

Isölde

A *Blood-Rose Guardians* Supplementary Novella

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A note from the author:

This novella is provided free of charge through a selection of online sites. It is hoped that readers find a connection and an interest in the story of Isölde, who is loosely based on the Isölde of pre-Arthurian legend. To explore the world of the *Blood-Rose Guardians* in greater detail, please see the published works.

Thank you and happy reading!

For the dedicated fans...thank you for your support.

Prologue

I always knew that love was the answer. The need and desire to be loved welled up from a place deep within my core; the love that I had to offer was bright and free and would willingly be given to the right man. As I left my childhood behind me, I wasn't quite prepared for the journey of love, but I knew that a life without love was not a life at all, and so, perhaps blinded by the sweet promise of what could be, I leapt into the idea of love a long time before I understood the consequences of such blind faith.

My journey toward appreciating the intricacies and evolution of love would begin with William...I had thought my journey would end with him too, but that, like so many other things, was just not meant to be. A young Tristan had seemed a worthy replacement when William disappeared and, had he stayed the man I met, perhaps, even now, centuries later I would be by his side. Alas, he did not, or could not, and so I was compelled to leave by the man I, at that time, loved more than the idea of love itself.

In my youth, when I was innocent and sweet, I believed fully in the idea of love...and more so, the idea of true love; a connecting of souls and bodies that would transcend time. My heart ached to be filled with that kind of love. I daydreamed of it as I wandered on the beach, alone with my thoughts and an ocean of possibilities before me. Somewhere, out there in the vastness, across the ocean, there was a man whose heart would long for the same connection with my heart; a man, strong and kind, who would sweep me up in a loving embrace and adore me until the end of time. Love, it turned out, was a bit more treacherous than I had anticipated; it could be fickle and unkind...and worse, it could break your heart! As a young, free woman, I could not even imagine the pain of a broken heart; an impossible connection between emotion and body; a pain so severe that the chest ached, tears formed and cascaded from red eyes and the ability to rise up and face the day was completely compromised. It was as foreign to me as the hoards coming in from the North and taking our lands. I had no idea that something so wonderful could become a weapon, so toxic and volatile in nature that it could render

someone useless; it could incapacitate even the greatest warriors...of course, that was until I had my own heart broken, and then I fully comprehended the power of love!

William broke my heart, through no fault of his own, but others...well, they did it on purpose. I understand that it may not have initially been their intention, to use love as a weapon; to ensnare and enthrall me, to derail and debilitate me, but that was the end result nevertheless. I was so young and easily beguiled; easily broken, by the effects of love.

I was sixteen when my journey with love began – the perfect age, my father felt, to be married off; to make me his responsibility no longer, but the responsibility of another man. The events that followed were mere coincidence, the ides had not been heeded but I don't think, that even if they had, that that would have changed anything. I think a decision made in a far off land, by a man who had no knowledge or care of my life – a man who had asked his soldiers to perform a simple duty, changed my world forever. For a while, I blamed my father, but it wasn't his fault. It wasn't William's fault either and yet he was the cause of my pain. Some level of responsibility lies with Tristan, some lies on my own head - for my actions too, had consequences, but the bulk of it, the one who has the most blood on his hands was Marcus! He alone is responsible for the majority of the pain and heartache that I have ever endured in my life time.

That I am still here to tell my tale, millennia later, is Tristan's doing...for it was he who transformed me. He challenged my faith, he challenged my simplistic ideals and he converted me from a weakling princess, to a vampire queen! There have been three significant men in my life; one of them my husband and two of them named Tristan. William took me from servitude with my father king to the highest honours in a new home; to this day I miss him and his gentle hands, but he is merely a memory of a far distant time and place when things were simple and love was enough. Then there was the first Tristan, he stole my heart at a time when it was not my right to give it to another man. His jealousies were fuelled by his indiscretions against my rightful husband and his own loving partner. He tortured my mind, body and soul. I was a prisoner for his demented idea of love; trapped in subjugation, a slave to his desires and quest for power. I am thankful for the gift he gave me – immortality, and the lessons I learned to protect my heart under his insidious tutelage, but I was not sad when his time ended.

The second Tristan loved me body and soul for a time – and it was a wonderful time, but then he took me and locked me away from the world too. For a long while, being the object of the second Tristan's affections was enough to sustain me, but eventually all good things must come to an end and the remaining goodness and purity of my heart was lost in the void of despair that occupied his complicated world. I no longer became his carefully guarded treasure, but more so his prisoner and prostitute. He went from a man who had loved me with such sweet surrender, to a beast who would follow the orders of a madman with no concern for how those orders would impact others. He broke my spirit and I eventually succumbed to the burden of a half-life; one where I was imprisoned without any hope for happiness. My life, it seemed, was not to be one filled with romance as love had promised, but rather one filled with sorrow and regret for the people I had hurt on my journey to love; for the husband I had betrayed, for the children never born, for the friends who had aged and died in my immortal presence.

It was a fitting punishment that I found myself lost in the darkness. My barren heart and tortured soul had ensured that I was not fit to walk in the Light, and so when the opportunity presented itself, that I might leave the prison Tristan had kept me in, I was afraid to do so. I had been exiled and left alone to survive in a strange world...afraid and forgotten by friends and family, lost and disoriented in an environment filled with strange creatures, but I did survive and even, at times, I thrived.

The night he finally died, stars lit the sky and they burned so brightly I had to shield my eyes from their dazzling light. The magic veil that had kept me imprisoned in the inky black of an eternal night these centuries past was lifted, and I knew he was gone forever. Ribbons of coloured light, green and pink, danced across the night sky and my heart celebrated their dance; the awakening of an ancient magic and the tug of destiny pulling me back into the game.

I felt the loss of him deep within my blood, and rejoiced in the freedom offered by that feeling. I had loved him; regrettably, I always would for he had bound me to him with magic in the dark ages when it was powerful and right to do so, and I had accordingly loved him with my whole heart as was my place at that time in history. Then one night, the oppressive power of that bond lifted and I knew that I did not have to love him any

longer; that I was no longer trapped in my tower; that I could leave and hope to live again...except that I was too scared to do any such thing!

Time has not been my friend. An immortal life in a mortal realm has its disadvantages. I have lost more friends than I ever thought I might have given where my life began. I have watched the world change and I have been invisible within that changing world. Time has allowed the world to overlook me and pass me by; it has ensured that I repeatedly find myself alone needing to start again and again; reinventing myself every generation...but, in this time, something new dawns on the horizon. Their coming is inevitable, for the wilds hold the secrets of another realm and they are the guardians of those secrets and that other realm. I might not yet be able to leave this island at the bottom of the world, but I don't think I will need to - because there is so much about to happen here in my Tasmanian home. My name is Isölde, once loved wife, twice betrayed lover, apothecary, explorer and exile. This, small rocky outcrop just above the Southern Ocean, is my island home and now begins my journey towards freedom and the Light. I have much to offer and many gifts to give. I could be a valuable asset or thorn in one's side. I will offer my services to them when they arrive, for they are my ticket on the train that leads back to brightness of day and the most sacred Light!

Chapter 1

The Beginning

The western shores of my homeland are skirted with a lace of ocean froth washing up the beach. It wrestles with the seaweed and pushes against gravity to force its way toward the low dunes. Waves evidence the power of nature and yet her ever forgiving outlook on the future, for they wash away all trespasses on a beach; the past is immediately erased. I love that the tide can delete all the scars of the day before and each new dawn brings a fresh beginning; new promises and fresh hope. Sometimes treasures of the sea are left behind for those of us who remain children at heart, despite the hardship of the world around us. I was raised, if you could call it that, by my father - The King, well one king, of the greenest island in the Atlantic. My mother died when I was quite young of a sickness, now easily treated, and so most of the responsibility for seeing that I was fed and cared for actually fell to her younger sister. I never knew that she despised my father, until I grew up and saw the way he treated people; experienced the way he looked at them as chattels – commodities to be traded for his own benefit. The day he traded me, was the day I understood my mother's true sadness. She herself had been traded to my father, as I was to his second in command. I was the prize for his warrior's great war efforts. I was the prize for this man's brutal ways and unforgivable sins against the lands he had conquered in the name of his king. I was to be married to a man I barely knew but expected to loathe, given to him by a man I now despised, and my independence, what little of it I may have had as the daughter of a king, was sold like a goat at the market.

Dressed in a white gown, crowned with a garland of flowers and forced to stand with a man in front of the whole Kingdom, I was blessed and cheered and bound in Holy Matrimony to a virtual stranger. It was the way of things and, because my endeavours to escape this green isle had all been thwarted by my father's guards, I found myself barely a woman, but suddenly a wife. Celebrations had continued into the night, wine and ale had flown freely from my father's great stores and the minstrels had ensured that music flowed and kept spirits high. We danced, my father pranced and the Kingdom celebrated, but on the inside, my heart wept for the love of my life I would now, never meet. I was

trapped in an agreement binding until death. I was now a wife, a slave, a piece of property, traded from one man to another and led from the castle keep to a small hut on the edge of town with a fine view of the ocean.

I cringed from his touch and evil stench as he invited me into our home. There was no excuse for bad personal hygiene when the ocean was so close with its cleansing salt water. I backed myself away from him; repulsed by his presence, but when he came at me, it was not as I expected. I had expected to be beaten into submission; to be raped to consummate the wedding in which I had been an unwilling participant. I had expected to weep every night as my mother had wept, but instead he had asked me how he might please me.

I bit my lip and stood with my back to the wall, trapped.

“Take a bath and clean your teeth,” I pleaded.

“My odour offends you so?” He had asked, apparently surprised.

I nodded nervously.

To my surprise, he picked up a clean robe and then walked out of the room. I peered through the door and was astounded to see him walking toward the beach. I set to work in the hut that was now to be my home. While my new husband cleaned his person, I cleaned our matrimonial bed. I tossed anything that offended my nose out into a wooden barrel to be washed another time. I banished all bloodied weapons to the entry near the front door. I could barely lift his mace and had to drag it across the ground. I swept the months of dirt from the floor and found stone slates underneath the filth. When he came back, wearing the robe alone, I barely recognised the man.

I looked at him more carefully, unsure that this was the same man to whom I had been married. He looked human now, if a little grotesque from battle wounds. Beneath the grime, his skin had been white, but now clean, this only made the red welts of healed wounds stand out against the pale surface. He disrobed and stood before me naked, allowing me to inspect his improved form. He was the first man I had seen naked and I was a little surprised by his anatomy; drawing in a sharp breath quite by accident at the sight of him. He was a lot younger than I had previously thought when covered with battle

grime. I had thought he was nearly of my father's age, but he was clearly much closer to mine.

"My name is Isölde, what is yours?"

"Rufus, the Mean" he replied.

