colin, his confusion and anger subsiding. "Well," he sighed, "suddenly, I feel outnumbered."

Davis laughed heartily, said, "Ye are. Trust me on that one."

Colin's silvery gaze locked with Shameer's, his stare brooking no argument.

"They are still in danger, brother," Colin said, his voice deadly quiet, marking how serious he really was. "The two men who followed them were not alone. There was a third. The other one watched from the shadows; he saw you."

Shameer considered what his brother said. He had felt the other man's presence, but had not been able to tell anything about the man's motives. He knew his brother was right, and if they needed protecting, then he had no choice but to do it. Deep down, however, his true doubts lay in how he was going to protect the one he was so drawn to from himself.

Colin paced tempestuously, clenched his fists, displayed an anger Shameer had rarely seen as he raged, "He plans to use

them to lure you back out. He plans to kill them and torture you." The look Colin gave Shameer made him understand, there was more, "or kill you as well."

Shameer's emotions were raw. He felt sure that bringing them here would result in setting himself up for more heartache. He knew that if anything else happened to her, or her friend, he could never forgive himself.

"Shameer, this being is not human," Colin continued quietly. "He is surrounded by some kind of dark magic." He nodded toward the doorway, added, "We must go now and bring them here tonight, for he plans to attack come morning. We are fast running out of time."

Shameer sighed at Colin's words. This was in direct opposition to every rule Shameer lived by, but he couldn't let any harm come to them, not again. He met Colin's gaze, nodded resolutely. "You do know how drawn to this girl I really am, don't you?" he asked quietly.

Colin nodded, adding, "But isn't that all the more reason to help her and her friend?"

Shameer inclined his head, but drew a shaky breath, "She reminds me so much, of..." He looked toward the painting, then back to his brother, "You are right, of course. We cannot let any more harm come to them."

Chapter 4

Jessica lay in her bed, staring absently at the ceiling. Though the movie they had gone to had been a comedy, it had done little to calm their jumpy nerves or ease the tension she felt. She felt oddly restless tonight as she checked the bedside clock for the hundredth time. It was two-thirty in the morning, hours before her alarm clock would go off. Yet here she was, wide-awake with a feeling of anxiousness she couldn't shake. Something was about to happen, she knew it. Her life was going to change. Everything she had always believed in would be put to the test, and she would never be the same again.

Her thoughts revisited the man, all logic told her could never exist, yet in her heart, she had always known he did. Now she could *feel* him. The touch of his lips on her throat still burned her skin. The sadness in the depths of his eyes as he had turned away from her returned to haunt her. There was the nagging feeling that something about to happen. Glancing at the time yet again, she threw back the covers and got out of the bed. The calico cat gave a disapproving meow at being forced to resign her comfortable spot on Jessica's chest.

As she moved to the window, she spoke softly to the cat, "I'm sorry, Neeka; I know you were comfortable." Both kitties sat on the bed watching her with interest. As she looked through the window glass, she found herself disappointed not to find *him* there. She wondered why she should care if he

came or not. *Why?* "He doesn't even know where I live," she reminded herself aloud. Even as she spoke the words, she doubted the truth of them.

A moment's thrill went through her before the image of that same beautiful man with bared fangs and blood dripping from his perfect teeth flashed through her mind. She stepped away from the window, gasped at the next vision she saw,— her dream lover, filling himself on her lifeblood.

A chill encompassed her as tears filled her eyes. What if the wolf had actually been after *them*? What if he had only settled for the men because they had beaten him to his actual goal? What if its ravenous feeding on the men in the park had only given them a temporary reprieve?

Suddenly feeling very claustrophobic, she moved once more to the window, intending to pull it open for a breath of air. As she fidgeted with the lock, her eyes caught a movement from somewhere under the big oak tree growing in her front yard. Jessica froze and stared out the window at the spot under the tree. Nothing. Her imagination was playing tricks on her, she thought wearily as she ran a hand through her hair. "Geez, Jessica," she scolded herself, "what' is wrong with you?"

No one had followed them home. It should all be over now. As for the vampire from her dream, *he doesn't have any idea who I am or where I live*, she thought. *He's in love with the platinum beauty I could never hope to rival, Lillian, the fair and perfect creature. What could he ever see in me?*

Jessica frowned in disgust at the thought. It was just fancy that let her believe a man such as he could even find the

slightest interest in her. Compared to the blue-eyed female who bore the name of Lillian, she was plain. *Hell*, she thought, *compared to normal women, I am plain*. The thought saddened her. When she had been younger, she had pretended to be a beautiful maiden, waiting for her one true love to come to her rescue. She remembered being caught by her step-father, acting out the part of Cinderella being fitted for the glass slipper by her prince.

She didn't know now which had been more humiliating, being caught pretending to be a princess, or the way he had laughed at her, telling her she would always be an ugly duckling. She remembered his mean jokes when she had been young about how her mother had kept all her beauty to herself. When she grew older, the jokes subject of the mockery had gone from her lack of femininity to comments about the size of her breasts. One day, when she got home from school, he had been there waiting for her. Her mother had several more hours to work before she would be home.

He had been drinking and he stared at her with a look she had never seen before. "You are growing into quite a young lady," he had said in a strangely slurred and husky voice. "Of course, someone like you could never amount to much, so I guess it is time for me to start teaching you what women like you are good for." She remembered cringing at the abrasiveness of his words, but then he had reached for her. Crying out, she pleaded for him to let her go, she tried to get away from him, all the while promising never again to do whatever she had done to anger him.

The next words he had spoken had crushed her very soul. "You're too ugly to mean much to anyone; certainly no man would ever want you," he said harshly, his hand closing savagely over the private place between her legs. She could still feel the sickening sensation she had felt as his fingers began to pull away the protection of her panties.

She reached blindly for the first thing she could find, her hands closing around a piece of granite her mother had placed by the fireplace for decoration. Sobbing, she had swung hard, brought the granite crashing over his head. It hadn't killed him, but at least it knocked him out long enough for her to grab some things and run to Chelsea's house. Chelsea's parents had been there. Nearly hysterical and in tears, Jessica told them what had happened.

Mrs. Thompson had calmed her, gently soothing away her tears and washing her face with a cold washcloth while Mr. Thompson had gone into a separate room to call Jessica's mother. When her mother arrived, her face was tear streaked and an anger Jessica had never seen before had taken hold of her. "You will never give up, will you? You just don't want me to be happy," she had accused viciously. Her words still rang in Jessica's ears, made her heart burn with pain. "First, you chased your father away by always pestering him for attention. And now, you come here with these lies, telling the neighbors George tried to rape you!" Her eyes were cold and hateful as she glared down at Jessica, snorting in disgust.

She turned then to Mrs. Thompson and acclaimed, "I have no doubt whatsoever that she tried to seduce *him*, being such the little whore that she is." Then she turned back to Jessica

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

and yelled, "I will not give up my one happiness for you. You are an ugly child, and I don't know why I had to be cursed with you." Her words had crushed her Jessica's very soul.

Mrs. Thompson had gasped in shock, and her husband had stepped protectively in front of Jessica, saying, "Mrs. Sidney, that is quite enough." He had reproached her mother, reprimanding her for her hateful words, but Jessica had already heard everything she needed to hear in order to know how her mother truly felt about her. Jessica had picked up clues of her mother's animosity toward her, but she had no idea just how deep it all ran until then. Mrs. Thomson had cradled Jessica in her arms, rocking her gently as she cried silent, humiliated tears. Mr. Thompson escorted Jessica's mother from the house and arranged to pick up her things.

She had lived with the Thompsons after that night. Chelsea went from being Jessica's best friend to being the sister Jessica had never had. She had never spoken to anybody about that night again. The Thompsons had encouraged her to go with them to counseling, but the visits had done little to ease the wound her mother had left on her that night, almost twelve years ago.

Jessica had never seen her mother again after that, though she had heard things. The man her mother had chosen over her had left her for a younger, prettier woman. Then a few years later he had gone to jail for raping his new love's thirteen-year-old daughter.

Jessica had felt some satisfaction and even a little bit of envy at knowing that at least one mom had chosen her child instead of that monster, a man who had nearly gotten away

with raping her as well. Jessica's mother had died almost two years later. She had killed herself after finding out that she had cancer. It was a strange kind of poetic justice, but Jessica found it gave her no closure to hear of her mother's plight. It hadn't been what she had wanted.

She had wanted to hear her mother simply say she had been wrong and was sorry. But in death, no words could be spoken and nothing else could ever be accomplished. The wound, still a fathomless pit of affliction to her, was still as biting now as it had been all those years ago; she had begun to believe it would never heal. She could almost understand exactly how Chelsea had felt after that man had raped her. She wasn't sure which could really be considered worse. At least it hadn't been someone in Chelsea's own family who had hurt her.

She suddenly found herself not wanting to be alone and wondered if Chelsea was still awake. She crossed the floor, opened the door and headed into the other bedroom. Chelsea had gone to bed earlier that night, pleading exhaustion from the night before. Jessica's thoughts centered on her friend. Chelsea was still the same loving person, but there was a sadness about her. Her smile didn't quite extend to her eyes right now, and her soul seemed damaged.

On reaching the spare bedroom, Jessica paused; listened for any sound coming from within before deciding if she couldn't sleep, then Chelsea didn't need to either, and knocked on the bedroom door. When no response came, Jessica opened the door slowly, almost afraid of what she might find.

The bed was empty. In fact, it was still made up. Panic struck her as she scanned the room, but she found Chelsea sitting on the window ledge, staring absently out to the street below, her face shining with newly shed tears.

Jessica started to speak, but found she didn't know what to say.

That was okay. Chelsea's voice filled the silence instead. "I couldn't sleep," she said quietly, her voice bespeaking a grief that made Jessica's own heart contract with sympathy.

"Every time I close my eyes, I see that louse lying over me, panting like a damn dog," she choked out, a sob breaking her trembling voice.

Jessica moved to her side and ran a hand softly over her hair. "It'll be okay, Chelsea, I know it hurts," she comforted, her own voice quivering. "That pile of crap can never hurt you or anyone else again."

Chelsea nodded, sniffed before she said, "Yeah, I know, but damn; that doesn't clear away the memories, ya know?" She paused, then sat on the foot of the bed, and looked back at Jessica, a tentative smile playing across her face. "Tell me again about your dreams of your vampire prince."

Smiling, Jessica sat beside Chelsea and started talking about the dreams she had been having ever since she turned sixteen. "Well," she began, "in the dreams, he rescues me from living a terrible life with an uncle who would sooner sell me off to an old lord for money, than have anything to do with me. He offers me a chance to travel the world with him and be free."

She stared off into space as she continued, becoming wrapped up in the memories of the dreams. "He loved me unconditionally. He made me feel safe," she said, gently shrugging. "He even went so far as to rescue my most precious belongings for me when we got ready to leave Europe."

"There was this one thing," she said and smiled at the memory. "It was a hope chest my father had carved out of cedar. It had roses carved into the wood." Her eyes met Chelsea's and they were filled with tears. "In the dream, my mother had put all kinds of precious treasures for me to have when I grew into a lady. There were perfumes and lace kerchiefs and her wedding dress ... and even a beautiful, silken nightdress with pink roses embroidered on the collar."

She inclined her head and felt a deep sense of loss over those things which had belonged to the woman she was in her dream. Feeling silly then, she shook her head and sighed, "I am supposed to be making you feel better, but this can't be helping."

She smiled sadly, patting Chelsea's back, then she perked up, said, "Come on; let's go downstairs to the kitchen. I'll make us some cocoa."

* * * *

Chelsea attempted a smile as she responded, "You always know how to make a person feel better." She got to her feet and followed Jessica, wondering if she should tell her about the unusual feeling she kept having that things were about to change forever. She kept having this unusual thought run

through her head that someone was getting ready to walk into their lives,—someone who would change their entire outlook on life. That was why Jessica had caught her standing by the window. She had been looking to see if they had arrived yet.

Pausing at the foot of the stairs, Chelsea found herself asking silently, *who? Who is coming? Why do I think someone would show up here, at this hour?* "Jess," she said, resigned to tell her friend about her strange experience, when suddenly there was a knock at the door. Both girls jumped, gasped, and then looked at each other. Jessica wrapped her robe tighter around her and moved toward the door, suddenly wishing she had a peephole.

* * * *

Standing before the door, she questioned loudly, "Who is it?" Then she wondered uneasily if she should have spoken to let just anyone know they were home. An eternity passed as she stood by the door, waiting for an answer. When the reply came, her heart leapt to her throat as she recognized the soft accent of the voice.

"Miss?" the man on the other side of the door said, "Uhm, you don't know me. I—I don't really know you, either, but,—we met briefly last night." He was silent for a moment, then continued. "Miss? I saw what happened last night. I wanted to check and see..." his voice trailed off.

Jessica and Chelsea stared at each other for a moment, and then Jessica found herself asking, "Through the eyes of a wolf!" She backed from the door, mixed fear and excitement

making her both anxious and leery about opening the door. Not caring how Chelsea would react to her words she spoke again, saying, "I know what you are. I don't trust you."

A moment of silence followed. When Shameer spoke, his own voice was weak, almost desperate in his reply. "You have little choice as to whom to trust, mademoiselle," he said, his voice cracking a little as he spoke. "I mean you no harm, which is more than I can say for the man who hid and watched as your friend was raped and you were nearly killed."

There was silence for a moment on the other side of the door. Chelsea sank at the foot of the stairs, a look of shock and pain on her features. "He knows," she cried in a whisper. Looking to Jessica she asked, "How can he know?"

Jessica's hands fidgeted with the lock as she opened the door and looked at the man she only hoped she could trust. Silent tears ran down her cheeks. He stepped forward, his arms circling around her and he held her for a moment in silence as she cried.

Shocked by the fierce protectiveness he felt for her, he tightened his hold for a moment, before releasing her and stepping back, he fought the urge to crush her to him once more, and instead, turned to the older man standing behind him.

"This is my father, Colin," he said as the other man stepped forward, then Shameer turned back and met her questioning gaze. "And I am Shameer." He stood facing her and bowed ever so slightly. "I am sorry to have called on you at such a late hour, but under the circumstances, it couldn't really wait."

Jessica stepped back to allow the two men entrance into her home. She asked, "Won't you come in?" She was shocked with herself. Never had she let someone she barely knew into her home, but she felt she *did* know this man. He had visited her dreams now for years. And there was something else, for some reason, she felt safe with him, like she would a person she had once been close to. She had *known* him in these night journeys for almost as long as she had known Chelsea. In some ways she felt closer to him than she felt even to Chelsea. *But that is ridiculous*, she thought, banishing the idea. *Chelsea has been my friend for almost twenty years.*

As both men walked into the house, Jessica turned and looked at Chelsea to see if she was all right with the men coming into the house, silently admonishing herself for not thinking to check before they came in. Chelsea was standing at the base of the stairs, a look of complete wonder on her face. Jessica felt like saying, Hey, I saw him first, but then she realized her friend was not gawking at the younger of the two, but at the older one. The surprise made Jessica smile. Chelsea had never before looked at an older man the way she was looking at this one.

As she gave him a second appraisal, Jessica had to admit he was actually quite stunning. She could understand why Shameer was so alarmingly attractive if his father looked like that. "So," Jessica said at last, trying to sound nonchalant, "what brings you to my neck of the woods?"

Colin cleared his throat, stated, "Alas, my dear child, this is not a social call." At his words, Shameer nodded, drawing both women's attention.

"Unfortunately, my father is correct. It seems, the men who attacked you last night were not alone," Shameer announced.

Jessica suddenly found it hard to breathe. She began to open her mouth to question him, but Chelsea cut her off, asking, "What do you mean? Are you saying..."

"We are saying," Colin said, speaking slowly, "that the two of you are still in danger."

Shameer stepped forward, looking at Chelsea. Concern marking his features, he said, "Perhaps we should all sit down and speak for a moment."

Jessica started to agree, but Chelsea let out a half sob, half hysterical chortle. "No!" she shouted forcefully. "The men who did this to us are dead." She shook her head in refusal, "It's over!" Her voice shook as she unconsciously wrapped her arms about herself and added, "This can't be happening."

Colin, sensed her fear, stepped closer to her, soothed "I am so sorry for what has happened, *my dear*." His accent only served to make his voice that much softer as he spoke to her. "However, there is no way for us to undo it."

As he made a last step toward her, she took a step backward, holding up her hands as if to ward off an evil presence. "Stop," she said. "Please, tell me this is just a bad dream and any moment now, I'm gonna wake up." Tears welled in her eyes and she moved closer to Jessica, as if for protection.

Shameer watched her, feeling every ounce of her pain. He bowed his head and looked away from her as he spoke. "I followed the two of you out of the club because I saw the

other two following." He said as he shook his head. "I followed at more of a distance and by the time I got there, what was happening was too fast for me to be able to stop it." His gaze met and held hers. "I am sorry I was unable to keep it from happening."

Jessica asked, "Who are you? Why are you here?" Her question was more of an accusation. "Why did you come here?" Her mind was reeling. *Why had he come here? What reason did he have for risking all?*

Shameer sighed, moved closer to her, spoke where only she could hear. "I was afraid if you saw me, you might panic more. That is why I appeared as the wolf." Inclining his head, he said in a louder tone, "I didn't want to set off any more panic than was necessary." His answer seemed to make sense, but she was still confused.

A long moment of silence passed as his eyes clashed with hers, a battle of wills was evident to everyone on the room. When at last he spoke, his voice was soft and there was a note of warning within his tone as he said, "There are some things better left unanswered right now."

At that moment, something flashed inside his eyes,—a light that made her remember; another face from the night when the animal had rescued her. *His eyes*, she thought, staring into their endless depths. Shaking her head, she banished the thought yet again. It wasn't possible for a man and a wolf to have the same eyes, the same expression.

She looked away from him and to her friend, who stood with terror on her face. Jessica knew Chelsea was scared; she understood why. Chelsea was afraid there would be more to

come with this new, mysterious yet unidentified man supposedly who had stood in the shadows watching.

"So," Jessica sighed, "there is another man involved; he *watched* what happened to us and did nothing to help." She walked to Shameer's side. "Does that sum it up?"

Shameer heaved a sigh, said, "Not quite." He cleared his throat as if stalling. Jessica wondered what he could possibly still have to say when he answered her unspoken question. "He followed you home; he knows where you live."

A loud crash sounded behind them. Turning, they saw Chelsea passed out on the floor with Colin kneeling beside her. Jessica ran to her friend, panic seizing her as she moved to cradle Chelsea's head in her lap. She smoothed back Chelsea's hair, looked up at Shameer, who stood stone still, a frustrated expression upon his features.

"Okay," she said. "You've delivered your bad news; you've sent my friend into a world of panic." She broke off, tears coming to her eyes. Quietly, she asked, "Now what?"

Colin, who sat across from her, gently touched her arm. When she turned her attention upon him, she saw eyes so sincere they shocked her. He said, "Our intention in coming here was not to cause more grief, but to warn you, and to offer our assistance."

Chelsea, who had come to, asked, "What help could you possibly give?" Her voice betrayed her fear. It trembled as though she shook from cold.

Shameer, who stood away from them, offered the answer, saying, "My father and I have a private estate in the country." He moved closer, made eye contact, first with Chelsea, then

with Jessica. "It is secluded and very hard to find. Unless someone has actually seen the way there, they would never be able to locate it."

Jessica registered no small amount of surprise as she realized the suggestion he was making. "You want us to leave everything here and go with you?" There was accusation as well as realization in her tone.

Shameer met her gaze, nodding slightly, he replied, "It was our belief it would be the easiest way to keep you safe."

A shiver of excitement raced through Jessica, even though she also was somewhat shocked at the proposal. She shook her head, said, "I can't, there's no way." She spoke with a finality.

Shameer knelt beside her, his eyes studying hers, asked, "What could hold you here so fiercely?" He found himself hoping whatever reason there was, it would not be a man.

Jessica sputtered, "Well, there's my job, for one." She looked around and upon finding the furry creatures, pointed, continued, "My cats, for another." Then looking back at him, she nodded. "And let's not forget, aside from your first name, we don't even know anything about you."

Smiling, Shameer looked at one of the cats, who regarded him lazily from her post on the couch. She was a small petite feline, solid black in color, except for the three white whiskers that turned at a somewhat different angle from the others on her face. He looked back at Jessica, saying softly, "Well, I understand leaving your cats here would not do ... you would have to bring them with you, of course." He dismissed that problem as solved. "As far as me and not knowing me," he

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

paused, as if for effect before he added, "whatever you need know, ask me, and I shall answer it as best I can."

He sat beside her on the floor, searched her eyes as he took her hand and said, "I know you don't want to lose your job, but I must put a question to you." Jessica had a hard time following his words as the shock of his touch rippled up her arm, making her long to pull away from him before she betrayed herself and the attraction she felt for him. Her eyes looked into his, knowing he was going to make a remark she was sure not to like. "What good does a job do you, if you are not alive to perform it?" he concluded.

Swallowing hard, she realized the words he spoke were true. From behind her, she heard Chelsea's voice saying, "Jessica? I would rather have to look for a new job than to die trying to keep this one."

Jessica found herself agreeing. She said, "As much as I would like to refuse your offer, I guess it would not be very wise of me to do that, given the circumstances." She got to her feet, pulled her hand free of the man who set her pulse racing, crossed the floor to the cats which sat waiting for her.

Jessica picked Sabbath up and handed her to Chelsea, then picked up Neeka. Turning to look back at the three of them that still sat in the floor. Her eyes meeting Chelsea's, she said, "Let's do this, before I change my mind."

Chelsea stood and moved to the phone, said, "I have to call Mom. I refuse to let her worry when she can't reach us."

* * * *

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

They packed enough clothes to last a week. Since Chelsea was about the same size as Jessica, she just had her pick out some of her clothes. Jessica reasoned that a few trips to the coin-op wouldn't be enough to give anything away to their unseen enemy ... probably. After their suitcases were in the trunk of the men's car, Jessica gathered up her cats' food, litter, toys and bedding. At Shameer's raised eyebrow, she countered defensively, asking, "And how well do you treat your wolf?"

Shameer's stare turned to a smile, then a small chuckle as he thought on how well he indeed treated himself. He nodded, helped her carry the things to the car, and placed them in the back seat. Once there, he turned and looked at her, coolly returning the even stare she leveled at him.

"I know I didn't seem grateful a little while ago," she said, her voice softening, "but I do thank you."

Shameer meant just to smile and accept her thanks, but when his eyes met hers, his mind gave in to a memory he had kept buried; one he had thought was lost in the past.

* * * *

Lillian's beauty had always drawn men to her. Men would come from other countries just to set eyes on the face famed for its beauty. It had caused many a man to swear his undying love for her. Also upon occasion, many a man had lost his sense of priorities because of it. Some had been willing to give up their birthrights, forsaking everything their lineage offered, just to be near her. Unfortunately, it had also

caused many men to attempt kidnapping, when she refused their attentions.

At one time, there was a particular suitor her uncle had been rather set on her marrying. He had cared not for whether she loved or even liked the man, only for the weight of his purse. The man's attraction to Lillian had nearly stolen her from Shameer forever.

The man was known as Lord Ravenmoore III. He was rumored to have been a cruel, possessive man. His servants lived in constant fear of him. It was said he had sired five illegitimate children, all produced with his female servants. It was also said Ravenmoore had denied parenting those children and sent most of them to work in textile mills. The ones left in his household still labored just as hard as his other workers did, but since they were family, they actually worked without pay.

Lillian's parents were killed years before and she had been left in the care of her uncle. As her legal guardian, he had been thrilled at the prospect of making the match with the titled lord. The betrothal had been made without consideration for Lillian's feelings or desires. When she had gone to her uncle to plead his sympathy to her case, he had said, "You should trust my judgment, my child. As your guardian, I know what is best for you." He would listen to no argument, nor pretend any understanding of her fears.

Refusing to be shuffled off to some loveless marriage, she sent a message through one of her servants to Shameer. Upon receiving her summons, he met her in their private rendezvous spot, the very place he had first seen her and

gazed upon her beauty. They had met there countless times. Shameer had first introduced himself to her there, in the dark. She began calling it their own special place, telling him it was the only place she felt safe.

Lillian had thrown herself into his arms, telling him everything, from what kind of man her betrothed was to her uncle's heartless refusal to listen to her pleas. "He won't even reconsider," she said finally. "And I will not be subject to a tyrant's orders."

Shameer had listened quietly as she told him of her uncle's plans and the doomed marriage she was being forced into. When she fell silent, he paced the grassy patch of land. He loved Lillian more than anything; he would never have forced her to do anything she had no desire for.

"I am leaving soon, tonight in fact," he told her quietly. "I had resigned myself to having to leave you, because I know that I am not what you need or deserve."

At Lillian's intake of breath, he held up a silencing hand, said, "Of course, I could never refuse you anything you wanted." His eyes met hers and he smiled slightly. "Understand, this would mean you could never come back, because keeping you far from here would be the only way I could keep you safe."

She broke in, said, "I would not want to stay here without you." Her voice shook with her tears. "You are the only thing that makes it worth being here. I would never survive in this place without you!" Her voice held an urgent tone.

Joy he had never before felt surged through him. She wanted to be with him, even if their time was to be short, she

chose him. Nodding, he spoke quietly, "Then, come with me. Live as my mortal wife, for as long as God grants us the time."

She rushed into his arms, crying out as she did, "I love you!" Then she pulled back and smiled up into his face. "Thank you!"

* * * *

The words echoed in Shameer's memory. Bowing his head, he turned from Jessica, a look of pain he could not hide fast enough crossing his features. Rushing to his side, she asked worriedly, "Are you all right?"

Nodding, he gripped the hand she had placed on his arm in both of his, lowered his lips to press against it. A shiver ran through her at the contact of his lips on her hand.

"You remind me of someone I once knew," he explained in a hollow voice that was strangely sad. "That's all."

Jealousy hit Jessica like nothing she had ever felt, made her almost sick to her stomach. She knew before she even asked, but she asked all the same, "A very close friend? Where is she now?"

Shameer looked back to her, a look on his face that made her instantly sorry for asking. He replied, "She died ... a very long time ago."

Jessica suddenly felt ashamed of herself. Lowering her head, she said, "I'm sorry." It was evident he still loved the woman she knew in her dreams. His pain was so deep she could feel it too. Her heart ached as badly as his own did.

Whether it was his loss she felt for or her own pain at the lack of possibility for them, she couldn't tell.

Before Shameer could respond he heard Colin behind him, saying, "We need to leave now if we are going to get back to our place before daylight."

Nodding, Shameer turned back to Jessica, repeated, "It's time to leave."

Before they entered the car, Colin pulled out two blindfolds. Chelsea looked up at him, surprise marking her features. At her response, he almost looked chastised, but he said. "I'm sorry, but my son and I value our privacy. The best way to keep it is to prevent anyone from knowing the way there."

Jessica and Chelsea exchanged glances, and then allowed the blindfolds to be placed over their eyes. Once their blindfolds were in place, they were ushered into the car, and as they pulled out of the drive and started down the street, Chelsea murmured, "Well, we always wanted to go on an adventure."

* * * *

Unseen, the *other* watched in the shadows. He cursed under his breath, crushed the cigarette within his palm, oblivious to the burning embers he squelched in his bare hand. His eyes, normally gray, glowed a strange luminescent lilac in his anger. "Fine," he said to the darkness. "You take them for now, *vampire*." He spat the last word. "But you can't have her in this life!" he continued, taking a deep breath before continuing. "She is *mine* this time."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Sneering, he turned and looked at the deserted house. There were spells he could cast that would help him discover their destination. It would not be hard to locate them once the correct belongings were found. Looking at the sky, he shook his head. It was too close to daybreak for him to be able to work a spell tonight. It would have to wait—for now.

His shadow was all that lingered as he used his unnatural powers to vanish into the night. Then his vestige, too, began to fade, soon disappearing entirely. The crushed cigarette was all that was he left behind.

Chapter 5

When the blindfold was pulled away from Jessica's eyes, she gasped. The house was built into a hill. What appeared to be the opening of a cave at first glance was actually an immense doorway. It was unlike anything she had ever seen, but at the same time, it seemed oddly familiar. Again she experienced the queer sensation of having come home, even though she had never seen this particular place in her dreams.

Colin smiled at the expression both women had plastered on their faces. Shameer walked to the entrance, and then turned to observe them. After a moment, he said, "I realize it is an unusual home, but you will find my father and I are a bit..." he paused as if searching for the right words before continuing, "eccentric, in our tastes." Making eye contact with Jessica, he spoke again, "It is not all that unusual for one in my line of work."

At reference to his occupation, she couldn't help but to show her curiosity. "And what line of work would that be?" she asked, her voice soft. For a moment she almost thought she would have to repeat herself.

Shameer's smile deepened as he turned and began to unlock the huge oak door. As she stepped closer to it, she could see the likeness of the gargoyle carved deep within the wooden frame. She stared in amazement at it; everything about it was so real,—and it was breathtakingly beautiful to

her, even though she knew most people considered gargoyles bizarre and freakish.

Shameer's voice roused her from her reverie, "I deal in antiques, import and export. I collect some myself and sell to others that which does not appeal to me." He looked first at Jessica, and then Colin and Chelsea, who stood beside him as he opened the door, saying, "Shall we?" Stepping back, he allowed the women and his brother to proceed into the entry before him. Hearing Jessica gasp in awe gave him great pleasure. It made him happy to know she could appreciate his taste in the old antiques he and Colin had collected to for themselves.

Chelsea stood beside Jessica, rapt in the splendor of the room. The floor was covered with elegant Persian rugs. The tables were intricately carved dark wood, which gave off a shine and aura all of their own. Walking farther in, they saw the imposing fireplace, which stood on the opposite wall. Over twelve feet in height, it stood with an opening that could easily hold all four of them within it.

Chelsea walked forward, staring open-mouthed at the hearth. She turned, looked from Colin to Shameer, and then asked in a small voice, "You guys don't use that for cooking, do you?"

The question, no matter how ridiculous, pulled a bright smile from Shameer as he replied genially, "No, in our culture it is considered rude to eat invited guests."

Chelsea nodded, and turned to Jessica. Smiling slightly, she remarked, "Well, that's comforting." Her gaze went once

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

more to the massive fireplace that looked like something out of a fairy tale castle from another place and time.

Jessica let herself truly study the fireplace for the first time since entering the unusual home. It was strikingly elegant and sculpted, amazingly, from what appeared to be a single massive slab of rose quartz. Gracefully carved angels in various poses against a resplendent background of delicate intertwining rose vines adorned the sides, from its giant base all the way up to the mantle. Across the top of the hearth, two cherubs offered dainty bouquets of roses to one another. Though rendered in stone, their exquisite forms took on the warmth of a life of their own in a breathtaking display before her eyes.

To be sure, the fireplace was incredibly wrought and might have held Jessica's interest, had it not been for the painting that hung above it. Jessica found it riveting to behold. The larger-than-life vision of beauty who stared knowingly back at her from inside the elegantly wrought ebony frame, was a vision of loveliness such as Jessica had never beheld. Her face was the kind that inspired songs and legends of long ago, but there was something more, something so familiar. A memory reached out and plucked Jessica from the present, casting her under its spell. It was from one of her dreams.

* * * *

Lillian had sat, staring at the artist, a look of forced happiness plastered on her face. It wasn't that she had not wanted to pose for the picture, but after the first three hours it had become tedious effort to remain perfectly still. Sighing,

Lillian searched the room for something,—anything that might provide some kind of diversion for her restless mind. The chamber was beautiful. Carvings of angels and gargoyles, poised in the arches of every doorway, gave her a feeling of being watched over, even when she was alone. The huge vaulted ceiling made every sound into an orchestration of reverberation.

Tapestries covered the walls, depicting mythical creatures, daring sword fights, and pastoral scenes. No one who entered this room could ever tire of beholding all the treasures held within it. A coat of arms and a statue of some kind guarded each stairway, almost as if trying to discourage people from leaving this one room.

Her gaze found the only portrait that hung in the room, prominently displayed on the wall opposite where she sat. Its occupant returned her stare squarely, almost making her believe the eyes that met hers were real instead of painted. Such sad eyes, eyes that held the knowledge she herself would never know. Painful truths spoke silent volumes in those eyes, but somehow, the language was always beyond her grasp.

She remembered when she had first arranged to have the portrait done. Shameer had argued, saying it was a waste not only of time, but of paint. However she had stood her ground, refusing to back down from her decision. "You always speak of not knowing what you look like anymore," she had argued. "This way, you will always have a way to look back." At this she stroked his cheek with her palm, then added "and remember—"

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

* * * *

"Remember..." Jessica gasped out as she tore her stare at last from the blue eyes that somehow had opened a floodgate to an almost forbidden store of memories. She turned, found herself searching the other walls, tapestries. Unicorns and dragons, sword fights and coats of arms, standing by each staircase. Everything was almost exactly the same as it had been in the vision she'd just had, all endlessly familiar, but where...?

She turned to look at the place it had hung in the scene she had just relived, but found only another tapestry hung in its place. She shook her head furiously, met Shameer's startled gaze as she demanded, "Where is it?" Her eyes glowed with agitation.

Shameer straightened with alarm, looked into eyes that were so different from Lillian's, yet impossibly held almost the same expression. "Where's what?" he asked in a strangely shaky voice unlike his usual speech. "To what are you referring?"

She shook her head again in disbelief, never taking her eyes from his, uttered, "I knew you didn't like it." Her expression was one of hurt as she continued, "But I thought you would at least hold it dear, for me." Even as she spoke the words, her mind was arguing with her that this couldn't be happening. Some part of her was still refusing to believe that this wasn't all some unfinished scene from one of her dreams.

Colin stepped forward, gauging Shameer's shocked expression to mean he had not the words and intervened, saying, "My dear, I am afraid we have no idea of what you are speaking."

She wheeled on Colin, fixed him with an expression that made him take a step back. There was such pain in her features; it made even him see Lillian. "The painting, Colin," she said, gesturing toward Shameer. "The one I commissioned of him." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, her expression turned from hurt to confusion.

She wagged her head and shrugged, found the closest chair and sat down hard in it. "I—I'm sorry," she stammered. "I don't know what..." Her words drifted off as she looked once more at the painting of Lillian, "I just—It seems so—*real*—as if..." She glanced at Shameer, who stood facing her, his hand over his mouth in astonishment. She continued, "Do I *know you?*"

Shameer took a step toward her, his heart aching to hold her. Yet, he caught himself and made his body obey his command to be still and breathe. Yes, he thought frantically, in unspoken answer to Jessica's question. *You must breathe. And for heaven's sake, stay calm!*

His eyes widened and he turned away from her, wagging his head. Colin moved forward, said, "It has been a long night, *mademoiselle*, and one without sleep." His accent was a mixture of Scottish, and English, she finally realized.

An older lady walked into the room at just that precise moment, as though she had been waiting somewhere just out of sight, but within earshot, for the cue to enter. Smiling, she

looked from one to the other, said, "Oh, my dears, ye must be exhausted." She looked meaningfully from Jessica and Chelsea to Colin, who smiled affectionately, grateful for her timely entrance and her easy acceptance to the intrusion of new people to care for. "I could show you to your rooms," she suggested.

"This is Abigail," Colin said softly. "She is our maid and our dear friend."

Jessica, and Chelsea both smiled shyly at the older woman, then looked at each other with raised eyebrows. They had never known anyone who had servants.

Abigail stepped closer, repeated, "If you like, I can show you to your rooms now."

Colin, seeming to regain his composure, smiled congenially and said, "I will show them Abby. You have been working hard all day, and most of the night. You need your rest as well, I imagine."

Abby nodded and curtsied slightly, responding, "Well in that case, I shall see you ladies in the morning. And I shall fix ye a bit of a brunch, since I am sure you will wish to sleep late in the morning?"

Nodding absently, Jessica reached for her cat carrier. She wanted to lock herself away in her room by herself, with just her cats, and her troubled emotions. As she stood, she caught Chelsea staring at her with marked confusion.

As she moved closer, Chelsea asked, "Are you okay?"

Jessica shrugged, still puzzled, and answered, "I don't know, Chelsea." She trembled as the two of them began to follow Colin up the stairs. "I'm afraid I have no idea what just

happened ... or why." She suddenly remembered her manners, looked back over her shoulder, smiled and said, "Thank you, Abigail. I hope we won't be too much trouble to you."

Abby dismissed it with a wave of her hand and a chuckle, said, "'Tis nothing at all, my dear. And please, call me Abby,"

Jessica nodded, echoed, "Thank you. You are very kind. Then she nudged Chelsea and whispered, "This place feels like *déjà vu* to me. It's weird."

Chelsea placed an arm on her shoulder. Instead of asking more questions, she just said quietly, "It is just that you're tired. I mean, *look at us*." She hugged Jessica closer to her as they ascended the stairs. "Neither of us has had a decent night's sleep in the past two days. You're just tired," she reiterated. "You'll feel better in the morning."

Jessica hoped her friend was right as she walked beside Colin up the stairway.

* * * *

Neither woman noticed how he studied Jessica as he walked beside her, taking careful note of her movements. How much like Lillian's they really were. Something about her was familiar to him, but he hadn't really thought about the possibilities before. Although he was beside her, leading the way, he had the oddest feeling she already knew where she was going. He walked with them into a corridor with two doors directly across from each other, then stood back and watched in stunned silence as Jessica walked straight to

Lillian's room and opened the door. He masked his surprise as best he could when she turned, lest she see.

Looking back at him, she asked, "Is this okay?"

He nodded and bowed ever so slightly, replied, "Of course, that was the exact room I would have chosen for you." He smiled, forcing himself to appear offhand. Looking then at Chelsea, he gestured to the door across the hall, said, "And that one is prepared for you as well." He opened the door for her and smiled. Stepping back, he looked from the one to the other and said, "There are nightgowns, extra blankets and anything else you might need to make you more comfortable." He backed up slightly. "Please feel free to use whatever you may need."

His eyes met and held Chelsea's. She found herself staring into the warm, kind eyes of the man before her. At a loss for words, she just nodded and smiled as she stepped inside and slowly closed the door. "Thank you," she said simply as the door closed fully.

Left alone to stare at the two closed doors, Colin faced down a fierce feeling of longing that hit him full force. He wanted to crash through the door that had just been closed to him, rush to Chelsea's side, take her in his arms and plead with her to love him. For a moment, he started to do just that, but reason stayed him and he stared silently at the closed door, knowing it was something he could never do. It was something he could never ask of her. Sadly, he turned and walked back down the long hallway toward the staircase that had led them to the rooms. He had no right to ask her to love him, no right to even hope she could.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

* * * *

Shameer stood staring at the portrait of the woman he loved. When she had died, it had been too hard to look at the many gifts she had bestowed upon him. The painting Lillian had insisted be made of him was hidden off in a room toward the top of the house now. No one ever gazed upon it because no one saw it. It was the first thing he had hidden away from his view. His heart had broken, leaving him no defense aside from trying to lock away all things that reminded him of her. All things, except her portrait. This one remembrance of Lillian, he kept ever near, a kind of monument to her beauty.

He had thought of himself as vain to even own a portrait of himself such as that. It had displayed him in a grand and *human* way. But he wasn't mortal. Not *anymore*. It had felt wrong to have it displayed. It was a futile way to try to hold onto a humanity that was no longer there. He had tried to explain that to Lillian, but she had refused to listen, saying one day, he would value seeing himself as she had seen him. He had let his painting stay hanging for her benefit alone. Once she was gone, he had seen no reason to continue displaying it.