"No. What is your real name?" I asked again.

He hesitated and I thought he might not tell me.

"It would please me to know my husband's real name," I told him.

"William, My Lady Isölde."

"William," I repeated finding the name comforting. It was a good name...a kind name. "Are these all battle wounds?" I asked walking around him, inspecting his brutalised skin.

"Indeed, My Lady."

I reached out and ran my fingertips gently across the mark that crossed his shoulder. He had another just like it lower down his back. He jerked a little at my touch.

"William, why did you want me to be your wife?" I asked him, still bitter at my father for trading me like livestock.

"I could not bear to think of you with another man – especially the ones your father tries to impress with his 'generosity'."

I tipped my head to the side and considered him. I felt that I had sorely misjudged this man. He cleaned up quite well. He had a respectable name and a kind heart...well a kind heart where I was concerned - he could not have been given the name 'Rufus, the Mean', if his heart was perpetually kind.

"You care for me?" I questioned him.

"I do," he replied quietly, "...for many seasons now."

"You would protect me from those who seek to harm me?"

“I would,” he answered with pride, standing tall like one would expect of a soldier.

“Would you force me to do something against my will?”

He squirmed a bit under that question, knowing full well that I had been forced to marry him against my will this very day.

“I mean apart from the marriage thing,” I clarified for him with a flick of my hand.

“You mean would I take you into my bed without your permission?”

“Yes, that is what I am asking, I guess.”

“Never, My Lady,” he bowed his head and lowered his eyes.

I could have been forced into a marriage, far worse than this appeared it would actually be, and I considered for a second, that my current position might be one of blessing rather than entrapment. He had very kind eyes and he had not complained that I had rearranged his place in his absence. He now smelled clean like the sea. I took a hesitant step toward him. His eyes lifted to meet mine. I reached out and nervously placed a hand on each of his shoulders and then, as my heart raced, I slid my hands down to his firm battle-hardened pectorals and I moved another step closer to him. He lifted his hands to my waist. I automatically tensed at his touch but fought hard to resist the urge to turn and flee. He began to pull his hands away, thinking he had offended me, but I held them there and got used to the sensation of a man touching my body in such an intimate way.

“No, keep them there, I am...I have never...it is permissible to touch me in this way,” I said with a nervous smile.

I could feel the heat coming from his body, and the part of his anatomy that, I had only for the first time seen moments ago, now stood at attention and pressed lightly against my hip. It was hard; I could feel it through the multiple layers of fabric I wore. I was pressed right against him, and although at first he had repulsed me, now it felt kind of nice and my pulse raced. My breaths, to my own surprise, were becoming shallow and were much closer to matching his.

“William, do you love me?” I whispered up at him.

I drew in a sharp breath at the way his lips against mine had excited parts of me that I hadn't realised could be excited by a man. I wet my lips with my tongue and moved to kiss him again.

“Isölde,” he whispered, “do you think you could learn to love me too?” he asked with an edge of pain in his voice.

“I will,” I whispered hoarsely, encircling his neck in my arms, and a moment later, his mouth captured mine.

I could learn to love this man who had effectively saved me from a far worse future, I was sure of it. Granted, I was intimidated by him, and I was certain his tenderness would stop at the front door and Rufus the Mean would return the minute the world's eyes were upon us, but if this was the man who I slept beside night after night, I would cope and I believed I could learn to love him. I could certainly be his wife.

I was surprised to feel desire rise within my loins as his kisses enflamed a dormant passion I had desperately hoped to one day feel with my future husband. Perhaps he was the right man for me. I felt inclined to find out and snaked my arms tighter about his neck as his kiss grew deeper and his tongue penetrated my mouth. The moan of pleasure escaped me before I had time to check it and consider what information it would give this man. He picked me up in his strong arms and carried me to the bed I had earlier refreshed, and I had wanted him to do just that. I found myself torn between my anger at having been married off to a relative stranger, and my desire to truly know this man: mind, body and soul. He lay on top of me and pulled his lips from mine to look into my eyes. He had such kind eyes; brilliant blue.

“Isölde, I would very much like to make love to you tonight.”

I teased his ginger hair betwixt my fingers.

“If you will be gentle...as this will be my first time, I welcome your love-making, my husband.” I was surprised to catch tears welling in the corners of his eyes. He didn't reply other than to nod and a swallow, his Adam's apple moving with the motion. I had

absolutely been wrong about this man and I was astonished that he had been so close in my presence, given on the periphery, but there nonetheless for years now and I had failed to notice him – perhaps even deliberately ignored him!

He kissed me tenderly but soon that kiss heated with passion, and he helped me escape the multitude of robes I had dressed in for my wedding to make this moment deliberately difficult.

“I’m sorry there are so many...I didn’t think I’d want to...” I bit my lip.

“I am honoured that you have changed your mind,” he responded with a smile.

I knew William was a great warrior. There were rumours that my father had intended to give him land and make him a Duke in Normandy, perhaps he had given that up to have me instead. I cupped his cheek in my hand and lay beneath a man for the first time in my life and I was agreeable with where my life had taken me this day. I had not anticipated that he would make love so tenderly. He was a killer, he could slay a man with one sword strike, but with me he was as gentle as I could have wanted. He kissed my lips and then moved his mouth down my throat. I did so enjoy that sensation. In no time he had me wet with the anticipation of his erotic touch and I longed for him to impale my sex on his hard erection.

“This might hurt for a second because it is your first time,” he warned me and returned to kissing my neck as he positioned himself at the entrance to me. As he slid forward, plunging himself between my thighs deeper and deeper, he bit on my ear. I was so distracted by the sudden piercing sensation on my earlobe that I barely noticed as he broke through my virginity. As he filled me with his turgid flesh I wondered at how pleasant the sensation was; how much I enjoyed the way his body completed mine. He started to move forward and backward: sliding himself deeper and then retracting part way before pushing forward again. I moaned with the pleasure of it and pulled him tighter against me. I smiled up at him but as he lowered his lips to mine, I arched away from his mouth and gripped the bedding as a completely new and explosive sensation barraged my body. My eyes, I am sure, rolled back in my head and I called out with the pleasure. He thrust into me harder then, only twice, before he too moaned and shuddered above me.

I cried then. I was so overwhelmed with how pleasant my first time had been, and at the thought of how unpleasant it might have been if my father had given me to another man – to any man but William.

“Did I hurt you? I am truly sorry if I did,” he stammered to calm me and wiped away my tears with kisses so gentle that I knew I could love this man...knew that I was already developing an affection for this man.

“Not at all...that was...good,” I said through my tears.

“If I didn’t hurt you, why do you cry, My Lady?”

“I am just so happy that it was like that...so loving and tender...I guess I am very happy that you were the man I was married to today, William.”

He moved from above me and tucked himself in neatly behind me. He pulled the blanket above us and ensured I was comfortable. Then he kissed my neck and whispered in my ear.

“...Me too, Isölde...me too.”

Chapter 2

William

William was strong and brutal in performing his duties for his king; in our home alone with his wife, he was tender and sincere. He worshipped me as a goddess and I quite enjoyed basking in his attentions. We were not rich, but we were comfortable. There was always food to be had, and we usually dined in the keep with my father and his newest wife – a woman younger than myself. William brought home trinkets from his exploits. One trinket he claimed to have found was an emerald ring. It was a simple gold band with a decent emerald guarded by a small diamond either side. He placed it lovingly on my finger. He had kept it at much risk to himself, as the spoils of any raid were to go to the king first, after he had taken his pick of the treasures, what remained was distributed amongst his men.

On this most recent venture I had found myself missing him and worrying for him with such great concern over his safe return that I had to check my emotions. I found myself longing for his return to my bed; for his tender touch and his passionate kisses. I found myself loving my husband completely and desiring very much that he returned to my side where he belonged.

The moment he walked through the door, bloodied and covered in the stench of battle, I rushed to his side.

“Oh how I missed you, My Love,” I told him.

“You did?”

“Aye, with my whole heart,” I replied.

“...but I was gone naught but two nights.”

“Indeed, I spent two nights alone in our bed without my beloved husband.”

“Isölde, know you what you are telling me...please say you are not playing with my heart so.”

“I play no games, sweet William, my heart and words are true. I missed you so and I love you dearly,” I told him.

His eyes sparkled and he reached for the clean robe we kept hanging near the door.

“In that case, I had better rush to the ocean and plunge my body beneath the cleansing salt water, for I fully intend to make love to you this night,” he turned and walked out of our home.

I felt such joy in recognising the truth of my heart. I knew not when my mind and heart had been convinced of his worth in my life, but I knew that I had fallen in love with him. He may be scarred by battle, he may sometimes cry out in his sleep during a nightmare, he may have to treat me with a condescension he did not feel in public, but for those few faults he was a man worthy of my love. He blessed me with laughter and love whenever we were alone; he romanced me with wild field roses and hand carved trinkets – four of such stood proudly on the mantle this very day: a phoenix, a falcon, a swan, and a sphinx.

The door swung open with his return and I leapt into his arms. He kissed me and I returned his kisses with all of the love I felt in my heart. It felt perfectly right, our embrace. I could not have wanted for a better husband. He disrobed and I saw for the first time his newest battle wounds. He was bruised and battered and had an angry laceration across his waist.

“You are injured, My Love!”

“...and every scratch worth it to come home to such a greeting.”

“I must tend to your wounds...”

“Nay, I must make love to you,” he cut me off.

“William Rufus, I will tend your wounds,” I said with all the dominance I dared muster, “and then I will make love to you.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but as the full breadth of my statement sank in he closed and simply stood still with a mighty grin.

“Agreed?” I prompted.

“Agreed,” he nodded.

I beckoned him to be seated and got to work preparing a poultice to cover the laceration. The salt-water bath would have been of great benefit, and he would need to do that daily. I prepared a paste of honey and beaten boiled nettle leaves, which I applied to the wound and then I bandaged it to hold the poultice firm. It would heal well providing no infection set in and with the medicinal magic in the honey and nettles that was assured. When I was done, I disrobed myself and stood before my husband naked. My long blonde hair trailed down my body like a waterfall. I reached for his hand and pulled him toward our bed. He came silently, taking all of me in with his eyes.

“Lay you down, My Love,” I directed him.

“Lay you down beside me?” He asked as he followed my instructions and lay naked but for the bandage in the centre of our bed.

“Nay,” I said and moved on top of him, being careful not to press against his wounded abdomen.