But her painting had stayed in the same spot as he had put it when they first came to this house. He had never been able to cast it aside as easily as the other things. He had tried, but always ended up searching it back out and putting it back on display. There were so many fond memories he had of their time together, and by keeping her picture close-by, he kept those memories fresh.

Colin approached him from behind. There was no need for him to announce himself; Shameer knew he was there. In the silent room, Shameer stared mutely up at the painting, and then at last he cleared his throat and asked, "Could it be? Colin, is it possible that young woman..." His words wandered off as he tossed his head in disbelief. "It is impossible; she could never be..."

Colin placed a hand on his brother's shoulder, said, "She went as straight to Lillian's room as if it were her own."

Shameer's eyes closed for a moment as he pondered Colin's news. "Dare I hope?" he asked, though it was more of a plea for assurance than a question as he met his brother's gaze. A look of white hot fury made his eyes glow with a milky opalescence. "Then again," he continued, "what if she *is* the soul of my lost love, come back to me? What then?" His shoulders sagged tiredly in an open sign of despair. "What life do I have to offer her? It is no different from before." he said sullenly, "I have no right to her. She has a life. It is one without me."

Turning, Colin walked a few paces away from Shameer, and then rounded to meet his brother's gaze, saying, "Perhaps, if it is she, you should try again to convince her to allow you to turn her."

Shameer shook his head. "I could never ask her to join me in a life like this," he declared as he moved to the wall, leaning against it. He closed his eyes as if he were in pain, for indeed, he was. "Even if she did agree, it would only be a matter of time before she grew tired of a cursed existence, grew tired of me."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

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As much as Colin would have begged to disagree, he knew the chances of being able to change his brother's mind. But his heart demanded one more attempt. Bowing his head he thought on his brother's words. He knew there was a possibility Shameer was correct about the love she had fading with time, being replaced with resentment. But there was so much in this young woman that made Colin believe the chances of it happening that way were slim. Something told him the love Lillian had felt for Shameer would span centuries, would bring them back together, no matter how many times death tried to separate them. What would he give to have a love that strong, he wondered, *anything*.

Facing Shameer, Colin asked, "Do you not believe in soul mates?" The small flare of hope that had built inside his heart, withered away when Shameer shook his head.

"What if I did? What right do I have to condemn her to an existence such as this? Hungering for blood? Watching those you love age and die? Never knowing the joy of having a child?" His eyes searched Colin's. "She deserves babies, Colin. She deserves to watch the sunrise locked in the embrace of someone who can share such things with her." He hit his chest angrily, said, "I can never give her that! There cannot be a soul mate for a vampire, brother. Part of my curse is that I shall never be able to truly and forever be loved." Turning from Colin, he offered no more space for argument, but walked away, leaving his brother staring after him.

* * * *

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Jessica stood in the room, her eyes looking over the area. She was surprised to see how many things were familiar to her. It was as if she had been here before, almost as if she was coming home after years of being away. She walked to the end of the bed and placed the cat carrier in the floor, then sat cross-legged beside it and opened the door. "Neeka, Sabbath?" She cooed, gently urging them out of the carrier.

Both cats moved out slowly, sniffing the air and rubbing on Jessica's leg, searching for assurance. She talked softly to them, calming them with the sound of her voice, as they began to sniff out their new environment. As they padded across the floor to investigate their new surroundings, Jessica turned her attention to the cedar chest at the foot of the bed. *It is real.* Tears welled in Jessica's eyes as she reached out to run her fingers over the roses, realistic, and perfect, right down to the thorns to go along with the timeless beauty of the rose.

Tears welled in her eyes. It was *the* chest, the same one she had talked to Chelsea about earlier that night. The emotion she felt both scared and intrigued her. Lillian had received this hope chest as a part of her dowry. It had been one of her favorite things, because her father had built it with loving care. She had been just a little girl when he had given it to her. Memories again pressed their way into Jessica's mind as she sat and lovingly ran her hand over the timeworn wooden surface.

* * * *

She remembered sitting on her mother's lap, as she had watched her father uncover the chest where she could see it. She had slid off her mother's lap and run into her father's arms, whispering, "Oh, Papa; it is beautiful." The delight in her young voice had filled her father's eyes with tears as he hugged her to him.

"I thought you might like it, precious," he said and looked over her head at his wife. Lillian had followed his gaze to where her mother sat, an approving smile brightening her face.

Lillian's mother had been a beautiful woman. Golden hair, bright in the sun, fell past her waist. Her eyes, almost teal in color, danced with a light of happiness. Getting up, she moved to her daughter and bent to pick her up, spoke softly, "This is where we will put things away to save for your wedding." She had held Lillian in her arms and looked with pride at the chest.

"I will give you the first present for your wedding night now," she said. Lillian watched her mother walk to a box that was on her bed. When she opened it, she reached inside, and pulled out a beautiful pink night shift. Lillian remembered having seen it before, and she remembered her father telling her how when he had seen her mother in it on their wedding night, he had lost his breath as he had gazed at her beauty. The gown was so beautiful. Elegant white lace trimmed the bodice, the cuffs of the sleeves and the bottom of the gown.

"But mamma," Lillian said softly, "this is yours; it is too special and delicate for me." Even as she said what she truly

believed, she remembered hoping her mother would argue her point.

She had not been disappointed. "Lillian, this is a special thing, that is so," her mother agreed, but then added, "By the time you wear this, you will have a way with such delicate things." With those words, she took it and placed it in the chest, adding, "Until you are ready, it will be safe within this fine, strong chest. I trust you to take special care with it when the time comes."

Her mother moved back to her father's side and placed a kiss on Lillian's cheek. Tears welled in the child's eyes. Her parents were leaving in the morning. She had to stay home because children were not invited to functions such as this. Even knowing she was unable to go, she couldn't help asking to go with them again, "Why can't I come with you, Momma? I wouldn't be any trouble. I could just stay in the roo—"

Her plea was cut short by her father's stern, disapproving look. "You know you cannot come, my love," he answered. His eyes met hers and she almost felt ashamed for trying so hard to make them alter their plans. Lowering her eyes, she nodded, finally accepting there was no changing their minds. They were going, even after she had warned them about the feeling of foreboding she felt.

She had been visited by recurring dreams, dreams that had shown her a tragedy she prayed would never occur. In it, she could see her parents, driving out of her life in their coach, but knowing they would never return. She felt a stab of fear the dreams might be true, but she dared not tell, for fear they would laugh at her premonitions.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Not wanting to appear too childish, as an eight year old, she felt she knew how to at least present herself as a young lady. Even though her fears worried her without end, she knew they would have little effect on her father once his mind was made up. Her mother took her, hugged her to her and carried her to the bed. Covering her with the blankets, she sat on the edge of the bed and said softly, "You must go to sleep now, just as we must go get ready for our journey." She placed a kiss on her child's cheek, then rose and moved away from the bed to give Lillian's father a chance to wish his child goodnight.

Leaning down, he had kissed her forehead, promising her that the trip would not take them long. "We will be back within the week," he had assured her, smiling. "You will hardly even have time to miss us."

Lillian had finally made herself abandon her fears. She kissed her father's cheek and squeezed her mother's hand and let them leave her to her sleep. Her deadly vision came to her yet again that night. The coach in the dream had a wheel that had not been balanced properly. The roads were slick and the terrain treacherous. At one point, the coach missed the curve in the road and her parents had gone off the cliff.

Falling to their deaths, they had held one another's hands, offering as much comfort to each other in death as they had in life—loving each other until the end. Their actions held the promise they would love one another as much in death as they had in life.

Lillian awoke the next morning, strangely calm. There was a buzz around the house she could feel before she even left her room. She knew they were gone the moment she walked out of her room. Lillian could hear her grandmother crying over her lost daughter even before she made it down the stairs. When the woman saw Lillian, she rushed to her, taking her in her arms. Through tears, she tried to explain to the child what had happened. The wheel had collapsed and the coach had gone over the cliff. There had not even been time to think.

Lillian had let her grandmother ramble and simply turned to stare out the window of the parlor toward the cliff that had taken her parents' lives. She had not spoken a word that day, or the day after. Or in the weeks that had followed.

What could she have said? Even at her young age, she had known to share her dream with anyone would be inviting the speculation she was a witch. So her mouth had stayed shut. The tears she had shed had been in private. Within the month, her home had been boarded up and she had been taken to live with the uncle she had never met. Her grandmother had gone with her for a time to ensure the child would become accustomed to the new man she must accept as her legal guardian.

He had been a vile, disgusting man, not graced with her father's charm or his quiet, gentle wit. No, this man was a tyrant. He screamed at the servants, treating them little better than slaves. He looked upon her as a prize. A man with little love in his life, he was unaccustomed to showing affection. She learned not to expect to be tucked in at night

and after a while she even lost the hope of one day being lucky enough to find a love like the one which had blessed her parents. Grandmother had been her only source of love after the tragedy, but even that only lasted only another few years.

After all, her grandmother had been an old woman. Two weeks after her seventy-fifth birthday, she had passed away in her sleep, leaving Lillian completely alone with no reprieve from the uncle who had been quick to notice the changes in Lillian's body. He watched like a vulture as she began to grow from a child into a young woman. With little care for her discomfort when he stared at her, he fairly undressed her with his eyes whenever she had the misfortune of having to be in his company.

When she had met Shameer, he had won her over with his gentle heart. He had been a man who both scared and thrilled her. She had never believed in vampires, but he had convinced her he was one; then he showed her he was a kind, gentle soul, despite the tales she had heard to the contrary about his kind.

Although he had been tormented by his curse, he never raised his hand to harm anyone, unless they had evil hearts. He amazed her with his ability to sense the evil in people. He always told her it was because he had just enough evil within himself to recognize the kinship. As time passed, Lillian had grown to love Shameer. She cared not that he was cursed; only that he was able to stay with her. It comforted her somehow to know she could not lose him to death. Losing every person she cared for had made her afraid to love again.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

She often had chosen loneliness, rather than risk the chance of loving and losing another person.

Knowing Shameer was not bound by the dictates of a mortal life gave her a security she did not have with other men. Although she had no desire to join him in his eternal fate, she did want to share her mortal life with him. He had loved her enough to accept that. She knew he would never hold her against her will. He would never force her to do anything she did not herself want to do. Loving him had been easy. It was both exciting and safe to be with him. Within the spectrum of that safety she found a love she had given up on ever knowing. She held him dear within her heart, knowing he had made her entire life mean so much more than it had without him.

She had told him about her fears, her dreams. She had shared with him the loss of her parents and the love they had shared. She had cried for him, letting out all the past pain she had held for so long within her heart, afraid to let others see how deeply she had truly been affected by the loss of the two people she had loved more than anything. Her grief gave way one night as she told him of the last gift they had ever given her. The chest and the gown that still lay inside it, locked away within her house. She told how her father had painstakingly worked on it for her, carving the roses into it with gentle care not to damage the wood.

She shared with him the glorious smell of cedar that had filled her nostrils when her father had opened it up for the first time in her room. When she cried after telling him about the gift, he had questioned her tears. She explained the gift

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

was locked up in her parent's house, as were all the other belongings of her parents' and hers, until the time when she would marry.

When Shameer took her away from her uncle's house, freeing her from the arranged marriage with Ravenmoore, he took her aboard the ship setting sail for the Americas. All the people believed her to be his wife. Once they entered their private quarters, the smell of cedar filled her nostrils, once again bringing tears to her eyes as she looked for the source and found the chest. Sitting at the foot of the bed, a sob escaped her as she had thrown her hands around his neck and lovingly, gently kissed him. That night, she had worn her mother's night shift and had given herself to the man she loved.

* * * *

With trembling fingers, Jessica reached out and opened the chest. The smell of cedar brought a fresh batch of tears to her eyes as she reached slowly into the chest and pulled out the gown. Her hands shook as she held it up to her in reverent silence. It was *hers*; the chest, the gown, and the man downstairs who still had no clue who she was.

Within the folds of the gown, she felt a package. As she slowly opened it, she felt the necklace fall from the soft silk material. It sat on the floor, yet another memento of her past life, its silver chain slightly tarnished, but the diamond just as bright as ever.

The pendant was heart shaped, the diamond perfectly cut with smaller amethyst stones surrounding it, giving it a hue of

lilac. He had given it to her on their wedding night. He had told her it was a present that was meant to show her how much her gentle, loving heart meant to him. She took the necklace with shaking fingers and put it on, wishing she knew how to tell Shameer who she was. Sadly, even though she knew her past life identity without a doubt, she still had trouble believing it.

Standing, she pulled off her clothes and grabbed the gown. Once dressed for bed, she climbed under the covers, telling herself things would make better sense after she slept. She couldn't tell Shameer who she was. She knew that. *Not yet.* That decision made, she curled up under the covers with a cat at each of her sides and fell into the first restful sleep she'd had in days.

* * * *

The *other* walked through Jessica's house, his anger growing. He had spent close to two centuries, searching for her. He had known wherever he found her; he would also find the twins. Now, after waiting so long and finally being within arm's reach of his goal, it was about to be taken from his grasp again. Anger made him tremble. It fairly bled from him into the room, forming a mist at his feet.

Viciously he used his energy to rip the curtains, tearing them asunder, leaving them shredded. The carpet fairly sizzled with his every step, leaving marks of his footprints behind. Coming to stand before one wall, he gazed at the pictures covering it, pictures of friends, pictures of some

family, he presumed. He surveyed them all, a grimace of disgust on his handsome, dark and delicate face.

Scanning them, his eyes fell on the one he needed. It was a picture of her, by herself. She sat alone on a rock that rested by a creek. The smile on her face was one of a happy, content person. She seemed from the camera's point of view, to have no worries, no upset in her life.

Placing his hand on the wall, he watched as every other picture burned. He watched the photos turn black and decompose before his eyes. Turning his attention back to the picture he had chosen to use for his evil purpose, he contemplated the photo's subject.

It looked quite possible as though she had never had anything bad happen to her, she seemed so content. Satisfied this image would do the trick; he quickly withdrew the picture from the frame and cast it aside. Holding the snapshot closer, he studied the face of its subject. There were distinct differences. Her hair, for example, was much darker. Instead of being sun kissed, it was more the shade of rosewood, warm with silken tones he found very pleasing to the eye.

Her eyes were the darkest brown he had ever beheld, but they held something more. Aside from the difference in color, the expression that emanated from within them was the same. Tracing the lines of her face with his finger, he thought, *Lillian, after all this time; you have returned to him at last.* A smile crossed his evil somber face. *I shall have my revenge.*

"You cannot escape me this time," he vowed softly. "I have worked too hard planning our time together, my lovely." His

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

eyes took on an eerie, gaze, one that would have scared any in his presence. Silvery blue eyes flashed as his mind worked over his plan. "You will come to me, Jessica," he fairly hissed. "Oh yes, my dear. When the time is right," he paused, rubbing the picture against his cheek, "you will have no choice." Picture in hand, he turned and made his way from the house and into the night.

Chapter 6

Chelsea tossed endlessly in the bed. Her whole body seemed to ache from being assaulted. Worse than the aches, she felt ill remembering how his hands had felt as he pushed and pulled, forced his way into her, ruling her as though she were a rag doll. Finally giving up on sleep, she pushed back the covers and crossed to the closet. Her hands shook slightly as she grabbed her robe, pulled it on and scanned the room. It was beautifully decorated and for the most part, she thought it was perfect. The only thing lacking was a window, but she knew an underground window would be extraneous anyway.

A feeling of sudden panic seized her. She had to get out of this room and into a more spacious area quick, or she was going to pass out. She rushed to her door, pushed it open, a simple gesture, which made her feel somewhat better. Opening it wider, she peered into the hall. She didn't want to wake anyone. *God knows this night has been difficult for everyone involved.* But since she couldn't sleep, she wondered *if maybe I can find a good book.*

As she stepped into the hall, she glanced at Jessica's door. *No,* she thought to herself, *let her sleep.* Moving along the corridor, she found herself thinking about the painting that had troubled Jessica so. Absently she continued down the stairs, bare feet padding silently on the hard, cool floor. The woman in the portrait had been beautiful; perfectly blonde and breathtaking, even in Chelsea's own estimation, a

realization, which unsettled her somewhat since she was not even vaguely attracted to women, let alone blondes.

Something else unnerved her about the portrait, it reminded her of Jessica, even if she and the woman in the picture seemed complete opposites. When she found herself back in the main room alone, she returned to stare up at the tremendous hearth. Once there, she looked above it, her eyes drawn immediately to the picture. Something had come over Jessica tonight. Chelsea had never seen her so *not herself*, not even when her mother had broken her heart all those years ago.

She and Jessica had been friends as far back as she could remember. When they were girls growing up, they hadn't had that much in common really. Chelsea had been the popular one, head of the cheerleading squad, with the kind of social life most of the other girls envied. Jessica, on the other hand, had been introverted, a quiet, shy scholarly type. Smiling, Chelsea thought of how her friend would become so involved in the a novel she was reading that the boys in high school often wondered if they would ever discover the color of her wonderful eyes, thinking it useless to try to compete with anything that could hold her attention so completely.

Her thoughts revisited Jessica's reaction to the painting. Chelsea stared at it. In all the years she had known Jessica, never had she seen her be confused or perplexed as she had been on beholding that picture. The woman within the frame at first glance bore no resemblance to her friend. Yet, when she tilted her head and looked closer,—yes, the shape of the face, the smile, even the eyes all bore an incredible

resemblance to the friend she had grown up with. The colors were different, but there was no doubt about the resemblance. So involved in her thoughts was she, she had not heard when Colin entered the room. Now his voice boomed in the silence, startled her half out of her wits.

"How long have you known each other?" he asked softly. Chelsea fought hard to contain her sudden rush of adrenaline as she turned to face him and took a few deep breaths before speaking. "You surprised me," she said, turning again to the painting. "You asked how long Jessica and I have known each other?"

He moved to stand beside her, said, "I apologize; I didn't mean to frighten you. You and she seem to be very close."

Chelsea nodded without looking at him. "We are," she affirmed simply. "She is my best friend." Her smile broadened then as she added, "And the sister I never had."

Not waiting for his response she continued, "I've known Jessica since we were in pre-school together." When she finally turned to look at him, she had to fight to squelch the nervousness she felt in his presence, "This lady," she said as she gestured to the picture, "reminds me of Jessica."

He followed her gaze back to the portrait, smiled sadly. "Her name was Lillian," he said simply.

She stole a glance at him, wondered at the sadness in his voice. Thinking it folly to be jealous of a dead woman, Chelsea smiled and said, "She was very beautiful."

Colin nodded and fell silent. Chelsea took advantage of the silence to observe her host out of the corner of her eye. The man was breathtaking, a magical mixture between Mel Gibson

and Sean Connery, with a body even Fabio could be proud of. His only obvious imperfection was a slight limp, which troubled her not in the least and detracted nothing from his beauty. Beauty is a strange word to use in describing a man, she thought, but she could think of no other word to describe him. *He is beautiful.*

The thought occurred to her, this man proved, without a doubt that a man did not give up his good looks when he had a son who was also strikingly handsome. In fact, of the two, she thought the father the more attractive. She could feel her cheeks burning and ducked her head in an attempt to hide the blush she knew was evident on her face. He had changed clothes, she noticed. Earlier, he was dressed in a three-piece suit, but now, he wore a simple, crisp pair of black jeans and a silk shirt unbuttoned halfway down to reveal a dusting of salt and pepper chest hair. Chelsea could easily imagine he had undoubtedly looked identical to Shameer when he was younger.

Trying to stifle her smile at the thoughts she was having about her host, she turned to face him to ask if he had any good books she could borrow. She found his eyes on her, an expression in them that tore at her heart. Her question died before she could express it and she found herself yearning to reach out to him. Almost of its own accord, her hand reached out to stroke his cheek, but he caught it, her palm up, and ran his fingers gently over the tender flesh before he placed a soft kiss at its center. She opened her mouth, ran a moistening tongue over the lips that had suddenly gone dry.

He watched her closely and started to take a step toward her before he caught himself and forced himself to step back again. "It is early morning, my dear," he said softly. "You have yet even to make it to your bed."

She was disappointed. It had seemed as though some enchantment had been about to carry them into one another's arms, but now she found the spell broken, much to her dismay. She sighed with a strange empty longing, looked away from him. It must be the woman in the painting, she thought. Dead or alive, she obviously still held his heart.

She backed a few steps from him. Seeking to salvage something of her dignity, she said, "Yes, I know. I was trying to find a book or something, because, this place—I—" She paused, chastening herself for being so defensive. *What did you expect, Chelsea, she asked herself; for him to fall down your throat?*

"I'm—a little jumpy in new places," she continued. "I thought reading might take the edge off."

Colin searched her eyes for what seemed an interminable moment, then turned abruptly, and walking towards an adjoining room. Chelsea followed him silently, gasped in astonishment as he switched on a light to reveal four walls totally filled with shelves of books, complete with moveable ladders to enable one to reach the volumes higher up. Colin was silent as she walked to the middle of the room and surveyed each wall.

He smiled warmly at her shock, and quietly said, "We have an extensive library. Please feel free to make use of it anytime." Watching her was excruciating as he battled the

age-old longing that filled him. He wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her senseless. Knowing it was an urge he could not allow himself to express; he moved back to the doorway to leave, then stopped and faced her again and said, "I deeply regret we could not stop what happened to you."

She regarded him openly for a moment longer, and then averted her gaze with a shrug. "At least it's over now," she said, and then added, "but you did come to keep it from happening again, and I am grateful for that. You didn't have to."

He lingered there, his eyes searching her soul a bit longer than he had intended. The warmth in the depths of his stare nonplused Chelsea. She could almost believe it was desire she saw reflected in his eyes. "I would always come for you," he said, so softly she was unsure she had heard correctly.

Determined to regain his composure and strengthen his resolve, he smiled and inclined his head toward her, gave her a curt nod and said, "Goodnight my dear." She stared after him as he made his way from her and down a staircase, she had yet to travel.

Although he was out of hearing range, she whispered a sullen, "Goodnight." She turned her full attention then to the seemingly endless array of books before her. She could spend hours,—maybe weeks—here, exploring every title, but she chose instead to select the first book she chanced to see with an interesting title. She then turned out the light and made her way back to the room that she now knew, for the time being, at least, as hers.

* * * *

Jessica awoke to a knock at her door. She stretched, sat erect in her bed, smiled contentedly. For the first night in at least a week, she had slept. Truly, fully, deeply slept. Looking at the clock, she could scarcely believe her eyes. It was after two in the afternoon. "Oh, my gosh! How did I sleep so late?" she asked herself as she grabbed her robe and donned it and stepped across the floor to the door. "Coming," she called.

Opening the door, she found Abby smiling back at her. "Good day, my dear! Are you well rested?" she asked cheerfully.

"Oh, yes, Abby, thank you," Jessica said as she opened her door wider. "Actually, I am wondering how I could have slept so late."

Abby smiled at her, said, "Dear child, you were up so late the night before, I didn't dare wake ye before now." She turned then and looked at Chelsea as she emerged from her room across the hall. Unlike Jessica, Chelsea had not slept well at all. Her weariness was evident on her face as she looked at Abby, attempted a smile.

"Oh, my dear, are ye alright?" Abby asked worry evident on her elderly features.

Chelsea nodded, affirmed, "Yes, I just haven't been sleeping well lately, but I'll be okay." She looked at Jessica, shrugging, added, "It's just nerves."

Abby put one arm around Jessica's waist and the other around Chelsea and drew them with her down the hall, saying, "Well, let me see, I have some tea and some

homemade soup downstairs just begging to be eaten. Maybe that will help you feel better?"

Neither girl could help but smile at their hostess as she whisked them with her down the stairs. Abby was like the grandmother of every girl's dreams. She had a warmth, an easiness about her that just demanded a person to relax, to forget their fears, doubts or troubling memories.

Relaxing into a big, comfortable chair, Jessica took the cup of tea Abby offered. Chelsea did the same, asking, "So, how long have you known Colin and Shameer?"

Abby smiled warmly, answered, "Oh, for ages." At Jessica's look of confusion, she added, "My family, and my husband's family, served their ancestors for generations, all the way back into the sixteenth century. They started out as mere servants. Back then, they were indentured servants. By the time my great-great-grandparents earned enough money to buy their freedom, Colin's grandfather had already freed them."

At this, Chelsea and Jessica exchanged shocked looks. Abby shrugged and continued to explain, "I guess our families never wanted to leave, because instead of treating them, or us, as servants, we were always treated as equals." She smiled, then adding, "Why, Colin and Shameer even sent me, *a woman*, to college, paid my way, and my sister's." She sighed, continued, "We enjoyed ourselves immensely out there in the world, but when all was said and done, we came back home. I mean, this was where our hearts were, where mine still is."

Both girls smiled at the older lady. Jessica said, "It sounds almost like a story from a fairytale book, almost too good to be true."

Chelsea nodded and Abby smiled kindly at both of them, and then looked about furtively before she said, "Well, I'll tell ye girls a little secret my own mamma told to me." They both watched her, listening. "There are two kinds of fairytales," she said softly, "the ones that could never come true and the ones that are so true, you'd never believe them." She smiled a knowing grin at them, winked before she stood and began to clear away the dishes.

Jessica stood to help her, but Abby shooed her away, saying, "Oh, no ya don't. I'll not have the guests bothering themselves with kitchen duty. Colin and Shameer had to leave for the day. They won't be back until late tonight. Why don't ye two go exploring?"

Chelsea and Jessica regarded her with a questioning look, so she explicated, adding, "There are so many rooms, and such a cache of wonders here, there is no way ye could ever uncover all the treasures, even if ye tried."

Chelsea looked at Jessica, raising an eyebrow. "Hey," she whispered, "that kind of sounds like fun. Why *don't* we have a look?"

Jessica looked at Chelsea, then asked Abby, "Are you sure they won't mind us looking around?"

Abby shook her head, replied, "Why would they mind, dear? They invited you here knowing ye may have to stay for a while. Trust me, they want ye to look at this place as if it were your home." That said, she left her unwashed dishes

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

and undertook to lead the girls through the mazes of the place she had called home for many years. They spent the next four hours touring the house. When at last they went to seek their beds, they were ready for a rest.

* * * *

Shameer paced his bedchamber, wishing he could just lose himself in the dawn. Mixed emotions flooded through his mind, agitated and unsettled him. His thoughts were on the woman who now slept in the bed that had once belonged to Lillian. Jessica seemed so familiar to him, even the way she smelled reminded him of *her*. When he closed his eyes, a familiar, cherished face peered back at him from the shadows. It had always been Lillian who had driven him mad with desire. He had lost count of the times he had spent nights when he could have been hunting and feeding lying beside her grave, begging her to return to him.

But now, for the second night in a row, Jessica was the one who filled his thoughts as he prepared for his rest. *What if she is my lost Lillian?* The question hung heavy on his mind, enticing him, daring him to follow his desires. That, more than anything else, also terrified him. *My desire*, he admitted to himself, *is to climb those stairs and take her—now*, he thought; *take her now*, without even giving her a chance to say no. She could be with him forever then. His pulse quickened as he found himself on his way to do just that.

He raced from his room, a blur of light in his haste, charging up the stairway. He found himself standing before her door; before he could stop himself, he had sped from his

dark chamber to this hall, as though the mere thought of coming to her had transported him. *I shouldn't be here*, he thought. Trembling fingers reached out and touched the hard, cold wood of the door. Silently, he prayed, *please, Jessica; please have locked this door*. He knew that was the only way he would be able to turn back now; if she had locked her door, he would have no choice. Even in his own home, a locked door gave him no entry without permission.

He reached out falteringly, his hand closing over the knob. Breathing raggedly, he tried to reason with himself. *Turn back. Go to your room. Don't do this*. Trying the door knob, he hissed, disappointed, yet inwardly elated, when it turned freely. He opened the door, moved into the room. A single candle glowed by the bed.

As he approached, he noticed her cats, one lying on either side of Jessica, almost like sphinxes, guarding their princess. He wondered if they knew he was about dangerous business this night. Wishing they possessed a power he did not and could send him away, he knelt beside her, watching as her chest moved in her peaceful slumber. Staring down at her, he felt an overpowering urge to take her within the span of his arms, to cry out to her his agony at having been alone for so long.

Breathing deeply, he glanced at the cat who had sidled up to him, purring, and its feet kneading his leg. "Mmmrrrreeeooww," it said in the stillness. It was the black cat, and it was being friendly.

He stared at the cat, scolded, "You should not like me, beast. At this rate, with my thoughts, I am your enemy."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

When he looked back at the woman in the bed, he was stunned to see her soft, doe-like eyes open, staring straight at him. It seemed time stood still as they just sat there and considered each other. Her hand found his, and she held it as she continued to meet his gaze.

Emotion overcame him as he realized for the first time she actually *knew* what he was. He opened his mouth to speak, but words failed him and he just continued to look at her, not knowing what he could or would say, should he attempt to speak. *She should be scared*, he thought. *She should be screaming right now, begging me to leave her.* Instead of doing anything he thought she might or should do, she sat up in the bed and leaned toward him, placed her hand on his bare chest. He cast a glance down at her hand, realized in his haste he had come to her without putting his clothes on. He sat before her, naked, nothing to hide the throbbing manhood that pulsed heavy and hard at the sight of her.

Jessica could feel him against her, his hardness against her leg. The sensation of it, even through the sheet, excited her in a way both foreign and familiar to her. Desire made her heart beat faster. She was shocked at herself. She should feel insulted he had come into her room uninvited and as nude as the day he was born. Glancing down, she swallowed hard. She doubted he had been anywhere near that massive at birth.

He laid his hand over hers and swore softly. Then he looked into her eyes and pleaded, "Send me away, Jessica." His voice trembled with the fear and unbridled desire he felt, part of him afraid of what he would do if she didn't send him

away; the other part afraid his heart would break if she did. She said nothing, but appeared to be waiting for him to say or do something.

Determined to try again, he whispered, "You said you know what I am. If that is true, you must know how dangerous I can be." His words drifted into silence as she placed a hand against his lips.

"I know who and what you are," she said softly, "and I know how you love." Taking his hand, she pulled it up and placed it over her own heart. "In my dreams, you never hurt me," she continued, her eyes never leaving his. Her hand cupped his cheek and he turned his face quickly, placed a kiss in her palm.

"I have nothing to give you, Jessica," he whispered. "I could never be a father to your children, never grow old with you." He shook his head at the desperate feeling of loss he had at the thought of not being able to be the father of her babies. There was only one way an *eternal* could procreate. The union had to be blessed by the one true Lord. Otherwise, the vampire's seed was lifeless and wasted. "And, eventually," he continued, "I would be forced to watch you die, as I already did once before, if you truly are who I think you are."

He squeezed his eyes shut, put forth a question he was unsure he really wanted the answer to, asked, "Are you who I think you are?" Then he looked at her, and drew a surprised breath as he noticed the gown she wore.

Looking at the gown, she touched its soft material. "Lillian's mother gave her this gown," she said softly, "the

night before she died." Then she fixed Shameer with a loving gaze as she continued, "She wore it for you the first time on the voyage to America, as your wife. I cannot prove to myself or to you that I was Lillian, but I do know this; I have dreamt of you since I was sixteen. In my dreams I was Lillian and you always loved me."

Her hand shook as it moved to touch him again. She said in a quiet voice, "I have never been able to love any other man, because they never could compare to you." She leaned forward, touched her lips against his in a kiss that claimed him utterly. It was a touch he knew. It was the way *she* had kissed him that first night on the ship.

He wrapped her in arms that ached to wind eternally around her, laid her back onto the mattress and deepened the kiss into one filled with passion, longing and a sorrowful pleading. She returned it eagerly, wanting to give herself completely over to him. His lips exacted more claim over hers, he pulled at the buttons of her nightdress, opened it to free her breasts to his touch. When his hand closed over the skin, she arched into his palm, moaning her acceptance of what he offered.

Running her hands down his chest, reveling in the feel of his skin beneath her fingers, she returned his kiss with a fierce passion that matched his. He lay atop her, pinning her beneath him. With her breasts crushed against him, her nipples tightened when they brushed against the hair of his chest. Daring to be brave, she let her hand move farther down his muscled chest, and his flat, tight stomach, to the hardened shaft she could feel throbbing to be inside her. An

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

exquisite longing ran through her as she let her hand close around its expanse. A moment of panic touched her, as she realized just how male he was. He groaned when she ran her hand down the length of him, squeezing her breast and toying with her nipple with the tip of his forefinger.

Moving, he bent to take a taut nipple into his mouth. He suckled it and reveled in her gasp and the feel of her free hand running through his hair, holding him to her. Rising up, he looked once more into her eyes, and then lowered himself to press his lips to hers again. She gave herself over to the kiss; let herself get lost totally in his embrace.

He gripped her backside in firm hands and drew her hips off of the mattress, shoved her nightgown up, pinned her arms above her head with it. Leaning over her, he drew her moistness closer to his hard manhood. Moaning, Jessica opened her legs, braced her feet flat on the bed to admit him into the part of her that shuddered for him.

His eyes met hers again as he bent to place his tip at her opening. Slowly, he entered her, stretching her wide and she felt herself gasp in shock at the momentary pain. He stilled within her, his eyes wide with sweet surprise. Then, smiling, he began to move, only a little at first, then deeper and faster, until, pushing deeper still, he gloried in the feel of her silky tightness. Her arms were still above her head. She took him into her with shivers of ecstasy as she lifted to meet each thrust, matching his rhythm and pulling at the restraint keeping her hands from touching him.

He let go of her gown, moved his hand again to her breast to touch and knead and pinch the nipple, as his lips once

again found hers. Her hands, freed at last, roamed down his backside, drew him to her as she panted, "Oh, please, Shameer, I need more." At her words, his pace quickened, bringing her to the point of her release. As he felt her tighten around him, it drove him into his surge of orgasm as well. As his seed emptied into her womb, he felt his fangs lengthening, the desire to taste her lifeblood very nearly consuming him.

His trembling lips sought and found the tender skin of her neck, dropping there a string of little kisses. Licking along her pulse, Shameer made the decision not to let her leave him this time. Rising up, he looked down at the beauty beneath him, willing her to know what he wanted. "I don't want to lose you a second time, Jessica," he whispered. "This time, if we are to be together, will you stay with me?"

Her eyes came fully open and a look of shock crossed her features as she sat upright, her eyes wide as she met his gaze full. "Y—you," she stammered, "you want to—to turn me?" She shivered slightly, unsure of what to say. She wanted to be with this man; she knew she wanted another lifetime with him. But she was scared at the idea of becoming what he was.

Sighing, Shameer caressed her cheek. "Shhh" he said softly, "never mind." He shut his eyes tight against the pain and hung his head. "It was wrong of me to even suggest such a thing." His eyes met hers again and he smiled tenderly. "I have been blessed to even find you again." He pulled her closer and held her head to his chest. "I promise to protect

you for the time you need me, then I will return you to your life, unharmed."

Even as his heart broke with the words he spoke in solemn covenant, he knew it was a vow he would honor. Her happiness was more important to him than his own. He would guard her for the rest of her mortal life.

She laid her head on his chest, taking a moment to indulge herself in the feel of him. It hurt to know she had wounded him. Even knowing who he was and why he asked, it was still too much, too fast. She took a deep breath and asked, "How long have I been gone?" Holding her breath, she waited for his answer.

For a moment, Shameer simply stared at the ceiling, his voice refused to come. "I lost you over one hundred and fifty years ago," he said in a whisper. He had tried to lock all the feelings away, trying to keep the door to those emotions closed. Suddenly, she had waltzed back into his life, and it was as if a riptide had come cascading over his being.

"I remember," she said softly, absently running her fingers in circles over his chest. "I remember telling you it was my mother's face I longed to see."

He smiled at the memory, attempted a little humor. "I wouldn't have let you go for anyone less," he said in a choked voice. "But as much as I loved you, she deserved to see you."

Jessica smiled and nodded her head. "Thank you, Shameer. Thank you for loving me enough to let me go," she whispered.

Shameer stared down at her, his heart swelling inside his chest with the love he felt for her. "Love isn't owning

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

something. It isn't holding onto something so tightly it can't breathe. No matter how much I want you, Jessica," he murmured, "you are not my property. I am honored for the time you choose to stay with me." He drew a shaky breath. "Thank you," he said softly, "for choosing to allow me to share some of that time with you.

He listened as her breathing became even. He knew when she had fallen asleep. Moving from the bed, he gazed at her for a few minutes longer. "I will always love you enough to let you go." he whispered. "You are the only part of my soul that can fly." With that, he turned to leave her room and closed the door softly behind him.

* * * *

Darkness was still upon the earth as Shameer made his way swiftly out of his home and into the woods. He ran fleetly, assuming the shape of a cougar in his headlong rush into darkness. His heart pounded and ached. He knew it was breaking, driving a pain deeper than a thousand stakes into his chest.

He raced through the darkness, wishing he had the courage and strength to stay and bask in the approaching dawn, to kiss his existence goodbye and spare himself the ache he knew would only grow as long as Jessica stayed in his home.

Reaching the water's edge, he gave way to his human form and collapsed beside the water, abandoned himself to the tears he couldn't shed, no matter how hard he tried. His

pain consumed him. How could he have her this close, only to lose her again?

The beast within him demanded he take her, end his suffering and claim what he knew was rightfully his. But his heart, his heart knew no matter how much he wanted her to stay forever with him, he would never ask her to damn herself to an existence such as his.

The sky became gilded with shades of red and gold and hues of light blue as the sun began to rise. Drawing himself up to his full height, he walked back to his home somberly and slowly, as if daring the sunrise to catch him unaware and release him from his eternal torment.

When he reached the doorway, his brother stood there, a concerned look on his face, as he watched the smoke rising from Shameer's back, evidence of the sun's rays doing their damage to his tender skin. Colin opened his mouth to speak, but Shameer cut him off with one word. "No," he said softly. No one but his own brother could have caught the hint of warning that lay in the undertone of the word.

The smell of burned skin followed behind him and lingered after him as he entered his home, his flesh marred by dark red welts. Shameer seemed heedless to it as he moved down the stairs, into the deep darkness of his own chambers.

* * * *

The *other* stood at the altar, a mist gathering around him. The darkness of the night seemed endless; no stars shone in the heavens, no moon lit the night. Black candles burned at either end of the altar. The man himself was robed in black

silk. He spoke the words of an ancient incantation, a spell for doing great damage, spoken in a language so ancient, so secret, no one knew it anymore; few existed who could translate more than a few phrases of it.

It was a spell banned from most witches' covens. To speak such a spell would wreak vengeance from the coven, had he been part of once. Concentrating on the words, he circled the altar, centering his attention on the picture that lay upon it. This spell would take a few days to take effect, but it would be worth it.

Lighting a red candle, he stood chanting over the photo. When the wax built up, he used it to draw a circle around the edge of the picture, then set the candle aside and resumed his chant.

It would be more pleasing, he thought if he could witness firsthand the pain she would be made to suffer from his magic. Patience, he chided himself silently. The spell would cause her enough agony so her hero would have no choice but to bring her out of hiding. The warlock smiled with bitter relish at the visions he conjured in his mind.

He had the patience; he could bide his time. What the beauty was about to feel went beyond any pain she could ever have imagined. But still, he promised himself, once she was where he wanted her, and then he would *show* her pain. He delighted in the thought. It would be near ecstasy for him to teach her all the methods of torture he could put her through. He began to chant louder and watched as the photo took on a translucent glow. Within seconds, the wax caught on fire, burning the edges of the picture, but somehow

leaving the actual subject of the photo untouched by the flame. His chant grew louder still, and the wizard threw off his cloak, revealing beneath it he was naked. Undeterred, he continued to work the spell.

He spoke the words forcefully as he circled the altar, his eyes ever focused on the picture. Reaching out his hand, he grasped the photo and held it in his hands with no reaction to the flame. It didn't even touch him and his manhood grew full. Smiling, he stared at the face within the photo and said, "Burn!" He spoke the word softly, a malevolent sneer settling into his features. "Let the pain course through you as naturally and easily as the blood in your very veins."

Only then did the fire enter into the depths of the picture, but travel only within the body of the subject. When the picture seemed to burst into flames, the wizard set it back down on the altar and ran his hand over it. Almost as if it was an unspoken order, the flames were extinguished. With that done, he turned and made his way from the room. His erection, full and long, seemed to point the way as he ascended the stairs.

The picture lay forgotten on the altar. By all appearances, it looked to be the same as it had before the ritual. No evidence of the flame was apparent, save the change in the girl's skin.

Her once olive complexion had turned a dark red hue, giving her the appearance of having a bad sunburn. A low, menacing chuckle filled the room before the light switched off. "Pleasant dreams, Jessica."

Chapter 7

Shameer stalked in his room, feeling much like a caged tiger. His mood was dark and foul. His sleep had been fitful, filled with dreams of losing the one woman he had ever loved all over again. They had plagued him, making him wish he had not gotten into this mess in the first place. Suddenly, he felt he should not have interfered in the entire situation. The hardest thing he had ever done was leaving her the night before. Part of him had wanted to give her no choice. He was tired of being alone, with only his brother for companionship. It was selfish, he knew, but...

He stilled, leaned against the wall, closing his eyes. He listened to the sound of her breathing. He could feel the beat of her pulse as surely, as if it were his own. Having her this close, but being unable to touch her, to turn her, making her eternally his, nearly drove him mad with longing. Feeling overwhelmed by his sense of loss, he moved swiftly to his door and up the steps out of the chamber as he ripped at the silken shirt he had worn, pulled himself free of its restraints. By the time he reached the front door, he was completely naked and already beginning to change into a creature, which could provide him the freedom he never felt within the confines of his human form. The tawny eagle owl stared fiercely into the darkness, flew from the doorway, its massive wings brushing the doorframe in its urgency to escape.

Freely, the bird took to the air, circling high above its lair. Keen eyes watched below for signs of movement. Using its

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

wings, it coasted through the night sky, taking itself ever higher, away from the weight of troubled thoughts. Deep into the darkness it circled, breathing deeply of the night air.

Yet even as he had won his battle against the feeling of being closed in, he still ached with need for her. She was ever present, in the back of his mind, pulling at his heart like a silken cord, eternally attached to his soul. Landing on the branch of a nearby tree, he let his keen eyes survey the area, listening to the sounds of the night. Most of the sounds he heard were normal, but just as he began to feel all was secure, the prattle of human voices on his land drifted toward him. He turned his head almost completely around, as only an owl could, and scanned the area. Scanning the area for a few moments, he saw nothing of importance. Then he spotted two figures, making their way down the path he himself so often used.

They had entered his land with a purpose, speaking in hushed tones, as though they thought at any moment someone might hear them. He could *smell* them. He could hear their separate heartbeats. One man, his pulse racing, looked around nervously, as though afraid the bogeyman himself was going to reach out and steal his very life away. The other man moved comfortably, his pulse calm. *This one*, Shameer thought, *is not mortal; he has a strong aura of magic about him.*

Shameer recognized that second man to be one of specific power. He felt nothing special from the other, except his fear. Yet something told him these men were no more than servants to the one who actually searched for the women.

Damn, he thought angrily. He had expected the man who was after them would eventually track them, but he had not thought to see any more of his goons quite so soon.

Now it would seem he would have to protect them once again. Sweeping down from his perch in the trees, he made his way home, his form changing as he made his way through the entrance of the cave. His frustration showed, despite his grace and agility as he began to call for Colin. It never occurred to him to notice his nakedness. Colin's voice sounded and drew him toward the other's voice, and he followed the sound, found his brother in the kitchen. Only after he opened his mouth to speak did he realize Colin was not alone.

Colin was seated at the center of the table enjoying a cup of coffee, with a woman at either end, drinking as well. Both women stared at him with widened eyes. At first, he pondered the meaning for their obvious shock and Colin's raised eyebrow. All three stared at him as though he had lost his mind. Abby rounded the corner coming into the kitchen, saying, "I believe the cake I am baking is almost ready." her voice faded as she saw Shameer's nudity. "My Lord," she exclaimed, "Did ya lose your clothes?"

Swearing beneath his breath, he lunged for the cabinet, grabbed the first thing he could find big enough to cover himself. Unfortunately, Colin's apron was the only thing that seemed large enough to cover his front. Swallowing an angry retort, he looked back at them. Chelsea's look of shock turned to one of mild amusement. A smile played at her lips, turning them up at the corners. Her eyes were no longer on him, but

fastened on Colin. Jessica still stared at him, an expression of confusion etched across her features. She opened her mouth to speak, but it was Colin's voice he heard first.

"Are you all right, Shameer?" he asked with a hint of humor, even though his face betrayed nothing of his mirth. Looking from Jessica to Colin, Shameer shook his head. He knew Jessica knew exactly who and what he was, but Chelsea still had no idea of the double life he was forced to lead. *Explanations are a waste of time anyway;* he thought as he threw his hands into the air in a gesture of pure exasperation, stated simply, "We have company." Then he gathered his composure and walked, head held high, from the room.

Jessica looked at the burns on his back, asked, "What happened to your back?"

He ignored the question, kept walking, painfully aware his backside was still exposed and that three pairs of eyes still watched as he left them. Colin rose, excusing himself, and moved to follow his brother.

When they were out of earshot of Abby and the women who still sat scandalized at the table, Colin asked, "What do you mean, we have company?"

Shameer stopped, turned, and with a look of utter disgust, handed the apron back to his brother. "I mean," He answered quietly, "you need to get your gun, and I..." he paused, regarded himself with a look of chagrin and continued, "I need to get dressed."

Colin nodded, taking the apron, and began to turn, but stopped when Shameer placed his hand on his arm. Meeting

Colin's eyes with a purposeful glint in his own, Shameer added, "Load the gun with the silver bullets."

Colin's eyes widened momentarily, and then he nodded and watched as his brother began to descend the stairs. He made his way back to the kitchen, threw the apron on the cabinet, and unlocked the drawer containing the gun. The women watched in stunned silence as he loaded the pistol, and then turned to face them. "Stay here," he warned quietly, "inside the house." His words brooked no argument. Looking at Abby then, he ordered softly, "All of you." He walked briskly from the room, leaving them looking after him in shock.

By the time he made it to the entryway, Shameer was waiting for him and he asked, "Are you sure they are here for the girls?" Dread filled his heart at the thought.

"I am quite sure," Shameer answered softly as he opened the door and moved through it. "They have the same scent as the man I did *not* see that night in the park." He shook his head, then added, "He sent them, I'm sure of it."

As the brothers stepped cautiously into the woods, careful to conceal themselves, they could hear the trespassers as they approached. The *normal* man was clearly not the brains of the intrusion. "So, tell me again why he wants them?" he asked in a voice that was nasal, high-pitched and annoyingly whiny. "I mean, it isn't like they can do any kind of spells for him. He's already feasted this week, and they aren't monsters, like you, so why, Harry? Why all the trouble over two human women?" he asked the last with a sort of disgust.

The wolf-man turned to the other with a low growl, said, "How should I know why he wants them? Maybe he plans to sacrifice them to that stupid god he worships." The man was annoyed at the other's incessant questions. "What do you *care* why he wants them? Our concern is only to get them and deliver them to him."

The younger man followed reluctantly behind, quiet for a moment, but unable to keep his opinions to himself, he blurted out, "But, Harry," he pulled, "how are we supposed to be able to fight a vampire? We have no idea..." He gulped back the rest of his retort as Harry rounded on him, already half changed into his wolf form.

"We have wooden stakes, holy water, garlic and crosses!" he scolded, then stopped and assumed an expression of contemplation. "Let's see, that seems to be everything the history books and movies tell you, or did I leave something out?" Without giving the other man time to reply, he snapped, "No, didn't think so. Now, can we *please* get this done? I'm getting hungry." He gave the smaller man an appraising once over that left even this dupe little room for doubt as to his double meaning.

Shameer felt a small amount of sympathy for the mortal. He was clearly nervous and way out of his league in the company he kept. Absently, his hand went to the golden crucifix he had worn for long over a century now. Thankfully, it had not been true about vampires being damned by God. Unfortunately, stakes, and sunlight could be very real threats, with very serious dangers linked to them. Stakes were the fastest way to kill a vampire; sunlight the most painful. A

certain amount of immunity from the sun's harmful rays could be found by feeding when needed, instead of allowing one's hunger to persist to the point of starvation.

Shameer had been relieved to find a vampire did not have to feed to the point of killing a victim in order to live. Although a kill could gain more power, it was not necessary to kill in order to keep up one's strength.

He and Colin watched and listened as the intruders argued. "Well, I brought my gun," the mortal said. "I had some silver necklaces melted down, just in case..."

Harry turned once more and looked at the other man for a few moments before asking softly, "Do you intend to kill *me*?"

The human shook his head emphatically, said, "Well of course not! Why would you think that?"

Taking the gun from the lummoX, Harry emptied out the bullets, said, "Because, you idiot, silver bullets kill *my* kind! *Not vampires.*"

Colin nearly choked on a laugh at the nonsense before him. He stood watching the conversation before him, and then leaned toward Shameer and whispered, "I'm sure if we give them time, we won't have to kill both of them Harry will take care of the other guy for us!"

Neither of the trespassers said another word as they neared the clearing. Harry slowed and tilted his head, testing the air for scents. For what seemed an eternity, there was nothing but silence in the wood, as though all the animals had left the area. Then Harry's voice filled the night, his lengthening canine teeth causing a bit of a lisp as he said, "I

smell you, Nosferatu." He turned, looking in one direction and the next slowly, surveying the surrounding area.

"We may hide from mere mortals," he continued, his voice rose, "but from each other No!" He chuckled, "You can't hide from someone who can smell you!"

Tired of waiting for the time to strike, Shameer moved into the clearing. Answering the wolf-man's challenge, he called, "You are right, of course." His eyes met the werewolf's "I was trying to relax, but you are absolutely correct." He wrinkled his nose in distaste. "One cannot rest when breathing in something so fowl as your scent!"

His transformation into the wolf's form now complete, Harry launched himself at Shameer, rage controlling him. Shameer sidestepped, him, pulled a silver blade from beneath his jacket. Leveling the creature with an intent stare, he waited patiently for its next attack.

Colin watched as the mortal turned and began to run frantically in the other direction, dismissed him as a harmless boy who had not had the faintest idea what he had been getting into. Colin turned his eyes back to the battle before him. Gun cocked and ready, he waited for an opportunity to fire.

Shameer and the werewolf circled each other. The wolf crouched low, ready to spring. Then he grew still; each looked into the other's eyes with deadly calm. As the wolf reared for another assault, Shameer brought his knife forward. The animal leapt the distance between them, prepared to feast on the vampire's flesh. Its eyes widened as its chest collided with the cold silver blade.

With one last stab further into the creature's flesh, Shameer let the wolf slip to the ground. Colin moved forward to investigate the damage done. "Is he dead?" he asked quietly.

Shameer studied the body for signs of life. "Let's hope so," he said as he turned, began to move up the path toward the house. Colin bent to retrieve the knife. Hand closing over the handle, he started to rise, only to be stopped by the werewolf's low growl. The animal sprang, knocking him onto his back, and the air out of his lungs.

Before either brother could think to react, the creature pounded its paws into Colin's rib cage, and then began to dig with its claws into his chest cavity. Colin screamed against the pain. Groping for the gun, he realized too late he had dropped both it and the dagger when the wolf had attacked him. Closing his eyes, Colin prepared for his long awaited death. He thought even the witch's curse could not doom him to exist past this confrontation.

A gunshot rang out and the werewolf yelped in pain, collapsed on top of Colin, his own blood mingling with the wounds he had caused in his victim's chest. With a shuddering heave, Colin rolled the dead wolf-man, now a man again, off of him and moaned at the discomfort it caused. He drew in a long, painful breath, sputtered blood and coughed raggedly, wheezing out blood mixed with air.

Shameer ran to his side, knelt to look at the gaping wound in his brother's chest. Concern lined his features. His expression made Colin swallow hard. When he opened his mouth to speak, Shameer shook his head, said, "Save your

strength, brother." He sighed. "You are going to need it to heal."

Picking Colin up, he hurried down the path toward the cave fortress. He saw the wound begin to heal before his eyes and it comforted him, even though he knew the chances of Colin's remaining unaffected by the curse of the werewolf's blood were slim. He wondered what the women's reaction would be. Jessica knew about their true identities, so she would realize Colin would live. Chelsea, on the other hand, was still ignorant of their secret. He worried over how she would react to seeing his brother in such condition.

Colin sighed, "We shall soon see, Shameer, in only moments." His voice carried the same concerns as Shameer's unspoken thoughts.

As he drew near to the estate, he saw Chelsea and Jessica standing in the entrance. Their eyes widened in a mixture of shock and fear when they saw the men covered in blood. It trickled onto the ground at Shameer's feet.

Colin was no longer conscious. His head and hands were limp in his brother's arms. Chelsea gasped, moved to stand beside them. "Is he..." Her words faded as her eyes brimmed with tears at the sight of his wound. There was no way he could have survived that hole.

Jessica stood back, holding the door wide, as Shameer moved past her. Chelsea stumbled blindly behind them, tears streaking her face as emotion ruled her. "We have to call an ambulance," she said, her voice shaking as she began to look for the phone. Abby grabbed Chelsea's hand, murmuring soft

words of comfort. Her worried gaze also followed Shameer's movements.

Shameer crossed to the couch and laid his brother on it, heedless of the blood that still poured freely from the slowly closing wound. He seemed not to even notice Chelsea's frantic pleas. Jessica turned her attention from Chelsea to Shameer and Colin. She was unsure how to explain to her friend about Colin and Shameer, but she knew it was time to do so. She could see the wound slowly closing. Looking at Abby, she had a plea for help to explain it all in her eyes. "It's time to tell her." Jessica mouthed to the older woman.

Shameer sat beside his brother, pressing his hand against the wound to help slow the bleeding. At the moment, he was more worried about the possibility of his brother's new status in the world than Chelsea's confusion over the situation. *If the werewolf's bite was strong enough, it could make a difference in Colin's life.* He dismissed the thought. *The witch's curse is too strong. It will take more than a werewolf to change it.*

Looking wildly at Jessica, Chelsea tried again, saying, "He's in shock Jess." Her voice trembled. "We *have* to call nine-one-one." When Jessica made no move, Chelsea spoke more forcefully, "He's going to *die* if we don't get him some medical help!"

"There is nothing they could do for him," Shameer's voice said softly, "that his body can't do for itself."

Chelsea looked stunned and was just about to tell them all a thing or two. Had the entire household gone mad? A man couldn't live when his life's blood was pouring out of him at such an alarming rate. She opened her mouth to speak when

Colin's voice made her lose her own. "Chelsea, come here," he said quietly.

She turned to look at the man she had given up for dead, her surprise evident as she let her jaw go slack. He had taken his shirt off and was using it to wipe away the last of the blood. The gaping wound she had seen for herself had been replaced by skin. In its place was a scar in the shape of claw marks, but the scar looked old, as though what she knew had just happened, hadn't.

The only evidence that he had been hurt was the fresh blood, and an abundance of it, on the men's clothes. She reached out, ran her hand across the nearly smooth, scarred flesh, said, "But, you were..." She looked into his eyes and bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

Shaking her head, she caught back a sob. "But, I *know* what I saw!" she said as she looked at the others in astonishment. "The blood! There was blood all over..."

Abby moved to stand beside her husband, who had come into the room and was watching the young panicked woman. A man of few words, all eyes were drawn to him when he said softly, "How are you going to keep *this* from them?" His eyes searched Colin's.

Colin met his gaze for a moment, then cleared his throat and said softly, "I think she needs to know the truth." He took her hand in his. "Chelsea, sit with me and let us explain."

* * * *

Chelsea sat in stunned silence as she listened while the two recounted their lives. Jessica sat quietly beside her. For a

moment, she did little more than sit mutely fighting to make sense of what they told her. Turning to Jessica, she asked at last, "So, uhm—I guess you *are* that woman in the portrait?"

Jessica nodded slowly, answered softly, "It *would* explain the dreams." She smiled and bit her bottom lip. "Are you angry that I didn't tell you everything?"

Chelsea stared silently at her friend for a moment, before regarding Shameer and asking, "And you are *truly* a vampire? Jessica did say the man in her dream was a vampire, but I thought that was just..."

Shameer raised an eyebrow. "For some three hundred years now," he stated flatly.

Chelsea failed to see the joke as she turned and met Colin's stare levelly. "And you," she whispered, "will live forever and can only die by the hand of one who loves you." She shot an accusing glare at Abby and Davis, asking venomously, "Should I also know how *you* both fit in?"

When Abby opened her mouth, Chelsea raised her hand to silence her. "Don't bother," she fumed, "I don't think I want to know." Standing, she began to walk slowly toward the stairs that led to her room.

As she walked from them, Jessica called after her, "Chelsea, where are you..."

"To bed!" Chelsea snarled angrily, "I suddenly have the feeling I don't belong at this *party*."

Colin rose and began to follow her, called after her, "Chelsea, I..."

She wheeled on him, the look in her eyes stilling him to silence. "Leave me alone," she ordered, and then added,

"*please?*" She looked at them before pronouncing her indictment against them, "A vampire, a three hundred-year-old man who only looks around fifty years old and a reincarnated *princess*. Somehow that makes me, plain old Chelsea, an outsider."

She turned and left the room before any of them had a chance to respond. Colin sat back down on the couch, staring after her, a look of concern on his features.

Davis addressed him with sympathy and no small amount of understanding, "She has her own set of issues to go through before she can accept the ones you have dealt her. Give her some time."

Shameer bumped his head against the wall he leaned on. He had been afraid of how Chelsea would react. Given the obvious affection she had already developed for Colin, he imagined how the news of his curse had affected her and the thoughts she must be having about even the remote possibility of being the one to end his life, if that time *ever* came.

Chapter 8

When Chelsea reached her room, she closed her door and stood for several minutes leaning against it. Then she locked it and moved to the bed. Sitting on its edge, she breathed deeply trying to calm her raging emotions. She lay down, pulled the pillow close, and hugged it to her as she cried the tears of a broken heart into it. She felt as though something very special was snatched from her. She had grown so fond of Colin in such a short amount of time it alarmed her.

She could accept Shameer's being a vampire. Given what she had seen with her own eyes, she could even believe Jessica was the girl from the painting. But her heart ached at the thought the man she seemed helplessly drawn to was fated to live forever, unless the woman who loved him would take pity on him and end his life.

Her thoughts screamed in denial. She was terrified, if she fell in love with him, he might ask her to take his life. Tears gathered anew at the idea of such a hideous thing. It perplexed her. It angered her. She felt powerless and helpless against it. *I shouldn't even care*, she scolded herself. She didn't even know him all that well. Instead, her feelings toward him overwhelmed her, haunted her. She admitted freely to herself that he was already special to her. There seemed to be an unspoken bond between them in the small amount of time they had known each other. She felt the connection deep within her soul. It moved her as no other emotion ever had.

Lying on her side, she hugged her pillow tighter to her as her mind wandered. *Oh well*, she thought to herself at last she, too, *I am unique in all of this, too*. She was a natural witch, one born with the inner magic few practicing Wiccans could say they possessed. She sat up, crossed her legs to sit Indian style on the bed, removed her necklace and gazed into the depths of her crystal sphere pendant that dangled from the dainty golden chain. Within seconds, the orb took on an eerie, luminescent glow.

Breathing deeply, Chelsea smiled. The sphere had been a gift from her mother years before. She had told Chelsea the time would come when her talents would be needed. Her mother and father had both been practicing Wiccans in a time when it was frowned upon by society. Chelsea knew her family was forced to move several times because of people's prejudices and ignorance.

By the time she had met Jessica, they had put aside their religion and pagan practices for fear of having to move away from a life where Chelsea needed stability and security. But in the privacy of their own home her mother had taught Chelsea enough. She knew how to read tarot cards, draw energy from certain gemstones and share healing energy as well. Her mother had also recognized power similar to Chelsea's in Jessica. Eventually, she had started to teach Jessica how to harness and control the powers she had been gifted with as well. Chelsea thought of how Jessica had cherished the time she had used to learn how to control her abilities of premonition.

Suddenly, Chelsea felt remorse for the anger she had expressed over the things shared with her tonight. This irritability was only part of a building force of evil designed to destroy their unity. She could feel it. All around them was a growing force of impending menace. It was a threat to them all, but at the moment, it was more of a threat to one of them, specifically.

"Show me who is in danger," she said aloud as the crystal warmed in her hand. As she watched, a shape began to form inside its clear essence. The form ebbed and flowed, becoming more defined, until Chelsea could tell the vision she saw was of Jessica.

She leaned closer, watched as the figure of her friend writhed in pain, clutching at her abdomen. Her aura was clouded and dark red, showing extreme signs of unnatural pain. Confused, Chelsea watched as the color grew darker and angrier until the figure stopped moving altogether, leaving the aura black.

It was a sign of poisoning, the kind that could only be done by a spell. Cold fingers of dread closed around her heart, making her feel almost suffocated by the threat she saw within the depths of the crystal. The spell was complicated, calling forth dark powers that frightened her. She wished she had some idea exactly what she was dealing with. As of yet she had no idea, but she knew she had to find out. *Soon*. It would not be long before the illness planted in her friend's body began to come to the surface. Much more delay, and it would be too late to do anything.

She closed her hand around the sphere and, putting the chain back around her neck; she rose from the bed and started for the door. Once in the hall, she fairly ran back the way she had come. Whatever happened, one thing was sure. Tonight was not the night to feel left out of anything.

* * * *

Jessica paced the floor, growing more agitated by the minute. She chided herself for not trusting her friend enough to tell her the truth. It was quite possible she had just lost her best friend. "I should have told her," she seethed. "I can't believe I was so stupid!"

Absently, she rubbed her stomach in an attempt to quell the ache that had been there since early this morning. It had only been a slight twinge until a few hours ago. She had told herself it was simply nerves.

Shameer sat in the chair watching her pace, "It will be all right," he said softly. "She will understand your reasoning once she has had time to think about it." He looked toward Colin for some sign of agreement, but his brother was lost to staring out into something that didn't seem to be visible to anyone else.

When Chelsea walked back into the room, all eyes fixed on her. Her gaze met and held Colin's for a moment before she turned to face Jessica. "Since this seems to be the night for unbelievable things to happen, I feel it only fair to warn you, a spell has been cast." Her voice was slightly shaky and it was not hard to realize she was nervous as she continued, "A spell cast to do harm. Whoever cast it wants to hurt *you*, Jessica."

She looked once more at Colin, and gave him an understanding nod before she said, "I am sorry for reacting the way I did; I had no right to do that."

Jessica stood, at a loss for words. They had been friends for so long now; she knew it was uncomfortable for Chelsea to share that part of her life with others.

Chelsea shook her head wearily. "I saw it through my crystal. Please," she said, "we don't have much time."

Jessica raised her eyebrow in surprise. "Chelsea, you are my best friend," she said softly. "You know I trust you. If you say this is serious..."

The friends looked at each other. Chelsea nodded gravely, then took Jessica's hand and led her to the couch, sat, pulling Jessica down beside her. Colin and Shameer closed the gap by moving nearer. Drawing a deep breath, Chelsea spoke quietly to Jessica, "I know you are the one who usually has the premonitions, but you are all in grave danger." She pronounced this fact without worrying much about what the others might think, but she did look from one anxious face to the next to see how her words had been received.

Colin and Shameer looked at each other for a perplexed moment, then regarded Chelsea and Jessica. "How do you know?" Colin asked quietly.

"My parents were practicing Wiccans for years. By the time I met Jessica, we practiced secretly," she explained. "They got tired of the prejudice."

Shameer peered at Chelsea with interest, asked, "What does that have to do with what is happening here?"

Chelsea smiled, continued, "I said they quit practicing *openly*, but they still taught us enough. They taught me spells, crystal meditation and healing. They taught Jessica how to enhance her extrasensory perception."

Jessica stared at Shameer, wondered what his thoughts were on encountering witches again. Somewhat uncomfortably, she asked, "Does that make you feel differently about me now? I am not a wicked witch, you know..."

Shameer shook his head. "It was ... *unexpected*," he said after a pause. "But I think I am actually glad, because I doubt our enemy, whoever he may be, is expecting this turn of events and it might give us a better chance of beating his devices."

Chelsea smiled awkwardly. "I'll just bet you never expected anything *like* this, did you?" she asked, and then added, "Finding your soul mates, only to learn they are witches?" She fumbled with her necklace. Pulling the crystal out from beneath her blouse, she held it out. "Jessica, I am just now beginning to realize how serious this really is. Someone has worked a very powerful, harmful spell..." her hand moved to Jessica's lower abdomen, causing Jessica to wince in pain at her touch. "Right about *here*, isn't it?"

Shameer's eyes fell on Jessica's stomach, and then he looked back at Chelsea. His voice trembled in anger as he asked, "What kind of spell?"

Chelsea looked up at him with regret, said, "I saw it in my stone and in her aura." Her eyes held his for an instant before she glanced again at Jessica and added, "But I don't know

exactly what spell it is. It is something very ancient and meant to cause a great deal of pain."

Worry settled over her features as she knelt before Jessica. "What does it feel like, Jess?"

Jessica, who was just beginning to realize that what her friend was telling her about the spell was real and true, put a hand to her stomach. Tears slipped unchecked down her cheeks. "Like fire," she said softly. "Kind of like a really bad case of heartburn, but in the wrong place." Her bottom lip quivered before she bit it to still its involuntary action. She rolled her eyes and, looked at Shameer.

"Why didn't you say anything about the pain, my darling?" he asked quietly, worry showing clearly on his features.

She looked apologetic for a few moments, before saying, "At first, it just felt like cramps. It is close to the time when I should have my period, so I didn't think anything of it." She looked at her shaking hands. "It started getting worse right about the time you guys got back and Colin was hurt. His condition seemed so grave; I didn't think I should start complaining then. I didn't have any premonitions about this; I missed it completely." Her hand went back to her stomach. She shook her head, gasping, "I thought it was just nerves."

Realizing how much time they had already lost on finding a counter spell, Chelsea asked Shameer, "Does your library have any spell books?"

As Shameer returned her look, understanding dawned on his features. "More than you could go through in a day," he responded.

"Then we had better get busy, because I am not sure we even have that long." she said, looking at Colin meaningfully. He moved to her side and took her hand. With a last concerned look at her friend, Chelsea told Shameer, "Keep her as comfortable as you can." Then together, she and Colin made their way to the library.

The cats, who had been content to stay in Jessica's room until now, suddenly appeared, gathering close to both Shameer and Jessica. It seemed as though they were trying to offer comfort. Sabbath settled in Jessica's lap, while Neeka wove herself in and out between Shameer's feet.

Jessica smiled up at Shameer. "They are worried about us," she said softly, wiping the tears away with one hand, while stroking Sabbath with the other.

Shameer could see the pain in her eyes, could feel the heat from the spell centering itself within her. Fear coursed through him, but he forced a smile back at her, "Then we should keep them with us. If they are worried, they need to be able to be with you."

She laughed softly at his words before gasping, and crying out as another pain struck her, forcing her to double over in pain. It was as if her entire mid-section was overflowing in lava.

His hand reached out to touch her, "Jessica, darling," he said gently as he brushed a stray hair away from her forehead, "what can I do?"

She seemed to consider his words for a moment, as she rocked herself back and forth on the couch. Finally, as the pain eased up for a moment, she sat up slowly and looked at

him with dark, sad eyes. "Tell me about your friends," she suggested.

Shameer sat back into the couch, a look of disconcertion on his face. "My friends? Why do you want to know about my friends now?" he asked. It seemed odd to him she would be interested in knowing about his friends right now, when she was in so much pain.

She shrugged, taking another labored breath. "Because it will help to keep my mind off of the pain." Suddenly, she gripped his hand, and whimpered before adding, "I know there are others like you. I remember that from before, but I don't remember any of them personally. It's like I never met any of them."

Shameer shook his head, said, "Well, I only know a few of them." He looked away. "Not many *Eternals* spend much time with mortals."

Jessica tilted her head and wondered, "Why is that?"

"I guess it would be because it is hard when one becomes attached to them," he looked away, his voice dropping, and added "only to lose them." He forced himself to smile at her and thought on her question. "I'll tell you about Darmetheus, and Tenaryn," he said, his face transformed by the mention of these two friends. "Darmetheus is the werewolf who taught me how to survive with what I was, without completely hating myself, that is."

Shameer spoke briefly of how desperately he had hated his existence at first. He said, "I wanted so desperately to die. I didn't even care if I left Colin to his eternity of suffering alone. I was just so unhappy." He thought for a moment

before adding, "and selfish. I was completely selfish. Darmetheus came upon me one night, when I was desperately seeking the courage to surrender myself to the dawn. He offered to teach me how to exist in harmony with who I was."

Jessica fought down the wave of nausea that came from her innards, feeling oddly twisted. She asked, "So, what exactly did he teach you?"

Shameer shrugged. "A lot," he answered with a smile. "He taught me how to ask for sustenance from the animals. He taught me I didn't have to kill to get the nourishment I needed. He is a good friend. He also helped me to learn how to shape shift." At her amused look, he asked, "What?"

Jessica rubbed her stomach, saying through clenched teeth, "I was just wondering how a werewolf could teach you how to shape shift. I mean," she said through a strained breath, "isn't a werewolf confined to just the shape of a wolf?"

Shameer nodded, replied, "Yes. But see, every eternal warrior has another eternal who mentors him after he has proven himself worthy of being instructed. You see," he continued, "Darmetheus was my mentor and he was a werewolf. Tenaryn was the wizard who was his mentor. A vampire was Tenaryn's mentor. His name was..."

His words were interrupted when Jessica curled herself into a ball and began sobbing. "Jessica!" he cried, reaching out to cradle her. "Oh, sweet Jesus, I'm sorry! You are in such terrible pain, and here I am wagging my tongue and making too much noise!"

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Jessica shook her head. "No, Shameer, it was helping," she said through sobs. "It is just; it's starting to be more than I can bear! Oh, Promise me something?"

Shameer's eyes filled with concern as he replied, "Anything, darling, what must I do?" He steeled himself for what she might ask of him. He would do his best at whatever task she gave him.

Biting her lip again to keep from screaming with the next wave of pain, she looked up at him, and gave him her best attempt at a brave smile as she whispered, "Don't forget to finish telling me about the relationships between the *Eternals* and their mentors when this is all over?"

A smile teased his lips as he sighed in relief at her brave attempt at humor. "I promise," he said simply. Moving closer to where he could lift her head gently into his lap, he used one hand to stroke her hair away from her wet face, his other one idly stroking the cats, which offered their trust and affection to him so easily. He desperately hoped Chelsea could find a counter spell. *Soon*, he thought; *let it be soon*.

* * * *

Chelsea flipped through the pages of the old tattered book. In the last five hours, she and Colin had searched through every book she could find, save two, trying to find a reversal spell. They were running out of time. Each time Jessica screamed in agony, Chelsea's heart leapt at the sound. She felt utterly useless. Abby had entered the library and now sat a hot cup of cocoa beside her. "I thought this might help," she said simply, then turned to walk away.

Chelsea caught her arm, said, "Abby?" When the older woman looked back, she smiled hesitantly and whispered, "Thank you."

Abby smiled warmly, "You let me know if there's anything else you'll be needing."

Nodding, Chelsea turned back to the book she was searching. Colin moved to rest his hands on her shoulders, kneading softly, an attempt to release some of the tension that had worked its way deep into her shoulders. "Any luck yet?" he asked softly.

Despite her worry over her friend's condition, his touch made her pulse quicken as her flesh became sensitized beneath his touch. Suddenly tenser than ever, she shook her head and replied, "Nothing yet." Perturbed he could affect her like that in a time of crisis, she pulled away from him. "Please," she said in a halting voice, "I realize that you mean well, but ... but maybe you should go get some rest," *far away from me*, she added silently.

His presence was distracting. She cursed herself for being so obsessed with the man that he could have such a disturbing effect on her. To make matters worse, he shook his head and smiled sweetly at her. "I want to help," he said simply, frustrating her all the more.

She banged her fist against the desk, heard her voice rise as she yelled, "You *aren't* helping!" She flung her hand over her mouth, stood shocked for a moment before continuing. "I know you are trying," she whispered softly, "but your presence right now is serving more as a distraction..." Her voice trailed off as her attention was drawn to the page that

had turned by itself when her fist had hit the table. The title brought a glimmer of hope to her eye.

"*The Undoing of Another's Evil*," she read out loud, then with an excited squeal, she turned, threw her arms around Colin's neck in a fierce hug. Then she drew back and kissed him soundly on the lips before turning to get the ingredients. She missed the open-mouthed, passionate stare that followed her.

"Okay," she said hurriedly, "we need blue candles, the tall ones, and white chalk, then..." turning, her voice stopped as she saw the expression on his face. Realizing what she had done, she stammered, "I—I'm sorry, I was just..."

He stopped her by placing a hand over her lips, then moving it to her cheek. With the other hand he reached out and pulled her closer to him and kissed her lips gently at first, then deepened the kiss. He let his passion show, exhibiting to her exactly how much he hadn't minded her kiss. She sighed as she let herself enjoy the feel and taste of him.

When he pulled back, he smiled gently and whispered, "I'll get whatever you need."

* * * *

Jessica lay curled in the center of the circle in a fetal position. The pain had grown so intense it was impossible for her to straighten even a little. She was near delirium, drifting in and out of consciousness.

Shameer sat beside her, a worried expression playing on his features as he used a damp cloth to wipe the sweat from

her brow. His eyes never left her as he brooded over the damage that may have already been done to her vital organs.

Colin sat on the other side of her, watched Chelsea as she finished placing crystals in the appropriate places, chanting the incantations as she lit the incense. Once finished, she sat Indian style at the head of the triangle the three of them created around Jessica. It placed her even with her friend's head. She tried to give an assuring smile to the others before she said nervously, "All right; let's see if my mother taught me anything, shall we?"

Focusing on Jessica, she began to speak softly, as though in prayer, "*Goddess*, I pray ye, hear my cry. Lend me your power to call forth each *Guardian* of each *Watchtower*. I need their energies to end this spell. I invoke thee, grant me thy power. Allow me to perform this healing. A spell has been cast to cause this pain, an evil spell, unworthy of your craft. Oh, worthy and mighty *Goddess* of goodness, I beseech you to aid me in ending its evil. Help me to send it back whence it came."

Chelsea sat very still, eyes closed as she waited for an answer from the spirit she had summoned. For a moment, everything was still and quiet. Then something changed. She felt a subtle shift in the atmosphere around them. She knew the *Goddess* was answering her summons. She could feel her presence as it settled around them.

Seeing the *Goddess* was almost unheard of and something that seldom, if ever, happened. She always simply fed energy to those who needed her. But something was different this time. Of all the times her mother had summoned the

Goddess, she had always used her mother as the vessel, entering her. Chelsea felt no entity trying to enter her, yet she knew the *Goddess* was there. Confused, Chelsea opened her eyes, seated in the fourth space, which had been empty, was a flaxen-haired woman with startling blue eyes and alabaster skin. She smiled gently, and then spoke in a smooth, silken voice even the angels would envy.

"Welcome, young witch of the right-hand path. I have been waiting for you to call on me." Her eyes regarded Jessica. She rose and moved in a single graceful sweep to kneel beside the unconscious woman and run her hand over the tender abdomen. Softly she whispered, "No Pain." A glow came under her hand, but above Jessica's distended abdomen. "Heal, rest, and let no more spells be used against you."

Jessica visibly relaxed and Shameer expelled a breath of relief. The angel, like woman sat back, and let her gaze come to rest on Chelsea. "I will allow no more spells to befall you from this warlock," she promised, as the expression in her eyes turned sad. "However, this is not over," she sighed heavily, "and my powers will be of no use to you in the upcoming battle."

Chelsea opened her mouth to question what the *Goddess* meant, but the woman held up her hand to silence her, saying, "I am not allowed to interfere anymore than I already have."

She fixed Colin and Shameer with a look and whispered, "This is a vendetta which goes back many years, past the life of any mortal."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

To Chelsea, she added, "You must study your magic, my daughter, for when the true battle comes, you will both need it." Gesturing to Jessica, a talisman appeared within the *Goddess'* hand. Placing it in Chelsea's hand, she said, "When Jessica awakens, have her put this on. Her magic will work to aid your cause as well, and the time approaches."

When Chelsea took the chain from her, the other woman vanished. Only her words lingered behind, "Get some rest."

Shameer sat stunned. *What battle was to come?* He wondered at the words, visibly shaken. Why did he have such a feeling of dread? Closing his eyes, he absently stroked the cat which sat relaxed in his lap. *Why, he thought, just once, why couldn't life be simple?*

He turned his gaze on Chelsea, said softly, "Welcome to our never-ending nightmare, Chelsea. There is no reason for you to feel left out anymore."

Chapter 9

Jessica relaxed and let the feeling of warmth envelope her. Her hand closed over the crystal she now wore around her neck. Cuddled beneath the blankets, she stared into the depths of the stone.

"Careful," Chelsea said softly, "once the stone begins to talk to you, it'll be difficult to get it to shut up." She chuckled under her breath as she settled under the covers and fluffed her pillows. Jessica returned her smile.

"Thanks, Chelsea," she said simply.

Their eyes met and Chelsea responded, "For what? I didn't do anything you wouldn't have done for me."

Jessica nodded, smiling, and said, "Still, I feel lucky to be able to count you among my friends."

Chelsea cuddled deeper into her pillow and closed her eyes. "Me too, Jess," she sighed. "I can't think of anyone I would rather go to the edge of insanity with." Her words made Jessica smile.

Jessica's body was tired and she felt her eyelids growing heavy. "Chelsea," she sighed, "thanks for staying in here with me."

Chelsea opened her eyes and watched Jessica snuggle deeper into the blankets. Her words were soft when she said, "After the last eighteen hours, don't be surprised if I never let you out of my *sight* again."

Jessica smiled, but her eyes remained closed. Chelsea listened to her friend's breathing as it grew rhythmic and

even. She watched Jessica sleep for a while, thinking about how she had nearly lost her best friend. It could have easily gone differently. In the blink of an eye, Jessica could have been lost to her forever.

A silent tear trailed down Chelsea's cheek. "Don't worry Jess," she whispered,

"I won't let anything happen to you." *I'll have to be dead first*, she added to herself. Knowing Jessica was safe beside her in the bed, Chelsea let herself drift off. Nothing else was going to hurt them, at least not tonight.

* * * *

The warlock cried out at the sudden onslaught of anguish as it hit him. It coursed through him, centering low in his belly, rocking him much like an explosion would have. He suffered a moment's confusion before he realized it was a mirroring of the spell he had worked against Jessica. His spell had been expertly broken, his victim freed from its binding, and the negative energies had returned to visit its vengeance on him.

Canceling the spell with a quick, quiet chant, he drew a deep breath when the pain faded. His hands balled into fists, his nails digging in and drawing blood from his palms. Anger filled him, turned his cheeks to scarlet. Only a witch or warlock born of the craft could have fought that spell, he thought, but to *break* the spell would have taken the aid of an immortal born of high powers.