His manly appendage stood to firm attention as I mounted his person and crawled forward to place my lips against his. He raised his hands to my shoulders and rubbed them down my arms. I lent backwards and righted myself, taking his hands and cupping them to my breasts. His touch was gentle but unyielding and as he brushed the darkened aureole of my breasts with his thumbs, my nipples stood out firm, excited by his touch. I leant forward again and kissed him tenderly, though my loins longed for a far more intense interaction, I resisted simply sliding his pulsing shaft within my eager depths as I wanted to show him that I truly loved him. I did allow his erection to rub against the swelling folds of my sex though, and as he brushed over the nub at the apex of it, I was thrilled with the sensation of his silken touch. I moved slowly down his body, kissing his bruises. I lingered upon each of his small dark nipples and then followed the trail of his glossy hair lower down his front until I found myself focusing on the area beneath the bandage. I gently took his manhood between my hands and rubbed the silky shaft; he moaned and lifted his hips to my hand. I moved lower so that I could take this most

important part of him within my mouth. His hands rubbed against my scalp as he allowed himself to enjoy the sensation.

I had never made love to him. He had always made love to me. I had been a willing participant each and every time, but he had done all of the work and I had simply enjoyed the ride. Tonight was different. Tonight it was my turn to show my husband of one year that I loved him as truly as he loved me and that I could pleasure him as he pleased me.

I took all of him into my mouth and then slowly lifted my head before plunging it back down his heated shaft. He moaned again and then pulled me forward so that he could kiss me. I straddled his sex and moaned myself as he impaled me on the mighty shaft. He reached for my hips and guided me into a steady rhythm. As the delicious sensation of our connection and the motion of our movements took me on this newest sexual journey I closed my eyes and leant back, feeling every inch of him inside me. I know I moaned as his hand pressed against my belly and his thumb began rubbing the exposed nub at the pinnacle of my sex. I opened my eyes to see him watch me so intently that had it been any other person besides William, I would have been embarrassed for my behaviour, but it was William and I smiled, before closing my eyes and letting the stimulation take me again. The electricity that swept through my groin had me in pleasurable convulsions within moments and I was forced to tip forward by the contraction of my muscles around him. He drew me down tight against him and kissed me with such ferocious passion as he thrust deeply inside me, filling me with his glorious seed as he came hard within my feminine depths.

“You make such sweet love, My Lady,” he told me between kisses, “I should never want to lose you.”

“You never shall, My Love.”

He held the blanket up as I snuggled into the bed beside him. He wrapped me in his arms and held me against his battle-fatigued body. I looked into his eyes; eyes that glistened with tears he was trying hard not to shed. I raised my hand to his cheek and he pressed into it.

“William, how would you feel about a child?”

“Are you with child?” He asked his voice lifting in his excitement.

“I’m not yet sure...but I would like to be, if it pleases you for me to be so.”

“Aye, the thought of you carrying my child pleases me greatly.”

I smiled and kissed him and closed my eyes surrounded in my own bliss. A year ago I would never have thought that being the prize of this man would ever have turned out so well, but he had loved me and saved me from a far worse fate. It had taken a year of his fond attentions and passionate embraces for me to realise my own feelings for him, but now that I had, I felt buoyed with love. He left the bed briefly and then returned to my side bearing a ring.

“Happy anniversary, My Love,” he said slipping the ring upon my finger.

“Oh William, I have naught but to give you...”

“Isölde you have already given me the greatest gift of all this day.”

“I love you, William; you are my heart; my love; my husband.”

He kissed me and I rejoiced in that kiss. The ring sparkled on my finger and my heart sparkled with happiness. I was fairly sure that I was with child, but I had wanted to be sure that William would be agreeable to such an endeavour, before I announced it to him and my father. I closed my eyes on the most perfect day...not knowing that it would be the last perfect day in a very long time.

Chapter 3

Attack

The day of the attack on the king's keep was a dark day in the beginning of a series of dark days. It was a late December day in 1065 and the sun barely seemed to shine at all. The ground was frosty and the sky darkened by heavy thunderclouds. The men who came were soldiers; an army seemed to walk right over us. Marcus their leader was unforgiving and sought to remove any evidence that we had existed at all. They had picked a time when our own men were away on distant shores. I knew not where this army had come from, but I could see the darkness in their eyes. They cared not for the sanctity of human life and I watched as everyone about me was slaughtered. Although I cared little for the king, my father, I still wept as he was forced to kneel before this Marcus and his head was sliced clean from his shoulders with a battle-axe. I did not scream out, but tears trickled down my sooty cheeks. I watched as the village and even my home were destroyed by fire. Only five of us survived – all women, all marched off to be the slaves of this Marcus' senior soldiers.

I had wished that I had died at the village when I was stripped and then dressed in a fine gown by female attendants ready to be paraded and sold to his depraved men. I longed for my William to come and save me, but I was thankful too that he had been away when the attack occurred, for not one of the men was allowed to survive. We, the five women, were paraded about a circle, bound by ropes and led as though we were livestock. The men bid on us as though it were an auction, and I realised it was, I was being sold into sexual depravity by my conquerors. I caught the eye of the leader's confident – a man named Tristan. I was given then to Tristan and no money was exchanged. Once again I had found myself traded to a man as though a chattel for his deeds in battle.

Tristan seemed as ruthless as Marcus. He took the band William had given me from my finger and departed our tent. I sat bound with rope to the central pole. At least he had had the decency to give me a chair to sit upon. When he returned he slipped the ring back onto my finger. I looked at him oddly, for that action made no sense to me at all.

“Kiss me,” he commanded.

I wanted to resist. I had no intention of ever kissing a man who was not my husband, but even as I resisted, I felt compelled to lean forward and press my lips to his. My heart screamed at me, but it was drowned by the overriding need that I felt to make Tristan happy.

“Disrobe...let me look upon you naked,” he commanded.

“I will not,” I declared but even as I said it, my hands lowered the garments I had been forced into toward the floor.

I stood before him naked; exposed and vulnerable. I trembled with fear for what he would have me do next.

“Get into the bed,” he directed as he sliced through the ropes that bound me to the pole.

I wanted to run. Now was my chance to escape, but rather than dashing toward the entrance of the tent, my feet carried me directly to the bed. I slipped in between the sheets, pulling them close to my skin as I watched him watching me.

“Stay there.”

He walked out and I was left alone, naked and unable to run. I wanted to. I so desperately wanted to escape this place and run back to my lover; my husband, but I was unable to move. It was as though my body was not my own. I closed my eyes and cried – at least I could still express my misery...for now.

When he returned he wore only a long nightshirt. He walked directly towards the bed and to me lying there naked, waiting to see what torture he would next inflict upon me. He pulled back the blankets and perused my naked form.

“Expose your sex to me,” he commanded.

“I will not, that is for my husband alone!”

I felt my legs separate and try as I might to keep my knees together there would be none of it. He moved between my open thighs and examined my exposed womanhood.

“You have not birthed a child?”

“No – I have not,” I stated with venom, hoping to hide the fact that it was probably on the cards though, for I was fairly certain that I was pregnant.

“You are not a virgin though?”

“No – I have been married one year and performed all wifely duties in that time.”

“Wifely duties?” He raised an eyebrow, “You did not choose your husband yourself?”

“No – but I have grown to love him and would prefer to remain loyal to him.”

“Well...that is impossible...you are mine now and you will perform the ‘wifely duties’ for me.”

“I will not!” I exclaimed, but even as I said it I reached for him and drew him toward my body.

I pulled his nightshirt from his head and wrapped my legs about his as he lowered himself against me. He kissed me and I returned the kiss, furious at myself but unable to stop it. His tongue plunged between my lips and my body responded with excitement. I felt my sex moisten and as he rubbed his erection against me, my loins invited him to enter even though my mind wanted to take a knife and plunge it between his ribs. He moved inside me until he was satisfied and then he rolled off me and lay beside me.

“How was that?” He asked.

“Disappointing,” I replied, meaning that he had been unable to make me climax as William always had.

“Well, that is better than feeling as though you were raped.”

I realised he was right. He had raped me! My brain was furious, but my body, unsated wanted more of his touch. My body wanted to engage in more sexual activity

until it too was fulfilled of its needs. I immediately loathed this man that had bewitched me with some magic that left me helpless in his presence.

“Bastard!” I spat at him.

“You will find pleasure this time,” he said and repositioned himself above me.

He was ready to go again – so soon? William was a great lover, but even he could not have climaxed and then been ready to proceed again only moments later! He ran his hard cock against the swollen and slick lips of my sex – he was indeed ready to go again. My body welcomed him in as he penetrated my depths. He nibbled at my neck and then I felt another weird sensation, I didn't recognise it for what it was at the time, but he had sank his fangs into my throat and as he thrust inside me, he injected me with chemicals that lifted me into a state of sexual euphoria. I desired the sexual climax and moved my body against his with gusto seeking that intoxicating release. I had not known he was feeding on me at the time. My hands explored his body and I moaned with the pleasures of the flesh as he pressed deeper and harder against and within me. I sank my fingernails into his back as I felt the contractions of orgasm begin. I pulled his buttocks hard against me forcing his throbbing manhood deeper within me until he filled the very core of me and then my eyes rolled backwards in my head as he tugged me into a frenzied climax.

I loathed myself immediately, and hated that I had found such sweet release with my captor. He licked my neck and moved off me. I wanted to cry but the last thing he said to me before he slept halted my tears.

“You will love me.”

Chapter 4

Tristan, The First

Tristan was my world for a long time. I didn't fully understand how or why he had convinced me it was true, but he was right, I did love him. All of my fears and anxieties about being captured had dissipated that first night when we had been intimate. I had fallen asleep feeling as though I was in love with the man who had taken me and effectively raped me. Some part of me knew there was something wrong with the whole scenario but I couldn't quite put a finger on why. I could not remove the ring on my finger either. Every time I looked down at my hand I remembered William and hoped he was well. I knew he would grieve for me having thinking me lost with the rest of the castle community. I had been with child, but the stress of being captured and given to a new man soon ended that and I had a painful episode where the blood ran brighter than usual and was more clotted than I had experienced in the past, and I believe that was the end of the child William and I had created out of love, but given my current predicament, I was grateful. I couldn't imagine what tortures would befall a child of the enemy in this camp. Tristan would know it wasn't his, somehow I was certain of that.

The host of Marcus' army followed the front line troops, who practiced a scorched earth policy – burning everything in their path. Tristan disappear with the men during the day and then return to bed me at night. I really had no choice in the matter and loathed myself for not feeling the need or desire to escape his clutches. It was weeks before their campaign directed us back towards Italy. It was in Italy that I became a vampire.

Tristan was a vampire. He and Marcus had been together already for nearly a thousand years. Sometimes Marcus was the General, sometimes Tristan was and this explained why Tristan did not show due reverence to his leader and why his leader did not punish him for the lack of diligence. Marcus and Tristan were the oldest of friends it seemed; immortal friends with no worries of aging or death. They had a friendship that had lasted many lifetimes and Tristan saw fit to include me in those lifetimes – at his side as a vampire. Looking back, I don't think it was because he loved me, but more so

because he was so vain that he did not want my aging beauty to detract from his person. At the time, the absolute worst punishment he could have inflicted upon me was to make me his immortal lover – trapped in his affections for all time.

One moonlit evening he directed me to ‘bite him back’ during our fornication. I had no choice but to follow that instruction. As he tugged me within an inch of orgasm and then sank his fangs into my throat, I waited for the sweet release of contracting muscles and then bit into him, swallowing his vampire blood. Instantly my throat burned. He smirked at me when he saw the pain and surprise in my eyes. I reached for my throat with both hands, but then I blacked out and I know naught what happened until the dawn when I awoke a vampire.

I was alone in the bed as was the norm. I had not yet once woken wrapped in Tristan’s arms as I had in William’s. This morning I woke with such a dry throat that I immediately climbed from bed and filled a cup with water from the amphora in the corner. The cupful did nothing to quench my thirst. I got dressed and tried to leave, but I had been bound within a line Tristan drew around our tent every night when it was set up, and when we moved on to a new destination, my place was in the back of a set wagon. I was imprisoned by his words. I moved to the line outside the tent and was stopped in my tracks, not only by the line drawn in the sand, but also by the brightness of the sun and the loudness of the birds singing in the woods behind our camp. A cool breeze excited every inch of my exposed skin and I tingled all over. I looked out over the camp and could detect the smallest details at the greatest distances. Something was different about me this morning. I felt stronger and more aware of my body. Tristan had done something to me during the night and I could not recall what it was.

As the camp stirred in the dawning day, I stood trapped at my line waiting. I was not sure what I waited for until the page-boy walked towards me carrying a tray of food for my breakfast. I walked back into the tent as he approached, deafened by the sound of his heartbeat. He followed me in and placed the tray on the small table mid-tent. I could almost smell the blood in his veins and I could definitely see the pulse of his carotid artery just above the fleece of his collar. I moved between him and the door way blocking his path. He bowed and turned to leave, but I had other plans.

I reached for the crook of his elbow and pulled him tight against me. He was stunned and moved easily toward me. I held him tight and then against my own better judgement I bit into his neck. I felt the strangest sensation within my gums just prior to the taste of his blood in my mouth. I revelled in the flavour of him and knew that this was the cause of my unquenchable thirst – I needed to drink blood, human blood – Tristan had made me into a monster last night.

The man whimpered at first, but then relaxed into my arms. I drank mouthful after mouthful as his hot blood surged into my mouth. It was so rich and so desirable that I did not want to stop, even though I sensed his heart slowing. I lifted my bloodied mouth and looked down at the red ‘V’ that had spilled down my dress. I pushed him from my lap and sat staring at the boy whose blood I had almost completely drained. He had two huge puncture marks in his neck and I knew I was the cause of that. I lifted my fingertips to my mouth and felt the fangs which extended a considerable length longer than my other teeth.

I worried that I had killed the boy and it was instinct that drove my next action. I bit into my own wrist and offered it to his mouth. He was so weak, that I had to lift his head to the wound. He drank just a little before his eyes rolled back in his head and he appeared to die. Had I not been able to detect the faintest thrumming of his heart, I would have thought that I had in fact killed the boy. I turned his head to the side and directed some of my dripping blood into the puncture wounds on his neck and watched as they seemed to magically heal over. The marks on my wrist soon disappeared as well. I lifted the poor boy to my bed and let him sleep off his trouble while I cleaned the blood from my person and clothes. There would be consequences for my action – I was sure Tristan would inflict some other heinous punishment upon me for almost killing his page-boy. I was hopeful that he would recover before nightfall and I would have no questions to answer. At least I had quenched my thirst.

The first flash of a memory that was not my own took me quite by surprise and I gripped the tent pole for balance as my thoughts began to spiral out of control. I grappled to get them back under control, when another set of images not my own invaded my thoughts. I sat down as one after another the images came. There were places I had never

been and things I had never seen, people I recognised and other who I didn't. As the images began to subside, the voices began and I was convinced that I was losing my mind. Male voices, female voices, screams of children and a great cacophony of laughter, one after the other or multiple voices simultaneously they created a barrage in my brain. I crawled onto the floor and sat there curled up in a ball, hands over my ears trying to block out the noise, but I couldn't. I rocked in the corner for hours it seemed and then suddenly everything went quiet again. The balance in my brain seemed to have been restored. I stood up on shaky legs and made my way to the tent flap.

To my utter astonishment I crossed the line that had, up until now, been holding me trapped within the tent with ease. It didn't block my next step at all as it had over the past weeks that I had been Tristan's sexual slave. I walked unhindered through the camp for the very first time. I swept between the tents and watched the people of the army's great host working. Women cleaned clothes and cooked meals. Children played with wooden swords – training to become the next front line just as soon as they had the muscular strength to wield a real iron sword. The men, except for the wounded and the post-battle invalids, were all off preparing for the next bloodied battle. I ventured to wander toward the most regal tent amongst the crowd. It had to be that of Marcus – the commander of the rabble. He would surely be out with Tristan on the field somewhere.

I passed stealthily through the heavy flaps and found that Tristan and Marcus were indeed together, but they were not out upon the field carrying swords and armour – they were lying together naked in each other's arms. Marcus held Tristan as William had once held me. I froze momentarily and then backed out of the tent, hoping that I had not disrupted the two great men. I stood listening outside the fabric to make sure neither had stirred and then I walked off back to my own tent, shaking my head at the revelation – Tristan was Marcus' lover! He didn't spend all day out with the troops in the field of battle. When he left my bed, he went directly to Marcus'. I couldn't help the smile when I realised that Tristan was just as much a sex slave as I was.

When I entered my own tent I found the page-boy sleeping and decided that seeing as Tristan was in fact still in the camp, I had better not be caught with another man in my bed – even though it seemed Tristan might actually prefer it that way!

I picked up the boy, thinking I would struggle to move him, but he was not at all heavy and I carried him from the tent as though he was a small child. I hoped not to run into any other camp member as I slipped him into another tent down the way a little and then returned to my own. I pulled the bedding off the bed and put it in the basket as was usual for someone else to wash, as I was technically not able to leave the confines of the circle. I put clean covers on the bed and sat down in front of the tray of food the boy had prepared for me. I wasn't at all hungry but thought I should at least make an attempt.

The food tasted fine and before I knew it I had eaten the whole lot despite the fact that I had not felt the least bit hungry. Granted it wasn't a huge plate of food, but I had devoured it all the same. I had not recalled ever seeing Tristan eat, so was unsure that he had dined on anything but me since my arrival. Stories about vampires had been circulating for years. I had been warned against certain behaviours as a child for fear the monsters of the night would claim me. Had I known those stories were true and not just the weapons of nannies to get children to behave better, I might have taken more notice of them. As it was, my knowledge of the creature that I had become was very limited.

I could clearly eat food other than blood. I was strong and my senses seemed extra good today. I had heard about the thirst before and was unsurprised to discover that about myself. The magic that usually bound me, no longer had an effect. I made a mental note to keep track of all that I discovered as I learned how to be a vampire and then planned my escape.

We were soon to end our campaign. Tristan had said that when we arrived in Rome, I would reside in his house with him. I didn't want that. Now that I had the power to leave, I desperately wanted to do so. I was still confused by my emotions regarding Tristan – I still felt a connection to him, but it had lessened greatly since I had awoken and tasted first blood. I packed and planned all day, preparing myself to steal away into the night, the moment Tristan left our bed. I braved the camp again mid-afternoon to search for weapons that I could carry and use – I found a dagger and another small knife. I had picked up a cross bow, but as I didn't know how to reload it, it seemed useless to me and so I settled only for the dagger, the knife and a coil of rope. I did manage to find some chainmail small enough not to weigh me down – I suspected it belonged to one of

the children I had seen practising their sword play earlier in the day. I wrapped all of my pilfered possessions in a large square cloth and tied a knot at the top. I hid the parcel beneath the bed and then removed my clothing and climbed naked beneath the covers as was the expectation when Tristan returned home.

As usual, just as the sun was setting he appeared through the tent flaps. He stripped his unbloodied armour from his body and then slipped into bed beside me. He eyed me suspiciously.

“How are you today?”

He never asked me how I was – I doubted he cared for such information. I looked at him quizzically, for I did not at first understand what he was asking...but then I recalled the thirst I had woken with this morning.

“I was very thirsty when I awoke, but am fine now,” I answered honestly.

“...and how did you quench that thirst?”

“...the page-boy was most helpful.”

He grunted, amused at my admission it seemed.

“Do you know what you are now?” He asked and manoeuvred himself above me, between my thighs.

“I am like you...a vampire,” I replied cautiously.

He nodded, clearly pleased with himself. I looked into his eyes and trembled as he impaled me with his hard erection. I gasped, quite involuntarily at the way that felt. Not because it was painful or bad, but because it felt so damn good! My entire body it seemed was more sensitive to every kind of stimulation. I opened myself up wider to him, hoping to feel more of him. He was not as well endowed as William and although he had commanded me to orgasm when he tugged me, it wasn't the same as it had been when William had lovingly excited me into orgasm with his touch and his tenderness.

“You enjoy these new sensations I see,” Tristan told me, and he was right I did.

“Yes!” I said as I dug both my nails and my teeth into his shoulders. I arched against his final thrust and came much more intensely than I ever had with Tristan before now.

A scream echoed across the camp. I heard it as loudly as if it was right beside me. Tristan raised himself from my loins. He sensed the air and then stood.

“Another vampire!” He dressed quickly and left the tent.

Another vampire! Of course! All the pieces began to fall into place. I was now a vampire, and I may have made the page-boy one too. Had he attacked someone as I had attacked him – was that the cause of the scream? It wasn’t long before I was to find out as Tristan returned sword in hand.

“You turned the page-boy?” He asked but it was more menacing and came across like a threat as he waved his sword in my direction.

“Did I? I didn’t mean to – how did I do that?” I asked, honestly quite unaware of what I had done.

“You drank from him and then allowed him to drink from you...you slut!”

I knew my eyes bulged at his accusation. It was true – I had drank from him, and then allowed him to drink from me, but only because I had felt so guilty for almost killing the man by taking so much of his blood.

Tristan was angry – so very angry – he was always mean, but I had never seen him filled with rage as he was at this moment. What should I do? Where could I hide that he would not find me? Was it possible that I could outrun him? I doubted it – I knew not where to run. Instead I rolled out of the other side of the bed and reached underneath it for my sack of possessions.

“What did you do to the page-boy?” I asked, my voice quavering as I ducked low.

“I cut his head off – we cannot have a rogue vampire running about the country side,” he replied.

“You cut his head off?” I asked suspiciously.

“Yes that is the method for killing an unwelcome vampire.”