The scowl on his face deepened. This was not going as he had planned. *Very well*, he thought wryly. *If they could use*

the aid of another to counter my spells, I will have to call her. As much as the thought of waking her sickened him, he knew she was the only one who could aid him in this endeavor.

Yes, he reasoned. *If that was how they wanted to play, so be it.* He could easily adhere to those rules. As he opened the door to the cellar, he chuckled softly. This might even be fun. He moved swiftly down the steps to the pentagram drawn years past on the concrete floor. He lit the black candles at each point of the star. As he stepped into the center of the symbol, he began to speak in a low, menacing voice.

"Jasmine, dark soul in the abyss of purgatory, I have need of your wisdom. I seek your power to exact my revenge. Come forward now at my beckoning. Allow me to use your power. I invoke you; I invoke your power. Help me; I order you to grant me the ability to gain my revenge!"

For a moment, there was absolute silence. It was almost as though the darkness had opened up, had given way to a void in which nothing could exist. Then, suddenly the candles flared brighter, the charge seeming to hang in the air with a current both electrical and elemental. Then the light of the candles seemed to dim as the room was lit by a spherical luminescence, seeming to appear from nowhere and glowing with an unusually bright nimbus, which pulsed with a life of its own. The center of the orb began to grow brighter than the rest of it until its glow became almost painful to behold, and a figure walked out of its core.

The woman, naked and youthful, was a vision of perfection. Her skin was flawless. Her auburn hair fell in

waves past her hips. She looked at him with unnatural, emerald green eyes, an instant distaste crossing her features.

"Shamus," she fairly spat his name.

He closed the distance between them, a mocking expression on his face, as he greeted softly, "Hello, mother."

* * * *

Colin paced like a caged animal, an action, which reminded Shameer of himself. The bad leg only seemed to slow him a fraction. His worry showed visibly on his face, making him look older.

Unable to keep silent any longer, Shameer asked, "What troubles you so, brother? Jessica is all right now and Chelsea has forgiven us."

Colin turned to face his brother, yet didn't truly look at him as he said, "It isn't that. I was just thinking." He leaned on his cane, stared absently at the floor before him. "I have a bad feeling about all of this."

The youthful twin watched his brother wearily before he answered, "Have faith, Colin. We shall overcome this plight as well as all the others we have encountered. It is just another obstacle in our path."

Colin shook his head. "It isn't just that, Shameer. I have felt strange ever since that wolf attacked me. I can *feel* my leg again," he remarked as he turned to look into Shameer's eyes. "You know? It has been forever since..."

Shameer considered his brother's revelation to him. "Well, perhaps the bite of the wolf will change you. Would that be so bad?" he asked.

Colin considered the question, said, "I have no idea. It took me so long to get used to my life the way it was. I'm not sure I am ready for another earth-shattering change. It doesn't help that I am filled with so much dread about this entire situation. I have feelings for a woman for the first time since *her*. And now we learn Chelsea is a witch as well." He chuckled mirthlessly, continued, "Am I doomed never to love a normal woman?" Then he straightened, as if giving himself a mental shake, said, "I am just tired. I will be myself after I get some rest."

Shameer nodded, agreed, "Then go, rest, let go of your upset. All will be well, and you will feel as good as new afterwards."

Nodding, Colin turned and made his way to his room. "God, let's hope so," Try as he may, he couldn't push aside the feeling something within him was changing.

* * * *

Davis watched as his wife paced endlessly, still cleaning from the day. She had washed the dishes, cleaned the counters and yet she continued to toil away in the kitchen. She moved speedily through her tasks almost as though she was full of nervous energy.

Standing from the stool on which he had been sitting, he moved to her side and laid a steadying hand on hers. "Hey, lass," he soothed, "calm down; ye be workin' yourself into a tizzy." Pulling her too him, he hugged her gently and willed her to share what she held locked in that mind of hers.

Clinging to him, Abby opened her mouth and, let a sigh escape. "I..." she began through heartfelt sobs. "Those girls," she said, "they are just a little older than our precious Angelica. They make me long for her to return."

Davis buried his face in his wife's hair. He had somehow known her pain had something to do with their daughter, but he knew not how to help her. "I know it hurts, my beloved," he whispered softly. "I know you feel lost without her."

Abby looked at him, said, "It is more than that. I miss her so badly that sometimes I swear I get images in my head of her being tortured or killed." She shook her head, looked away from him. "And now, I can feel myself becoming attached to those girls. Knowing that they are in grave danger is tearing at me."

Davis nodded, took Abby by the hand. "There is nothing we can do anymore to help Angelica, my love," he sighed. "She is lost to us, but perhaps we can make up for the help we were unable to give her by helping these two women who are so much like her in ways they will never know."

His eyes searched hers, "Do not close your heart to these girls, Abby," he admonished softly. "They need our acceptance and love if they are to make a family with our boys, who need them both so desperately now!"

Knowing he was right, Abby nodded, "I shall try, Davis," she answered softly. "God knows I shall try."

He took her hand again, pulled her from the kitchen. "Enough of this," he whispered for her ears only, "I have a need for my wife to lie beside me in me bed." Smiling, he led her from the kitchen to their rooms.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

He was right, she acknowledged to herself. Those girls would need help in order to accept this household. She resigned herself to help them any way she could.

* * * *

When Colin closed the door to his room, he leaned heavily against it. He hoped it was just lack of sleep which had him so distressed and frustrated. Looking down at the scar from the wolf's claw that seemed to burn into him, he drew a deep breath. He felt marked, as though any stranger could look at him and know that he bore the imprint of this dastardly beast forever emblazoned on his chest.

Unbuttoning his shirt he made his way to his bed, pulling the shirt off gladly. Leaning hard on his good leg, he gave the room a once over as he unbuttoned his pants and slid them down his upper legs. He sat on the side of the bed, unhooked the prosthesis, let it fall with his pants to the floor.

Absently, he rubbed the stub where his leg used to be. It ached from the more than constant use it now got with the two ladies present. Somehow the loss of his leg, which had not bothered him in over half a century, now sent shame running through him. Suddenly, he perceived himself less than whole.

The feeling angered him, made him wish he could have been a different man altogether. Lately, he had found himself comparing his worth to his brother's. Although deep inside, he knew he was just as important, he suddenly felt he was a burden on his sibling. He let his thoughts of the wolf subside as he mentally turned to deliberation of the attack itself.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Something about the entire affair made him think the attack had been spurred by more than just an average warlock trying to wreak havoc. Somehow, the feeling he got when he thought about it was familiar, like something he should recognize.

As he rubbed his leg, he became aware of something that had never caught his attention before. A long hair seemed to be growing from the stump. He looked down at it and noticed it was white and thick, more like a rope than a hair. A shock coursed through him and he wondered if he had indeed been given some kind of dark gift.

Shaking his head, he dismissed the idea. If his own brother had tried to get past the confines of Jasmine's curse by trying to make Colin a vampire as well, and it had not worked, he doubted a mere werewolf would have had a different effect. His thoughts turned to Jasmine. For a moment, he smiled, remembering the way she had been at first. She had loved him in the beginning; he had been sure of that. Pulling back the covers on his ornate oversized bed, he crawled under the blankets. He tucked his arm beneath his head, thinking of her. His mind wandered back to the last time he had seen her. It was after he noted the change, which seemed to turn her into a different woman, but before she had cursed the two of them.

* * * *

When Shameer and Colin began to realize she was not good for them, it had been Shameer who had the strength to walk away. He had also distanced himself because he had

realized how much Colin loved her. It had taken their coming to blows to make them both realize to what extent she ruled them, turned them against each other, even though they were blood kin. Both brothers had been ashamed, but it was Shameer who had decided to separate himself from her and her temptations.

When Jasmine realized Shameer was setting her aside, she became a woman obsessed. She followed him, watched his every move. She wrote him letters, pleading for his affections.

Her once gentle treatment of Colin had turned to loathing. She shunned Colin, treated him as though he had been little more than an inconvenience, as though his attentions meant little or nothing to her.

Colin had been heartbroken. He had never loved a woman before, and losing her attentions brutalized his heart and mind. He remembered the day she had sent the plea to Shameer, jealous and hurt; he had angrily ripped open the letter and read it. In it, she swore her undying love to Shameer, telling him Colin had meant nothing to her, her heart belonged to Shameer alone.

Colin had no passion, she complained. There was no fire within him to please a woman. He was too meek, too gentle to take her as she wished to be taken. Fury built inside Colin and he had set out to meet the deceitful woman in his brother's stead. He promised himself she would rescind the words she had written, even if he had to deceive her in order to prove her wrong. "She wants passion?" he said to himself, "I'll show her passion."

When he reached the grove of trees where she awaited Shameer, he took her, almost brutal in his passions. Afterwards, he lay beside her, debating on telling her the truth. His fascination with her had amazingly, begun to fade as he realized how false and selfish she really was. Just as he opened his mouth to tell her of his true identity, she whispered softly in his ear. "I have worked a fertility spell," she said quietly. "Now you will never want to leave me; we have a son. His soul takes root in my womb even as we speak."

For a moment, Colin sat in stunned silence. A son. She had worked a spell to bind his brother to her. She knew even if he did not love her, Shameer would never abandon his own flesh and blood. Neither would Colin, for that matter. But he knew she would never forgive his deceit, though it was little different from her own. Colin sighed, resigned to tell her the truth now, whatever the consequences.

"You planned your trap very well, my dear," he said softly as he met her gaze. "The only problem is the wrong brother fell into it."

Confusion crossed her features a moment before realization dawned on her. An angry cry escaped her lips as she leapt from him, coming to her feet. "Colin," she screamed, her outraged cry echoing against the trees that surrounded them. "How dare you trick me!" She fumed; she stamped her small foot, as though it should intimidate him.

He met her glare, his eyes betraying an anger all his own. "How dare you plan to trick Shameer!" he countered in deadly, lowered tones. "Your blunder is no less than my own,

Jasmine. Shameer does not return your affections. Once," he whispered, "I would have sworn my love to you, but no longer." His words made her eyes rise to his. "I see now, all I felt for you was a sick, dangerous obsession, one that threatened to claim my soul if I had not recognized you for the deceiver you are." For a moment, he was silent as he breathed in the fragrance of the blooms in the trees. Turning away from her, he steeled himself to make the sacrifice that would ensure his son a legitimate family. "I will, however, do what is right by my son," he said softly. "We can be married, and I promise he will never know I feel no love for his mother."

Outraged, she stepped farther away from him. "Never!" she whispered angrily. "I want nothing to do with you, you despicable, loathsome, hateful..." Her next words filled Colin with a sense of dread. "How can you believe I would ever allow a child of yours to grow inside my body?" She smiled when she saw the blood drain from his face. "Do not fear, Colin. Your son will never know a mother who despises him." She laughed then, a delirious, sickening echoing laugh he would never forget. "He shall never even draw breath," she said darkly as she narrowed her eyes in pure hatred.

Her words, strange and sing-songy, filled the air as she delivered her deadly chant. With a final victorious glare in his direction, she spat, "You can rest assured the child we conceived this night will never come into being."

The wind began to howl with the ferocity of wrath itself. The sound of the leaves whizzing about him haunted the night. As she turned away, her figure vanished before his

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

eyes, leaving him staring into nothingness. When he tried to search her out, it seemed as though she had disappeared from the very face of the earth. Her gypsy camp had even vanished, leaving nothing but trampled sod in its place.

Colin had often wondered if she really got rid of their child. Often he wished he had a way to find out. A thousand times, he wished he could have bonded with the son he had never known. He had decided his brother never needed to know about his confrontation with Jasmine. Shameer's hatred of Jasmine already bordered on a vengeance he held inside only barely.

* * * *

Colin gave himself a mental shake, tried to release all the questions in the back of his mind. Jasmine had always been one to do exactly as she promised. If she said she would rid herself of his child, she had done precisely that. Feeling a moment of emptiness for the loss of a nonexistent son, Colin burrowed under the covers, pressed his head into the pillow and waited patiently for sleep to come.

It didn't.

* * * *

The young woman sat in the darkness. She had been here so long; she had forgotten the face of the man who brought her here. She had forgotten the sunlight and the clouds. The chains that bound her rattled as she brought her hand up to pull her unkempt, dirty hair from her face. As her eyelids

fluttered, a tear spilled onto her face, and ran down her cheek.

She remembered when she had first been brought here, she had not been alone. The others had kept her company then. They had been just as afraid as she, but somehow, their presence had helped her calm her own fears. They were all gone now. The man had come for them; one by one, he had taken each of them away, leaving her all alone now.

She remembered hearing each of them scream. Some of them had screamed for what seemed an eternity. She would curl into a fetal position in the dirt floor, hug her knees to her chest and cry a soft lament for the horror the one she heard screaming must have endured. Sometimes, they had begged, had pleaded for their freedom, had offered anything, including their souls, if only he would let them go. Other times they had simply cried and screamed out when the pain would come, poor souls, too beaten down in spirit to care about freedom anymore, just praying for release.

One night, when they had taken one girl, she remembered trying desperately not to hear the child's pleas for release. The pain from being unable to help when needed tore at her soul. She herself was twenty-three years old; she had at least experienced life for a decent number of years. But the child, the child was still so young, so tender. It had broken her heart to listen to the girl's weeping. It was a step beyond the average rape and murder. The child's name had been Julie, and she had only been ten years old, a terrified little girl with an ache to go home to parents she would never see again. When the men had come to choose the one they needed for

this particular sacrifice, she had heard them saying they needed a child; a virgin who had never been with a man, who had yet to begin her woman's flow.

Fear for her young friend had made her try to hide Julie behind her own body, as if to protect the child from being chosen. Yet, something within her had known what they planned. She knew this was evil beyond anything she had ever imagined. It had still been dark, because the leader had only brought down a flashlight to choose the victim of their crime. When the ray of light had settled on the spot next to her, she had known she had failed in her attempt to hide Julie from their view.

As they reached down, grabbed Julie, she cried, begging them not to hurt her. Unchaining her hands and feet, they began dragging her up the stairs. She herself had added her pleading to Julie's. One man had paused before her, and she had reached out to him, thinking she had at least gotten to one of them.

She realized her error only after she felt the kick of his boot against the flesh of her face.

Blood had oozed from her lip and nose as she lay on the cold hard floor, listening to the chanting, rutting men who had chosen the child moments before. Closing her eyes, she had prayed for the child's death to come swiftly.

She listened to Julie's screams, vowing to herself that no matter what torment they elected for her, no matter how long it lasted, they'd not hear one sound escape from her lips.

Now as she sat in the spot she had occupied for God only knew how long now, she heard footsteps padding down the

stairs leading to her personal version of hell. She closed her eyes, bowed her head, prayed for God to send his angels to carry her home soon. But she also prayed for the strength to be silent.

"Please," she whispered for the Lord's ears alone, "please help me not to give them the terror they seem to thrive on." An inner peace filled her. Not panic, nor fear, but a tranquil calm just surrounded her. Smiling, she waited as the handsome man led a beautiful, naked woman down the stairs.

Something told her this woman was not another prisoner. No, she thought. This was *her* end. She faced it gladly. She was ready for release, even if death was the only liberation she'd ever know. Two more men followed the woman and the handsome man. Once they reached her, the woman sank to her knees, meeting the younger girl's gaze. The two men came to either side of the prisoner. Holding her arms up and immobile, the handsome one produced a knife, and held it before her.

"You are to be sacrificed, so that my mother may gain strength," he said as he met her gaze, expecting fear. Any moment, he expected her to beg for her life. That was how all the others reacted when faced with their own mortality. She met his eyes evenly for mere moments. Then, expressionlessly, she turned her gaze from his, and stared up the stairway, at something no one else saw.

The angel looked at her with love and smiled deeply at her. Julie stood beside the angel, smiling encouragingly as the knife sliced into her flesh. The man who had cut her looked quickly at her face, surprised at her failure to express fear or

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

pain. As he reached his hand inside her chest, he took out the still beating heart, held it before the naked woman. "Eat, my mother." he said, but his words never reached the young woman's ears. "Use this heart to regain your power." As her teeth bit into the heart, each one present prepared to hear the protesting, frantic screams of the victim. The cries never came. The eyes that stared to the top of the stairs had glazed over. A soft smile played on her now pale lips.

The angel on one side, Julie on the other, the young woman turned and ascended the stairs, leaving the grizzly scene behind her. They could eat all her organs for all she cared. She wouldn't need them where she was going.

* * * *

Darmetheus sat beside the stream that ran down the side of the cliff he now called home. His thoughts were on his past. He had been immortal so long; he had almost forgotten how long he had been alive. He had been born in Russia, the son of a leader of the gypsies. His kin had always called him the young prince. He and his younger sister Tessah had always lived happily in their life, traveling the countryside, performing with their elders in small shows to entertain the people of the lands they came to.

Darmetheus had a unique ability, which made him highly valued among his gypsy kin. He was an animal trainer. He worked with the lions and tigers which had adopted his family as their own. The thing, which made him special, was not what he did, but how he did it. He could talk to them. He

heard their thoughts and they in turn, could hear and respond to his.

His sister, Tessah had also been special. She had a touch, which could heal any pain. She could bring down a child's fever, simply by placing her hands on him and drawing the heat out of him. She herself would bear the ill effects of the fever for a few minutes usually, but then she too would be well and the fever would be gone from them both.

Darmetheus had loved Tessah dearly. The bond between them had been so strong that when the curse of the wolf had come upon Darmetheus, Tessa had tried to take it from him. Their father had tried to explain to Tessah what had been given to Darmetheus was not truly a curse, but rather a gift to make him a defender of the weaker race of humans. He had explained the Lord of man had in his wisdom, recognized there were evils of the earth which man himself had not been able to fight.

He tried to make her understand the Lord of man chose certain people with special talents and made them more than average humans. It was an honor to their family for Darmetheus to have been chosen. Tessah refused to listen. She had used her skills to try to take the gift of the werewolf from her brother when he had changed the first time. Confused and afraid, he had bitten her.

When chosen to become one of the *immortals*, certain people can give the endowment to another. But there are also those who cannot survive such a gift. Tessah was one of the ones who could not survive it. Although her talents of healing

were unique and special, it was not in the Father of man's design for her to bear the gift of immortality.

Darmetheus had watched helpless as Tessah had gone through the metamorphosis. It drove her mad. Once the change had begun, he had been helpless to stop her as she began to tear her lupine flesh from her own bones with her newly acquired wolf's teeth.

She died before him that night, had bled to death in the shelter of his arms. It was the only time in his eternal life he had cried. It was also the night he had vowed he would never turn another being into what he had become.

About one hundred years into his existence, a wizard, another eternal creature named Tenaryn had come to him, and the two of them had become friends and allies. The wizard had taught him how resist changing forms at the full moon if it was not what he wanted. Darmetheus had learned meditations to help him control his shape shifting. Tenaryn had told him every *Eternal* would one day become mentor to another. He smiled as he remembered the day he had felt the call of the *Eternal* he was to aid.

Shameer had been nearly broken when Darmetheus had found him, half starved from his refusal to feed, miserable with the fear of turning anyone he touched. Shameer had welcomed him as a mentor and had learned eagerly how to feed from the animals of nature.

He had also met Colin. Shameer's brother had been cursed into the worst eternal life Darmetheus had ever seen. The brothers had been cursed by a witch. A strange way to be called into an existence such as theirs, but it had happened

before. He recalled Tenaryn's tale of how he had become a wizard. It had been as bad, if not worse than the twins' story. Almost as though it had been sent from the depths of his own mind, Darmetheus felt Shameer's need for him now. He felt trouble coming in the brothers' direction, speeding hard and fast toward them.

Cursing, he got to his feet and made his way to his home to would gather supplies and go at once to Shameer. He knew they needed him. He would send word to Tenaryn as well. It was possible they needed more help than he alone could give.

As he approached his dwelling, he frowned at his bike. The elegant Harley was fast, but it would not be sufficient for the task at hand. Turning, he stared at the big motor-coach stretched before him like a great dinosaur. "Man," he swore softly, "you guys are gonna owe me lots of gas money!"

Shaking his head, he went to pack. He knew he needed to hurry. If his instincts were right, he didn't have long before the *shit hit the fan*, so to speak. He didn't know how or what was coming; he only knew he had no choice but to go to his friends. "I'm coming," he said more to himself than his absent friend, who probably had no knowledge of having called him.

Chapter 10

Jessica stood in the center of the library, trying desperately to calm her rapidly beating heart. A feeling of dread had seized her, made it difficult to breathe. She wondered at her sudden panic, unable to grasp what was the matter. Yet the feeling could not be denied, its steely cold grip closed viselike on her, leaving her heart aching.

It was an emotionally charged pain. She felt as though the world might end tomorrow. Moving to the chair, Jessica sank into it as the tears began to spill unchecked down her cheeks.

"This was not the way my life was supposed to turn out," she said quietly, a sadness settling in on her very soul. All she had really ever wanted was a good life, a loving husband, a few children and a few close friends.

What she had ended up with was one good friend, who also happened to be a witch, a boyfriend who was a bloodsucker, literally, and a crazed madman who wanted her dead for no possible reason she could fathom. Feelings of loss enveloped her. She was so immersed in her sadness and lost in her tears, she failed even to notice when Shameer crouched beside her chair. He watched the tears wet her cheeks and wondered what to say to ease her pain.

"Jessica?" His voice was soft, almost a caress to her senses. As he touched her hand gently, he asked, "What can I do?"

She turned to look at him and felt her fear slip away, another emotion taking its place. "Hold me," she said,

slipping to the floor and wrapping her arms around him in an effort to forget the sorrow she had felt moments before.

His arms came around her, pulling her to him in a gesture of possession. His lips found hers, branded her his for all time in a kiss which demanded a response. Threading her fingers through his hair, she answered his passion with her own. Moaning, she let him pull her to her feet, and then gasped as he lifted her into his arms. Breaking the kiss, Shameer looked into Jessica's eyes, an expression of longing in his eyes.

Jessica returned his gaze, and then caressing his cheek, she said, "The feelings that I have for you overwhelm me," she said softly. "I never imagined I would feel this way. I dreamt it; I felt it in the dreams." She shook her head. "But it never occurred to me it would be so intense now."

"I feel it, too," he said as he put his cheek against hers. "I want only your happiness, Jessica. Let me make you happy." His sad smile nearly broke her heart. "I'll never ask anything of you," He whispered softly, "I will gratefully accept any time I can have with you."

Tears filled her eyes once more as she placed her hand on his chest, played with the curls under her fingers, gently letting her hand flirt across his skin. Biting her lip, she brought her eyes to meet his. For moments, they simply stared at each other, then she whispered, "Love me, Shameer. Let me love you."

Her hand shook as she reached to caress his cheek. Turning his head, he kissed her palm as he turned and left the library. Jessica put her head against his shoulders,

enjoying the musky scent of him. It tickled her senses, pushing her desires to their limit.

She nuzzled his neck, and then nibbled slowly and gently on his ear. Moaning, Shameer quickened his pace, stopping only when he had reached the privacy of his room. He set her on her feet and turned to lock the door.

Not wanting to break contact with him for even a moment, Jessica ran her hands down his spine, and then wrapped her arms around his waist. He sighed and leaned against the door frame. Her boldness spurred by his response to her, she ran her hands lower, feeling through his jeans the swollen flesh which seemed to pulse with a life of its own.

He turned to face her, his hands going straight to the buttons of her shirt. She held her breath as he slowly opened her blouse, and slid it down her arms, his hands caressing her flesh on the way. He leaned into her, his lips grazing her neck, causing a shiver to run down her spine. Even his eyes caressed her as they met and locked on hers. The blouse dropped to the floor behind her. He let his fingers trace the curve of her back to her bra as he found the clasp and released it.

Jessica was so entranced by the feel of his lips on her throat, his breath on her skin; she didn't even realize he had rid her of the undergarment, until his hand brushed against the bare skin of her breast. Her nipple hardened when his thumb rubbed across it gently, barely the whisper of a touch. She pulled air into her lungs sharply at the near electric shock she felt from his touch. Moaning, she leaned into the touch. She found herself reaching for him, ripping the buttons off his

shirt in her haste to rid him of it. Once his chest was completely bare to her view, she reached out to caress the firm hardness of it.

"You're beautiful," she marveled at his perfection. He smiled at her words, running a finger over her lower lip.

"No, Jessica; you are the one who is beautiful," he said and urged her toward the bed as he spoke. She turned to walk toward the bed, but instead of letting her go, he molded his form to hers, pressing his chest into her back. One hand toyed with her nipple while the other was unbuttoning her jeans. She could feel the hard muscles of his chest press against her. She reveled in the feel of him so close to her. A thrill ran through her as she remembered the last time they had touched like this. It excited her to think of sharing herself with this man. He was everything she had ever wanted; tender, loving and passionate, and he loved her.

Yet, even as she told herself she wanted him, there was a voice in the back of her mind, screaming at her. *He's not like you, it taunted. You will grow old and die, but he will be forever young.* She shoved the thought away from her, faced him, as she moved just a few inches from him from him, and slid her pants and panties down her thighs. She brazenly stared into his eyes, the expression in his eyes exciting her, driving her. His response made her feel truly beautiful for the first time.

He stood motionless for an eternity, taking in every inch of her, his eyes seeming to memorize her before locking again on hers. When he stepped out of his pants, his gaze never wavered, his desire burning her with his stare.

When Jessica let her gaze travel appreciatively over the contours of his body, she suddenly felt a little apprehensive. He was too perfect, and she felt a little too aware of her own imperfections. As though reading her thoughts, Shameer said, "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever known." He reached out and stroked her cheek, wiping away a tear in the process. He pulled her to him, took her lips in a kiss so tender, it melted her heart. She returned it with every ounce of her being. She had always yearned for a love like this. At last, her wish had come true.

He softly eased her onto the bed as she timidly reached out for him, running her hand over his biceps, down his chest, past his taught stomach. His sigh halted her advances and she started to pull her hand away, but he caught it, positioned himself beside her and laid her hand again on his abdomen. "No," he said his voice trembling. "Don't stop, please. I *want* you to touch me."

Hesitantly, she resumed her exploration, sliding her fingers lightly down his abdomen, to the joint of his hip, then lower still as she touched the part of him that was hard and trembling with anticipation for her touch. When her flesh met his, he groaned and pulled her atop him. She shivered deep inside in excitement as she felt his hardened manhood press against her belly.

He moved her into position astraddle himself and she gasped, a look of shock crossing her features as she felt the warmth of him pushing against her opening. "I..." she began, but broke off, watching him.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

His eyes held hers. "I want you to take what you want from me," he said softly. "That is why I put you on top." He smiled. "This way, you control our pace."

She stared, eyebrow raised at the man below her. The same man she knew was always the one in control, had given control over to her. Leaning down, she began to kiss him, still exquisitely aware he was pinned against her. Sliding her opening over his tip, she began to push herself onto his shaft. Moaning at the feel of him inside her, she bit her lip and moved faster, sheathing him deep within her. She felt his arms go around her as he abruptly sat up.

Her legs wrapped around his waist and for a moment, she sat still, adjusting to his size. Then, slowly at first, she began to rock against him, feeling him join her in the little dance she seemed to be leading. She moaned loudly as a warmth spread within her core, making all of her body go numb and come alive at the same instant. Her breath quickened as she was seized by a spasm that shook her to the core and made her have to relinquish her command again into his hands.

Shameer stood, taking her still meshed with him, moved to brace her against the wall where he continued thrusting into her. Waves of pleasure drifted over her. Her arms wrapped around his neck as he took her to a new level of ecstasy. She felt him spill his seed within her and the warmth of it drove her to yet a new paroxysm of ecstasy. For moments, he stood there, head buried in her shoulder as his breathing slowed.

She felt the bed once more beneath her as he laid her gently on it, and then joined her, pulling her close. She nestled closer to him, content to just lie beside him, wrapped

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

in his arms. She listened as his breathing slowed. Once she knew he was asleep, she allowed herself the same luxury. It was wonderful to lie beside him. Her last thought as she dozed off was how good it would be to waken in his arms.

* * * *

Her dreams were troubled. In them, she saw prisoners bound, gagged, and locked in a dungeon of sorts. They were all women. Each and every one of them had been beaten, some sexually abused as well. Some, she could see, had the marks like those of the vampire on their necks. In her dream, two savagely barbarous people dominated the scene; a man who bore a faint resemblance to Shameer, but with obsidian eyes devoid of any color, and a woman, naked from head to toe. Her hair was long and the color of flame, but Jessica could see nothing more of the female whose back was turned toward her. The red head knelt before a girl who lay chained on the floor.

Jessica tried to wake up. She tried to not see the images, which instantly burned themselves indelibly into her mind. All she could do was watch as the young woman; her heart cut from her chest, was stretched out in the corner and left there as the woman with hair of flame feasted on her heart. Jessica cried out, glad to know the people she witnessed did not know of her presence. She began to sob, holding her hand to her mouth in shock. Her stomach rolled violently as she woke, a scream wrenching from her throat.

Once the shock of the nightmare had passed, she calmed herself and looked around, finding herself still in Shameer's

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

room. He slept beside her, unaware of her horror. He looked so peaceful and serene. She pushed her revulsion at the dream into the back of her mind as she lay once more beside him. She knew he was unable to wake to her because the sun had yet to set. She wondered if he could hear her, but was just unable to respond. She positioned her head on his chest, closed her eyes and continued to calm herself with slow, steadying breaths. She would learn if he had heard her when he awoke, she was sure.

* * * *

The woman stood before the mirror, studying herself thoroughly, wrapped now in a green terrycloth robe, the green of her eyes exuding an emerald fire which overshadowed the color of the robe. She didn't like the color. It was not her natural color, nor was it one to which she was accustomed. But whenever her darker side was in control, green was always the color of her eyes.

Shamus moved into the background behind her, watched as she appraised herself. She was a beautiful, desirable woman. He wondered if she knew just how bewitching she was to behold. Stepping closer behind her, he whispered in her ear, "Do you like what you see" Lust echoed in his voice.

Slowly, her eyes met his in the mirror's reflection, and she smiled slightly. "Do *you*?" she questioned back. "Do you ache to touch what you see?" Opening her robe, she let it slip to the floor.

Tempted, yet angered at the same time, Shamus stepped away from her leered fiercely at her. "You are my mother,

you disgusting bitch!" he spat at her. "Just because I fancy the black arts does not mean I wish to taste afresh the womb that bore me."

She stared at him unmoved, unemotional. She kept her silence so long he began to lose his anger, to feel more confusion at what she must have been thinking.

When she did step closer to him, he could see the streaks of amber showing through the green of her eyes. "You may think you are so evil nothing can touch you," she said without emotion, "but you are still a little boy, playing at a game of revenge to a father you believe forsook you." Her smile grew as did his glare. He took an involuntary step backward as she advanced on him, anger glistening in her eyes. "I could kill you right now, by simply wishing it so." She reached out and smoothed a stray hair behind his ear. "If you truly want to embrace evil," she taunted, "cast away your memory of me as your mother, and take me; I *know* you want me."

Her eyes challenged him and he saw the truth of her words. She wasn't truly his mother anymore anyway. She was evil incarnate and she was there to serve him. What better way, he thought, to be truly evil than to consummate his union with this creature he had summoned to do his bidding?

The body was still his mother's, yes, but the soul, well; it didn't belong to her anymore. She was no longer human. His decision easily made, he pulled her into his arms, his hand closing over her bare breast. He pinched a nipple in his fingers cruelly, smiling wickedly when she gasped in pleasure. Leaning down, he captured the same nipple in his mouth, and

tugged it roughly with his teeth. She sucked in her breath and let it out in a low chuckle.

He raised his head again to meet her stare. "I hope you weren't expecting this to be a tender joining, *Mother*," he growled, "Because, I hate you as much as you loathe me; I want to hurt *you*, too."

At that, she smiled and said, "Oh, there's my boy." Reaching out, she rubbed her hand against his cock. "Come on, honey," she purred, "play with mommy."

Grasping her hair, he yanked on it hard, and together they slid to the floor. That night they became lovers, sharing more in their mating than just their bodies. By giving in to the lust he felt for her, he forfeited the last shred of his humanity. In place of his soul, she used her darkest gift to fill him with enough evil to blacken his heart utterly. There would be no hope of his ever regaining what he lost this night.

She replaced the part of him, which had wanted reconciliation with pure, evil hatred. And the subservient, lost entity attached to the *thing* which possessed her body, cried. She mourned for the son whom she had never been allowed to know. The darker side of her soul allowed her no say in the life she had, past or present.

She cursed herself for being too weak to stop what she witnessed. Her heart ached at what she was forced to feel. Her dark half was letting her own flesh and blood use her body. She felt revulsion from his touch. If she had control of her functions at this moment, she would be vomiting and crying. She mourned, too, for what he would lose this night,

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

for once it was all said and done, his existence would be as painful and powerless as her own.

* * * *

Upon awakening, Shameer asked Jessica what had happened to scare her so badly when he had been chained to sleep. She cried as she had told him of the nightmare she had during his rest. "It was terrible, and I couldn't wake up," she continued, "so I *know* it really happened."

At his puzzled look, she explained, "When I have a dream that is a vision, I can't awaken from it until it has played through entirely." Shameer was oddly silent at the telling of her dream, but did not share his thoughts with her. Now, Jessica sat in the overly large recliner, watching Shameer from under lowered lashes. She could not prevent the warmth which spread through her as she thought of the way he had touched her during the love making of what was to him the *night* before. It had given her the feeling for the first time in her life that everything was as it should be.

This was how it felt to be in love, she thought to herself. *Happy, excited, anxious and afraid, all at the same time. But it was worth it.* She smiled shyly when he looked up and met her gaze. "So, are you gonna daydream all night, or what?"

"Huh?" Jessica asked as she turned and smiled at Chelsea, who stood, hands on hips, looking at her expectantly.

"Uhm, I'm not daydreaming." she said, but even as she denied it, she knew she *had* been.

"Uh-huh, so I see," Chelsea said with a smirk. Sitting down next her friend, she watched the two brothers out of the

corner of her eye, while feigning interest in what Jessica was doing.

"So, what are you reading?" she asked when Jessica looked down at the book sitting in her lap.

"Oh well," Jessica responded, "I am *trying* to read it, but I don't quite understand it." She handed the book to Chelsea, who took it and closed it to examine the title on the cover.

"Spells of Protection," she read out loud. When she said nothing else, Jessica turned to look at her. She found her friend staring back at her, a look of concern clouding her features. Silence stood between them until Jessica wondered if her friend had lapsed into some kind of shock.

Then Chelsea asked, "Do you want to try to work a few of these?"

Jessica nodded and reached for the book, said, "There is this one ... seems really simple, and..." She paused while she looked it up. "It calls for a protector, kind of like a guardian angel."

At Chelsea's look of unease, she stopped speaking, and then asked, "What?"

Her friend slid more into the seat beside her as she answered.

"We already have guardian angels, Jess; Mom taught you that," She took the book, shaking her head. "We don't need *spells* to summon them."

Reading through the spell, Chelsea continued, "You really have to be careful. Some of these are actually a lot like opening a Pandora's Box. It might seem like a good idea, but most times, these spells cause more harm than good."

Jessica let out a sigh, then asked, "So, how do you know which ones are good and which are bad? Your mom taught me all about channeling my psychic energy, but she didn't teach me much about separating the bad spells from the good ones."

Chelsea sighed and thought for a second, saying, "Well, see, usually if it is an okay spell, it is bound by white light; if not." She let her voice trail off as she read details of the spell Jessica has shown her. Shaking her head, she raised her voice so the brothers could hear her as she said, "Did you guys know you have one *evil* spell book here?" Looking again at Jessica, she added, "This one calls for the sacrifice of a puppy."

Gasping, Jessica leaned closer to read for herself what Chelsea had just pointed out. "It says you have to kill a puppy and drain its blood!" Looking in alarm at Shameer, she asked, "What kind of angel would that summon?"

Chelsea smirked, replied, "Certainly not a nice one." She patted Jessica on the back. "Well, in any case, I guess you know now how to tell the bad spells from the good ones." She shook her head. "If a spell calls for the death of any creature..."

She left the sentence unfinished as Colin and Shameer came up beside them. Both men stood looking at the women expectantly. "What did you say?" Colin finally asked.

Chelsea gestured to the book lying between her and Jessica, said, "I said this is one nasty spell book."

Shameer took the book in his hands, flipped through the pages and said gravely, "When Colin and I were first cursed;

we tried to find a spell to counter the evil the witch had done to us." He shrugged his shoulders. "We did get a bit desperate." He sat the book aside on the table, and then looked once more at the women who watched him, added, "But we were never *that* desperate."

Colin gestured to the large glass bookcase behind them, said, "This case is filled with spell books that deal with the darker side of magic." He stopped then and stared for a moment, as if pondering before he continued. "But there is usually a glass lid that fits over it," he said absently, and then turned to Jessica. "Did you take it off?"

Jessica shook her head, answered, "No; it was exactly as you see it now." She felt as though she had stepped into forbidden territory.

She watched as a dark, forbidding look crept across his face. She would have sworn he was seriously pissed off. She hadn't meant to make him angry. She was only looking through the book; she hadn't known it was a forbidden book shelf. "I would never have touched it, if I had thought ... I am sorry," she apologized.

Shameer came to her, taking her hand and pulling her to her feet. "It' is not your fault, and no one is blaming you," he said as he kissed her forehead, hugged her to him.

Over her head, Shameer, and Colin exchanged knowing looks, and some unspoken knowledge passed between them. Jessica, safe in Shameer's arms, did not see, but Chelsea did and a nasty chill ran through her.

Chapter 11

"What was *that* all about," Chelsea demanded to know as she followed Colin to his room.

Colin turned, surprised to see the anger reflected in her eyes. He had not expected her anger. "What do you mean?" he asked softly. It was hard to believe such a gentle mannered woman was now showing anger toward him.

Her eyes widened for a moment before she recovered herself. "Don't you dare try to tell me what I saw was not what I saw!" she ordered as her voice rose. She fought to control her rising anger and apprehension.

Colin watched her body shake almost violently and knew she was shaking not so much from anger as from fear. Fear was the true emotion he had to deal with in her. It caused her to mistrust and second-guess her feelings for him. Moving to look her in the eye, he answered, "I am not trying to deny anything as of yet. First, I would know what I am accused of."

Sighing, Chelsea leaned against the wall. She made a point of hitting her head just a little harder than necessary on the wall to show her frustration. "I saw the look exchanged between you and your brother." She said and bit her bottom lip before continuing. "That wasn't a simple look of two people just meeting each other's eyes," she fumed. "That was an, *Oh shit, it's started now* look, and don't tell me it wasn't!" Her eyes met his and the look in them caused his heart to skip a beat.

She whispered softly, "I will stand beside you guys on this, whatever *it* is, surely you know that. I know Jessica will, too." Her gaze became one of pleading as she continued, "Only, just don't keep us in the dark." After a moment, she stepped closer to him, taking his hand in hers. "I can't fight what I can't see, especially if I don't know what it is. And, you can't protect us forever from this. At some point, we will *have* to know all of it."

That said, she let go of his hand and turned to leave him, but he stopped her and pulled her the last remaining steps into his room, away from any distraction or prying ears. Once inside the room, he released his hold on her, turned to lock the door. For a moment, he stood with his back to her. When he turned, his expression of frustration overshadowed her own. Suddenly, she felt as though the worry she harbored was small compared to what he was going through.