“Oh...I did not know a vampire could be killed.”

“Mostly they cannot – decapitation and mercury poisoning are really the only ways to ensure death – this is why I will need to cut your wicked head off this night.”

Again my eyes bulged – only the bed stood between this crazed vampire and my safety. I tugged at my bundle and then thrust my hand inside reaching for the dagger. It was quite beautiful. It had a golden handle and was encrusted with jewels. Of course, I had no need of its beauty, merely its sharpened blade. I had no idea how I was to get to Tristan’s throat without him getting to mine first. His reach with the sword was far greater than mine with the dagger. He jumped on the bed. I turned and cut a line down the tent fabric and then stepped quickly through it. He laughed, clearly expecting me to be trapped by the circle but I easily stepped across it – and although it pained me to give up William’s ring – I suspected now that Tristan had had some form of enchantment placed upon it and that was what had caused me to submit to him. I tossed the ring in his direction and fled into the woods behind. He screamed at me and ran full speed after me. I ran faster and faster, surprised at my own speed. He came after me, crashing through the undergrowth behind me. I ran straight off the edge of a cliff and plummeted with a high pitched scream, down, down to the raging river far below.

I hit the water hard. It slapped me as though I had collided with rock. My body stung from the impact and the cold of the water seemed to make it worse. It took me a minute to catch my breath. I looked up through the darkness to see Tristan at the top of the cliff. Would he continue to follow me? Would he run along the cliff edge, following the course of the river or would he dive into the inky waters below. I ducked my head beneath the water’s surface and didn’t wait to find out. I swam along the river, moving with the current and then across the river once I was a significant distance downstream. When I was sure not to be seen by even his vampire eyes, I poked my head out of the water and surveyed my surroundings. The river had widened into a lake and the water’s flow had slowed considerably. I swam across to the farthest bank and then pulled myself out upon the rocky shore. I was free!

Chapter 5

Going Home

With Tristan far behind me and a new strength of character and body I started my journey home to the far off distant shores of the Normandy coastline. It was imperative I felt, to make my way back to the Atlantic Ocean and back to my William. In the time that I had been Tristan's prisoner, we had crossed much of Europe. It could have been six or seven weeks, I lost count after the first few and preferred not to remember any of them.

It was dangerous for a woman to travel alone, even for a woman such as I – now vampire. I travelled under the cover of darkness and hid from the light of day in caves and under the dense canopy of the forest understorey. It took me almost as many weeks to get back as it had to cross Europe in the company of the host. I knew I was following the right course when every now and then I would come across a village, burned to the ground, bodies decaying in the ruins. I hunted stags at first – for the blood-meals I now required, but they gave me so little energy that I had to hunt more often than I had expected and finally relented to the taste of human blood at one of the untouched villages along the way. I was careful not to take too much blood this time and to heal the wounds with saliva not blood. The man seemed none the wiser and I had an energy boost that lasted three days.

The journey was long and lonely and I craved my William's touch so desperately that I could almost feel him in my dreams. I had the ocean in sight when Tristan tracked me down again. His only companion Marcus. They had come on horseback and had even given me a head start – they enjoyed the hunt so much. I heard the horses thundering hooves and looked down upon the vampire men from my hide in the canopy. I could not possibly hope to survive an encounter with the two of them. There was not a chance. If I surrendered would they keep me or decapitate me as Tristan had done the boy I had accidentally sired? I remained still and motionless in my canopy hideaway. They set up camp, perhaps thinking that I had made it to the ocean and another day would be needed to capture me, or maybe they knew I was trapped above them.

As the stars lit the twilight sky I heard Tristan's familiar moans of pleasure and realised that he and Marcus were fornicating. I was intrigued and silently descended my tree to take a peak. I peered through the lacing at the corner of the tent and observed Tristan on all fours like a dog mounted by Marcus who kneeled behind him. It wasn't aggressive as I had expected two men to be, but quite tender if unusual to my eyes. Marcus gripped Tristan's hips and plunged deeply within his orifice; both of them seemed to be enjoying the activity. Tristan came into his own hand and Marcus obviously within Tristan. I had thought that Tristan was Marcus' toy as I had been Tristan's, but that did not seem the case at all. Marcus genuinely appeared to adore his lover and Tristan seemed to reciprocate that affection. Their adoration of each other was no different to William's and my relationship. I was sure to incur Marcus' wrath when I crept in and decapitated his lover this night, but that was the punishment this man deserved and I fully intended to be rid of him.

I waited outside the tent until I heard the sounds of two men snoring. My heart beat hard as I pulled the dagger from its sheath and prepared myself to enter the tent. I feared that the sleeping vampires would hear my heart the way it raced. I crept in and looked down on the men in the cot, cuddled together as though in love, cuddled together as William and I would have been had I not been taken from him. Marcus' encircled Tristan and their bodies fit neatly together.

I carefully, grabbed a handful of Tristan's hair and raised the dagger ready to slice through Tristan's exposed neck. His hand caught mine and froze. He pulled it in to his chest and I was forced onto my knees. His eyes were closed, but he held my hand fast, tenderly against his heart. I didn't know what to do. Could I tug my hand free? Would that wake them and I'd then have two angry vampires to contend with. Did he think my hand belonged to Marcus? Was he snuggling into his male lover rather than his female one? I had no choice but to finish the deed I had come here to perform.

The blade cut cleanly and quickly. I was very much surprised with the ease of it. I was also surprised with the result. Tristan turned to dust. A pile of dust lay beside the sleeping Marcus; in the centre of it lay the ring, my ring, but one that I could no longer bear to wear. I contemplated killing Marcus too, but decided that I he deserved to know loss – it would be his punishment for all of the pain he had inflicted on my village and

others, and so I crept silently from the tent and continued my journey...I wanted him to suffer over the loss of his lover as I was sure my William had suffered since my disappearance.

It was a few more days before I made it home and found nothing but rubble and the blackened remains of the burnt out village I used to call home. I ran, weeping, towards the humble cottage William and I had shared. The door swung broken from its iron hinges and the roof was missing, burned away by flames. I stepped into the living room and looked around at what had been my happy home. I wiped the tears from my face and leant back against the support of a stone wall. Everything was ruined. If it hadn't been damaged by the flames and heat, then Marcus' men had smashed or shattered it or the ravages of weeks of exposure to the weather had ensured that destruction was total. Not even my figurines stood on the mantle. William had carved them for me, whittling them from soapstone while on campaign, but not one of them remained for me to treasure. I longed to stay and search the contents of my house more thoroughly, but the distant thunder of hoof beats startled me into action. Marcus was bound to pursue me for decapitating his lover – he couldn't be sure it was me of course, but he wouldn't wait to find out if his suspicions were right either – and so I left. I picked up the bundle of goods I had carried since escaping Tristan's clutches and disappeared into the forest.

Chapter 6

Distant Shores

It took me almost a year of hiding and backtracking to make it safely to Ireland. The green jewel in the summer sea seemed remote enough to offer me a safe existence, far from the watchful gaze of Marcus and his minions. I hoped to find my beloved William there, but as the weeks turned to months, and the months to years, I despaired that such a reunion might never occur. I listened of course, for the stories of the men on distant shores fighting their great battles against the marauders from the sea, hoping to hear his name, but alas, I never did. The years became decades and the decades, a century and I lost all hope that William and I would ever meet again, for his mortal life had surely ended years ago. Though no man would ever fill my heart like William had with his kindness and giving nature, I grew lonely and did hope to find another to warm my heart if not fill it completely. It was a bizarre twist of fate that the next man to romance me into his arms shared the same name as the man who had taken me from my beloved so many long years before.

Tristan caught my eye while on a mission for the Church. He had claimed to hunt heretics and witches and was based at the monastery of Lindisfarne. I met him by chance outside the monastery walls when I attended the markets the monks held each week of summer to support their income. From my small cottage upon a hill, I could see much of what went on within the monastery walls. I had watched the monks at work for long hours each day and as I collected herbs and barks for my potions, I had heard them whistle delightful tunes. I had become something of an apothecary over the past century. Within my humble abode, stone and occasionally glass phials lined the walls containing all manner of herbs, spices, minerals and pigments. Though I lived distant from the village, people often wandered to my cottage to gain medicines for whatever plague or discomfort ailed them. I had spent most of my last lifetime studying the effects of various poisons and intoxicants on subjects - animal and human alike. I had then used my knowledge and skills to devise antidotes, or at least treatments, to many of the poisons. I sold, for a few coins a soldier's protection kit, containing barks, herbs and charcoal that provided

antidotes and relief for the common poisons used to lace the blades of weapons. The main offenders were the venoms of poisonous sea creatures, such as the pufferfish – it is very toxic with the effect of paralysing the poor soul whose skin was incised with a blade covered in the toxin, and yet they remain fully conscious and aware of their situation. The venom of the sea-snake too was a potent paralysing agent and becoming increasingly common as the shipping routes were extended into tropical waters. I had potions and elixirs for just about everything a person could expect to need at that time. I had even managed to make a concoction against the dreaded bubonic plague, but the mould used to make it had a limited shelf-life and an infected person had only a short time to be treated before blood-poisoning would take them to their quick and painful death. On the darker side, I also manufactured protective ointments – one in which you could poison a captor and escape their evil clutches. I sold these only to women and it was a secret that they were even created. Only the most trusted could acquire a salve to render their raping ‘husband’ impotent, or a draught that would ensure sleep carried their aggressive master away before they had the opportunity to punish. It was in this collection that I created a red pigment so lethally toxic to vampires that I took great care not to expose my own skin to it. It contained a fatal blend of mercury-based pigments that poisoned the unwelcome visitor. I called it *Blood-Rose*, a name sure to entice a vampire, for there were naught amongst us who could resist the temptation of anything offering blood. I then circulated rumours of its existence and ‘magical’ properties within the community. A population grown fearful since the onslaught from the Vikings had begun and since the witch trials shredded communities across Europe and moved ever westward towards us. In all honesty, there was nothing magical about the original pigment – except that it took the immortal life of a vampire away and its reputation as something powerful was mere rumour spread to entice greedy vampires to be exposed to it. The beautiful red of its paint made it a favourite amongst the monks who decorated their books with illuminations bright and beautiful in the quiet hours of their days. I sold a great deal of this and a rich blue I extracted from ultramarine to the monks at Lindisfarne.

On occasion a vampire would knock on my door and request a tattoo with the pigment. Of course I would oblige, as far as I was concerned there were far too many vampires in the world. Not one of them survived I am happy to report. At one point a

vampire woman of such regal standing visited me and procured a significant amount of the pigment along with other medicinal potions and elixirs. She was beautiful and exotic and claimed to be the wife of the new king, Arthur – a man rumoured to be fair and just. I did not usually ask what my potions and unguents were to be used for, sometimes it was better not to know, but this woman seemed to read my mind and answered me before I had voiced the question.