Colin took a deep, weary breath. His voice held a heart-rending sadness as he said, "When Jasmine cursed us, Shameer and I spent the better part of fifty years, searching for a way to undo it. Shameer even attempted to bring me over to his kind of existence rather than to watch me age while he stayed young. We had no idea she watched us. We didn't even know she was still alive ... or at least, a part of her was." He moved to a chair by the table and sat, gesturing her to take the seat opposite his. She sat and he continued, saying, "We searched though every spell book imbued with good magic to no avail. As our desperation grew, we began to seek through the darker magic. We collected more dark magic

books than even Merlin ever thought could exist. We had an entire library filled with them."

Amazed at his confession, Chelsea asked, "Where are they all now?"

He smiled a mirthless smile, answered, "We destroyed them. When we realized what we were doing and how it could damage us even to possess those tomes, we destroyed as many of them as we could. The ones in the glass case are the ones that cannot be burned."

She fixed him with a confused stare, asked, "*Cannot be?*"

He looked at her, replied, "They are indestructible. They have enchantments of protection worked into them."

"Oh," she said with a sort of sinking realization. She understood exactly what he meant. As a child, she had watched her grandmother weave spells of protection into the fabric of her journals to keep them from falling into the wrong hands. She softly said, "So, how was it the remaining spell books ended up in the glass case?"

A look of sad memory crossed his features. Absently, he rubbed the stump of a leg which was the reason for his limp as he began his answer, "Because she watched us, she knew what we were doing; she knew when each of us was alone with the books. I was so desperate to find a spell to release me from this curse of eternal aging I was completely obsessed. I never knew she monitored our every move. She has the ability to possess a body with her spirit. I used to fall asleep in the library looking over all these forbidden texts," he paused, a frustrated anger filling him. "She would enter me then while I slept, unknowing..." For a moment, he grew

silent. Then, almost as though to just himself, he said, "I did awful, unspeakable things and worse than that, I had no memory of the things I did." He looked pointedly at his leg, added, "I tried to destroy Shameer." His story concluded he fell silent, as though drawing into himself.

Chelsea rose and crossed to him, dropping to her knees before him to make eye contact. "Is that how you hurt it?" she asked, gesturing to his leg.

"No," he answered softly. He remembered when he had realized what was going on, how he had almost not made it in time to stop what was to be. "She used my body to conjure a spell to call demons forth to drag Shameer into the sun." He shook his head, swallowing hard at the memory of his unwilling betrayal. "Shameer can be in the sun a few hours each day, as long as he has fed well. But of course, we didn't always know that."

He remembered it all too well, and the hurt of the memory would have been too much to bear, had Chelsea not reached for his hand and squeeze it to comfort him. He continued after a long hesitation saying, "Shameer wouldn't feed very well back then, because he had not yet learned to feed without killing." He closed his eyes, heaved a heavy sigh. For a few moments more, he remained silent, as though gathering strength, wishing the telling of the story accomplished. He went on at last to say, "I came to, hearing Shameer calling to me for help. The demons had dragged him into the sun, and he was burning. I could smell the burning flesh before I even got out of the house."

Chelsea felt tears on her cheek. She could feel his pain, to wake and find not only was your brother in trouble, but to realize you had been a contributing factor in his agony. Her heart ached with his.

"When I reached him, the demons had tied him to a tree," he said, a strange hollowness in his tone. "He looked like little more than a lump of screaming, writhing charred flesh." He looked again at Chelsea. "I don't know how I saved him. I don't remember how I made the demons go away. All I remember is when I awoke; it was Shameer who took care of me. He says I rescued him, but in answer to your question; yes, that is how I hurt my leg." he sighed again before adding, as he pulled up his pants leg, to reveal the prosthesis, "Or actually, it's how I lost it." He waited for her revulsion. He prayed she would just leave the room without saying anything.

To his surprise, she reached out and touched the metal of the makeshift leg, caressing it with her fingers. Then she looked again at him, genuine warmth in her eyes as she said, "Tell me the rest."

* * * *

Colin had lain abed for what felt like forever. He was angry and frustrated beyond all measure, his guilt consuming him. Each evening, Shameer would come to him, his burns healing ever so slowly, and they would talk, each sharing his own knowledge of what had transpired. Finally, one evening, Shameer didn't come, but instead had gone out. Colin knew what was to come. Before long, images of his brother began

to come to him. He knew Shameer had to feed. It was necessary in order for his body to heal and rid itself of the burns.

To do otherwise would be to condemn himself to more pain and would lead to his becoming a gaunt shell of a man. Colin tried to steel himself for what was to come, but it did him no good. When the images of his brother's kill began to fill his head, Colin wept. He cursed his telepathy, found himself wishing for death. It seemed a peaceful alternative to what he was enduring thus far, especially since Jasmine had made sure he could never know what peace he might find in death.

A nagging ache had settled in his calf and he had absently reached to rub it, finding only empty air where his leg should have been. Closing his eyes, he gritted his teeth in anger. To add to the harsh circumstances of his curse, he was now doomed for all eternity to endure cramps in a leg, which was not even there. It enraged him, made him forget what his brother had done just moments earlier.

Later, when Shameer had reentered Colin's chamber, he held a book in his hands. "I think I may have found a solution to our problem," he had said softly.

Colin had turned red, swollen eyes in his direction, had asked, "Really? Think you to have found a way to relieve me of my miserable existence?"

Shameer stopped short, his eyes studying Colin with pity, and replied, "No Colin, I meant Jasmine."

Colin had looked away in disgust saying, "I could care less about her."

Shameer shook his head before saying, "I do not care for her either, but I know of a way to rid ourselves of her interference in our lives—" He gestured to the book in his hands and added, "Once and for all."

Colin regarded him with renewed interest and asked, "What must we do?"

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Shameer had told him of the spell and how it would banish her to purgatory for all eternity. Then the only way she could gain her freedom was to be summoned back by one of her own flesh and blood. "Her own family renounced her," Shameer had said and paused before continuing. "By now, I imagine any of them who had any true ties to her are dead."

Colin's mind wandered back to what he had shared with Jasmine that day in the grove when she had thought he was Shameer, the child the two of them had conceived together. She had sworn to kill the baby before it drew its first breath. Had she, he wondered. Every other threat she had ever made, she had always made good. The child was gone, forever lost to him. Looking back at Shameer, he nodded and said, "Let us bind her quickly, before I lose the other leg,"

* * * *

Colin told Chelsea everything, although he left out the part about his child. Somehow, it didn't feel right to tell her about his poor choice in lovers. She listened as he finished his story.

"The spell ended by placing the spell book and the other harmful books within a glass case that could never be unlocked ... unless..." he stopped, once again thinking of their

unborn child, and then he repeated, "unless she was released."

Chelsea tried to make sense of what he said as she asked, "You mean now, after all this time..." Her words died when his eyes met hers.

Wordlessly, he nodded. Tears brimmed, falling on her cheeks. He had told her more about himself tonight than she had ever hoped to know. Rising, she stood beside him. His expression was one filled with sorrow and even, she thought, a trace of fear. Taking his hands in her own, she pulled him to his feet. Meeting his gaze, she smiled sadly, before moving to wrap her arms around him, laying her head on his chest.

For a moment, he stood stunned at her reaction to the glimpse he had just given her into his dark and forbidding past. Then, a floodgate opened and his arms closed around her, as though in an attempt to block out the anguish he felt. He knew the case opening could only mean one thing. On some level, he had always known his seed had survived. But too afraid it had grown into a dark soul, like that of its mother, he had chosen to ignore the possibility of its life.

It was his fault, Colin conceded. Because of his fear and selfishness, the child who, no doubt, had suffered an unhappy life, had grown into an angry and vengeful being.

His blood turned to ice in his veins at the thought, the realization hitting him full force. Chelsea and Jessica were not this misguided warlock's victims, but merely bait to draw Shameer and himself out of the illusion of safety they had created for themselves. Tenderly, he pulled himself away from the woman who so blindly offered him what he had

craved for almost longer than he could remember. His eyes met hers as he stepped back and said, "We cannot do this, my love." Sadness consumed him as he continued, "You would later regret it, and I could not bear to live with your regrets and your pity."

Confusion crossed her features. She stepped toward him, her outstretched hands beckoning him as she said, "Colin..." But the words died on her lips as he stilled her with a gesture.

He refused to meet her eyes, but simply said, "Go to bed, Chelsea. What we want can never happen; I realize that now."

He turned then and opened the door for her, looked at her expectantly. Dazed, she stood unmoving and stared at him, tears shining in her eyes. "But, I..." she began falteringly.

"Go, Chelsea, please," he pleaded softly. "Don't make this any harder than it already is." His voice sounded stern and cold to him. It wounded his heart to know he was hurting her. As she moved past him, it took all his strength not to reach out and stop her. After she disappeared down the hall, he stood staring after her, his heart aching for what he had done.

Angry with himself, he moved back into the privacy of his room. Too long now, he had sat back and let his brother make every sacrifice. He knew it was time for him to fix some of the damage he had caused by keeping his child hidden from a brother who had never kept a secret from him. He pulled a tablet and pen from his desk, sat and stared at the paper for a moment, not exactly sure what to say. It had to be a well-written goodbye there would be no second chance

to say it. Pressing the pen to the paper, he began to write as he prayed those he loved could forgive him.

My Dearest Brother,

There are times when I truly regret the choices I have made, but never so much as this moment. It is my fault all of your lives are in danger. I have kept secrets from you, things I should have told you long before now. Brace yourself, here is the biggest one.

You are an uncle. Long ago, when I had yet to deal with my being less in Jasmine's eyes than you, she wrote a letter to you, which I intercepted. In my vain stupidity, I disguised myself as you, and went to her in your stead. My plan had been simply to seduce her with all the fiery passion she claimed only you had, and then to tell her who I was.

What I did not know was, because of her obsession with you, she had worked a fertility spell. She knew you would never leave a child behind as you would her. Her plan was to trap you to remain by her side, but I ignorantly fell into her snare.

I offered my name and myself but of course, she did not want me. She told me she would never let a child of mine grow within her womb, and before I could stop her, she worked yet another spell and disappeared.

I always believed she had made good on her threat, because I never felt anything else, until lately. I have a son. Should be good news, tidings of celebration, right? Funny, but actually I believe it to be the worst. I can feel him, Shameer. He is as evil as his mother is, and it is the two of us he is after, not Chelsea or Jessica.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

It is my child who has called his mother back from the demon's haven to which we sent her. That is why I must leave here and stop them. This is my fault. I will accept full responsibility for my foolish mistake.

Please tell Chelsea that how much she really means to me. I believe I hurt her this morning, when I turned her away. Please make sure she knows the blame lies not with her, but with me.

I have never blamed you, Shameer, for the fate of the immortal life we have shared. I only hope you will forgive me, for it is I who am sorry. I accept whatever fate awaits me, and if I must die to save the three of you, then I shall go quietly to my grave.

Forgive me,
Colin

* * * *

Shameer stared at the letter. He had read the note four times, but he still could not believe what his heart knew to be true. Colin, fearing for their lives, had forfeited his own. Anger such as Shameer had never known consumed him.

All their lives, even before the curse, Colin had endured torment on some level. He had always been willing to do whatever would help another, even when it put himself into jeopardy. To learn now Colin had a son by Jasmine didn't truly surprise him. He knew she would stoop to any low, dark, deceitful trick to get what she wanted. Having a child was no exception. The fact there had been a time when Colin loved Jasmine so deeply gave Shameer reason to believe he would

have searched to prove his love to her, even by deception, if that was what it took.

Shameer closed his eyes at the thought of losing his brother forever. He had never really considered the possibility before. Now the idea of being without him tore at Shameer's heart, "Why did you have to go and play saint, Colin?" he asked the question to the room, as though his brother were still able to hear him.

He wasn't, but Chelsea was. "What do you mean about someone playing saint, Shameer," she chided. "Are you talking to yourself..." The rest of her question was lost as Shameer handed her the letter and looked at the woman who had stolen his brother's heart so easily.

Shameer watched as she read the note. Her face fell as she studied the paper, all the color draining from her, making her look as though she might faint. Jessica who had walked in beside her, took the note and helped her to a chair, then she in turn read the words. Having read it, she turned her eyes on Shameer and held his gaze, knowing the affliction he felt must be nearly unbearable. Chelsea sat silent in the chair, Jessica's hand resting comfortably on her shoulder.

Jessica pondered over what to say to either of them. Her heart was with her friend because she was in love with Colin, but at the same time she ached at the thought of Shameer's pain. But then, too, she felt sudden anger surge through her at the idea of Colin's taking an easy out. She was furious he would leave them in a time when it was obvious he was needed. Did he honestly believe by sacrificing himself, he would be saving them?

Looking at Shameer, she asked, "What are we going to do?"

Obviously still at a loss, he simply stared at her, an agonized look of indecision on his face. She addressed Chelsea, asking, "Do *you* have any ideas?"

When Chelsea gave her a bewildered, lost look, Jessica stamped her foot impatiently. "Well, I'll be *damned*," she said, her voice shaky. "I would never have imagined you would be speechless, Chelsea. You always have an answer." She turned once more to Shameer, "And you..." Shaking her head, she walked toward the library, purpose in her step and anger in her eyes.

Still confused, both of them looked first at each other, then after her. "Where are you going?" Chelsea asked.

Turning, Jessica met their questioning gazes. "First," she said, "I am going to look up some different spells. Then, I am going to attempt to see if one will bring him back." Her eyes moved from Chelsea to Shameer. "If I am lucky enough to pull it off, I may just finish whatever it is Jasmine has in mind as her next torment."

Snapping out of his stupor, Shameer rose to follow her, saying, "Let me help."

Chelsea also stood to follow her friend. "Jessica, you have never worked a spell like that before—You have no idea what to look for," she said.

Jessica smiled at them wryly as she said, "Well, then, I guess you had better *both* help me. I, for one, am not about to let Colin commit suicide."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Chelsea nodded in agreement, said, "You are right, Jess. I don't know why I didn't think about a spell to bring him back. If we hurry, we may even be able to intercept him before he reaches them."

Shameer moved beside Jessica, who was losing her position at the head of the line of marchers toward the library. "I know what you did," he said simply.

Looking into his face, she gave him her most innocent look as she protested, "What? I didn't do anything."

He stopped, took her hand, replied, "Yes, you did. You know it, too. Had you not brought us out of our shock by saying you were going to look for a spell, we might have just sat there with no hope." Turning, he followed Chelsea, who was now even with the library doors.

Jessica sighed, allowed her face to show fear for the first time. Under her breath, she whispered, "I just hope it is enough to save him."

* * * *

The vision came to her unexpectedly. Forced deep into the folds of the dark one's mind, she had endured the nausea and disgust, which had filled her when her son had used her body as one would a common whore. The thing that dominated her body, answered to her name, and let her son, her own flesh and blood use her body in ways that were immoral, and wrong.

Pain coursed through her now, making her suffer all the more. She could feel her physical self for the moment. She could even control it when the dark one slept, but she never

could truly break away from the entity, which had grown roots deep within her soul.

Unexpectedly, she had felt his call. Out in the open, where he could be found, unprotected and alone. "No," she warned. "Stay away! She'll kill you." But even though her mind had been clear of the dark one for a few moments, she had felt it the demon witch waking instantly at her warning to Colin. The dark spirit within her stirred and took control before she could think to stop it. It filled her yet again, overwhelmed her with its anger, and demanded payback for the exile to which Shameer and Colin had sent it.

When Jasmine opened her eyes, she rolled over to face her new lover. "Wake up, Shamus," she said, and then smiled when his eyes opened to her. She felt him instantly harden, as his erection pushed into her thigh.

Moaning, she rubbed the palm of her hand against his arousal and said, "Oh, I am sorry my pet, but we have company coming."

Instantly, he swung from her, his face a mask of suppressed rage as he began dressing. "Good," he said coldly.

The prisoner inside the body shivered in apprehension. She watched everything as it unfolded before her, but was powerless to stop any of it. Her evil captor always forced her to feel everything it did with her body, but refused her the ability to fight it. Even now, she had no control. It had completely repulsed her when her son had ridden her like a dog in heat. Shame filled her to know her own traitorous body had taken him in willingly. She was filled with self-loathing,

wishing for release from this body in which she was little more than a slave to the desires of another.

Now, Shamus' father was coming, walking no doubt into a death trap. He did so unselfishly, without even realizing the dangers he sought. Emotion washed over her. He had always been able to make her wish for something she knew she could never have. Her dark persecutor grew weary of her thoughts. *Yes, you pitiful weakling*, it answered within her mind, *you are utterly helpless against me. I will have everything you ever wanted.* Wicked laughter made Jasmine cringe within as the other's voice continued inside her mind as though it spoke her own thoughts. *Your love will be my slave, your son will be my lover, and I will enjoy watching you wallow in your misery.* The voice taunted her. *So just shut up, and, oh yes enjoy the show, you spineless, ineffectual little weakling.*

When Shamus turned back to Jasmine, her inner battle was over. No signs of the conflict showed on the face, which regarded him. "What are you waiting for?" he demanded. "We have things to do."

Jasmine lingered for just a moment more in the lush bed, daring him to return to her. As though sensing her hopes, he turned and moved out the door, calling after him "Come to the altar room when you're decent." He closed the door to the bedroom with a meaningful slam, as though to show his displeasure.

She stared at the closed door, her brow raised. *So*, she thought, *he thinks of himself as master.* A wicked smile curved her lush burgundy lips. It was time to teach the young

whelp just who was more intimidating. He was evil, she gave him that, but she had been close to a millennium old when she had allowed him breath. Rising, she moved past the robe, which lay discarded on the floor. She moved with all the grace and poise of an empress. Reaching the door, she opened it and began her descent to the room where he awaited her.

The servants stopped and stared. She indulged her thoughts, which told her they all worshiped her. She could feel the desire the men felt for her, as though it pulsed through her own veins. It made her feel even more aroused and vilely wicked. She let herself think of her nudity as a dangling piece of meat held in front of a starving tiger; they were all ready to pounce, and she wanted them to.

When she first entered the room where the altar rested, his back was to her. As he heard her enter, he turned. Upon seeing her nude and unashamed, he could contain his rage no longer, but gave it expression on his face as he addressed her, "What the *hell* do you think you are doing?"

She met his hot anger with a cool, knowing smile. "You said to come when I was decent," she said, her voice defiant. "Since I have no pulsing dick shoved between my legs, I am decent. I just also happen to be," she paused, gave herself a lingering look in the mirror, surveying herself from all sides, before looking back to meet his glare, "naked."

His fury exploded, and he charged toward her in his anger as though to strike her. However, the blow never came. Instead, he found himself thrown back against the wall by some unseen force. Shocked, he looked back at Jasmine,

amazed to see her eyes lit with a red glow. "You damned bitch!" He swore angrily.

She laughed at him then, a laugh, which warned him to mind himself. "So is that the best you can do?" she asked, her voice menacing as she moved closer to him. Kneeling beside him, she spoke softly. "You need to consider something, my darling son," she said in a hiss. Suddenly, her form changed ever so slightly before him and she pressed one long talon, obsidian in color, threateningly against his jugular. "In this endeavor, we are partners. However, from now on, you will not dare to order me again," she paused, touching his cheek gently with the same talon before changing back into the form with which he was familiar. "Are we understood?"

Realizing for the first time the depth of the power with which he dealt, he nodded, said, "Yes, mistress. Please forgive me."

She smiled and ran her hand down his chest. "Of *course* I forgive you," she said and bit her lip a second before adding, "But just so you don't forget..." She pressed her hand full against the skin of his stomach and he cried out as the hurt engulfed him. The smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils and his abdomen felt as though it were on fire. Then just as suddenly, the pain ceased, as she pulled her hand away, a layer of blackened flesh pulling from him with her.

He looked down to see his abdomen was branded with her handprint. Looking back to her, he asked, "You branded me?"

She nodded, narrowed her eyes and said, "If you think *that* hurt, wait until I do it from the *inside*." She turned and

moved from him to the altar. "So is everything ready for your father's arrival?" she asked softly.

He looked back at her as he rose to his feet and fought the urge to pass out. "Yes, although I was going to search through my book for a spell to bring him here faster," he said.

Jasmine raised an eyebrow in his direction, asked, "In a hurry, are we?" She smiled slyly at him.

He returned her smile if a bit reluctantly, said, "Of course, I have waited all my life to feast on his pain." There was a hunger in his eyes.

She watched him for a moment said, "Very well, but there is no need for spells." With a simple flick of her wrist, Jasmine produced Colin, chained and bound to the altar. He blinked in surprise and shock at his surroundings. When his eyes beheld Jasmine, she returned his stunned look with one of amusement.

"Welcome, lover," she crooned softly as she closed the distance between them. Smiling, she leaned down and traced the edge of his jaw with her finger, and whispered, "Did you miss me?"

* * * *

Colin lay stretched, bleeding and bruised on the altar where Jasmine had left him chained. Shamus stood beside him, his anger spent. He looked down at his father, his eyes flashing a contempt easily felt by anyone in the room. Shamus leaned closer, meeting Colin's eyes and said, "I have spent my entire life hating you!" His voice trembled with the rage he felt. He wanted so badly to kill the man who lay

prostrate before him. He wanted to make him pay for all the miserable moments of being alone he had endured throughout his youth.

"You never once looked for me!" Shamus cried out accusingly. "You never even cared you had a son!" His voice betrayed his hurt. It shocked him to feel it. He had thought he had locked away the pain, but it still burned, still churned his insides. Having Colin so close only fueled his indignation.

Looking at Shamus, Colin could not blame him for his pain. As he drew a deep, agonizing breath, he whispered, "I am sorry, my son. I never knew you lived." Colin seemed to will his aching body to still as he cursed the air Jasmine filled her lungs with.

"*You lie!*" Shamus spat angrily. "Mother told me before she left me on my fifth birthday how you had abandoned not only me, but her as well upon discovery of my conception!" He indicted. "Tell me, did you never once wonder how I fared? Years of begging in the streets? Eating rotten food out of the rubbish disposed of outside the homes of children who were beloved by their parents?"

Colin shook his head in denial. "*She lied to you, my son,*" he said softly, stopping to moisten his parched and aching lips, he continued. "She seduced me, thinking I was Shameer. When she learned it was I and not my brother who had fallen into her deceit, she swore to kill you before you ever emerged from her womb!" Tears filled Colin's eyes as he described the day when both he and his son had been damned. "When she told me she had conceived, I humbly offered myself as her protector and husband. But she didn't want me." Wishing he

could touch his son, he said softly, "I am sorry for the pain she has caused you, for the pain she has caused us both. I cannot remove the scars she has given your spirit, but I can offer you my love now."

Shamus tried to deny the truth he felt in his father's words. Suddenly, it made sense to him why his mother had despised him so. A new wave of contempt consumed him as he thought of the happy childhood he could have had, the different life that could have been his, had his mother not betrayed the innocent child he had once been.

Colin felt an ounce of hope at the tears he saw sparkling in his son's eyes. Then his hopes were dashed as Shamus sadly shook his head, his words like daggers cast anew into his heart, "I have no spirit, father." Shamus drew a ragged breath as he loosened the bonds, which had held Colin so tightly, making it easier for him to breathe. "My spirit died the day I gave my soul to demons in order to live long enough to exact my revenge on you." he said flatly. "Now I have discovered the very being I called forth to help me claim the revenge I felt I deserved, is the one who is to thank for the unhappy life I had." He let his shoulders sag wearily and continued; "Now I cannot stop what has begun." Turning, he made his way from the room, speaking loudly, so Colin could hear, "Rest assured, at least I will not make your death as painful now as I had originally intended."

Colin stared after him, feeling this ultimate loss of his son tear through his heart like nothing he had ever felt before. His son was damned. And like it or not, there was absolutely nothing Colin could do for him; not now.

Chapter 12

Shameer let himself out into the night. He hated to leave, but he had no choice. He had to feed, and soon. Shifting into the form of an owl, he took to the sky, searching for someone evil to feed upon. He needed to be at full energy to help his brother. He had no choice; he would have to feed this night.

Flying high above the night sky, he searched for someone performing a deed loathsome enough to justify his killing them. He hated himself right now. He hated to have to do this. He was supposed to be a protector of humanity, and he didn't want to take the blood of a human.

An enemy wolf or wizard would be better. That way, he could at least engage in a fight, which was more equal. He watched the city below him. His senses honed in on one particular house. He heard a woman crying and screaming. Nearing the house he listened to the woman as she begged for her child.

"No, Nathan, please!" she cried as he beat the boy who couldn't be more than five years old. "He didn't mean it! It was an accident."

The man was heedless of his wife as he beat the child with the leather belt. "You know better, don't you Tommy? You know you aren't supposed to play in my music room!" the man screamed, each word seeming to bring forth a harder hit on the boy's back.

The mother wailed in the background while she watched her son's back break out in bloody welts, "*Please!* Nathan, you've been drinking! You don't want to do this."

Shameer fought the disgust, which made him want to do to the man what he was doing to the child. Anger coursed through him as he dropped the bird's shape and became the solid mass of his human form. Moving swiftly, he grabbed the belt from the man's hand and backhanded him, sending him crashing against the wall.

With a wave of his hand, he altered what the woman and her son saw. To them, the father, had stumbled in his clumsiness and had passed out on the couch. Shameer leaned over him, invisible to the two standing so close. His fangs extended, he bit into the man's neck and drank his fill. As much as he hated the abuse of children, he couldn't see his way clear to kill the man. Instead he leaned close to the man's ear and whispered softly, "Usually, because of your drunken sprees you do not remember come morning what evil things you have done. Tonight, instead of taking your miserable life, I give you a gift." He spoke harshly as he continued, "You, pitiful bastard, will remember everything you did tonight, up until the time you passed out."

He shook with anger barely held in check. "Children are a special gift," he whispered menacingly. "Your son loves you, although I doubt you deserve that love." Leaning back, he spoke aloud since the woman and the child could not hear him, "I leave you with your life and your memory. Make use from now on of both or next time around, I may have to kill you out of necessity."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

As Shameer turned, he felt a stab of pity for the woman who was afraid to leave the man and the child who would probably die from his hand if she did not gain the courage to go. Standing over her for a moment as she held the boy to her and cried, he spoke a thought into her head, saying, "Now is your chance. He is passed out. He won't wake till morning. Take your son and leave." He pushed the thought home with an added, "If he wants the two of you back, then he will get his ass into Alcoholics Anonymous and quit drinking!"

He watched as the woman gathered her little boy tighter into her arms, and whispered, "Come on Tommy, let's get out of here. Wanna go see Grandma?" she asked, stifling back a sob.

Turning away from them, he made his way out of the house, and then with a quick glance around, he took to the sky once more as the bird. He flew home, knowing he would not kill this night. He had no desire to.

* * * *

Chelsea's head lay on the table where she still sat in the library. Beside her was a pile of the books she had gone through, searching for a spell to bring Colin home. Jessica and Abby watched her sleep. It was a troubled rest. Chelsea seemed to be having a rather bad dream. Abby leaned over to Jessica, placing a hand on her shoulder, and said, "You must get some rest too."

Jessica shook her head, said, "I can't yet, Abby; Chelsea would never forgive me if she knew I had let her sleep."

The older lady nodded in sad understanding, and then moved to leave the room, saying, "I will go brew up some coffee. You don't hesitate to get me should you need me."

Jessica nodded, looking from Abby back to her friend. Moving forward, she placed a hand on her friend's shoulder, intending to wake her. Suddenly, images of her friend's nightmare filled her head, doubled her over in pain. A cry escaped her as images of Colin's mangled form filled her mind. He was chained to an altar; a sign had been carved into his chest, marking him as damned.

To the left was the auburn haired woman with green eyes, which seemed to have flecks of amber moving in their depths. In her hand was held a dagger with several jagged ends sticking from it. To the right was a man, a little younger than Shameer, and just as handsome. His eyes were the color of obsidian and savage in their viciousness. His smile was one of pure evil. He seemed to radiate it.

As both Jessica and Chelsea seemed helpless to do anything but watch, the woman thrust the blade into Colin's chest. A moment later, when she yanked from his chest, Colin's beating heart hung from the tip. The woman held the dagger to her lips, then to both viewers' revulsion, took a bite out of the heart before handing it with a smile to the man across from her, saying, "Eat, my son; eat the heart of your father."

She laughed then, and both girls seemed to break free of the wicked enchantment. Chelsea came up screaming and Jessica hit the floor crying. Shameer raced into the room to find both girls tear-streaked and hysterical. "They're killing

him," Chelsea sobbed, adding, "for no reason aside from sick pleasure!" Her heart was breaking as she slipped to the floor, covering her face with her hands.

Shameer moved to help Jessica up. She flinched when he touched her. "Don't," she warned him, her shaky voice high and unnatural. "You may see what I saw," she told him in a softer tone.

As Jessica stood, Shameer turned to look at Chelsea, asked, "What did the two of you see?"

Chelsea returned his stare. Tears glistened in her eyes as she gestured to Jessica and said, "Show him." It was a command.

Jessica shook her head, shocked Chelsea would even suggest such an awful thing. "I—I can't..." she stammered with the thought of the whole affair wrenching at her soul.

"You *have* to," Chelsea interrupted. "Colin is his brother!"

Jessica drew a deep breath and turned to face Shameer. Moving to stand beside him, she reached her hands slowly toward his head. "I'm sorry," she whispered as her hands touched his temples.

She closed her eyes, concentrated in her own mind on the vision she had seen only moments before. A look of confusion crossed Shameer's features only a moment before the visions began to play in his head, knocking him to his knees. He gasped for breath, wanting to force what he was seeing from him. It took a few minutes to regain control of his emotions.

Hesitant to touch him, yet wanting to offer some comfort, Chelsea sank to her knees beside him. "It hasn't happened yet," she said softly. "It is only what they plan."

Shameer looked at her, anger dancing within the depths of his eyes. "We must bring him back," he said as his voice shook with barely contained rage.

Jessica said sadly, "We haven't been able to find a spell to bring him back yet." There was a weary tone within the depths of her voice as she continued, "I'm not sure we can." Tears welled anew as her chin quivered her desperation evident.

Shameer seemed to consider her words for a moment, and then he rose and moved with purpose to the glass bookcase which had opened only the night before. Pushing books out of his way, he grabbed a handful of papers, which had previously been hidden from view.

When he turned back toward them, they saw the papers were very old, and they were not simply papers, but ancient scrolls. As he moved back toward them, his voice held a dangerous edge. "We can now," he growled resolutely.

* * * *

Jasmine stood over Colin, free for a small amount of time from the demon which controlled her most of the time. A look resembling pity crossed her features. Slowly opening his eyes, he regarded her wearily. It seemed to him almost as though she was sneaking to see him.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked bitterly. "Kill me, and have done with it, already."

Her eyes widened momentarily and she looked about the room as though checking to ensure his voice had been unheard.

"Shhh," she urged him as she came closer to him. "Please, you'll wake *her*." Her voice was timid, which deepened Colin's confusion as he found himself staring. This was the same woman who had hours before stood side-by-side with Shamus and taken pleasure in torturing him.

"What kind of crazy game is this, Jasmine?" he asked softly, his voice hoarse and raspy. "Why do you toy with me?" His eyes held hers, a look of challenge in their depths.

She met his gaze a moment before she caressed his cheek with soft and gentle hands. "Oh, Colin, I'm so sorry," she said, her voice full of pity and something more he thought he had seen there once before, long ago. She looked away from him at last, ashamed. "Please, forgive me for being the weaker one," she said with a sob. "I wish I were strong enough to stop her."

Colin watched her display, confused by the way she behaved and positive it was a trick. "Go away, witch," he said, furious. "You waste your breath with this ... this charade, this mockery of my pain." But his voice trailed off as he witnessed something he had always known Jasmine could *not* do.

Big tears trailed down her cheeks, her eyes shimmering. She nodded, lowered her eyes to stare at the floor. "I understand Colin," she said softly. "And I do not blame you for your mistrust. I know I am not to be relied upon." She turned then and moved crestfallen toward the door. Colin watched as she began to retreat, total shock seizing him. Where were the cruel words? Wasn't she going to threaten him with some unspeakable pain? At least he was steeled to

accept more of her wicked scorn. That was what she and their son had promised him earlier. Reaching out with his mind to touch hers, he was surprised to discover the barrier which had always been there when she was being cruel, was no longer there. It astonished him to find the girl whose mind he now touched was consumed with emotional pain and self-loathing.

He started to reach further, but she turned back to him, a look of panic on her face. Tears still glistened in her eyes. "Don't," she warned as she shook her head frantically. "If you go much further, she'll know I am here," she pleaded. "She'll take control again and hurt you if she discovers I'm here." A far away look crossed her features, and she stared past him to an unseen part of the wall as she continued, "She'll make me watch." This last sentence was spoken with a kind of horrified dread, one which caused her to convulse with fear as she shivered at the thought of it.

Looking closely at her, he swore this was the girl he had fallen in love with all those many years ago. Before she changed, her light and love being replaced by something dark and hateful. Cautiously, he asked, "Who is *she* Jasmine? How does she control you?"

Bright amber eyes met his. He realized then all the green, which had been in their depths earlier, was gone. "Do you remember my uncle?" she asked softly, "the one who was always taunted by the women of the clan?"

Colin thought for a moment before and said, "I never spoke with him, but I remember your telling us of him, yes."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Jasmine drew a deep breath and looked uncomfortably away from him before continuing, "He was my guardian, because my parents had died. He was a very cruel man. He used to beat me for no reason other than his own amusement. No one would stop him." she said softly. "They all knew he hurt me, that he used to take me as a man took a woman. None of them ever lifted a finger to stop him."

Knowing the memory was causing her pain; Colin said softly, "You do not have to tell me all this, sweet one."

"No," she said as she shook her head. "I *want* you to know this." Then she smiled with what appeared to be a happy thought as she continued, "*Maybe* it will help the two of you discover how to destroy her." Moving closer to his side, she said, "I used to pray for a way to escape him. I used to beg the gods to send me a savior." Her face took on an expression mixed with both terror and anger then. "Finally, I made the decision simply to end my life and thereby end my suffering. I went to the forest and took his dagger with me."

Apologetic eyes met his. "I should have done it. If I had, you and your brother would have been better off. But," she continued, "that was when I heard *her* speaking to me for the first time." she sighed, "She offered me a trade I had *thought* was acceptable."

* * * *

"I know he hurts you," the voice said as Jasmine prepared to thrust the blade through her flesh and into her heart.

Startled, she looked frantically around her, searching for the owner of the voice. Was she hearing things? I've gone

mad, she told herself. Shaking off her feeling of dismay, she resumed where she had left off, dagger over the heart, poised and ready. Taking a deep breath, she began to press the knife hard into her chest.

"I can think of a better use for that blade," said the unseen interloper.

Whirling frantically, Jasmine searched in vain once more for the person whose voice she heard. A mischievous chuckle sounded at her attempt. "You'll never find me," it said, "unless by chance you have a looking glass."

Jasmine stopped, her eyes still searching, but she stood still. "What jest is this?" she asked quietly.

A chuckle followed her inquiry. "Why, I am part of you, of course," the unseen voice deepened into a whisper which made Jasmine's skin crawl. "I am the gift you received from your mother, and I can teach you magic you never dreamed existed."

The girl shook her head vehemently, as though the voice in her head was a flesh and blood person. "My mother is dead," Jasmine cried out.

Pity filled the unseen voice. "I know. But then, if she hadn't died," the voice said, "I would never have been able to come to you." There was a pause, and then the voice went on to say, "I can hurt him, Jaz." Jasmine could almost see the smile on the unseen lips. "Let me hurt him, honey," the voice pleaded softly. "Let me make him pay for the pain he has caused you."

It had not taken long to convince Jasmine to relinquish control to another. She remembered letting the darker half

take control leaving her as only an observer to what was going on around her.

* * * *

"She took the knife back to the caravan with us. I watched everything she did." Jasmine continued reluctance and sorrow deep within her voice. "She surprised my uncle, by acting as though she wanted him. She tricked him into thinking I wanted his touches." Tears once again began to fall as she told Colin of the sex scene she had watched as an observer, but felt every moment of, for she was, in a sense, also a participant.

"She used him, wore his energy down, and when it was over, she took advantage of his weakness and cut his manhood from him," she told Colin. "Jasmine looked at him, told him if he ever even thought of touching her, *me* again, the demons of hell themselves would come and use him as he had me."

Jasmine sat on the edge of the altar and absently traced the mark of the wolf on his chest with her finger. "He never touched me again, but," she added, "she never really relinquished control of my body back to me, either." Her bottom lip shook as she leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips. He did not return the kiss, but instead watched her closely.

Pulling back, she said, "By the time I met you and Shameer, I had found I could have control during certain phases of the moon and when she slept, if I was careful, very careful." Expelling a deep sigh, she began to loosen the

bonds, which held him prisoner. When he realized she was releasing him, he asked, "What are you doing?"

She smiled and suddenly, he remembered the girl he had fallen in love with, before she had become warped and cruel. He remembered at the start, she would only meet him at certain times.

She *was* the Jasmine who had stolen his heart. "You must leave," she said softly, calling him back to the present. She helped him to his feet, and then stared for a moment at his chest. "I cannot break her curse, Colin, but I can soften it." Placing her hand over the deep scar on his chest, she chanted softly, "From the mark of the wolf, may life begin anew, may the gift of the wolf burn brightly within you."

A moment of sharp, lightning-like pain coursed through him. Then just as fast as it had come, it was over. A look of confusion crossed his features once more as he looked first down at his body which seemed to have taken on a somewhat, younger, healthier sheen. His hands, once calloused and worn with age, began to feel more limber and looked somewhat less wrinkled than they had only moments before.

"The changes will be slight until the full moon. At that time you will run as a wolf," she said with a smile as she followed his gaze to his hands. "But after you will be reborn fresh and new." Meeting his eyes, she smiled softly, then added, "and young," Her eyes misted with fresh tears then. "I give you back your youth, Colin," she said as she grabbed his hand. "Let's get you out of here."

She started to pull him from the altar, but he grabbed her hand and turned her back to face him, saying, "She will hurt you, Jasmine."

She shook her head. "She can't hurt me," she returned. "She needs my body to survive, and what more could she possibly do to me mentally, that she hasn't already done? Do you know why she hates you so much, Colin?" she asked softly.

When he shook his head, she answered, "Because she knows how much I love you."

Leaning toward him, she kissed him again, but this time he returned the kiss, wrapping his arms around her, almost in desperation to keep her safe. When she broke the kiss, he started to speak, but she held her hand to his lips, said to him, "She's waking; I can feel her. You must go *now*."

"How do I get out of here?" he asked softly

She smiled and squeezed his hand before letting it drop. "I know a few tricks of my own after all these centuries." Tears ran down her cheeks as she backed away from him. She said through deepening sobs, "Take care of your new love, Colin. She is your salvation."

Before he could ask what she meant, she began to chant, "Powers of earth, wind, water, and flame; return my love from whence he came."

Colin saw her begin to fade from his sight. Her form growing dark, she said to him softly, "Watch the moon tonight, Colin. It holds a special gift for thee."

* * * *

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

All the objects had been gathered and positioned in their appropriate places. The black candle stood at one edge of the offering, the crystal at the other. The onyx completed the triangle. Within the triangle was the offering. A small kitten played innocently with a ball of yarn. Had the tiny creature known what fate that awaited it, it would have run.

Jessica sat on the west side of the altar, watching the animal play, tears gathering in her eyes. Horror made her shake uncontrollably at the idea of what they were going to have to do.

Looking up, she met Chelsea's tear-filled eyes. She shook her head and said, "I'm not sure I can go through with this."