“In the service of the Light,” she had answered.

“Against the Darkness?” I had continued the conversation out loud.

“Against those who are evil and dark of heart and soul.”

I nodded and thought that there was no better way to employ my services than in aiding this woman fight the darkness that surrounded and attempted to overwhelm us in these mediaeval times.

“I welcome your support, Isölde.” She spoke my true name, though I had not used it in such a long time.

I had spread the rumour that Isölde had died many years past and even created a head stone for her fictitious grave. I claimed that I was her very distant relative: Jordan. This woman knew me for who I was despite my charade and this was cause to eye her suspiciously.

“Your secret is safe with me, Isölde. I guard many secrets.”

I nodded and wrapped her purchases in a piece of handmade paper procured from the monks.

“May I ask your name great guardian?” I asked her.

“My name is Guinevere, and I take you, Isölde, into my confidence for the information we have just shared. There will be much darkness in both of our futures – but eventually the light will come – hold on to that belief, for it is as true as I stand before you – whatever darkness you face, believe the Light will come for you. It will not be

soon; there is much hardship yet to come, but give us service and we will bring you to the Light.”

I nodded, shook her hand when she reached for mine and watched her depart, my hand now filled with a generous purse full of gold coins. It was an odd message Guinevere had given me, but one she had professed with such intensity that I believed her. There was something different and strong about her. I believed she was a Guardian in the sacred sense of the word. It is that belief that got me through the great period of darkness that would consume most of the next millennium of my immortal life. If that woman had not made that statement at that time – then I am sure I would have succumbed to the ease and temptations of the darkness so soon after having been exposed again.

It was here in Ireland that the second Tristan stole my heart. He had come as a witch hunter and my apothecary obviously was the target of his raid, but from the moment his eyes caught mine I was enamoured of this man. He reminded me naught of the other Tristan who had taken and turned me. This Tristan appeared kind and caring. He gave me flowers and fruit and courted me so sweetly I was certain he would fail in his duty to eliminate the ‘witch’ and her apothecary. It was a long time after Guinevere’s visit that he came, but I remember it as though the two events were quite close together – and when compared to the span of my life – they were close.

Tristan invited himself into my life, and it was an invitation I felt no need to turn away. He romanced me with sweet sonnets and delicate verse. He loved me with a passion I had not felt since the days of William. I feared and questioned him naught until on one of his visits I noticed the red stork on his back. I had seen the stork before, on flags in a tent. The tent where I had first seen my captor wrapped tenderly in the arms of his lover. I recall that a sudden flush of adrenalin had heated my soul. My Tristan could not be the Tristan of before – I had killed him, decapitated him with the blade. It wasn’t possible that this man who made love to me now, was the same man who had taken me and bent my will to his own selfish desires. I dared not ask him in the beginning. I did wonder what pigment had made that tattoo though – it was bright red like my *Blood-Rose* concoction, but had it been that he would have become sickly and died – no vampire or human could survive the accumulation of mercury in their blood stream. Stupid men used

quicksilver as an elixir for stomach ills, but it did not cure such ills – unless you count death as a cure. Mercury poisoning made a human cry out like a cat; they would lose muscular control and become a virtual vegetable – helpless but for the aide of others, in a vampire it was quick and lethal, but not it appeared in Tristan. I had to ask, there was no way to find out otherwise.

“Tristan, is your tattoo of *Blood-Rose*?” I asked hesitantly, running my fingers over the thin-legged bird.

“Aye...it is...what of it?”

“Where did you get it?”

“My mother made it – each of her children is tattooed as such,” he replied.

My mind started reeling – that wasn’t possible. If they were human they should be deathly ill, if vampire dead...why did it not work on him? I was glad at that point in time that he was not dead, for he loved me so perfectly, but there was no logic in his existence...unless...could there be a resistance? Was it possible that some were actually resistant to the effects of mercury?

“Is it magic?” I asked hesitantly, for that was the original rumour that had allowed me to lure unsuspecting greedy vampires to their quick silver deaths.

“Aye it is!”

How was that possible? It made no sense what so ever. It was just pigments and blood, ground together – there was little in it to be magical – what had I created? Was it even possible? Did magic truly exist? The curse of my ring had told me it did, but I preferred not to believe that it was so easy to access. I used only the natural chemicals in plants and minerals to treat natural ills, but this was not that kind of elixir!

“You are a vampire – are you not?” I asked, knowing full well that he was, but had never told me.

“Aye – as are you.”

“Indeed.”

It made absolutely no sense, unless he was connected to someone who really did dabble in magic.

“May I ask of your parents, My Love?”

“You may...my mother is Morgan Le Fay and my father is Marcus Medici.”

I know I must have grown pale with his admission. This Tristan was the son of Marcus, whose lover I had killed centuries ago...and Morgan Le Fay – well her name said it all really – Morgan the Faery! I was in way over my head and I knew it instantly. The next time Tristan left on business, I had to escape. I had to leave and go into hiding. That darkness that the maiden Guinevere had spoken of was about to tap me on the shoulder!

Was I doomed to be a hopeless romantic? A girl whose relationships with men were too complicated to allow the true love she hoped to find. My experiences so far had been tormented to say the least and torturous at most. I was torn between the deep affection I honestly felt for this Tristan and the utter fear I felt knowing who his namesake had been. Had this all been a ploy of Marcus to redeem a punishment upon me for slaying his lover? Was I once again a puppet manipulated by the strings of a man who wielded dark magic against me? How could that be? How could I have fallen for a man who was so inappropriate?

Tristan’s hand slid up my naked hip.

“What tortures your mind so?” he asked.

“Do you love me?” I asked swallowing hard with the question.

“Indeed I do,” he answered and claimed my mouth with his.

As I returned his kiss, I wondered just how much he loved me. Would he plead my case with his father, should he ever find out my true identity? Did I have a hope to survive this affair?

“Jordan, you seem distracted, what troubles you so?”

I looked into his worried eyes and knew that I could never tell him. I smiled.

“...that you tease me so and have not yet given me the sweet release of climax,” I winked.

“Well now, that I can accommodate,” he said and rolled me beneath him as he spread my legs with his knees. He plunged deep within in me and although I knew that this was my Tristan, not the one from a life so long ago that it barely mattered, my thoughts kept returning to that other Tristan and the way he manipulated and ensnared me. I felt my Tristan moving inside me, rubbing his hardened shaft against the soft tissue of my sex, but it was not enough – my mind was not on the task at hand and try as he might, with this method he would not make me orgasm.

His frustration grew as I moved no nearer to climax. He withdrew from me and moved his whole body down the bed. This time he stimulated my sex with his tongue. He licked long lavish strokes upon the folds of my swollen flesh and consumed the nub at the apex. His fingertips were delicate but probing and his determination pushed through the barriers my mind had created by my distracted thoughts. My body began to betray my mind as I moaned against his movements and pushed the mound of my eager flesh against his feverish tongue. Harder, faster and with greater friction he licked at my writhing sex until as I ran my fingers through his blonde hair I cried out beneath his touch and reached for handfuls of bedding, my hips lifting from the bed as I came hard against his mouth.

He lifted his mouth and smiled at me and then moved up my body plunging his erection deep between my legs and impaling me on his shaft. He pumped within me hard and fast seeking his own sensory salvation. As he thrust I sank my fangs into his shoulder and the hot stream of his seed exploded within me, he shook above me and then sank his own fangs into my neck. I felt a moment of utter joy and then a terrible fear as my heart beat changed and started to beat in time with his. Something had just happened. Something deep and mysterious and I knew instinctively that I was in a whole host of trouble now.

Chapter 7

Blood-Bound

My heart betrayed me to the son of my enemy this time. It was an act I had initiated and an act that would cause me to live condemned to darkness for years to come. I could no longer imagine a life without Tristan in it. My heart beat in time with his and the moments when he left me I ached for his speedy return. I had not known that such an action would bind me to my mate. In sharing blood while making love as we had that fateful afternoon I had blood-bound myself to Tristan – forever or until one of us died or severed the bond. He was and would always be my heart. In the beginning, though I loathed and feared his father, it seemed not to matter because our interludes were ours alone. He would come to Ireland purely with the intent of loving me and for a while I was a secret from his family, but all too soon his mother discovered me. When he came with his mother, I had trembled for fear that she would recognise me – of course we had never met, and there was no reason for her to recognise me, but I feared it anyway. Tristan had introduced me by the name I had told him: Jordan Isölde, daughter of Nechtan. It was a name inconsequential now – centuries after my father had disappeared from this Earth. Morgan, however, recognised it immediately and I cowered under her gaze.

“King Nechtan?”

I nodded, daring not to lie to this obviously powerful woman.

“You are Isölde – the princess who disappeared?”

Again I nodded, but curious now, because I had not known that I had a history. I had not expected to be remembered now, centuries after my life should have ended. She too was a vampire, but one that complemented so well her husband, the savage Roman who had been the ultimate cause of my disappearance in the first place, that although I feared her, I also respected her. Tristan held me firmly in his arms and I was reassured by the single beat of our hearts. I had no idea that soon our blood-bond would matter not. The moment Marcus met me I was sure he would know me – my name would be enough, that and my so obviously well known history. He would know me as the woman who had

bewitched and slain his lover. He would not be so happy to meet me as Morgan appeared to genuinely be. Tristan stayed on with me after Morgan left and was still with me weeks later when Morgan returned, Marcus by her side.

As I feared, he knew me the instant his eyes were laid on me.

“You!”

I know I turned ghostly pale. I also think I fainted or else was hit with a stunning spell of some kind for I woke up hours later bound to my bed. The consequences of my actions were to be severe – they would have been far worse had Tristan not been blood-bonded to me. I am certain he would have tortured me, had Tristan not claimed me as his mate and lover. There was naught that Marcus could do without inflicting pain on his own son – and he at least seemed unwilling to do that at the moment.

I watched as Marcus paced the length of the room eyeing me with disdain.

“I will take everything from you wench!” He eventually declared.

I stared squarely at him.

“You already did Marcus, centuries ago – there is naught that you can take that had not already been ripped from my clutches by you or your Tristan.”

“We shall see,” he seethed at me and departed, slamming the door in his wake.

I was certain I was right. There was one thing I had not counted on though – he could take the light. Marcus gave Tristan an ultimatum he could keep me as long as I was trapped within the depths of the earth or Marcus would himself kill me. At first I thought he meant with a blade across the throat, but later I realised he meant with mercury. Morgan came in mixing the paste – it was a bright red from the *minium* – a mercury-based pigment.

“Do you know what this is?” She asked as she circled me.

“Of course – I invented it!” I said at to the woman, no small touch of hostility in my voice.