Shameer stood at the head of the altar, looking at the defenseless animal. "I know no other way," he said wearily. "Believe me, if I did..." His words drifted off as he closed his eyes.

A circle of protection had been drawn at the far end of the room, away from all the evil energies, which would be used to call Colin back. White candles had been placed around it in an attempt to lend positive energy. If the spell worked right, Colin would be delivered safely into the center of the waiting circle of protection.

Just as Chelsea was beginning to speak the words of the incantation, there was a sudden shift in the energy in the room. Biting her bottom lip, she looked at Shameer to see if he had noticed. The look on his face was evidence he had. The kitten in his arms struggled to reach the yarn, which still sat in the center of the makeshift altar.

She looked from Shameer to Jessica, who also stared at something, the look on her face one of complete bewilderment. Confused, she followed her friend's gaze and understood her surprise in an instant. Colin stood at the other side of the room, his shirt bloody and torn, having been ripped in half. His face was bruised and swollen in places.

He met Chelsea's gaze and smiled, then looked at Shameer, his pleasure at seeing them turning instantly into consternation as he noticed the kitten poised in one of Shameer's hands and the knife in the other. He glanced at Chelsea; saw the spell book in her hands before rounding on Shameer. "You are jesting, surely?" he snapped with an angry scowl. "It isn't enough my son, who happens to be a warlock, is trying to kill us; now *you* want to set a few demons loose to wreak havoc too?"

The three of them stood in shocked silence. Chelsea was the first to recover. "Colin," she whispered in relief. Closing the distance between them, she hugged him close to her. When she drew away from him, her worried stare went to the bruising on his face. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

He looked at her, feeling guilty over what the true Jasmine had made him feel once again. Smiling sadly at her, he answered, "Not any lasting damage."

Shameer came to his side, asked, "How did you get back?" The worry in his stare was accompanied by an underlying caution.

Colin debated not telling his brother the truth, then remembered how the whole situation had come about, he straightened. "Jasmine sent me back," he said clearly.

Shameer's eyes widened in disbelief, "She *what?*" he asked, incredulous. His reaction didn't surprise Colin in the least. Setting his hand on his brother's shoulder, he began to lead him from the room, gesturing for the women to follow. "Shameer," he said softly, "this is a long story."

* * * *

Shameer's jaw had gone slack early on in the tale, but as Colin took them deeper into his tale, Shameer's frown grew deeper and harder. He sat silent while Colin explained about how the first Jasmine had greeted him, a mean, cruel, horrid creature. Then, Colin told them about Shamus, and his visit and the anger his son had felt, which, with what he had believed, was justified.

He then told of how Jasmine had returned a second time, alone, her eyes amber, instead of green, and a sorrow deep within her heart over the pain she had been helpless to stop. When Colin grew silent, Shameer shook his head. "It's a trap," he said simply, standing, and moving closer to Jessica, subconsciously seeking her comfort. She responded gently by taking his hand in hers.

"No," Colin answered. "She sent me back at great risk to herself," he countered angrily. "When the demon inside her discovers what she has done, she will punish Jasmine without mercy."

Shameer trembled with barely checked rage. "She has bewitched you, brother," he growled.

Colin held his anger, his own patience being tested by Shameer's refusal to believe him. He understood what he was

telling them was completely opposite to the evil she had plagued them with since she had changed. "I do not blame you for your doubt, brother. I didn't believe her at first either," Colin said as he watched his brother closely.

"What changed your mind?" Chelsea asked softly. It was the first time she had spoken since he had begun his tale.

Colin turned to face her, saw her hurt expression. He knew it was because of his admitting to remembering his love for Jasmine. He reached out to take her hand, but she stepped away from him, her arms going protectively around herself while she waited for his answer.

Dropping his hand, he closed his eyes, said, "Shameer, when we first met Jasmine, what color were her eyes?"

Shameer stood pondering the question for a moment, confused before saying, "We both know they were amber, almost the color of warm honey." Despite himself, he smiled at the memory. "I could never forget that."

Colin nodded, said, "She was sweet then, was she not?"

"Yes, but..."

Colin moved to stand before his brother. "And what color were her eyes the day she cursed us? I know you could not forget that, either," he said with a sigh. "I know I did not."

Shameer looked at his brother for a moment before he let the memory sink in. When his voice broke the silence, it had a different almost awed sound to it as he replied, "Green!" An alarmed expression settled on his features. "How could I have not seen it? Surely I should remember." Looking at Colin, he asked, "She isn't a split personality, is she? She's possessed by a demon, or worse."

Jessica looked at him, shocked. "There are worse things than demons?" she asked as she looked from Shameer to Colin. "What could possibly be worse?"

Colin said, "There are certain spirits who were once alive themselves, as normal people, but they sold their souls." He looked back at Shameer, then Chelsea. "They want so badly to find a way back to the living, they will use any means necessary. I believe this spirit is one of those. They attach themselves to the soul of the person they torment, becoming one with them. The only way to free the imprisoned, innocent soul, is to kill them; both."

Shameer nodded solemnly. "She must be terrified," he said sadly.

Chelsea moved to Colin's side, took his hand. "I am sorry for her pain," she said softly. Tears filled her eyes when he pulled away, putting distance between them.

White hot pain reeled through him. He felt something akin to fire shoot through his stomach. Blinking, he backed a few steps from her and said, "I'm sorry Chelsea, but..."

She turned and ran up the stairs toward her room, her heart breaking at his dismissal of her. He still loved the other woman, and he wasn't even going to take comfort from her.

Colin watched as she raced away from them. She didn't understand. He took a step toward the stairs, but stopped and doubled over as another spasm shot through him. He pressed his hand to his stomach, drew it away bloody. But that wasn't what gave him pause. It was the way his hand was beginning to change. White hair covered the back of it.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Turning he ran past Jessica and Shameer, leaving them staring after him as he ran out into the night.

Chapter 13

Colin roamed outside, limping hurriedly past the shelter of the trees toward the lake. At the water's edge, he stopped and stood very still. His heart raced, his skin hurt. It itched and burned at the same time. It had been nearly two weeks since the werewolf had marked him. He had dismissed it as just another scar to be added to all the others he had acquired. But he remembered the gift Jasmine spoke of to him before sending him home. If not for her endowment to him, the touch of the wolf would have worked its way out of his system, just like the *gift* his brother had tried to give him, all those years ago.

His clothes suddenly felt very confining. This wasn't happening, he told himself. He didn't dare to wish or hope. Looking up, he fixed his gaze on the moon, gloriously round and bright. Joy filled him with the knowledge this was in truth, the new beginning about which Jasmine had spoken. He knew all of the curse was not lifted; he knew Jasmine had only made him be able to become ageless through the power of the wolf. He would still live-forever, but unlike before, his body would no longer age.

Whatever else this unexpected gift brought him, he was ready to receive. It was a blessing to have a change from what the lingering centuries of his life had held. Slowly he began to strip off his clothes. He could feel the fur pushing its way through his skin. Reaching toward the night sky, he watched as his hands morphed into the paws of a wolf. It was

painful, yet exhilarating. He could feel his bones give way, growing in some places, shortening in others.

His prosthesis fell away, as a new leg quickly formed in its place. In a matter of seconds, he stood in the form of the wolf. Silvery white fur glistened in the moonlight as bluish-silver eyes turned toward the sound of a snapping twig. His keen ears had heard the approach during his change, but his now acute sense of smell told him it was only Shameer even before his extrasensory communication abilities had informed him. Lupine ears met the almost imperceptible sounds of the vampire. Shameer stood a mere ten feet away, hands in pockets, a faint smile playing on his face. Legend dictated werewolf and vampire were natural enemies. But because of their blood, the feud was ended before it could even begin.

The wolf moved to Shameer's side, a slight wag to its tail, which indicated trust. The vampire's hand stroked the wolf's ears as he studied the new leg, which had replaced the lost one. Smiling, Shameer ran his hand through the animal's silky fur. "I had thought this might happen," he said softly, feeling his brother's joy. "Congratulations, Colin." The wolf whined in response to the praise. "You have been given a reprieve from the demon's curse," he added. The wolf's eyes once more met his, and Shameer could feel the animal's excitement and the knowledge it still retained through the change.

"Go," Shameer said softly, "enjoy this time, but use caution, and come home before the change occurs, leaving you naked."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

The wolf howled deeply in answer, then turned and made its way deeper into the night. Shameer watched him until he disappeared, then smiled, turned and made his way back to his home. It would be good to see his brother's face, unmarred by age, and in no danger of growing old.

As he made his way back to the fortress, he began to think over the recent events which had occurred. As much as he hated to admit it, the situation was beginning to be more than he believed they could handle on their own, even with their combined abilities. He needed to call in some of his colleagues. He just hoped he could find them.

* * * *

Chelsea had cried herself to sleep late that night, crushed by the idea Colin could love that other woman, feel sorry for her, and wish her life was better. Those things Chelsea could accept in him and understand. But, knowing this man she was so helplessly drawn to could remember and still feel the love which had supposedly ended three centuries ago very nearly broke her heart.

When she finally fell asleep, she was plagued with nightmares of losing him just as quickly as she had found him. Finally giving up on getting any rest, she stared at the ceiling feeling numb and lost. A sound at the door interrupted her thoughts and, thinking it was Neeka or Sabbath, she moved to let them in. To her surprise, when she opened the door she discovered a solid white wolf. It was the largest she had ever seen and had startling silver-blue eyes. She would

have been frightened, but there was something familiar in the eyes, which placidly regarded her.

Standing back, she let the wolf enter into the room. She watched as it crossed to the bed and jumped onto it without the slightest hesitation. When the animal had situated itself comfortably in the middle of the bed, it looked at her expectantly. Chelsea found herself smiling as she addressed it, saying, "Oh, and do you think you can help me sleep? Is that it?"

At that, the wolf whined and offered its paw, as though patting the space on the bed beside it. Sighing, she crawled into the bed beside the creature. Covering herself, she laid her head back on the pillow. Instantly, the wolf lay beside her and closed its eyes. Reaching out, she stroked its fur and said, "Pleasant dreams." Within minutes, her eyes were closed and she had drifted into the most restful slumber she had known in weeks.

* * * *

"Where is he?" Shamus bellowed, drawing Jasmine's attention to him. He was screaming at the guards who had been posted outside his father's prison.

One of the guards was begging, "Please, sir, I swear to you, *no one* went into or came out of that room. I was here the whole time!" Fear echoed in the man's voice. He knew he was in danger, as was the other guard.

Shamus pinned the guard with an angry, ice cold stare that would have frozen the sun. "Then, *where* is my plaything?" he whispered angrily. "There are no windows; he

couldn't have let himself out some back way. This," he hissed, "is the only entrance in or out of this room!"

The guard was shaking his head emphatically, saying, "I..."

"Silence!" Shamus hissed, waving his hand in a magic gesture. Suddenly, the guard couldn't breathe. Grabbing at his throat, his knees buckled and he slid to the ground. Jasmine watched as the guard began to turn shades of purple. His eyes bulged as though they would pop out of his head.

Amber swirls became almost violent in the green eyes as she moved forward, an arc of lightning seeming to dance across the room from her hand into the poor man struggling on the floor. "Enough!" she said loudly, her anger giving her control, for a moment, at least. It released the guard from the hold Shamus had on him. He fell on his face, sputtering and coughing, vomiting the bile, which had risen in his throat.

Shamus turned on her, his fury surmounting his better judgment for an instant, as he reached out to unleash his ire on her. She easily intercepted the fire he sent spiraling toward her and sent it out the window at the far end of the hall. Her cold green eyes met his. "You would do well to remember *I* am the stronger one here," she warned flatly. "This guard does not lie to you." She made the truth a warning.

"Then where is my father?" he returned angrily. He glared at her with distrust forming within his eyes. Carefully, he closed himself off from the emotion, which was akin to joy at his father's escape. His darker side was so furious and

desperate for revenge, it did not matter who felt its wrath. He had given up his soul and heart centuries ago.

Jasmine pondered his question for a moment. She knew it had been her *hostess* who had set him free. But she could not share this fact with this stupid excuse of a man. In his anger he might actually harm this body, endangering her own existence in the process and that was unacceptable.

"There is a witch among them," she answered quietly. Why *not* bring the innocent into play, she thought. "She is a friend to the woman Jessica, and she has ... *affection* for your father. I imagine she found a way to call him back to them."

Shamus shook his head. "But I put a binding on that room," he said, as though in denial of the possibility.

Jasmine looked to him. "A natural witch can go beyond any boundary *you* set, idiot," she acclaimed, rolling her eyes. "*This* woman, in my possession, is a natural witch, for example," she said as she gestured to herself.

"Then why do *I* not have these natural powers; I am born of you!" he yelled.

Jasmine crossed the distance between them. "Because, my love, besides the fact you are male," she said as she leered at him, "you have chosen the dark side of the craft. There is a price to pay for that. It is well, Shamus," she continued. "Let them have their time. We will have ours."

She needed this body. Without it, she would be forced to go back to oblivion. That was something she could never let happen. If it did, she would take this soul with her. She warned Jasmine silently, *do you understand? Do not wish for your prince to save you. It will not happen. If I am defeated, I*

take you with me. Turning, she led Shamus back down the hall, soothing his anger with gentle erotic touches. The amber in her eyes became tiny little flecks of gold dust once again.

* * * *

Shameer thought about his past and the pain he had gone through because of his ignorance. It couldn't hurt to search out his friends. Smiling, he thought of Darmetheus, the werewolf who had taught him the rules of being an immortal.

Shameer had been staring into the darkness, awaiting the dawn. Blood still covered his hands from the kill. He had torn the victim's head from his body to prevent the poor soul from turning. Self-loathing engulfed him, making his desire for death grow. Jasmine had turned him into a monster. In order to live, he had been forced to feed on the blood of others, claiming their life-force to sustain his own.

His decision to feel the sun's fire on his skin had come from the horror of his existence. He couldn't bear it anymore. He prayed Colin would find a way to forgive him. His only regret was the knowledge he would be leaving Colin behind. He was so lost in his own thoughts he did not realize he had company until the man's voice greeted him. "The thoughts you are having are terribly selfish. You do realize that, do you not?" the man asked simply.

Turning, Shameer came face to face with a man whose eyes were the most startling shade of green he had ever seen. They stared back at the stranger and the look of contemplation on his face.

The man looked to be the same age as Shameer, but instinct told him this man was older. His hair was long, past acceptable length for a man. Truly, it was well past his waist. It fell in waves almost to his thigh. At first glance, Shameer had thought it was the color of salt and pepper, but even in the darkness, he could tell now, the lighter shade was not gray but gold.

The man leaned against the willow tree, his eyes scanning Shameer in obvious distaste. "Good Lord, man," he said softly, "you're a bloody mess."

Despite the light-hearted tone in the man's voice, Shameer had bristled. "You would be too, if you had to live as I must!" he spat back angrily.

Clicking his tongue, the man said, "Temper, temper. How do you know my existence is so unlike your own?"

Shameer, scoffed, "Who are you to claim to know of my life?"

The man moved forward with a quiet grace. When he was closer, he bowed ceremoniously. "I am Darmetheus," he said softly. "And I am here to teach you the difference."

Shameer waited, eyebrow raised for the man to continue. When he did not, he asked, "The difference in what?"

Crouching low, the stranger neared him, the emerald eyes searching his own. "The difference between barely existing through your curse," he whispered, "or using it to make a difference in the world," Darmetheus said.

Shameer stared at the other man shocked and surprised at the gut instincts which told him the other man's words were true. Still he asked, "How could I ever make use of this as a

way to make any kind of difference?" His sorrow spoke volumes, like a warning siren to every living being around him.

Darmetheus moved to sit beside him. "You are not the first to be given this Eternal brand," he said with a smile. "There are others; many of them."

Shameer could smell the other's blood. For the first time, he recognized the fellow immortal. But this man's scent was different, unlike anything he had before encountered. He looked at the man beside him in confusion.

"What are you?" he asked cautiously.

The other man smiled. "I am what legend would call werewolf," he replied with a shrug. "Although the legends would make me into some hideous creature which was half wolf, half man; in truth, I am simply a man who can become a wolf." Green eyes locked on gray ones as he continued, "You are not a monster simply because you were chosen to live forever,"

Shameer shook his head, sadly looking at the blood on his hands. "But I kill," he responded. "I feed on the lives of others."

"And you feel remorse because of it," Darmetheus said as he nodded in understanding. He put his hand on Shameer's shoulder. "Come," he encouraged, "let me show you how to feed without killing."

Shameer looked at him in disbelief, argued, "We are not even cursed with the same malady. How can a werewolf show a vampire to feed without killing?"

Darmetheus straightened a look of waning patience in his eyes. "I myself was taught by a wizard whom had been the student of a vampire. Because I know what he did in order to exist, I can teach you of your own abilities." He sighed, and rose to his feet. "Or do you prefer your misery?" he asked sarcastically.

"No," Shameer responded. "I do not relish this life. Please, if there is a happier way to live out such an existence, teach me."

Darmetheus nodded. "Then come with me," he said and offered his hand to Shameer, who in turn looked at his blood-drenched hands. The wolf-man quickly reached into his tunic, and pulled out a kerchief. Once he handed it to Shameer, he turned and began making his way past the clearing, deeper into the woods.

"There is a calmer part of the river downstream. You may clean up there," Darmetheus said.

Shameer rose and followed him silently, praying this man could truly teach him a better way to exist. Some time later, as Shameer washed in the icy water of the stream, he listened to Darmetheus speak of his own life with the gypsies.

He shared his life with Shameer, spoke of his inborn ability to communicate with animals. He told him of the day he had been chosen by the wolf to receive the eternal powers of protection, which were meant for only a certain few. And then he confided about his sister, Tessah, and her healing powers. He told Shameer how close the two of them had been, and how it had broken her heart to find her brother marked for eternal life as a servant of a greater good. While his father

and mother had been happy for him, Tessah knew only grief. She had been unwilling to see what everyone else in the gypsy tribe had seen, that their family was had been blessed by his being chosen.

His eyes had misted over and he ended his story there. Looking Shameer in the eyes he said, "The first lesson I will teach you as your mentor is, be extremely careful who you choose to turn. It could kill them."

Shameer cocked an eyebrow at his companion. The man was a total stranger, but Shameer liked him. He had an easy flow of energy about him. It was simple to see he made no pretenses. Shameer had to respect him, no matter what form his gift had taken. Wading back to the water's edge, he reached for his shirt.

"You might as well leave that off for now." Darmetheus said.

Shameer laid the shirt again on the ground and looked at the other man, asking,

"May I ask why?"

Darmetheus rolled his eyes then glanced back at him. "Well, if you would rather ruin your nice clothes, I can always teach you how to reshape with your clothes on," he said a bit sarcastically.

Shameer stilled. "I cannot shape shift," he said simply. "You are the werewolf."

"Of course you can," the other man answered, eyebrow raised. "As a werewolf, a wolf is all I can become, but you," he paused, "you can see through the eyes of any animal you choose."

Darmetheus rose to look at the night sky. "You can soar with the owls, or run with me as a wolf; you can play with the tigers, or even sneak among the rats though, I cannot fathom why anyone would want to smell as foul as such a beast."

Shameer nodded, said, "All right, then, I am your willing pupil." Yet as he stood, a wave of dizziness forced him back down. He had not fed well for so long even his recent kill did little to strengthen him, and the hunger was affecting his energy.

Darmetheus watched the wave of fatigue cross his new friend's features.

Standing back, he assessed Shameer's condition for the first time, noticed the signs of starvation. "How often do you feed?" he asked softly.

Shameer looked at him wearily, shrugged and said, "Once, maybe twice a month."

Darmetheus laughed before saying, "You really don't know anything about yourself, do you? You should feed at least once a week."

Shameer stiffened angrily, replied, "I can't let myself kill that often; then I would surely become the monster I so despise."

Darmetheus slumped a bit, then put his hands on his hips in consternation and said, "I do not mean for you to kill. You must learn to take only enough to sustain yourself, without harming the donor of the blood. And you can use animal blood, as well as human," he continued. "It is not as rich in a few of the main nutrients your body craves, but it helps to sustain you and keep up your strength, not to mention, it will

keep you from starving. Never mind shape shifting; I must first show you how to draw your prey to you. See that fawn?" he asked softly as he peered across the water.

Shameer nodded, said, "Yes, she is beautiful."

Darmetheus nodded, ordered, "Call her to you."

The thought alarmed Shameer, who protested, "I cannot kill her! I won't!"

"There you go again, putting everything into terms of life and death. You are not listening to me," Darmetheus groaned. "I am not asking you to kill her; merely to call her to you and make a request."

Shameer stared blankly at Darmetheus, asked, "Request? Request for what?" His gaze held the other man's for moments before he turned to look again at the fawn.

Darmetheus answered softly, "You request her assistance to help you live, and in return, she'll let you know when to stop."

Shameer contemplated the fawn. She raised her head and turned a wary eye toward him. Steeling himself, he sent the request to her mind, asking for sustenance from her. He half expected her to bolt without further regard of him. Instead, she turned, made her way across the stream to his side. She sank to the ground before him and offered her life-force to help him.

Shameer looked from her to Darmetheus, unsure. Before he could speak, Darmetheus answered, "She has offered you both her respect and her trust. In turn, you must do the same for her."

Suddenly, Shameer understood. Leaning over the trusting beast, he bit gently, but firmly into her neck Rich red blood flooded down his throat, feeding his need. He drank deeply, feeling the energy growing within his body as a result of her offering. After a moment, he felt a gentle nudge, a touch from her mind to his, telling him of her lightheaded feeling. Immediately, he stopped his feeding and moved away from her. Instinctively, he held a hand over her wound, channeling energy through it. He watched as the fang pricks scabbed over, the flow of blood ended.

Darmetheus nodded his approval. "Very good," he acknowledged, "and you already knew how to heal her."

Shameer felt a moment's surprise and joy over his newfound discovery before waves of self-contempt washed over him for the deaths he had caused to his victims in his ignorance. Disgust and remorse filled him.

Darmetheus placed his hand on Shameer's shoulder in sympathy. "I realize it is easier said than done, my friend, but you must try not to blame yourself," he said. He nodded when Shameer's eyes searched his own and added, "What you did not know is not your fault. Now you know better, I will expect you to change your ways."

Shameer turned to stare at the starless sky, as though searching for answers he could pluck from the heavens. He said, "I killed needlessly. I intentionally set out to destroy people because I thought I had no choice, because I could not control the hunger." The tears, which would have spilled onto his cheek, had he been human evaporated before they could

escape his eyes. "Now I discover they could have been spared."

Darmetheus shrugged, rolled his eyes before looking back to Shameer, "Will you stop already?" he said shortly, "So you messed up at first! So you hurt people!" He groaned, "You never intended to hurt anyone, but control over such an existence as yours takes discipline, and control!"

He sighed, and sat beside the other immortal, saying, "You never took an innocent, Shameer. I followed you for some time before I let you know about me. You never took the life of anyone but murderers, rapists and other misfits." He looked to the heavens then also. "How many lives have you saved by removing those who would harm others?"

The two regarded each other. At length, Darmetheus said, "Go home and take your rest. I shall meet you tomorrow evening and we will continue t your raining."

Shameer watched as the other man turned and before his eyes shifted into his lupine form and headed silently deeper into the forest.

For the next several months, Darmetheus had been his mentor and friend. The wolf-man had taught him about his talents and his weaknesses. Because of their friendship, Shameer had learned the difference between the realities and the myths of the immortal's existence. Smiling at the memory, Shameer made his way to his chamber, and curled up beside the sleeping form of the woman he loved. Holding Jessica close, he allowed himself to dose.

* * * *

Chelsea awoke slowly, gradually becoming aware of the arm wrapped around her middle. It caressed her as though she were precious. It had to be Colin, she thought happily, but it was unlike him to come to her room unannounced. Perhaps he had come to make amends. Opening her eyes, she stiffened. Staring back at her were the eyes she had grown to love seeing, silvery blue with streaks of gray marbling them, but the eyes were the only thing about him she recognized. The face was no longer that of an aging, older man; this man looked little older than she herself.

Her intruder bore a striking resemblance to Shameer, same age, same face, but the *hair*. This man had long, silver-blond hair, which fell well past his shoulders. She had a moment's misgiving before he reached up and smoothed a stray hair from her face. In that instant, she realized it was indeed Colin who was in her bed. She asked, "What happened?"

Colin smiled as he ran his fingers across her temple in an affectionate gesture, began his explanation, saying, "You remember that night a few weeks ago, when I was attacked?"

Chelsea nodded, replied, "Yes, I remember. I thought I'd lost you." She bit her lip at the memory.

Colin tightened his hold on her and whispered, "The animal which attacked me was a werewolf."

Chelsea's eyes widened. "You..." she began, seemed to shake herself mentally before she continued, "Your own brother trying to make you a vampire didn't break the witch's curse, but..."

He stopped her with a kiss so passionate it left her breathless. When he drew away, he whispered, "Chelsea, I don't know exactly where all of this will lead. I do know the wolf's bite would have worked its way out of my system as well, if Jasmine had not worked a spell to lighten the curse the demon inside her had placed on me."

At the mention of Jasmine's name, Chelsea stiffened and started to pull away. "I see," she pouted.

He smiled slightly at her jealousy, but said, "No, darling, you *don't* see; you don't see at all." He wrapped his leg around her lower body, arrested her attempts to get away from him.

She stopped struggling and looked at the perfect leg that was touching hers. Tears filled her eyes when she looked back to him. "You're healed," she whispered. "I'm so happy for you."

"For *us*, Chelsea," he interrupted. "Be happy for us!" His voice was filled with emotion. Pulling her face to him, he captured her lips with his own and poured himself into it. She returned his kiss, letting her tears mingle with their tongues as she held him close. Pulling back, he searched her face, asked, "What is wrong? Is it that you don't actually feel what I thought we both did?" There was pain in his voice, and it tore at her.

She shook her head, reached up to stroke his cheek. "No, I love you," she said softly, "now, more than ever." She took a deep breath to steady herself. "But, you admitted you still love Jasmine, and after what she has done for you..."

His soft laughter brought her up short. "You thought I would choose her over you?" He asked incredulously. His face grew solemn. "Jasmine, the real Jasmine and I *do love* each other, that is true. But Chelsea, she and I can never be together. Too many things have happened which can never be undone."

Chelsea continued her protest, saying, "But..."

"She knows about you," he added softly. "She told me to take care of you." His lips brushed her forehead. "I want *you*. I never loved her as much as I do you. Even she knows that."

His thumb traced her bottom lip, stilling its quiver. Chelsea touched him gently, staring into his eyes. It was as though a jolt of electricity ran through him at the feel of her fingers against his cheek. His arms tightened around her, his mouth claiming hers in a torrid kiss, which branded her as his.

Giving herself over to the feel of him against her, she opened her arms to him. She held him close, letting him into her heart as well as her soul. Just when she thought her happiness would be endless, he pulled back from her.

His eyes met and held hers a long moment. "Are you sure you want to be with me?" he asked quietly. She started to question why he would ask her such a question now, but he continued, "If I make love to you now Chelsea, it will turn you. Making love to a werewolf during the time of his change ... the full moon ... makes the lover susceptible to change as well. That is why you must be sure. I don't want you entering into this without knowing what it could mean."

He worried over changing her, he had heard Darmetheus's story of his sister, and how the change had affected her,

driving her mad. But something inside of him knew Chelsea was not just a powerful Wiccan; she was also his soul mate. He felt secure she could easily come through the change unharmed.

However, he reasoned with himself, he had to warn her of the possibility of the lunar madness. "I must explain something to you," he said softly. "There is a very small possibility you would not survive the transformation." His eyes searched hers. "Some people are not meant to be immortals. Certain things happen to them if they are subjected to the change. It could be fatal." He paused, studied her expression before continuing, "I feel secure you would be fine, but it is still a risk, and I cannot make the choice for you."

She drew back then and looked into his eyes, considering his words. She had never thought of becoming a werewolf, *of course*, the idea had never occurred to her; why would it have before?

Not only was the idea of becoming a werewolf put before her, but also the possibility of certain death if her body rejected the conversion. As she thought about it, she felt an inner peace. She saw in her inner vision the happiness that awaited them. As she considered this vision, Colin watched her and prepared himself for her refusal to share his fate.

But when her eyes did finally meet his, the smile on her face melted his heart. "I want to be with you, Colin," she said, her voice steady and sure. "If I had to become a *lab rat* for us to be together, my answer would still be yes."

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

The words were scarcely out of her mouth before his lips found hers once more, his hands going to the ties of her robe. As the robe opened to expose skin, Colin's breath caught in his throat. One hand touched her softly, cradling her breast, while his other pushed the covers out of their way.

Chelsea shrugged out of her robe, opened her arms to him, as though making an offering of herself. Moaning he closed the small amount of distance, which separated them and brushed her neck with his lips; he kissed the exposed skin while his palm pressed against the small of her back, urging her closer still to feel his desire for her. Chelsea moaned at the hardness of him pressed so close to her. Her lips found his as she inhaled the fragrance of his skin. It was better than any cologne she had ever smelled. The scent surrounded her, wrapping her safely in a heady fragrance of earth, mixed with spice, lulling her senses, inviting her to relax into him.

The moment his mind touched hers, she froze. It was more than a mere touch of his mind on hers. It was as though his thoughts were her own. She could feel his being engulfed in her. His eyes held hers as his thoughts filled her mind and she heard the telepathic words as though they were her own. *I love you, Chelsea. I want to share everything in my being with you.* The sentiment in the words brought tears to her eyes. *I want you to know me as intimately as I desire to know you.* The words tore at her heart, making her want to give all she had of herself to him in return. She boldly sent her hand to explore the expanse of his chest, past his lower stomach, to his groin.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

When she touched his erect manhood, she stilled and bit her lip in hesitancy. He groaned and leaned his head back as her hand curled around him. His hand moved to the warmth between her legs. She gasped as his fingers found her core and began to work magic on her body. Gripping him tighter, she moved her hand over him, while she sought to capture his lips afresh with her own.

Cupping her breast in his hand, he moved to capture the pink bud of the areola between his teeth. Leaning over her, he laid her deeper into the bed, covering her body with his own. Spreading his body over hers possessively, he pressed himself into her, his mind reaching once more for hers with unspoken words. *I am sorry, my love; I must have you now. I can wait no longer.*

She enfolded him in welcoming arms, pulled him closer to her, her mind answering his in tacit words. *Then take me, darling; take what you already know is yours.* It was true; she knew it with all her being. She *was* his as he was hers—forever, if God granted them eternity; until death, if he had been made mortal. It no longer mattered to her. He was the other half of her soul; she could deny him nothing.

Holding tightly to him, she rode into the ecstasy his body promised her. Both of them knew no matter what tomorrow brought, they would face it together.

Chapter 14

"This is not what I had planned, Jasmine," Shamus growled as he paced angrily, flexing his fingers, then alternately clenching them into fists. "I brought you back to aid *me* in this endeavor of revenge and so far, all you have done is manage to free my father before I could exact any torture to him."

His voice had risen as he finished his words, the resultant trembling in his body growing into a pronounced tremor. He glared daggers in her direction, daring her to argue his accusation. Yet she said nothing.

Raising an eyebrow, she considered him, silently weighing the truth of his words. As much as she hated to admit it, it *was* a spell cast from this body, which had released his father. A pout settled over her face.

She fumed in silence because; unknown to Shamus, her meddling hostess had also modified the spell she had cast to damn Colin to age eternally. Instead, Colin would now remain forever young as a werewolf.

She had dealt out a punishment she had intended to last forever. Now, thanks to her hostess, Colin would no longer be a burden Shameer would have to protect, but rather could stand now as a warrior beside him. Looking back at Shamus, she groaned in disgust. She was fast growing tired of this body. It was getting harder to control as the captive spirit inside it learned more and became bolder, but she had no desire to make Shamus her vessel. The very thought of

functioning from inside him made her ill. He was a weakling, unworthy of playing host to her soul.

Besides, Jasmine preferred women. They had natural powers and earth energies all their own which men had never learned to harness. Women came by that power naturally; therefore, it made the demon inside a woman's body even more powerful, multiplying the demon's own strength. Tiring of the sound of his voice, Jasmine stood. "Cease your senseless whining," she directed. "It changes nothing."

Shocked, he stared sulkily at her. She imagined he resembled a child who had been denied extra playtime. Dismissing his hateful expression, she moved to the balcony, opening the French doors, which led to the outside. Stepping out into the night air, Jasmine looked into the darkness and smiled. Looking back at him, she gestured for him to follow, "Come," she called to him.

Following her, Shamus asked, "What are you doing?" He cast a wary eye to the darkening clouds that barred all stars and even the moon from his vision.

"I want to show you something," she answered simply.

Shamus smirked, asking, "And what would *that* be?"

Spreading her arms outward, she answered, "The power of woman."

He watched the clouds darken and grow more volatile as she chanted in a tongue older than time. "What are you *doing*?" he repeated quietly, afraid of disrupting the spell she was weaving, but too curious to stop himself.

She smiled a wicked sort of grimace, which sent a shiver through him. "I plan to scare them out of the false safety of

their hideaway. It is time they know exactly how strong the forces they fight really are," she said.

Shamus shook his head. "You can't," he argued as he looked at her as though she were stupid. "We don't even know where they are."

Her smile broadened as she regarded him coldly. "They *think* they are hidden, as do you," she answered. "But in all actuality, no one can hide from me. *No one!*"

Suddenly a vision of the four people whom they sought appeared before Jasmine and Shamus, two on the stairs and two below. Shamus stared at the man with the silvery blonde hair, knew it was his father. "He's become a Wolf," he whispered in soft surprise.

"Shhh." She hushed him as she began to speak softly, saying, "By the powers of gods left unnamed, I command you to see me. Hear my words and their warning to you..."

* * * *

Chelsea beamed at the idea of telling her friend the news of her decision. She took the stairs two at a time, with Colin racing along behind her, his merry chuckle sounding from deep inside his chest. Jessica stood at the foot of the stairs, a baffled expression on her face. Watching the joy on Chelsea's face, she couldn't help but to find herself smiling as well.

Her eyes moved from her to Colin a moment before her jaw went slack as she took in his appearance. Shameer had told her the curse he had first been placed under had been replaced by the gift of the wolf's bite and further softened by

the spell the true Jasmine had worked. But seeing him young and with two legs was a little more than she had expected.

"Wow," she breathed in awe as she leaned back into Shameer's chest for support.

Chelsea smiled, asked, "You aren't angry with me, are you, Jess?" The look in her eyes made Jessica aware her friend had made the decision to follow Colin into his new existence.

Drawing a steadying breath, Jessica shrugged and smiled. "Why would I be?" she asked softly. "You are a grown woman and I am very happy for you." Rolling her eyes, she continued, "And it isn't exactly like we ever lived normal life to begin with, is it?"

Chelsea smiled and started to answer her, but stopped short as the ground beneath their feet began to shake. The walls of the cavern house trembled as though an earthquake shook its very core. Sinking to the floor, Jessica looked at Shameer, who was staring at a spot high above them, head tilted, a look of sheer rage on his face. Chelsea clutched her crystal as she leaned against the wall for support. The stone about her neck was almost too hot to hold, a sure sign a malicious spirit or entity was somewhere close by.

Looking at the area where Shameer was staring, Jessica gasped at the transparent but huge vision above them. Green eyes met and held hers for a moment before turning back to address Shameer and Colin.

"You think you will always escape me?" the apparition asked, leering angrily. "I *will* find you; I always do."

Abby came running into the room from the kitchen, followed by Davis, "Saint Agnes, what be happening? *Oh. ..*"

she exclaimed, and then drew up short when she saw the ghostlike visitor. Davis stepped protectively in front of his wife, holding her behind him as he regarded the spirit warily.

Shameer stepped forward, facing Jasmine boldly. "What do you want?" he asked forcefully.

She glowered at him darkly. "Why, I want what every jilted lover wants," she answered venomously, her eyes glowing with an angry hatred. "I want to *watch you die!*"

"That may be a little difficult," he answered, "since you made me immortal." He paused for a moment, adding snidely, "Sorry."

Jasmine seemed to pout for a moment. "I know," she whined, much like a child who had begged for a new toy only to be refused. Then suddenly, she perked up as she added, "Guess I will just have to make you watch *her* die instead."

Before he could react, Jessica began gasping for breath as invisible hands choked off her air. Alarmed, he rushed to her side, at a loss as to what to do. Chelsea ran to her friend with Colin following swiftly behind her. She cradled Jessica in her arms, trying to ease her pain.

"You can't help her, witch," Jasmine sneered mockingly.

Suddenly, a bright light came from somewhere behind them and a stunning woman, clad in shimmering gossamer white silk appeared. "But *I* can," the woman acclaimed. Making a forceful pushing gesticulation with her hands, the woman expelled the spirit form of Jasmine from the house with a burst of white light, which exploded from somewhere in her chest.

* * * *

Jasmine reeled, shock and fear overpowering her and causing her to tremble as she found her consciousness ousted from the presence of the silken-clad intruder. Turning to Shamus, she asked, "Who was that?"

Shamus looked at her, a mixture of shock and disbelief in his eyes, from where he had watched the unfolding scene. His voice failed him for a moment, but returned as he answered in shaky, weak articulation, "You should know mother; you ate her heart."

* * * *

The air lay motionless before them where the apparition had been. Their unexpected defender stood before them, her eyes focused on the spot where Jasmine's form had hovered. Jessica looked from one astonished face to the next, all of whom shrugged in confusion. Both men looked as though they had seen a ghost.

Before Jessica could ask what was happening, she was interrupted by a sob from Abby as the sound of shattering glass also broke the silence. The woman in white turned and with tears in her eyes and said softly, "Hello, mother."

Abby cried all the harder as she moved slowly toward the girl in the center of the room. "Angelica," she whispered brokenly, "You're *alive*."

Before her mother could bridge the distance between them, Angelica stepped out of her reach, "No maman," she whispered. "My body is dead."

Abby shook her head, exclaimed, "But you are right here, right in front of me. How can you be dead to us when you look so alive, so beautiful?" Tears fell freely down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, maman," she whispered as she stepped closer, desperately wishing to comfort her mother. "I've missed you terribly. But this was the only way I could come back ... as a guardian of sorts."

Shameer crossed the distance between them, asked, "Angelica? What happened to you?"

The girl faced him, a sad smile playing across her features as she replied, "I was the sacrifice used to bring Jasmine back to full power."

Colin groaned and sat heavily on the step, "Damn!" he muttered angrily. Abby cried out anew and Davis, who had been rooted to the same spot since he saw her, closed his eyes and bowed his head.

Angelica looked toward him, "Papa?"

Davis looked back toward her and attempted a smile, asked, "But, ye are without pain now, aye?"

Angelica smiled, "Yes, papa. I am very well now." She looked at Colin then, attempted a lighthearted smile as she observed, "You are looking pretty fair yourself, master Colin."

A half smile played across Colin's face. But before he could answer, the ground shifted again and the quake began anew.

Angelica turned to Shameer. "We must get out of here," she said hurriedly. "Jasmine means to collapse the entire hill and the house."

Jessica gasped in terror, then taking the steps two at a time, rushed toward her bedroom.

Shameer called out to her, "Where are you going?"

"My cats! Shameer, I can't just leave them here to die!"

Just as she was finishing the phrase, the ceiling on the level above her collapsed, blocking her from going any further. She cried out in near hysteria, "No!" But before she could react, Shameer was beside her, scooping her up into his arms. "No! Let me go!" she cried, frantically beating on his chest, but he held her firm.

"There is nothing else we can do at the moment," he told her as he raced back down the stairs and out the door Colin was holding open for them. He ran several more feet before turning to face his home, which was crumbling before his eyes.

Chelsea, Colin, Abby and Davis all stood close-by, also watching with horror in their eyes as the massive stone crumbled into nothing that could be recognized as having been a fine home mere moments before. Silent tears ran down Jessica's cheeks. Her cats were trapped inside the rubble. If they had survived the collapse, they would run out of air soon.

"Oh my," Abby gasped, looking around wildly. "Where is Angelica? Did you see her come out?" She gave Davis a stricken look. Davis wagged his head from side to side sadly.

"I never saw her when we were leaving. In truth, methinks she disappeared before that," he said sadly. Just as he finished speaking the sound of a very unhappy cat wafted through the dust-filled air. All eyes turned toward the sound.

There, standing before the ruin, was Angelica. In one arm, she held a solid black, hissing feline. In the other was a

calico, which was also quite perturbed. Both were covered in dust, and resembling dirty mops made of fur.

Upon seeing Jessica, both cats began squirming to gain their freedom from the odd stranger. Dropping them, Angelica leaned on a nearby tree before fading to her original transparent form. "Gee," she sighed, "that takes a lot out of ya."

Jessica bent to retrieve her two pets, and then looked gratefully at the other weary girl.

"Thank you," she said softly, unshed tears glistening in her eyes.

Davis looked appraisingly at his daughter. "What was it took all your energy, child?" he inquired softly.

She smiled weakly back at him, and then whispered, "Becoming solid and transferring."

Chelsea regarded Angelica curiously, asked, "Transferring?"

Angelica nodded, "Yes, I moved my energy from one place to another to get the cats."

"Kind of like astral projection?" Chelsea asked, raising an eyebrow.

The other girl smiled in a friendly manner, answered, "Yes, quite similar, but a little more difficult for me, as I have no human body with which to anchor myself."

"Well, whatever you did," Jessica interrupted, "I thank you for it. I thought I had lost them." Suddenly, a look of shocked alarm crossed her face and she cried out in dismay as she turned back to the rubble.

"Oh no, Shameer," she cried. "Your beautiful home and *my hope chest!*" A renewed sound of mourning filled her voice.

Shameer moved to her side soundlessly, gathered her into his arms. Gently he pulled her to him and held her, letting her cry onto his shoulder.

Chelsea asked Colin softly, "What hope chest?"

"It was Lillian's. Her parents gave it to her the night before they died," he answered.

Chelsea looked back at her friend, "Oh no," she said sadly, looking back at where the cliff-house had stood. "This is awful."

Colin nodded, agreed, "Yes, but I can tell you what is worse."

Chelsea searched his face, her brow arched, asked, "What could possibly be..." Her words faded as she followed his gaze. The horizon was growing light with the dawn. Seeing the tinge of bright color just beginning to brighten the edge of the sky, she cursed. "What do we do now?"

Colin was shaking his head and opened his mouth to speak, but instead of his articulation, another voice rang out, saying, "Well, I suppose the only solution for the time being would be to come and stay with me." The voice belonged to a man about the same height as Shameer and Colin, who both smiled at him in a relieved greeting. At first glance the man seemed to have short-cropped hair. But as he drew closer, they saw his gold and black streaked hair was actually laced in a long thick braid which hung in the back to his waist. Tall and trim, the man's eyes were a startling emerald green.

When he smiled, his teeth were whiter than freshly fallen snow.

"Brother," Shameer greeted him softly, claspng the other man's arm in a show of friendship and loyalty. Colin smiled a warm greeting as well.

The emerald-eyed man turned and studied Colin. A light began to dance in his eyes as he took in the other man's appearance. "It seems you have become my brother in yet another way besides the mark of eternity, Colin." he observed in a voice both deep and appreciative. "I am honored you have become part of *my family*."

Colin smiled, greeted, "It is good to see you, Darmetheus."

Shameer nodded his affirmation. "How did you know we were in trouble?" he asked.

Darmetheus shrugged. "I didn't," he answered, "but I felt you thinking about me." He looked toward the horizon and added, "Come, we waste time here. I am just glad I didn't ride my Harley." As he led them to his motor-coach, Chelsea and Jessica exchanged looks.

Shameer called to Davis. "Follow us," he said simply.

Davis and Abby moved toward the car. Abby stopped and looked around, then gazed questioningly at her husband, who shook his head. "She is all right now, my love." he assured her. "I am sure she will join us when she can. Right now, she is probably resting."

Nodding, Abby got into the car beside him and they followed the motor-coach as it pulled away from the place they had called their home for nearly sixty-five years.

* * * *

When they all were in the motor-coach and the cats were settled securely on Jessica's lap, Darmetheus climbed behind the wheel. "Colin, this is going to be a lengthy drive, so you might want to close the windows to block out the sun," he suggested.

Obliging him, Colin closed each blind, and dropped the thick curtains down to block the rays of the sun from making their way into the vehicle.

"I thank you, Darmetheus. We shouldn't have to stay with you very long; just until I can have the other estate opened back up," Shameer said.

Darmetheus chuckled, "And how long has it been since you were at the other home, Shameer?" He smiled at his friends through the rearview mirror. "It is nonsense for you to worry over it. You will stay with me as long as you need. End of discussion."

Jessica, who had been staring at Shameer since he had mentioned the other estate, now found her voice and asked, "You have another place? Where is it?"

Shameer held her gaze for several minutes before answering hesitantly, "Let me just say it isn't in America, Jess."

She tilted her head, contemplating his meaning. "Is it in Europe?" she asked.

He responded, "It is very far away."

"When were you there last?" she prodded for more information.

He regarded her steadily, answering, "Given your remarkable memory of your past life, I am surprised you do not already know."

Darmetheus's voice came to them from the front as he said, "Get some rest. We have most of the day ahead of us."

Jessica settled into the sofa next to Shameer and let her eyes drift shut. Tears of relief rolled silently down her cheeks. Her attachment to her cats was hard to explain to people, but it was real. She felt far more than just a simple affection toward them. They were her family, her friends. They loved her unconditionally, which, with the exception of present company, was more than she could say for most people.

Holding Neeka in her arms, she looked at Sabbath where she was purring and content in Shameer's lap. Both cats had recovered fairly well from their trauma. She wondered if they had even known the danger they were in or if they had just believed someone would save them.

Feeling eyes on her, she looked up to find Shameer's dark steel gray gaze leveled on her. His free hand squeezed hers as his other stroked the black bundle in his lap. Suddenly, Jessica felt surrounded by love; for the first time in her life, she actually felt cherished. So many times, she had hoped and prayed she was on the right path. So many times, it had turned out to be a disappointment.

This time, she knew without a doubt, this was where she was supposed to be. At that moment, she made her decision. She didn't want to grow old and leave behind the man, who had become one of the guardians of life, for guardian, he was. Although he saw his existence as a curse, Jessica knew

he had used it as a way to keep the innocents of the world safe. She also knew she wanted to stay with him for as long as heaven would allow.

She had never believed in reincarnation before and even now, she still believed in God and his son who had died on the cross to give people a chance at eternal life in a better place.

But in the last few months, she had been given an entirely new view on several things. She now knew some people already *had* eternal life right here on earth, and not all of them were evil.

Now, she believed some people who were born with a marked purpose would have to keep coming back until that purpose was fulfilled. What if Shameer's purpose was to fight the forces of evil and her purpose was to be there as his companion until the day when they too, could join the ones who had already moved on?

Looking across to where Chelsea and Colin sat, she thought how easy it must have been for Chelsea to decide to join Colin in his new and sometimes frightening life. Chelsea had never let herself be overcome by the fears or the *what ifs* of life; Jessica always envied that in her. She could look at the situation and instead of saying, *let me consider what I should do*, she was the first to say *I will do*.

She looked again at Shameer. His eyes were closed, his head leaning against the seat. Secure in her decision, she snuggled closer to him and laid her head on his shoulder. When they reached their destination and had some privacy, she would tell him of her desire to follow him into the night.

Chapter 15

Jasmine sat on the floor, eyes closed in concentration, elbows resting on her bent knees. Her palms were turned upward, a black onyx pyramid balanced in the center of each palm. In a voice so soft, it echoed only in the recesses of her mind, she chanted the incantation of a dark spell.

Shamus stood in the doorway, perplexed by the scene before him. His nerves were still shaken over the previous attempts, which had gone awry. He was beginning to think by summoning the sorceress, he had wasted his time. As though she had heard his thoughts, Jasmine said through clenched teeth, "If you are not able to clear your brain of that ridiculous prattle, please leave this room." Her voice held a growing menace in its inflection. "You are a mindless distraction."

He opened his mouth to rebuke her, but found he had no voice when his eyes met hers. He noticed the green there had been replaced with black, and her entire aura was darker and more deadly than he could ever have imagined. He could feel a vortex of raw, angry energy opening all around them. Looking at her was almost like staring into oblivion.

Taking a step back, he found he felt a tinge of sympathy for Shameer and Colin for the revenge she would take. "Those poor bastards," he whispered softly as his back came against the wall.

The thing he had wanted most was revenge. But he had envisioned torture, a century or so in a dark pit, trapped with

no blood and no way out, for Shameer; broken, paralyzed body to go with the ever alert, eternal mind, for Colin. As he looked at Jasmine, he felt the rage within her angry, sickened mind. It wasn't revenge she craved; it was their total annihilation. For the first time since he was a boy, Shamus actually found himself worrying over another person's safety. The twinge of conscience shocked and angered him. He hated his father and his uncle. It was a waste of his time to bother caring for either of them. Still, his voice was overly quiet when he asked, "What are you going to do?"

The voice that answered him was much deeper than normal. "They have a blessed one protecting them," Jasmine said, a low menacing chuckle escaping her lips. "She will be anticipating my next move, our next attack."

Suddenly, her face lost all hint of humor as the obsidian eyes looked once more deeply into his and said, "Let's see how well she anticipates *this*." He heard a clap of thunder strike somewhere close-by and the room was illuminated as multiple shards of lightning lit the sky, as though she had declared war through her unnatural storm.

* * * *

Darmetheus watched the gathering clouds as he drove. He could feel the darkness within the atmosphere, recognized it instantly for the magical storm it was. There was a charge of angry, vengeful power intermingled within the depths of the tempest. Sighing deeply, Darmetheus cast a quick worried glance over his shoulder at the form of his sleeping friend. If the storm pushed them out of the motor-coach and into the

open, it would be easy for the enchantress to open the sky; the rays of sunlight would destroy Shameer.

His worries were shared. Colin came up beside him. "Can we continue driving through this storm?" he asked quietly so as not to alert the rest of the passengers who were still sleeping soundly despite the storm.

Darmetheus shook his head, answered, "Not if it gets much worse than this." A flash of lightning momentarily blinded them.

Then a soft, feminine voice addressed them, saying, "It *will* get much worse than this."

Both men turned and saw Angelica standing behind them, a look of anger and determination on her features. "This storm is Jasmine's doing, but of course, you have probably figured that out. She plans to test my strength at protecting you," she said. "And she plans to kill Shameer."

Darmetheus pulled to the side of the road. The ferocity of the storm with its accompanying hail and gusty wind, made it impossible to continue to drive. Shutting off the engine, he turned to meet the angel's eyes. "So," he said flatly, "any ideas?"

* * * *

Jasmine's energy was beginning to grow, creating a magnetized vortex around her. Shamus could not have moved if he had wanted to. It seemed almost as though there was a whirlwind of electricity around them. He started to wonder if maybe all this magnetic charge would draw the storm to them.

Jasmine seemed oblivious to everything except her chant. She continued to repeat the spell, eyes rolled back unnaturally into her head, as she pronounced the words louder and faster, invoking the raw power to grow ever larger, stronger. Shamus could feel the ground beneath his feet begin to shake as her words further intensified the severity of the storm.

Dread filled him as he realized the storm was not only centered over his uncle and father; it seemed to be everywhere. As far as he could sense, the entire planet seemed caught in this storm system. Forcing one foot in front of the other, he tried his hardest to make it outside of the maelstrom Jasmine had created. Grabbing for the wall, he pulled himself through the doorway and into the outer room. If he had expected the other room to be any better, he was mistaken. The room looked ravaged. Chairs were toppled; pictures thrown off the walls. The chandelier he had bought in Europe lay shattered on the floor. The gold-veined Italian marble floor he had imported bore a three-inch wide fissure through its middle, torn apart from the forces Jasmine continued to stir.

"My God," he said softly, "aren't they dead yet?" Surely they would have to be dead by now if their little motor-coach had to endure the same brutality which raged here against his house. The thought stuck in his head as he watched the grand piano seemingly levitate off the floor before it was hurled wildly in his direction. Screaming, he lunged out of the path of the three-quarter ton gold inlaid instrument. Narrowly escaping its crushing force, he dodged as pieces of the once

wonderful piano flew in all directions, having shattered on impact.

"Let this be over soon!" he pleaded loudly at the woman in the other room who seemed not even to have a clue to all the damage she was inflicting in his sanctuary.

* * * *

Angelica met Darmetheus's gaze, replied, "I am doing all I can to reflect her storm back at her. You may not believe this, but the full force of the storm is *much* more violent than this."

Both men shot a glance at her before locking anxious gazes again. Colin groaned as the motor-coach tilted and slid askew, deeper into the ditch. Jessica and Chelsea were jarred awake instantly.

Shameer opened an eye and looked at Darmetheus, asked, "This is no *natural* storm, is it?"

Angelica turned to him, answering for Darmetheus, "No Shameer, it isn't. I am doing everything I can, but this demon is powerful, and I must ask a boon, from *your* witch, Colin."

Chelsea raised an eyebrow, replied, "If it is *my* help you seek, why ask him instead of me?"

"Because I don't want this evil targeting you!" Colin interjected angrily before turning again to Angelica and growling, "Go get some more angels to help you! I *will not* lose Chelsea."

Chelsea stared at him in shock, said, "Colin, I am surprised at you"

Shameer rose a little unsteadily, but laid a hand on the table to steady himself. "I'm not," he said softly. "I would not

want Jessica opening herself to danger either. Fighting this thing, even with angels helping, would be very difficult."

Chelsea nodded, assured him, "I understand that." She looked back at Colin, her eyes shimmering with tears as she added, "But it is *my* choice to make, just as it was my choice to become what you are."

Angelica said patiently, "I am not asking her to put herself into Jasmine's path; merely to help me deflect more into the storm to wear the witch's energy down." She smiled, and then added, "Once she is spent, it will be time for Shameer to seek the proper way to destroy her, while her powers are weakened."

Before any of the men could raise an objection, Chelsea said, "Ask whatever you need of me."

Angelica still looked at Colin as though seeking his permission and at his nod, she smiled. "Good, come with me," she told Chelsea.

Turning, Angelica led Chelsea outside into the rain and hail. Lightning flashed all around them, but because some kind of protective barrier would not let the lightning touch the ground; they and the ground around them were untouched by the rain. Chelsea asked, "You have a shield around us? How do you..." She let the question die as she saw the figures in the distance which appeared to be giants, ten to maybe fifteen feet in height. Arms outstretched and touching, they appeared to create a wall which in turn generated a corridor of protection which encompassed the entire motor-coach and the stretch of road as far as the eye could see. "Oh ..." she whispered, impressed.

Jessica stepped off the bus behind them, said, "Hey, it stopped rain ... Oh, my G..." She let her words drop with her jaw as she beheld the line of titans in the distance and addressed Angelica, saying, "I'll bet you take them everywhere."

Angelica smiled and replied, "Only when I need a little extra oomph." Turning she told Chelsea, "I need you to cast the four directions. Beseech the guardians to aid us and mother earth in this part of the battle."

Chelsea nodded, saying, "Is that *all*? And I thought this would be hard." Moving into the center of the circle of power around them, Chelsea prepared herself for her chant, her hand going to her crystal to help her focus and harness her power.

Darmetheus, Colin and Shameer all followed Jessica off the vehicle. Silently, the men looked at the angels in the distance. Darmetheus whispered to Shameer, "Even with my abilities, I wouldn't want to get on *their* bad side!" Shameer nodded as he looked from them to the sky, which was black with clouds.

Angelica told Shameer, "At the first sign of the sun, you must return to the motor-coach. As you know, it will no longer be safe out here for you once the sun comes out." At his nod of understanding, she addressed Chelsea again, saying, "Please, evoke the guardians now."

Chelsea nodded, took her first position, facing north. Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep breath, then began, "Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the north, powers of earth and mother; bring forth your soil to aid in this battle."

The ground beneath them shifted abruptly, as though the soil had hardened itself into a more stable surface on which to stand while the battle ensued. Turning toward the east, she continued, "Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the east, powers of fire, and passion; bring forth your fires to burn this enemy."

As she finished speaking the last part of the chant to the east, a lightning bolt streaked through the sky, targeting their center. But before it could reach its mark, a spark of light coming from the shield they created itself blazed to life and seemed to turn the lightning back toward its source.

Shocked, Chelsea stared a moment, then turning to look over her shoulder, she whispered, "I think its working."

Angelica nodded. "Continue, Chelsea. Hurry!" she encouraged.

Turning to the south, she said to Shameer, "I think you might want to go inside now; it will be light soon." She drew in another deep breath, continued, "Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the south, powers of air and cleansing; use your forces of wind to drive these storms back whence they came."

Almost immediately, the wind first died down completely, then turned and blew with a vicious fury, forcing the dark clouds away within seconds, leaving the sky clear, the sun's rays almost blinding in their glory. Determined to finish, Chelsea turned to the west, chanting, "Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the west, powers of water and purity; rain on the one who caused this torment."

Everything was still a moment before the giants lowered their hands. The largest, a giant creature with long golden hair and dark amber eyes, nodded once to Angelica, then they were gone, almost as though they had never been there. Alarmed, Chelsea turned to her, saying, "Nothing happened that last time! How can we be sure it worked?"

Angelica, smiled, studying the sky a moment, before looking back at her and replying, "Don't worry, I have it on good authority; it worked."

Colin turned his attentions once more toward the motor-coach, realized someone should speak to Davis and Abby before they continued their journey. He walked swiftly toward the car as the others made their way back to the motor-coach.

Davis rolled down the window as Colin approached, commented, "That was one nasty storm."

Colin nodded his agreement, looking once more at the now serene countryside before he said, "At least the battle is over for now. Are you both all right?"

"Oh, sure," Davis replied, though it was evident to Colin by the way he still groped the steering wheel what Davis' *true* feelings were on the matter.

He decided not to comment on Davis' body language, but sought rather to give them some assurance as he said, "You know where we are heading, of course; and I know *you two* won't want to follow us to the mountain. Why don't you go on ahead of us now?"

"Are ye sure ye'll be all right?" Davis asked.

Colin had to smile at the man. Even though he himself was still visibly shaken from all the things, which had transpired this day, his concern was ever for others. "We will be fine, old friend. Jasmine will need to recover before striking again and that should give us time to arrive at our destination. You two go ahead and go to the house we keep for you in New Mexico, and we will be in contact with you later."

"All right," Davis said, if somewhat reluctantly. "Aye, ye know where we'll be. Be careful and we will expect to hear from ye very soon."

Colin nodded his agreement as Davis rolled up his window, started the car and eased it back onto the pavement and down the road. At times like this, he was grateful for his friends—all his friends.

* * * *

Shamus roared in anger once more as the fire trapped him inside the very room he had sought to escape. It formed a circle of flame around him and Jasmine, who was still feverishly chanting. His face blistered from the heat of its closeness. He had been left with no choice but to strip out of his shirt when it had caught on fire. His entire house was engulfed in flames now and he was powerless to stop it. He had tried a spell or two to lessen the anger of the Inferno, but his charms held no power against what Jasmine had created. It was almost as though the fire was dealing out retribution of some sort.

Grabbing hold of Jasmine, he shook her roughly, shouting, "You stupid bitch, you have to *stop* now! The flames may do

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

nothing to you, but they will kill me!" Her eyes opened and a look of utter disgust filled her eyes before she backhanded him, sending him spiraling into the flames.

The smell of burned flesh hit her nostrils at the same time as his last painful scream touched her ears. She heard the rushing water but an instant before she saw it and gritted her teeth as a wave of epic size came crashing through the remaining walls, which still clung to the ancient foundation. It put the fire out immediately, but not before its hungry flames had claimed the life of Shamus.

Jasmine stood firmly in place as wave after wave of water bombarded her. When what was left of the flood was only about ankle deep, she shook her head vigorously and almost instantly, she was dry. She walked to where the charred, fleshless bones of her son had washed against one of the walls. She stared at them a few moments, before she said, "I was growing tired of your constant complaining anyway. You were really beginning to annoy me."

Stepping over the pile of bones, she made her way out of the structure, then with one final look around her, under her breath she cursed the powers, which had interfered, snapped her fingers and disappeared, leaving behind her nothing but the rubble of a burnt-out, flooded building and the remains of a creature no one would really miss.

Chapter 16

Darkness had long since fallen by the time the motor-coach pulled into the drive of a large, secluded brick home high in the mountains outside Ruidoso, New Mexico. Darmetheus stepped out of the vehicle and stretched much like a cat might before turning to smile at the waking passengers. "Home, sweet home," he said in a deep, throaty seductive voice.

Chelsea and Jessica exchanged amused glances, wondering if all *Eternals* had such a pronounced air of sexiness. They smiled at each other, stood and followed the others off the motor-coach. Jessica scooped up her cats, one under each arm. Sabbath meowed in a discontented manner, but Neeka settled quietly and began to purr.

"Wow," Jessica breathed the word reverently as she saw for the first time the house before them wasn't actually a house, but a mountain. It was halfway up one of the largest peaks in the New Mexico area. Darmetheus had traveled up the paved road over halfway up the mountain, and then turned onto a private dirt road which took them somewhat farther into a secluded portion of the mountain.

Looking at him, she asked, "What is it with you guys and caves?"

Before them was a set of steps which led up the side of the mountain. A large, gothic-style door was built at the top of the steps.

Darmetheus gave her a look mixed between smile and smirk as he said, "These are houses built by God himself. I feel far safer within its foundations, than in any structure a mere man has built."

Having thus explained his penchant for living in a mountain, he turned and started climbing the stairs. Shameer smiled at Jessica, and then gestured for her to follow. As they climbed the rock steps, she wondered if it was going to be cold or damp within the depths of the cave. The steps were a bit steep and it was actually a fairly long way up them to the door. There was no way anyone could pull a surprise attack on this location, no way down from above the entrance into the cave, and little chance of anyone's being able to make it up the slope without being spotted.

"The temperature within the cave is actually quite pleasant." Shameer assured her softly. "It usually stays well within the range of seventy to seventy-five degrees. As you might guess, there isn't much need for air conditioning up here."

"And I have three places inside where I was able to build fireplaces into the earth, so it is seldom too cold." Darmetheus added with a smile. "Relax, ladies. I assure you; you will like my home."

Once they finally reached the door, Chelsea let out a low whistle before asking, "Who else lives here, Dar? Giants?" The door was made of reinforced steel and stood at least ten feet taller than a normal man's height.

Darmetheus shrugged, answered, "Well, no, but I entertain all kinds of people here. Some of them could be

considered giants, yes," He turned then and spoke a simple order to the door, "Open."

Instantly, the great door, which had appeared at first to be a solid mass of steel, creaked and slowly began to split in half, opening much like a set of French doors out onto a grand veranda would. Jessica let her bottom jaw go slack, and then asked, "My God! Who *designed* this place?"

Shameer smiled at her reaction. "A friend of ours," he answered. "His name is Tenaryn. He is believed to be a relative of the fabled Merlin, but he'll neither admit, nor deny the accusations."

Colin sighed, "Yes. But whether it is true or not, no one can deny he *is* a magician without equal." He addressed Shameer then, saying, "I was hoping he might have shown up by now. His help in this situation would be most appreciated."

Shameer shrugged and said, "If he thought we couldn't handle this, he would have shown up by now."

Jessica shook her head as though to clear it. "Hold on; you guys know a wizard? I mean, a *real* wizard, like Merlin, or Harry Potter?" she asked, a look of awe on her face. "I always knew Merlin was real. I just felt it." She ended off her prattle with a giddy sort of smile.

"Aye," a deep voice said from within the cave. "That would be the Wiccan inside you talkin' lass."

All heads turned toward the sound of the voice. Slowly moving toward them was a man who looked almost unreal, because he fairly glowed. His eyes were like blue mercury, his hair the light, and shimmering color of spun gold. It was long and straight, falling well past his waist in a thick braid. Like

Shameer, this man was dressed completely in black. A single crystal prism hung on a silver chain from his neck.

Shameer and Darmetheus both smiled as though greeting a brother. "Took you long enough Tenaryn. Where have you been?" Darmetheus asked quietly. "We could have used your help back there."

Tenaryn shook his head. "You have no need for my help in this," he answered. "One of you already knows what must be done." All eyes turned questioningly on him, but he shook his head once more before continuing, "If I told ye how the story ends, would ye even want to read the book?"

Darmetheus shook his head and said, "Enough of that for now. It has been a long day, and I want nothing more than to rid myself of these cumbersome clothes and run free before the night is over. Perhaps you and your lady love would like to join me, Colin." Without waiting for an answer, he turned and started into the cave. "Come, let us get comfortable. Jessica's cats are beginning to tire of being held in such a way."

Without another word, the group followed him. The entryway was filled with hundreds of candles. From the entry, another set of stairs led downward. Following them, they soon found their way into the living room, which was also filled with candles and furnished elaborately with large overstuffed leather couches and other accessories; a grand piano standing stately in the center of the room. This room also had huge stalactite pillars, which stretched from the ceiling and met the stalagmites which reached up toward them from the floor. The light from the candles made the pillars resemble

finely carved ivory, giving them a beauty, which nearly took one's breath away.

Darmetheus said to Jessica, "You can let the cats go. They should like to explore their new domain now." At her questioning, doubtful look, he continued, "Don't worry; they won't stray too far from you." He glanced at the cats for a moment, as though in some private conversation with them, then said, "They promise."

With a bemused look, Jessica let the kitties jump from her arms and watched as they took off into the nether regions of the eclectic home. Chelsea leaned over and whispered, "That was interesting, wasn't it?"

With a smile which was much too wide and suggested more the hysterical fit of laughter she fought to suppress, Jessica nodded. "Haven't you found yourself yet, even once, waiting to wake up from this rather bizarre dream?" she asked.

Chelsea nodded. "Yes ... a few times," she confessed and returned her smile. "But I actually feel relieved when I once again convince myself it really *isn't* a dream."

Jessica nodded, looked lovingly at Shameer, agreed, "Me, too." Turning, she resumed listening to what Darmetheus was saying.

"The library is down this path; the second spare bedroom is *this* way the kitchen branches away from that trail right before you get to the bedroom, but it is down the same corridor. Each bedroom has a bathroom complete with a toilet and hot springs for baths." He said, but shook his head apologetically before he continued, "I am sorry, but I don't

like showers, so I never had one put in—although, there is an underground waterfall, complete with a pool in the *master* bathroom."

Smiling at Jessica and Shameer, he said, "I hope you will rest well." With those words as his welcome, he turned and left them all there staring after him. Suddenly, Jessica remembered Abby and Davis and asked, "Where are...?"

Shameer was shaking his head as he replied to her unspoken question, "Abby is not overly fond of Darmetheus' home. She says there are too many fae folk down here for her to be comfortable. They stay on an estate I keep for them for those rare occasions when we visit here."

"Oh? I see," she said, then paused before adding, "I think..."

He smiled and held out his hand to her, said in a husky voice, "Come, I want to spend some time with you. *Alone.*"

Her breath caught in her throat at his words. Taking his hand, she let him lead her through the tunnels toward the room Darmetheus had spoken of which had the fantastic waterfall and pool in the master bath. Upon entering the huge chamber and seeing the fireplace, which was taller than the living room in her own house, lit and burning bright, she felt instantly at home. The room was warm and welcoming, the unique round bed positioned in the middle of the floor. Jessica had never seen a bed such as this one. She started to laugh, but the joke died in her throat when she saw the look in Shameer's eyes.

His eyes devoured her. She felt the power of his gaze as surely as though it were a caress against her naked skin. He

gathered her into his arms and whispered her name as reverently as a prayer before placing a kiss softly on her mouth. His touch, as soft as the whisper of butterfly's wings against her lips, utterly took her breath away.

She felt cherished and nurtured and loved, beyond all else. In his arms was safety, a deep, abiding safety she had never known before. Even in the midst of all the turmoil surrounding them, her fear was minimal, knowing he was her protector. Taking a deep breath, she said softly, "I am ready now."

His eyes met hers, a look of confusion playing in their depths as he asked, "Ready for what?"

Her smile widened as she said, "To share eternity with you."

His eyes widened at her words, words he could scarcely believe, making his eyes shine with unshed tears. He asked, "My love, are you positive? This is not something you can change your mind about once the deed is done."

She nodded, reaching up to caress his cheek softly before affirming, "I have been thinking about it since the first night I knew who you were. The truth is, I don't want to live without you, and I don't want to live only one lifetime with you, then grow old and leave you." She took his hand in hers and brought it to her lips, placing a gentle kiss on each finger as her eyes held his. "I want *forever* with you; I can't accept anything less. I *won't* accept anything less."

He needed no further urging. He closed what little distance remained between them, taking her into his arms, holding her tightly. "I never thought you would choose me," he said softly, his voice shaking with emotion. "Especially with all the

torment we have had to endure since you met me." Slowly he reached to caress her breast with the back of his hand, before taking hold of her shirt and sliding it from her shoulder to expose her soft skin. Bending, he ran feather light kisses against her skin, licking and tasting the salt from it as he found her pulse. It felt like the beat of a steady drum under his lips. It called to him like a lost lover coming to reclaim the other half of its soul. Picking her up, he moved swiftly to the bed, laid her on it, as though afraid she would break. He began to unbutton her shirt as he trailed his hands with his lips, lingering between the valley bordered by her breasts.

Jessica moaned softly as his tongue slid down her chest to delve into her navel before his hands went to her pants to unzip them. She lifted her hips so he could slide them down her legs.

When her shoes and pants were gone, all that remained between them was her bra and panties. She lay breathless before him, yearning to feel him, skin against skin. He stripped his shirt off, tossed it aside, his hands going to his pants.

Jessica stopped him, rising onto her knees to work at the buttons of his jeans and pulling them triumphantly down his hips. He wore no undergarments and his manhood sprung free, full and hard before her. Her hand wrapped around it and she slid her thumb over the tip before beginning to slip her hand up and down the shaft.

Shameer's head fell back as he choked on a gasp of ecstasy. Smiling at the power she knew she had over him,

she leaned to capture his tip in her mouth. Sucking gently, she enjoyed the feel of his body shuddering before her.

"Jessica," he whispered, his breathy exhalation betraying the extent of his desire. Growling, he pushed her gently onto the bed, following her, to covering her body with his.

Leaning back briefly, he took the filmy material of her panties in his hands and yanked hard, ripping them from her. She gasped a thrill of excitement coursing through her as he covered her body with his. The bra followed the panties as he pressed into her, filling her throbbing moist heat with his shaft.

Placing her feet flat on the bed, she raised her hips in time to meet his thrusts. Her heart raced in rhythm with his as together they climbed to peaks of pleasure, which far outshone any heights either of them had ever experienced before. Her hands traced the contours of his back and slid down to gather his buttocks in her palms. Her nails raked his skin as she urged him closer still. Crying his name, she nearly fainted as she felt the waves of orgasm begin to course through her.

It was then she felt the sharpness of his teeth against her pulse and another forceful wave of orgasm claimed her. She cradled his head in her hands, running her fingers through his unbound hair as he fed off of her life-blood. Then the shattering orgasm reached him. He moved faster inside her and breaking the hold on her neck, he bellowed loud enough to echo within the walls of the cavern. Then he fell back on her, wrapping his arms around her, cradling her body close to his.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

After a moment, he leaned back and met her eyes with his in a silent question. Smiling, she nodded. His eyes closed as though in relief at her acceptance, then he moved to a sitting position beside her on the bed. Using his thumbnail, he drew a thin line above his nipple, and with his other hand he reached out for her.

Obediently, she leaned into his embrace, and let her lips open to taste his blood on her tongue. Sucking, she felt the warm, coppery liquid slide past her tongue and down her throat. It was not as unpleasant, as she had thought it might be, but instead tasted sweet, almost like honey.

After a moment he stopped her. Together they lay naked above the covers, looking deep into each other's eyes. At length, he said softly, "I have been blessed by a God I thought had abandoned me." Tears glistened in his eyes as he watched her snuggle closer to him and begin to drift off to the sleep of a newly turned vampire. She would sleep now, and no earthly force could wake her until the hour of darkness.

Reaching behind him, he pulled the cover over the two of them and once again enfolded her into his embrace. She was his salvation and he was unwilling to even chance losing her. Come the night, there would be a solution to the problem of the demon-witch. His need to protect Jessica and the others he loved demanded it.

Chapter 17

Chelsea followed Colin out into the night. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness easily enough. She watched as he turned and began pulling his clothes off, a blush spreading across her cheeks. He met her gaze and smiled, said, "My love, you have seen me naked before. Why the sudden bashfulness?"

Chelsea grinned, said simply, "It isn't your nudity; it is your nudity, combined with being outside." She glanced around, felt silly, "I mean, I know there is no one anywhere near here, but..." Her protest died off as she felt a pain in her gut.

"Oh," she gasped as she bent over. Her eyes found Colin's. "Ouch! It hurts," she said softly.

Colin nodded. "It won't last much longer," he said sympathetically. "Once the transformation starts, it goes fairly quickly."

Chelsea sighed and rubbed a hand absently over her belly. She felt a burning sensation beginning to grow from her the center of her torso to her shoulders, neck, face and ears. She gasped as she not only felt, but also heard bones popping and contorting.

"Well," she gasped, "I am certainly glad *this* doesn't last long." As she finished her sentence, the pain hit her again and knocked her to her knees.

Colin let himself transform into wolf form and sat back on his haunches, waiting for her. He was sorry for not having

warned her of the first time. It was not a simple change. The first change always hurt, because it not only transformed a person on the outside, it also made adjustments on the inside to the major organs.

As she watched herself begin to take on the shape of the wolf, a milky white fur began to coat her arms. She felt her clothes tearing. *So, that is why he was taking his clothes off,* she thought silently as her form became truly lupine. Looking around her surroundings, she noticed her sense of smell was far superior to what it was as a human.

Her eyes met those of the wolf, which sat, looking at her with a slight tilt of its head. Baring her teeth in a gesture that was not menacing but affectionate, she moved to snuggle close to her companion.

The male wolf nuzzled her neck, then turned and began to lead her down the side of the mountain. She followed him, noting all the differences she felt and saw. As a human, she only saw so much. But as a wolf, her senses were finely tuned. She saw so much more.

Excited, she raced to catch up with the two male wolves now waiting at the base of the mountain for her. There were only so many hours of darkness ahead of her this night. She intended to take advantage of it.

* * * *

Jessica awoke to a feeling of pain unlike any she had never known. Nausea raced through her. Sitting erect on the bed, she let her eyes open and adjust to the light of the candles.

Shameer sat at the foot of the bed, watching her quietly. When her eyes met his, he smiled lovingly at her.

She softly returned his smile and asked in a whisper, "How long have you been watching me?"

Shameer tilted his head and answered, "For as long as I have been able to break free of my sleep." His voice was soft and it wafted over her skin as surely as a caress. He sighed contentedly. "I have yet to convince myself last night truly happened."

Jessica took a deep breath before saying, "Well, you need to accept it fairly soon, because I am actually feeling a little discomfort right now." She searched his gaze with hers and asked, "I assume that is because I need to feed?" He nodded, and she drew a deep breath, said resolutely, "Then I guess you should teach me to hunt."

At this, he shook his head, said, "No, beloved, you will never have to hunt." He stood and moved to take her in his arms. Carrying her like a priceless treasure, he sat down in the armchair before the fire, which blazed strongly within the hearth. Cradling her in his lap, he unbuttoned his shirt and drew the fabric away from his neck, saying, "The taking of blood is a very intimate and somewhat erotic thing when it is the woman who feeds," he explained. "I don't think I could handle your taking blood from any man, save myself."

She bit her lip, already aroused by the way his hands caressed her shoulders as he pulled her closer to him. She could hear his heartbeat; feel the blood which raced through his veins. She felt her incisors lengthen as she bent to run her tongue across his pulse. His sharp intake of breath made her

realize just how deeply her erotic vampire's touch affected him.

Feeling the strongest point where the blood flowed through his neck, she bit and was rewarded instantly as his arms closed around her, holding her to him and cradling her head against his neck as she fed. Soon, her hunger subsided and she felt the warmth of his blood fill her. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she leaned back to look at him. Smiling, she said softly, "I love you, Shameer. I am glad I made this decision."

Shameer's eyes met and held hers. "I am honored, Jessica. I feel truly blessed to have you choose to remain with me." He hugged her to him, laying his head on her shoulder and relishing the feel of her smooth skin.

Jessica smiled and whispered, "I know we have a lot to do, but do you think we could stay in here for just a little while?" her eyes were lit with a hopefulness he just couldn't bring himself to deny.

"If you want, you can rest for a while more." He paused then asked, "Are you feeling better now?"

Nodding, she rose up and went to get her clothes. "I am. I don't feel bad at all right now. Actually, I am feeling really good," she said.

Shameer watched as she dressed a smile of wonderment made him feel young, and torrid. Straightening, he sobered and said, "Jessica, I know I said we could stay here, but I really think I need to start researching what we are going to have to do."

Jessica sighed, but nodded and said, "You are right. I am just going to go wash my face and then I will come meet you in the library. Okay?"

Shameer nodded and moved to go to begin studying the possibilities.

* * * *

Some time later, Shameer sat, concentrating on the parchments Tenaryn had given him. He questioned his findings. He wondered at the truth of the information. There was no way to truly *kill* this demon that had hold of Jasmine. It was impossible. It was a creature who held more power over immortality than any wizard, vampire or werewolf could ever have.

However, there was a way to force it out of her body, a way which would forever forbid it from re-entering Jasmine. It would grant her freedom, but it was not without risk. There was a very real possibility if the demon held enough strength; it could drag the remaining life from Jasmine as it left her. It would suffer her to be dragged into the depths of the hell dimension the demon itself came from.

Turning through a few more sheets, he found himself wishing he was anyone else, in any other life. He wanted to free Jasmine of this abomination, but he didn't want to sentence her to hell for all eternity.

Jessica wandered up close to him. "What did you find?" she asked hopefully, "anything?"

Shameer sighed, looking into the eyes of the woman he loved more than anything. "I found *something*..." He glanced

back at the ancient scripts he had been reading over, added, "I am not really sure if it is going to go over very well with the others."

Jessica sighed and examined his face. The frown he wore there was a dead give-away to her he was very concerned about the outcome. "Are we going to be able to do this?" she asked.

Shameer stood and put the book on the table before him. He said, "I know we can cast the demon out, Jessica. I have no fear where that is concerned."

She nodded, said, "Well, that is good then. Right?"

He shrugged, explained, "What I do *not* know for certain, is if we can accomplish the demon's eviction without Jasmine being killed in the process."

"Oh," Jessica murmured softly.

Reaching her side, he clasped her hand within his, asked, "Will you come with me to talk to Colin about this? I really don't want to break this news to him by myself."

Nodding, she kissed the back of his hand, lending him her strength. "Of course, darling. I'm right with you," she said.