“I didn’t record the date but I dare say nigh on a century ago...perhaps a little over.”

“So you know what it will do to a vampire?”

“Of course – but it only works on some vampires – you already know this,” I told her. I was sure she did because she had tattooed Tristan with it.

“Does it work on you?”

I hadn’t tested it and I had no intention of testing it either. I would have to bluff my way out of this one, for I feared the toxic pigment would do to me exactly what it was designed to do to vampires – kill me.

“Hell no! Do you think I would invent a substance that would be toxic to myself? Are you mentally inept?”

She seemed to process my statement a short time before she left the room. My next visitor was Tristan. I had not seen him at all since Marcus’ had arrived and I was attacked and bound.

Tristan swept into the room silently and released me of my bonds. He took me in his arms and carried me from the room. I knew not if he was friend or foe at this point. He carried me so tenderly that he felt like a friend but I had no idea of where he was carrying me and so I leant against him and hoped it was somewhere warm and safe.

Chapter 8

Fire and Ice

Tristan stole me away that night from his parents' clutches. We boarded a boat and then another and spent months it seemed crossing oceans to some distant location. It probably wasn't months; it was just that the journey was uncomfortable so it seemed to take longer. Eventually the boat landed on a newly discovered and now inhabited island – now called Iceland. The soil was dark and the location was a strange mixture of fire and ice. Volcanic eruptions extended the land along a ridge that crossed the island, making it ever larger. It was so far north though that the polar ice battled with the lava for prize of place. Tristan kept me here with him for a long time while he debated his father's arguments for slaying me. Marcus, it seemed, had not told his family why I ired him so and Tristan had had no idea that his namesake was his father's prior lover. We built a house of stone and lovingly tended the few stray plants that had emerged through the weathered lava field about our home. We mostly ate fish and the few other settlers on the island for blood. The settlers were an unlikely combination of Viking immigrants and Irish monks and us – two vampires.

Tristan loved me here in our hideaway on remote shores. I could not possibly live like this forever, but for a while I might endure the isolation and the excessive consumption of fish. Our cottage was simple and hand built from stone blocks chipped from the igneous rock formed by cooled lava. We managed to pilfer the pelts of seals and a polar bear that had become trapped on an ice float. It had died of dehydration it seemed, but as we stripped the pelt from the hide and tanned it to preserve it, I felt blessed to have such a warm covering as the winter approached and the ice was winning the battle against the lava. There was little to do but ravish each other's bodies in the darkness that prevailed for longer and longer as winter touched our shores.

Had he been an average man, his hands would surely have calloused from working the stone, but he was not an ordinary man and as he ran his hands across my stomach I was grateful for that fact. He looked upon my body as though I was the most beautiful girl in the world – I knew I wasn't, but in his eyes, I felt it. His lips covered mine and I

tasted his tongue. His hands explored my body and parted my thighs; fingertips delving into the moistness of my loins. He fluttered them against the sensitive nub and plunged them within my warm depths; enticing me to open myself fully to his desires. He filled me with his throbbing erection and I wrapped myself tightly against his body. Our hearts raced together as our bodies writhed in their intimate connection. He was no William, but he was a more than adequate lover and I appreciated his efforts to please me. Had I known he was planning to leave me, I might not have appreciated him so much, but as he thrust deeply within me and I clenched at his buttock with my fingernails, I knew naught of his intentions and simply enjoyed the love-making activity as the waves of orgasm rippled across my muscles. He pushed me through the ecstasy and on toward another moment of sheer elation before finding release himself as I sank my fangs into his shoulder with the second climax.

He was gone when I stirred the next day. I reached across the ‘bed’ for him and found the space cold. It was a reminder of the other Tristan’s methods and in a sudden panic, I pulled myself out of bed. Wrapping my naked body in the bear skin pelt, I left our dwelling and surveyed the horizon. It was not light, and it would not be much at all this day for the winter solstice was upon us. I saw nothing. The darkness of the polar winter blanketed all of Iceland and the seas beyond. He was gone. He had left me, virtually alone in the middle of nowhere – trapped in the darkness as his father had decreed. I felt the most horrific ache in my heart and wondered if he felt it too as he journeyed across the seas away from me. Had he saved me from a fate worse than death or merely delivered me to it?

I was a woman alone – exiled to an island so new it continued to form as lava spewed forth from the ridge at its centre. The air was laden with sulfurous fumes at times and it snowed ash at others. When the lava chose to take our homes there was naught we could do but watch it. The ice too would take our lives with its bitter cold. Was this place hell? It hadn’t seemed that bad until Tristan left me here alone...but now, surviving each day as a woman alone in the Arctic Sea, I felt I was being bitterly punished...and worse – somehow Tristan had bound me to this land. I could not wade more than a few metres from the shore before an invisible rope hurled me back onto the black rocks on my ass. It was like the spell that had kept trapped in tents, but this one, was far more powerful. I

was somehow bound to the land. I was imprisoned, alone in the darkness. If I survived the winter, at least the sun would rise again, and by the summer sun, this place wouldn't seem all that bad – I hoped.

I cursed Tristan because he had left me here, and I cursed myself for loving him so much that my heart ached in his absence. I hated that I was bound to such a man. I hated that the man I was bound to had chosen his father's side over mine. I hated that although I should feel as though I was the most important person in his world, I felt as though I was the least. I loathed him for leaving me here in the very centre of nowhere; for trapping me in my own private hell. Had I not forced Marcus' eyes from his male lover, he may never have sought out a female one – Morgan may still be mateless and her children never born. It was my actions that had allowed them to exist and here I was paying the penalty for allowing and aiding their creation.

I tried to start my apothecary business up again, though the produce I had to work with was severely limited – though I had no shortage of volcanic sulfur for the treatment of wounds...and a poultice made from the leaves of the weedy nettles that seemed to proliferate on our volcanic soil was quite a decent remedy for the ailments of the skin here in Iceland. We suffered from frostbite and thermal burns, from infections of rocks and sea creatures but not from the common ailments often seen on the continent. I experimented with eel skin and kelp straps for making bandages; with sea urchin spikes for needles and horsehair for thread. I found human blood to be a rare commodity and needed to develop mutually beneficial relationships with settlers across the island to ensure I had a ready supply. Though I went to bed with these men, I never developed an affection for them and purely engaged in the nocturnal activities to acquire the much needed human blood. I would survive for as long as I could on seal and walrus, but inevitably there would come a day when I needed human blood and with great humility it was on those days that I would endeavour to attempt the former Vikings into intimacies. It was never difficult; they craved the touch of a woman as much as I craved the haem-rich blood flowing through their bodies. Did I feel dirty and tainted by the life I was forced to live due to isolation at the top of the world – absolutely! Could I do anything differently – not with a hope at surviving this place unless I took a permanent mate and risked my heart again!

I look back now and wonder what drove me to survive. I had lost both of the men I had ever loved and found only poor substitutes to replace them. I had lost the land I loved and all contact with the rest of the world. I knew not that the world was not flat for such a long time; I wondered of the stories of Prestor John, snippets of which arrived with each new raft full of Irish monks. For some reason they kept coming to us. I don't think one monk ever returned to Ireland to tell them that the gods of Iceland were Thor and his companions, not the Christian one the monks always promised to shepherd us under and deliver us from sin via his mercy...had they taken a look at Iceland – they might have thought twice about sending their shepherds to us...but as they failed to return home, more continued to brave the crossing. Some of them converted to the religion of the island; some of them died on the journey; most of them wished they had never sought to save this particular island of heathens and a stone placed above their grave the only recognition that they were ever here!

I always introduced myself to the new arrivals and occasionally managed to subdue them enough to feed and gain some fresh blood. They always tasted just a little different to those that had survived mostly on fish. One boatload of monks had the foresight to bring sheep with them and we tended a communal flock. The young males and the old females were eaten eventually, but in the meantime we had wool and lambs and milk. The first goat presented more of a problem but as it was an animal sacred to Thor it was revered until we could figure out what to do with the infernal creature that would eat anything in its path and jumped our simple stone fences as though they were entertaining obstacles put specifically in its path for exercise.

In summer, the fields were lush with grass and the sun shone as if it would never set. I enjoyed the light and soaked as much of its glorious rays into myself as I could before the darkness started to creep back in. It was at the end of summer that Tristan returned and tipped my world upside-down again.

Chapter 9

Sea Voyage

Tristan arrived not in a rickety little raft like the monks did, but in a grand ocean-going ship. The entire island had turned out to greet the ship which offered new supplies, if not freely given, then under the threat of the blade in exchange for fresh water. I was surprised to see Tristan climb down onto the row boat to come ashore with the landing party. I knew not whether to smile or run and hide. What was his purpose in coming back to the site of my exile? My heart felt joyous as the torment of loss lifted and it beat in time with his. He took me in his arms immediately and planted a kiss as though he had never meant to leave me. Tears ran down my cheeks and I fretted over what his return would mean to me. Would he leave me again and plunge my heart back into the depths of depression and oblivion? Would he take me away with him this time; could we have a life together? Was he here to kill me and break the blood-bond that must have tortured him as thoroughly as it had tortured me? I knew naught but questions and felt as though they might drown me themselves. He said nothing, but his kiss told me that he had missed me dearly and I revelled in that physical admission. He carried me to the home we had built together, raised his eyebrows at the goat that balanced on the stone wall nibbling to top most buds of the nettles from his perch, and then walked toward the door.

The door was nearly forced from its mounting as he charged the room and headed directly for the bed, his intention clear as it bulged at his front. He wore tights, a weird piece of apparel if there ever was one, but one that allowed me to appreciate the excitement of his manhood fully. Things had changed in the wider world in my absence and I felt a pang of loss for not knowing the state of affairs beyond this island.

He lifted my skirts, not waiting to remove my clothing at all and lowered his tights only enough to release the monster within them. He plunged into me without the slightest hint of foreplay and had I not already been aroused by the view of those tights, I am sure his lack of consideration would have hurt me; but from the moment he took me into his arms I was moist with anticipation and he was able to pound into me thoroughly as though it had been the full six months since he had found such release. I doubted it had been that

long for him, and because of my need to gain blood, it certainly hadn't for me. It was different with Tristan though. He knew my body and he knew how to please me, and even as he thrust within my tender folds, he nibbled at the base of my ear and scraped his fangs across my throat. Had I not felt his heart racing with mine, I might have feared this man who had still not spoken to me but had forced his way within my loins without the slightest hesitation. He leant backward and lifted me fully so that I was impaled upon his thrusting blade. I sat virtually in his lap as he pulled me hard down upon him, thrusting all the way to the core of me it seemed. I felt more of him in this position and though I was still more than a little overwhelmed by his sudden return, I embraced the tightening of my groin that indicated the impending orgasm. I arched back as it claimed me and then lent forward and bit into his throat. I felt his hot surge inside of me and then his fangs penetrate my own tanned skin.