* * * *

"What are you saying?" Colin asked as his voice rose in frustration. "How do you even imagine we could pull off such a thing?"

Shameer spoke softly, no hint of anger in his voice. "I have thought long and hard about this, brother," he answered. "I have read over everything I can find. I am sorry, but I see no other choice."

"But you will *kill* her!" Colin was shocked at Shameer's suggestion of how to rid themselves of the demon-witches. "It is not Jasmine who is our enemy, and yet you would sentence her to a certain death!"

Shameer advanced on Colin then, anger evident in his eyes. "And you believe she deserves to be forced to live any longer as this prisoner of an unspeakable evil?" he asked as he shook his head. "Colin if a simple exorcism could be done to rid her of this wickedness and spare her life, I would be the first to call the Catholic Church."

"It sounds possible to do what you are suggesting, Shameer, and still perhaps, save Jasmine's life," Tenaryn said from behind where the entire group sat, still horrified and bewildered by Shameer's suggestion. "It has a slim ... *very slim* chance of being able to spare her life," he continued after a pause. "But it is a far better idea than anything I have been able to come up with myself."

"But, what he is suggesting is like taking a person with a split personality and dividing them into two separate bodies," Chelsea protested. "I have been practicing magic the better half of my life and I have never even heard of such a spell being possible." She shook her head wildly to emphasize her point.

Tenaryn turned silver eyes in her direction. "Do you know there is magic in this world which need no spells in order to be performed?" he asked, his eyes then turning to regard Jessica, who watched Shameer with tears glistening in her eyes for a woman whom she had never even known. He

moved to stand beside her, reached to wipe a tear from her cheek.

"The magic between you and Shameer is one of those, Jessica. His heart reached out to yours and yours answered his, even though he was no longer even the same species as you."

He told Colin, "The love you feel for Chelsea gave you the desire to save her from unnecessary risk, by going to face your son and the demon-witch alone, knowing full well they would most probably kill you. Yet you went. And, Jasmine's love for you gave her the strength to save your life; even though the risk of waking the demon within her was so great it terrified her." Tenaryn inclined his head and added softly, "Shameer is right. Even if this plan kills her, I doubt she would want to live with this *thing* continuing to fester inside her."

Jessica sighed, then nodded and said, "Yes, I agree. She must be freed."

Chelsea let her eyes travel from one to the next of her companions before she said, "If I were the one being held prisoner by this beast, I would hope you would free me, even if it *did* cost me the life of my physical body." Her eyes searched Colin's as she added, "You wouldn't continue to make me suffer if there was even a remote chance I could be freed—*would you?*" She wiped the tears from her eyes.

Colin drew a deep breath, looked away from her, and then shook his head sadly. "No, I would do whatever I had to in order to keep you from suffering," he admitted.

Silence fell across the room, each lost in his or her own thoughts. Darmetheus, who had been watching the meeting with a tightly sealed mouth, at last rose to his feet and cleared his throat. When all eyes had turned toward him, he asked, "So, when do we do this *parting of the souls*, so to speak?"

Tenaryn answered, "Shameer, Jessica, Colin and Chelsea must do this thing on the night of the lunar eclipse ... tomorrow night."

Jessica looked at Chelsea, "Is there a way we could try to construct a shield around Jasmine once we have separated the demon from her, to protect her from being grabbed by it when we cast it out?"

Chelsea raised an eyebrow, considering Jessica's question. A slow smile spread over her face. "Actually, yes," she answered softly, "I think we can."

* * * *

Chelsea followed Colin to their chamber, a quiet sense of determination strengthening her resolve. "This will work, Colin." She said, her voice steady and assured. "We won't let it not work. She is going to be okay."

Colin held her tightly to him. "I know. You have such a tender, generous spirit," he whispered as he kissed her forehead. "How did I ever get lucky enough to have you as the better half of my soul?" His voice broke as a tear slid down his cheek.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Chelsea looked at him as a desire to be closer to him tore at her. "Make love to me, Colin," she said softly. "I want to be as close as possible to you. I need to feel you ... *now*."

Colin's lips met hers in a heart-felt kiss, which stole her breath. Her hands tugged at his shirt, as he too pulled her free of her pants. She moaned softly as his hand closed over her breast. His lips left hers as they moved to taste a nipple. Gently he suckled one, while his hand rubbed and tugged on the other.

Chelsea dropped her blouse on the floor and sank to her knees before Colin, her hands going to his pants to release his already stiff, throbbing manhood. She let his pants fall and reached out to stroke him tentatively. He groaned deeply as he felt her hands working over him.

When she lowered her head to taste him, he nearly lost himself to the pleasure of the feel of her. "No," he said as he pulled her to her feet, took her in his arms, moved to the bed and laid her on its softness. "Let me worship *your* body, Chelsea," he said softly. "I want to make you forget everything else at this moment but the two of us."

Pulling her shoes and pants off her, he left her naked before him. Her eyes followed his movements as he climbed beside her on the bed. His hands caressed her breasts, one toying with her nipple as the other traveled down between her legs to the soft curling hair covering her innermost private place.

She moaned again as he parted her folds and touched her moistness, almost drawing an orgasm from her at his touch. His finger slid inside her heat. She arched off the bed to meet

his hand. Her hand found his arousal and closed around it, drawing yet another low moan from him. Moving to position himself atop her, he used his knee to part her legs and afford himself access. His tip brushed her as she raised her hips to meet him. She whimpered at the feel of him against her. "Oh, God, Colin," she panted as he impaled her on his thick hardness.

Gasping in unison with her, he thrust deeply inside her, feeling her muscles clench tightly around him, drawing him inside. He pulled back, thrust again, deeper this time. Picking up the pace, he carried her with him to heights she had never before thought possible. She held to him, meeting each thrust by raising her hips to follow his lead. He reached to put a hand at the opening where they were joined, rubbed her clit in time with his thrusts, dragging a scream of completion from her as she reached orgasm.

He moved within her faster, faster until she felt him begin his release as well. He cried out as his seed emptied into her womb, filling her with a heat, which pushed her into another climax as he lowered himself to lie breathlessly atop her, holding her to him. "I love you Chelsea," he whispered. "I love you so very much."

Cradling his head in the curve of her neck, she smiled contentedly. "I love you too, Colin," she sighed. "I don't ever want to lose you." They lay twined in each other's arms, until finally, early into the dawn, they fell asleep, still holding to one another.

Chapter 18

Shameer held fast to Jessica's hand as they left the shelter of the cave to breathe in the fresh night air. Once outside the cave, he continued to hurry along a path, which led away from the area she had become familiar with the day before. His pace was almost faster than she could walk and she found herself trotting alongside him.

Jessica nearly stumbled, but caught herself before she fell. "Shameer, are we winning?" she asked softly, a faint smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

He stopped, turned to face her and asked, "Winning? At what?" It was a look of confusion he gave her.

"At this *race* we seem to be running here. I swear you are going so fast, if I were still human, I doubt I could keep up with you!" she said as she shivered in the coldness of the night.

Shaking his head, he smiled and said, "I am sorry, my love. I just..." He paused and looked around before continuing, "There is something I wanted to show you."

Nodding, Jessica tiptoed and brushed his lips with her own. "Okay," she said with a soft shrug. "Show me, then."

Turning, Shameer continued, this time at a slower pace, down the path, holding her closer to him to help avoid her stumbling again. "When Darmetheus was my tutor, I lived here with him. There is a place, not much further now, which is one of my favorite spots on earth," he told her.

No sooner had he spoken but the path seemed to broaden and the trees gave way to a sparkling mountain pond. The trees lined the banks and the sound of a waterfall reached her ears right before she saw it. "Oh," she said, a kind of reverence in her eyes as she beheld the water shimmering in the moonlight. The waterfall came from inside the mountain and poured out of the opening in the rock to feed into the pond before them.

Shameer smiled at her expression, told her, "It is fed from a hot spring deep inside the earth." Slipping off his shirt, he tossed it aside, and then quickly shed his pants as well. With one last look in her direction, he gave her a dazzling smile before diving into the water.

Jessica watched him swim from the bank to the middle of the pond. Turning, he called out to her, "Wouldn't you like a swim? The water is warm ... feels wonderful."

She wagged her head in amusement, rid herself of her clothes and dove in after him. The water was more than warm; it was just like taking a hot bath. It *did* feel wonderful. Swimming out to him, she giggled, "We must be crazy! This feels marvelous *now*, but when we get out and the air touches our skin, we will be so cold!"

Shameer captured Jessica in his arms, growled a heady, "Then your nipples will become taut peaks and I will have no choice but to worship them with my tongue."

At his description of what he wanted to do to her in the cold night, Jessica felt a heat spread from the middle of her belly, up to her cheeks and down to her toes. "You are making me blush," she whispered.

Shameer smiled wickedly, whispered, "I plan on doing much more than that before we leave here tonight." He bent his head to her, claimed her lips in a passionate kiss. Reaching between their bodies, Jessica stroked his hard, throbbing manhood.

He pulled her closer to him, one hand grabbing a fistful of her hair to hold her closer still, as the other hand reached between her legs to enter into the hot, moist cavern which was ready for him.

"I love you, Jessica," he said tenderly as he stroked her and elicited a moan from her parted lips. He covered her mouth with his in a wild, torrid kiss, one that bordered on abusive in its demand to be matched.

Opening her legs, she moved to encircle both her arms around his neck as she wound her legs around his waist. She felt his throbbing heat pressing into her, begging for entry into her body, as his tongue dueled with hers in a dance as old as time. Grabbing her at the waist, Shameer waded through the water to the bank, and leaned her against its shore. Almost immediately, he slid into her, filling her with his heat. She cried out at the feel of him inside her, stretching her even more it seemed than he had at any other time they had been together.

He fit her as surely as if God's own hand had formed them together, two pieces of a magnificent interlocking puzzle. She wanted no other but him; she had no life apart from him. Her existence would mean nothing, had he not found her and she him.

"I ... I" she gasped, "Shameer, you..." Her words ended in a sigh as his lips once more claimed hers.

His mind touched hers then, softly. *You are my Alpha and Omega*, he whispered inside her head. *Through you I have found the beginning of my life; if I lost you, it would be my end.* His words were to her an ancient, exquisite poem, one so full of emotion, it was alive. A sigh of pleasure escaped her as she could feel and know from this intimate mind melding the true intensity of the emotions he had for her. It was a dreamlike state of pure and total bliss she seemed to enter whenever he made love to her.

Breaking from his embrace, Jessica turned her back to him and he gripped her from behind, once more filling her with his pulsing length. She leaned her head against his shoulder as he moved with her, holding her to him while working her in time with his thrusts. She expelled a fresh gasp of air from her lungs in a vaporous billowing puff as she felt herself starting to tighten around him. His hand found her clit and rubbed it as he continued to sheath himself repeatedly, ever deeper within her. She began to pant as her sensitivity increased, almost as though he were becoming larger as he began to reach his own orgasm.

Crying out his name, she braced herself against the bank as he began moving faster and harder. It was ecstasy to have him inside her. She almost felt in that moment as though he and she were the only two beings in the entire universe. Nothing else existed but the two of them and this instant in time. She bawled aloud, her own voice sounding primordial in its coarse expression of pleasure, as her orgasm began, his

following closely behind. She felt his seed pouring into her like molten lava. It claimed her totally, held her in its grip as she began to weep. Turning to face him, she wrapped her arms around him. "I never knew that it could be so good, so sweet," she whispered through sobs of joy. "I love you so much, Shameer."

Shameer held her close, thanking God silently for giving him such a special gift as her love. "*We are one*, Jessica," he said, smiling at her gently. "I exist for you, and only because of you."

An abrupt look of concern clouded her features then and she asked, "Do you think we can do this thing? I mean, can we really banish the witch without killing Jasmine?"

Shameer considered her question, replied, "I don't know, darling. I wish I did, but I do not. Do you think we are making the wrong decision?"

Jessica climbed onto the land, used her undershirt to dry off, before putting it on. "I don't know," she answered. "I almost feel as though we are playing God, even considering it. It is hard to feel right about it."

Shameer donned his own clothes then moved to her side, helping her button her shirt. "I can understand your feelings, but what we will be doing is more like what the priests would call an exorcism," he said, looking deep into her eyes. "Those priests are not playing God; they are calling upon Him to help release the victim who has fallen under a demon's control."

He shook his head, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips. He adored her kind, gentle heart. "Jasmine has been a

victim of this demon for over three hundred years, my love. Isn't that long enough to suffer?"

Jessica nodded, whispered, "Yes, it is." She squared her shoulders then with a firm resolve. "Let's see what must be done. Tomorrow is the night we have to do it, so let's make sure we are ready."

He led her back onto the path and toward the cavern. She followed him in silence, praying what they planned would not kill Jasmine, but free her. Jessica walked behind him, a feeling of nausea growing steadily in her stomach. She tried to push it aside and continue along the trail, but suddenly, she broke free of him and rushed off the path, her hand over her mouth. The contents of her stomach would no longer stay down. She heaved violently into the night air. Shameer followed her, gently held her hair away from her face so she wouldn't get vomit on it.

Gasping when she had finished, she turned to look at him. "Am I still suffering the effects of the change?" she asked softly.

Shameer shook his head, replying, "No. The effects of the change occur all in the same night. How long have you been feeling ill?"

Jessica shrugged, said, "I have been feeling it steadily since the night you changed me." She looked up to see a look of incredulity in his features. "What? Shameer? Why are you looking at me like that?"

He smiled a smile so tender it stilled her heart, his lips trembling; he reached to touch her belly and whispered, "Jessica, we are going to have a baby. God has chosen to

allow you to carry a child from our union." Then he shot a fearful glance at her and continued, "Oh, darling, If you don't want..."

She stilled his words, calmed his worries with a soothing hand to his lips. "I *do* want," she answered. "I want it more than I ever dreamed possible."

Taking her into his arms, he cried out in joy. They had been blessed. The only way for a baby to be born to his kind was if the Father of all creation smiled upon the union. By Jessica's being able to conceive, and so soon, it meant their coming together was accepted and blessed by the higher powers.

* * * *

Darmetheus sat on a large boulder in his wolf form, looking out into the night. He breathed in the crisp air and expelled it again with a low howl. He called to Mother Moon, which was high in the sky and almost fully round. He felt, rather than saw when Tenaryn joined him. The wizard was forever traveling under the cloak of invisibility. Rising and stretching, Darmetheus doffed his lupine form with the ease one might take off a hat and turned, naked, toward the place where his old friend still stood, invisible. "Drop your invisibility, Tenaryn; I *smell* you," he said in an almost apathetic voice. "You could never sneak up on me; I can smell you a mile away."

Tenaryn shimmered into view. "My intent has never been to *sneak* up on you," he answered quietly. "I just didn't wish to startle anyone else on my walk. It would have

embarrassed the lovers to know I had come across them in my stroll." He looked rather abashed for a moment at his confession.

Darmetheus raised an eyebrow, turned his head to the side. "Did you see something to make you envious?" he asked with a hint of humor in his voice.

Tenaryn shook his head and regarded his friend from the corner of his eye before he sighed a bit discontentedly and turned to face him squarely. "Don't you ever get tired of always being alone?" he asked testily. "I mean, Shameer has always had his brother, so he wasn't ever truly alone. Such company as that may be, he still had fellowship."

He moved across the rock, pacing a bit before turning to regard Darmetheus once more. He said, "*You* have ever been alone. I don't think you have taken a lover in all the time you have been immortal." He paused then and sniffed awkwardly. "Is there something which *hinders* you from functioning as a ... well ... damn man, are you a eunuch or something?"

Darmetheus chuckled, "I assure you all of my manly parts function quite well, thank you. I just..." He paused then to look longingly at the moon. "Human lovers are so dangerous to have. They don't live as long as we do; most of them cannot be turned successfully. Colin is lucky his mate was able to survive the change." He shook his head sadly then, remembering Tessah before continuing. "Many human women would go mad from the metamorphosis, if they didn't die before completing it. I miss being able to have someone to share myself with, no denying that," he admitted softly, "but I will never doom a woman to die the painful death it would

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

mean, should she not be able to convert. And, dear friend, please spare me having to kill her after a successful conversion because she suffered from lunar madness." He cringed afresh at the memory of having to kill his own sister after she had changed form. It was too painful to remember, and too scary to dare repeat; *ever*.

* * * *

Colin and Chelsea were going through the books, researching what was needed for the spell they would cast that night, when Jessica and Shameer found their way back to them. Chelsea looked at Jessica's hair and raised a questioning eyebrow. "Have fun?" she asked with a knowing smile.

Jessica blushed in spite of herself. She almost told Chelsea her news right then, but decided against it. Shameer had said it might be best to leave the news out until all was done and she had agreed. "Yeah," she answered Chelsea softly, "I did." She turned her attention then to what her friend was doing and asked, "Having any luck?"

Chelsea shrugged, said, "We have pretty much everything we need. I think we have a fair chance at being able to release Jasmine's soul without harming her. As long as we play our cards right, and assuming she can withstand the evil one's pull, all will go well."

Jessica found herself wishing there was a way to warn Jasmine without alerting the demon to their plan. Taking her unaware might make her fearful of what their true intentions were. She only hoped they would be able to refrain from

causing the poor girl any more pain than she already was made to endure.

Shameer looked over Colin's shoulder at the book he was studying and asked, "Are you all right with this, brother?"

Colin stood still a minute, and then nodded without meeting Shameer's eyes. "We have no choice, do we? And if that be the case, I am as ready as I can be."

Shameer nodded, feeling the approaching day upon them. "We all need our rest. We have a long night ahead of us."

Taking Jessica's hand, he led her from the study. Chelsea watched them leave, then stood, and laying her book aside, moved to Colin. Taking the book he held from him, she set it aside as well, took his hands in hers. "He's right," she said softly. "We already know what has to be done and we know how to do it. What we need now is rest." Pulling him to his feet, she wrapped her arms around his waist, hugged him affectionately and said, "This will work, darling ... it *has* to."

Colin nodded and took her hand, pulling her toward their chamber. "I ask only one thing of you tonight," he said.

"What is that?" she asked.

His eyes met and held hers as he said "Hold me."

Silently, she reached out and stroked his cheek. "*That* is the easiest request anyone has ever made of me," she whispered, before standing on tiptoe to kiss his lips. Together, they walked hand-in-hand to their rooms.

Chapter 19

The boy had never seen such a beautiful woman. She was gorgeous, from her flaming red hair to her emerald green eyes. She lured him to her with soft words and he went willingly to her, unsuspecting of the evil within her. His thoughts of her had been the same innocent trusting thoughts he had held of his mother. She and his father had both died a year ago in a car crash. He had been the only survivor and since he had no living family, he had become a ward of the state. He was simply a child, no more than four years in age. He had no idea what she had planned for him. He had gone to her when she waved at him, had taken her hand, thinking she would hold him to her as a mother would and take him away from the orphanage. His joy had been complete as she had picked him up into her arms and carried him away from the church playground.

He hadn't seen the contemptuous look she threw in the direction of the playground, hadn't felt the animosity she had for his frail, malnourished body. To him, she was a gift from God; he was going to have a home again. After all this time, all the loneliness he felt dissolved as he wrapped his little arms around her neck.

She carried him into the alley and down it. He didn't notice, for he was already half asleep in the warmth of her arms. He didn't notice the blade in her hand. He was barely aware when she laid him down on the crumbled cardboard box. Her arm went up, bearing the dagger in her hand. His

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

eyes opened barely in time to see the silver of the blade before it drove into his heart. He gurgled only once as he watched her cut his heart from his chest, then his short look of horror died, along with his last breath.

As his soul began to climb away from the scene of his murder, the tunnel he had entered gave way to a glorious bright light. Within that light, he saw his mother and father holding their hands out to him. He thought one last time of the woman who had taken his heart. He knew now she had been bad, her motives wicked. She was not going to give his heart to anyone who needed it. He knew she was not from a good place. Then all thoughts of her washed from his mind as he was engulfed in his parents' arms, giving him what he had longed for since the day they had died, to be reunited with them. It was where he belonged.

* * * *

Jasmine devoured the heart of the child hungrily, swallowing it whole. Her eyes darted furtively around the alley, and then moved back to the body of the child before her. She sneered contemptuously at the empty expression in his eyes before pushing the body into a bag, which had been discarded at the side of the large trash can.

Once she had stuffed his broken little body into the bag, she tossed it without further thought into the trash. Feeling her energy returning because of the evil she had just done, she vanished into the darkness of the night. She could feel the anger of the soul of Jasmine screaming at her, repulsed and refusing to accept what had just happened. In fact, it

nearly drained her of what remaining energy she had, to keep Jasmine from taking control of her body back from her.

Well, she thought, I will just have to feed more often to keep my strength up so there will be no danger of that happening in the future. She sent her consciousness in search of Colin and Shameer; and those *vile little witches*. Getting a lock on their location, she transported herself into their area. She would let them rest today. They had no idea she would have already tracked them by now. An evil smile played across her lips as she thought of the fun she would have, come midnight.

* * * *

Shameer awoke to Jessica snuggling in his arms. She was beginning to come out of the forced sleep of a fledgling vampire. He felt his body respond to having her naked form against him under the luxury of the silk sheets. His hand went to her abdomen. There was no sign of the babe, which rested safely there yet, but there would be soon. He prayed the ordeal at hand would be over shortly, before his child could come to harm.

His arms wrapped around her and he reached to kiss her lips. She moaned and returned his kiss as she moved to get closer to him. Opening her eyes, she met his with a quick, easy smile. "Good evening," she said in her best Transylvanian accent.

He chuckled low at her jest. "You silly thing," he said as he sent his hand to toy with her nipple and pulled her on top of

him. Jessica straddled his hips, her naked body touching his in all the sensitive places.

"Hmmm," she sighed languidly. "We have work to do tonight; do we have time to play beforehand?" she asked. In answer, Shameer pulled Jessica's head down to meet his, his kiss urgent, demanding. He wanted to be inside of her now. He raised his hips to force his manhood to brush against her most tender spot.

Moaning, she deepened the kiss and pushed herself over his erection, the folds of her flesh closing over him as she pushed herself fully onto him. He filled her in one movement. Sighing, he thrust upward again, letting her feel his desire. She moved with him, gasping as she felt her first wave of hot pleasure hit. It rocked her, making her grind her hips against his as she moved, taking charge of the lovemaking. She had control and she loved the feeling as she manipulated how fast or how slowly they moved.

Pacing herself, she moved over him faster, gasping as she felt him grab tighter onto her and whirl her around to lie beneath him. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she raised her hips to meet his thrusts. Moaning out her pleasure she matched his speed, crying out his name when her orgasm took her, making everything else oblivious to her.

He followed soon after, holding her to him and panting in her ear, "I love you, Jessica." Lying beside her then, he traced patterns softly on her breast. "Are you ready to do this thing?" he asked quietly.

Jessica drew a deep breath and looked into his eyes. She saw concern there, concern for her and the dangers their task

would entail. She smiled bravely up at him, knowing he worried for her and their unborn child. "We can do this," she answered firmly. Chelsea is a strong witch, and I have to have faith in this decision. If I don't do all I can to help, I do no service to Jasmine, who needs our help so badly." It was good Chelsea did not yet know about the baby. If she knew, she would refuse to go through with the ceremony for fear of harming the child.

Jessica rose from the bed, began to dress. He lay in the bed watching her. When she turned back to face him, she was fully clothed. "Okay, let's do it," she said.

* * * *

Jessica and Chelsea sat Indian style facing one another. Between them was a phantom quartz about eleven inches tall and at least four inches wide. Their eyes were closed as they began their soft chant.

Shameer, Colin, Tenaryn and Darmetheus stood in the positions of the four directions, forming a boundary of protection around them. The men focused their attention on the crystal between the two women. When it began to glow, they would know the entity who was being summoned was about to be in their midst.

Jessica and Chelsea concentrated on their chant. Both women knew they had to do everything just so, or the entire procedure would be for naught. Once they felt the crystal begin to warm, they opened their eyes and focused on it. Their chant ended. A moment of silence followed as they sat before the crystal, watching it take on an unearthly glow.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Chelsea spoke, her eyes never straying from the light within the stone, "Spirit of destruction and victim of its horror," she said forcefully, "we command you to stand before us, release your victim and take your true form."

Jessica watched the crystal as its glow changed from a bright white, to a darker, almost crimson color. When the color of the crystal was the color of blood, it meant the spirit which they summoned would be soon standing among them.

* * * *

Jasmine was scaling the mountain. She had considered using her powers to send herself straight to them, but knew the witches would sense her presence, which influenced her decision simply to climb to the entrance of the cave. In that way, she thought she would have the element of surprise on her side.

Just as she was nearing the entrance of the cave, she started to have a tingling sensation throughout her body. Drawing up short, she looked at her hand, which was slowly fading into invisibility. As she watched, she felt herself being sucked through a vortex. *They were calling her*, summoning her to them.

Making a fist, she steeled herself against the pull of their summons. The tingling sensation soon turned to burning. It engulfed her, making her ache inside as well as outside. The soul imprisoned within her body did not make anything easier. It screamed inside her, filling her with a sensation easily compared with nails scratching a chalk board.

She could imagine if it had been possible for Jasmine to kick her in an adolescent gesture, she would have done so. Cursing, she spoke aloud, "Shut up, you sniveling little piece of human crap! If it wasn't for my possession of your weak, fragile human body, you would have long since turned to dust.

For a moment, the screaming within the body became silent. Then with a voice deep with emotion, and anger, Jasmine answered in a dangerous voice of her own, "Then at least I would have been able to choose my own destiny." Her voice inside Jasmine's head became louder again, "I would have been able to control my own life!" she sobbed her anger. "My son would have known I loved him; he could have lived a normal, happy life, you *evil-ass bitch!*" The captive's last three words stung with a deadly venom, delivered a striking blow to Jasmine. It was then she lost her control on refusing the call of the witches.

One minute she was standing outside the entrance to the cave. The next, she found herself inside the cave and within an odd circle of imprisonment. A shocked look came over her face as she saw not only Colin and Shameer, but two other men as well; guarding the perimeter of safety the women were inside.

Smiling evilly, she laughed and sneered. "If you wanted my company, all you had to do was ask," she hissed.

Shameer held within his hands a doll made into her likeness. Taking a leather cord, he began to wrap it clockwise around the doll. "I bind you Jasmine, from doing harm," he said softly. "Never again will you torture, kill or torment

another soul. No more shall you be able to use your powers to hold that body your prisoner."

Jasmine sneered angrily. The doll burst into flames in Shameer's hands. He held to it as Tenaryn spoke a single word, "Extinguish." He then waved his hand over the doll, putting the fire out instantly.

She laughed, shook her head. "You are so stupid if you think you can defeat me that easily. As old as you are, I am older still," she screamed as she looked at the two men who stood on the outer side of the circle. "Even your wizard is a child, compared to me."

Darmetheus moved closer to Tenaryn in a protective gesture. He didn't like the look in the demon's eyes. It was as if she was memorizing his face. He said to Shameer and Colin, "Can we hurry this up, please?"

Colin spoke next, a strange expression coming over him as he said, "Jasmine, if you can hear me, you are about to be free." He returned his gaze to Chelsea and Jessica, nodding. "Go ahead ... separate them," he said.

Jessica and Chelsea both stood and walked to the edge of the circle, each holding a crystal in her hand. Chelsea spoke first, saying, "We call on the spirit of the intruder to come from that body. Take form before us, as you truly are," she demanded.

Jessica added a forceful command of her own, saying, "Take substance and be real, whole as you are, separate from the body you possess."

Jasmine fell to her knees, red in the face with the strain of resisting the orders she found herself forced to obey. She

growled, she screamed, she writhed in agony as her face contorted with the effort of holding herself inside Jasmine's body. She pinpointed Jessica with a stare meant to frighten. "You will regret this," she promised. "You are nothing but a weak little fool!"

Jessica shook her head and looked at Chelsea, who in turn gave a sideways smile before they chanted in unison, "What was once done, we now undo; give possession of the body back to the soul it belongs to." They watched as Jasmine wriggled harder than ever, still trying to fight the command.

Again in unison they continued, "The spirits of nature demand you to be, solid in your form, true to be seen!"

She let out an agonized howl and Jasmine's body appeared to break in two as the parasite that had controlled her so long was forced from inside Jasmine and moved to stand separate from the human it had controlled.

Tenaryn raised his hand and chanted softly and in that instant, Jasmine's limp form flashed from the circle of imprisonment into the circle of protection. Immediately, the wizard bent and helped Jasmine into a sitting position. Her amber eyes flashed from him to the women who did not know her, yet were battling a demon to save her. Tears filled her eyes as she watched the demon, which towered above them, as it screeched and howled in tones more like a wild animal than anything else. It bore a resemblance to nothing any of them had ever seen.

Jessica's eyes widened a moment as she glanced from the creature to Jasmine, smiled, and then nodded to Chelsea when they knew Jasmine was alive and safe.

Chelsea stood at the edge of the protective circle and raised her voice, saying, "In the name of the one true Lord, I banish thee from the human realm! You have no more power here! Your victim is freed! Be gone, devil that thee may be! Angels, heed my plea! Take this lost soul far away from humanity!"

The demon cast a dark, angry look at each of the people who stood in and around the circle. "You think you have won, and for now that may be true, but only because I am weakened and have not the energy to truly fight you in this battle. Take care, for when you least expect it, we shall meet again and my brethren shall accompany me."

A blinding flash of light was followed by silence. Shameer walked out of the circle and tossed the leather-bound doll into the fire, which burned hot in the hearth. Colin moved to Chelsea's side, took her into his arms and kissed her forehead.

Jessica turned toward Jasmine, who still sat stunned in the middle of the circle with Tenaryn bracing her so she could sit upright. She looked dazed, confused and exhausted. When her eyes met Jessica's, she smiled weakly. She looked at each of the friendly faces in turn and sighed shakily. "Thank you," she whispered wearily, "thank you all so much."

Shameer moved to her side, helped her to her feet, and said, "I am only sorry we didn't realize how to help you sooner. It stole too much from you."

Colin moved closer to her and asked, "Where is our son, Jasmine? Is he still trying to find us?" His eyes held hers and

when hers filled with tears, he knew before she answered, his son would never again be a problem to them.

"She killed him, Colin. He died the day she tried to attack you after she destroyed your home." Her eyes lowered as her bottom lip shook. "It is my fault he became the way he was. I should never have allowed the demon to join with me," she said, her voice braking as she allowed herself to morn the son he should have been. She mourned the childhood he could have had, if she had only made different decisions. "He wasn't a good person, Colin. He was consumed with hatred and greed," she looked away before adding, "and it was all my fault."

Colin shook his head and said softly, "You had no way of knowing how your choice would harm anyone, Jasmine. The demon tricked you!" He was angry at the circumstances that had been.

Shameer patted the hand he was still holding, said, "I am sorry, Jasmine. I am sorry for all the pain you suffered because of that demon."

Darmetheus stepped forward then, clearing his throat. "Okay, *enough* of the sympathies," he scowled. "What she needs is rest." Coming closer to her, he wrapped an arm around her waist, seeing she was still off-balance and weak. "Come; let me show you where you can rest."

They watched her depart, clinging to Darmetheus for support. Jessica laid a hand on Shameer's arm, her head on his shoulder. "It isn't over, is it?" she asked softly.

Turning, he wrapped his arms around her and said, "It is for now." He held her to him as he thought of what the

demon had said. "For now, we have won." He shook his head. "The demon cannot come back right now or even anytime soon. We will deal with *it*, if it ever comes back, when that day comes." He looked at her, a tender smile touching his lips. "For now, I have a much more important thing for us to deal with."

At her confused look, he lowered himself to one knee, looking up at her with large, shining eyes, "Will you marry me?" He asked the question with a shaky voice then continued, "I know you have already accepted me and agreed to share my eternal sentence, but I thought maybe you would like a marriage before your friends and family. In a church perhaps?"

Before he could finish the sentence, Jessica had thrown herself into his arms. "Yes," she cried out, tears gathering in her eyes. "I am so happy, Shameer," she whispered. "I don't know when I have ever been so happy."

Chelsea and Colin held each other and smiled at their friends. One day soon, he hoped to ask Chelsea the same question, but he would wait for another time, when it could be their special moment. Colin's smile grew as he saw his brother reach into his pocket and pull out their mother's wedding band. Placing it on Jessica's finger, he pulled her hand to his lips, and placed a kiss on her palm. He knew Shameer would do everything within his power to make sure she was forever happy.

Chapter 20

Jessica walked through her house, shook her head at the amount of destruction it has sustained. Her furniture was in tatters. The pictures on the walls had been burned; curtains were slashed from rod to floor. Everything was a mess. Even her clothes had been vandalized. Knowing it had been Shamus who had done all of this and there was no longer any threat from him, didn't really help much. She still felt violated and abused.

Realizing how close to death she had actually come, she crumpled onto the floor, tears building in her eyes, but failing to spill as she sat in shock. Shameer knelt beside her, putting his arms around her, trying to comfort her. "It is over now. He can no longer torment us," he said.

Jessica nodded, knowing he spoke the truth. "I know, Shameer," she sighed raggedly. "It just terrifies me to realize how this could have turned out. If we had not been able to find a way to release Jasmine ... can you even imagine?" She sobbed at the thought, "We could have lost each other. Again."

Helping her to her feet, Shameer held her tight in his arms. He knew how she felt. It had been a very real possibility things could have gone differently. They could have lost each other, not just for this lifetime, but forever. His lips captured hers as he offered her comfort the only way he knew how, he crushed her to him.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

She held to him as though she was lost at sea and he had just tossed her a lifeline. She returned his kiss wholeheartedly. Gasping for breath, she broke away long enough to tear at her clothes. She wanted to have his naked body atop hers; wanted to feel him inside her.

Heart pounding, he ripped at his own clothing. Grabbing her, he melted with her to the floor, kissing her passionately, as though the very air they breathed was nothing to them compared to each others' touch. Her hands caressed his chest, playing with the thin line of hair, which led downward toward the swollen member she knew ached to be inside her. She took his hardness in her hands, moaned as she felt him twitch in her grasp, then lie on the floor and spread her legs in invitation. He moved between them, his eyes never leaving hers as he penetrated her. Thrusting deeply inside her, he held her tightly as he pushed himself deep within her.

His hands found her breasts and his thumb brushed her nipple, wrenched from her a moan deep from inside her throat. Her cry of pleasure was lost as his lips claimed hers. He kissed her as though she were his only sustenance. Moving down her cheek, his let his lips trace a pattern down to the hollow of her neck, then, fangs extended, he bit into the tender flesh of her neck and she felt herself soar to new heights of orgasm at the union.

He drew the blood from her neck at the same time he thrust again deep inside her, sending the automatic orgasm rocketing through her body. She gasped for breath through the feelings he was pulling from her. She wanted more. She wanted him.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Licking the remaining blood from the already closing wound, he rolled over and pulled her atop him. She smiled at him and asked softly, "Is it my turn?"

At his nod, she found the vein in his neck which matched hers. Sinking her fangs into it, she drew on his lifeblood, moaning as she also impaled her moist vagina once again on his hardened length. The feel of him inside her was almost more than she could handle without climaxing immediately once again.

Sucking gently on his neck, she moaned as she felt his need become greater, more urgent. She doubled her efforts over him, rose to watch his face as she pushed him yet closer to his release. Before he could reach it, she moved and knelt to take him into her mouth. Sucking fast and hard, she began swallowing the thick fluids of his passion, delighting to herself as he cried out her name. Knowing she had just given him something he would never have asked her for, she laid her head on his abdomen and smiled happily at him. "I love you, Shameer," she said softly. "I am glad you came into my life, even though it meant we all had to deal with big nasties before we could find our happily-ever-after."

Shameer caressed her cheek, returning her smile as he did. "I don't believe I ever knew what true happiness was, until you came into my life," he whispered. He pulled her up his body to hold her close. "You have given my life meaning it never had before." His lips claimed hers then in a kiss so sweet, so gentle, it brought tears to her eyes.

* * * *

"Oh, Colin, stop," Chelsea giggled as she watched him try for the fifth time to smooth his long platinum blond hair into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. Shameer and Jessica both stood in the doorway of the group's newest home, watching and waiting.

Scowling, he surveyed himself in the mirror. "Perhaps I should just cut it," he whined.

"Don't you even *think* about it!" Chelsea responded hotly. "I love your hair; I wouldn't have it any other way. You look *wonderful*. Mom is going to love you!"

Colin looked back at Jessica and Shameer, who had such looks of amusement on their faces that his scowl deepened. "What are *you two* looking at?" he asked angrily.

Shameer let his smile broaden as he looked at his brother. "A fool," he answered softly, attempting to keep the humor from making his voice crack. "I don't see why you are so nervous. Her mother is a witch. She is probably used to men with long hair." He smoothed a hand over his braid before continuing, "I even considered leaving mine down for this occasion."

Jessica laughed heartily at Shameer's words and said, "Don't let him fool you, Colin. He was up at the break of dusk, trying to decide what to wear, how to comb his hair, and he, too, wondered about cutting *his*." She shook her head at Shameer. "Shame on you for making your brother believe you aren't nervous over this meeting! He's fibbing Colin; don't buy it," she added.

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

Shameer's shoulders fell as he looked guiltily at Chelsea. "In all of our years of existence we have *never...*" He paused, swallowing hard before continuing, "met the parents."

Chelsea giggled, "Well, Daddy died several years ago and Mom is pretty easy-going." She smiled brightly and wrapped her arms around Colin, hugging him tightly. "She really is going to love you, *both of you!*"

Jessica nodded, said, "Now will you two stop worrying and come on? We are gonna be late." Turning, she led them out the door. Chelsea followed her, leaving the brothers to stare helplessly at each other before closing the door to their new country mansion and following them to the silver Jaguar parked in the circle drive.

Epilogue

The night the brothers had met Chelsea's mother had been the night they had become more than just mates to the women they loved. They became a part of something they had longed for much longer than they had ever thought possible in their long lives; they became a loved and accepted part of a family. They discovered Jessica also lovingly called Chelsea's mother Mom as well. It was a good title for her, as it was apparent she loved her every bit as much as she loved Chelsea.

She had insisted Colin and Shameer also call her Mom. It had felt awkward to them at first, since the woman did not look like a mother of anyone over the age of twelve. They both could imagine she was often mistaken as Chelsea's older sister, instead of her mother.

The family held a double wedding ceremony on the anniversary of the day they had all met. It was a happy time; filled with love and laughter and blessed by the newly proclaimed knowledge Chelsea was expecting a baby.

Abby and Davis doted on the expectant mothers. It gave their lives new meaning to have new life being born into the family their own families had been serving for over eight generations. Life was happy for the brothers now. They no longer prayed for death to release them from a curse intended to break their spirits as well as their hearts. They had a reason for living each day, or night to the fullest. They had found something, which made everything else in their

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

world worth the battles against evil they would continue to face. With Colin's newfound youth and the gift of the wolf form, he had become Shameer's partner, able not only to watch his own back in battle, but to aid his brother as well.

Shameer had found a contentment he had never before known. He knew now the witch's curse had not truly been a curse at all, but a deep, powerful blessing. He would have never found his true love, the way she was meant to be in the time period he had been born into. He had to live an *Eternal* life in order to find the other half of his soul. And he had.

The End?

The Eternal
by Shiloh Darke

About the Author

Shiloh lives in West Texas with her husband and two children. Her favorite past times are singing, reading fantastically unusual Romance novels, and writing a few of her own here and there. She enjoys writing fan fiction as well. She has had a love of vampires and the supernatural all of her life. It is easy to understand why when you open up one of her books.

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