I savoured every drop of his fruit-flavoured blood. It was so sweet and fragrant and laced with the endorphins of sex. I could barely believe that he was here in my arms; and but for the radiant pleasure I felt, I would not have believed it to be true, but more of a dream. I knew not why he had returned to me and dared not ask in case he left me as quickly as he arrived. I placed my ear to his chest and listened as his heart beat its steady rhythm in time with mine. That beat, that had caused me such sadness for the past season, suddenly filled me with joy and reminded me of the love we had shared.

He stayed with me the rest of the day, making love and telling me tales of the changing world and explaining to me the need to wear tights, through the short night, and in the morning when his ship was ready to sail. He beckoned me to collect my most important belongings and took me to the ship. We shared a small cabin. The pitch and roll of the ship on the ocean waves kept me in a perpetual state of nausea. I tried to keep my stomach full, but failed time and again. I sat by the small window in our room and hoped for a salt-laden breeze to refresh me of my ills, but mostly I was greeted by the stench of what lay below decks. It wasn't pleasant and I had no desire to explore the lower half of the ship given the scent of fetid flesh, excrement and decay that rose from the hull. I welcomed the smell of fresh pitch, for the powerful petroleum smell of it drowned out the less delicate perfume of the lower boat. On the deck the air was fresh and crisp, but the movement of the boat was almost overbearing and not long after I had

been refreshed by the ocean breeze, my stomach would surely turn and I would need to lean over the rail and empty what little contents my stomach had managed to retain over the side. The water from Iceland towards our southern goal was chummed with my vomit: an unappealing mix of blood, apple, potato and fish. The older sailors (sea dogs they called themselves), lacked teeth and limbs thanks to the ravages of scurvy. That was the price these men paid for their freedom upon the sea. I had no doubt that amongst the crew was a dangerous set of thieves and other criminals. I never left the cabin unescorted by Tristan and I never slept alone. He stayed by my side, and had the constant desire to vomit not reminded me of the dark future I was bound for, I would have enjoyed having him as a constant tender presence in my life.

Tristan had indicated that we were sailing south to explore a new land south of the equator now that it had been established by Portuguese and Spanish sailors that it was impossible to sail off the ends of the ocean. It was a several month journey across the azure sea. We passed from the icy winds of Iceland to the warm tropics with its tepid seas and blistering sun, onward we journeyed crossing an expanse of uninterrupted ocean so boundless it left the greatness of ancient Rome following as insignificant as a mosquito against a butterfly. On a few treasured occasions we would stop on a small island to take on fresh supplies. Tristan would take me ashore and let me rest on the beach sand. I feared always that I would be exiled on one of these supply drops, here in the remoteness of the ocean, but after the crew had collected fresh water and local fruits, Tristan would take me back upon the ship. I was weak and ill from the constant loss of my stomach contents and the overwhelming nausea that claimed me in a constant barrage against my senses. For the duration of our sea voyage, Tristan was kind and considerate. He cared for me and in the rare moments when my arousal for him outweighed the nausea, he made sweet love to me – although those moments were few and far between I thoroughly enjoyed them. The crew, however, did not as it meant the sea was calm and we were without wind. The doldrums were as calm as if we sat on land and it was only when we hit a pocket of such inactivity that the nausea dissipated and I could enjoy the view, enjoy the air, and enjoy Tristan's body above me and within me.

Although I had suspected it, I had not known for sure that I was being taken to a new place of exile.

“Land ho!” Cried the ratty sailor in the crow’s nest and pointed to the western horizon.

There was a great scramble of activity as the crew enthusiastically jumped into action. The rigging was altered to set us on a course for the new land, previously uncharted on the Captain’s map. The Captain was a Dutch man and we sailed aboard his Dutch ship toward a land so far south no-one had thought to look for it until now. The sea shallowed as we crossed onto the Continental Shelf and the land mass grew ever closer. My heart raced with Tristan’s he knew something I didn’t and I didn’t like it. As we drew up as close to shore as the Captain dared, a group of ebony-skinned people congregated upon the shore.

They seemed as unsure of us as we were of them. They were tall and thin and mostly naked. Their skin was so much darker than any I had seen before and they stood together watching us in a manner that suggested a sense of community. The children were held at the centre between the women, all of whom stood behind a line of men carrying long javelin-like spears. They didn’t seem threatened, but were cautious all the same. They sat on the shore of their land, and we sat on the ship, watching them watching us.

As night fell and the stars began to shine brightly in the black sky, I realised I was a very long way from home. I could not recognise a single constellation above me. The only familiar sight was the moon starting its ascent above the horizon. I knew not where I was nor where I feared I would be exiled by Tristan, for I was certain, the excitement he had felt earlier in the day was a result of his having found a new isolated location to keep me trapped. The people on the shore lit a fire and sang in an unrecognisable language beside its golden glow. They huddled together against the cooling night air and pulled their wild-looking dogs in closely for extra warmth. We weighed anchor under cover of darkness and slipped silently along the coastline of this expansive land. We stayed off-shore for several days and looked up at great cliffs that bordered the sea for several more. Eventually, a smaller section of the landmass, far more appealing than the wide brown land we had first encountered rocked lazily on the horizon as the ship approached. This area had tall trees and looked infinitely more inviting than that which

we had observed in recent days. Tristan's heart beat at speed again and I suspected I viewed my new exile.

Chapter 10

Van Diemen's Land

The frigid air was a surprise. I had expected it to be warmer, but apart from the tall trees and lack of volcanic activity, it was much like the Iceland I had left. Everyone went ashore to explore this new land, and a few hours later everyone but me returned to the boat. That Tristan intended this to be my new exile was evident by his insistence that we make love once this new land had been spotted by the scout in the crow's nest. Everyone else aboard the ship had worked excitedly and watched impatiently as the boat rocked towards the green mass in the distance. As the boat moved ever forward and into the swirling mists that surrounded the landmass, Tristan had tugged me within an inch of utter exhaustion. He meant to abandon me to the wilds of this previously uncharted territory. Here I couldn't be found!

I had dressed and packed the few meagre belongings I had acquired during the long journey from Iceland. They were mere trinkets and souvenirs from lands so remote that had I not put my own feet on their sandy shores, I would have thought they belonged with the fantastic tales of Prestor John. Tristan would be the last European I would see for many decades.

Van Diemen's Land wasn't all bad. There were plenty of trees for wood and caves in the mountainous terrain, both features Iceland had been without. As with our first encounter with this new land, there already existed a native population here, but they were a smaller people and seemed more fascinated with my white skin and bizarre clothing than finding anything about me hostile or threatening. I tried not to interfere with their life, but on occasion I did need to feed and they were the only humans within reach. The flavour of their blood was different to that of the humans I was accustomed to dining on; it was fresher as though untainted by the chemicals and deprivations of modern living. Their small size prevented me taking too much, but I always managed enough to survive. I was an anomaly to them in so many ways, not least of which was the way my garments covered me from neck to toe. It was cold, with frost on the ground for much of the day, and I appreciated every centimetre of clothing. I wasn't sure that I

would be able to kill and skin the possums required to make a cloak like the natives wore for warmth, but as I was certain Tristan had left me for good this time, I may need to find out. I may need to find out a great many things about myself and my ability to survive in this lonely place at the bottom of the world in the near future. It wasn't the first time I had to start over and redefine my existence – it wasn't even the first time that I had been left alone on a distant land with naught but what I wore on my back. I could...I would survive this exile too!

I slowly began to circumnavigate my new home: step by step I worked my way further south until all I could see was the open ocean stretching from horizon to horizon. I was at the end of the world and as yet, this particular part of the world was quite unknown to the rest of the Europe, I admitted to myself that I would be here, virtually alone, for many years to come. I walked on beaches where they existed and climbed cliffs where they blocked my path. I kept the ocean on my right side and the bulk of the land on my left and travelled the shore line. For the first few weeks I bothered to count the nights, after that I stopped for the depressive cloud it brought to my sensitive sense of reality.

The creatures here were strange, and had I not come across them in their natural habitat, I might have thought them a hoax for they surely nothing would create such bizarre forms. In the night there were howls and disagreements between the local predators – a bizarre black and white cat-like creature and a striped hound of sorts. The night was never calm as it had been in Iceland. Here it was a continual cacophony of sounds: rustling in the undergrowth; howls on the air and grunts and groans of both the wildlife and the great swaying trees. Was I alone? No, but was I lonely? Yes. Immortality is a harsh punishment for the lonely. In my long life time, I had loved and lost, and loved again and been punished for that love with exile. But for the native population, I was devoid of all human contact and it would be that way for more than a century – trapped by Tristan on another island in the ocean as far from any sense of civilisation as was possible at that time in history.

When civilisation did come to my free-range prison it brought with it thieves and criminals of many an ilk; it brought diseases and an entirely new set of problems for the native population to contend with. They were not successful and the last of them, a little

woman by the name of Truganini died leaving the land to the colonists and one vampire woman's care. Though I had longed for civilisation, the experience of it in this land was not what I had anticipated, much had changed since I had left Ireland's green shores now almost three hundred years past. Civilisation no longer seemed to be civilised!

When I look back on my life it is filled with complications and loss. There are the faintest glimmering moments of hope and happiness, but more of it has been spent in desperation and sadness than in warmth and tenderness. William was long gone to me and Tristan, except for the magical binding, also had not resurfaced in my life for the past couple of centuries. I had moved toward the next millennium a woman alone; a vampire alone; a tattered replica of the king's daughter I had once been. Technologies and houses crept into my, now Tasmanian, life. Though I could not yet leave the island state of what had become Australia, I no longer needed to. I was no longer isolated and alone. I developed friendships and once again returned to the world of apothecary, though now we called it 'pharmacy'. I wore a white uniform and worked only between the hours of 9am and 6pm. I worked four days each week and earned a wage significant enough to support a lifestyle far more relaxing than those I had lived in ages past. I mingle with the community of Huonville, and occasionally I might drive my car into Hobart to watch a movie at the cinema or do some shopping. I have learned to be more indulgent of my own desires. I have no doubt that, had the Guardians not got involved, Tristan would have returned to steal me away from my lovely life as he did the last time I had established an equilibrium with my surroundings. It would have been more difficult for him to isolate me now – so much of the world was populated and easily accessible – even Antarctica had a community for much of the year. Perhaps that is why he never returned since the day he left me here and bound me to the shore.

As I looked down on the Huon River from my house I appreciated how far this place had come in the time since I had arrived and made every effort to find a home here. For a long time the caves near what is now Hastings, were my home. I enjoyed the luxury of the hot springs and mineral pools that graced that locale with their warming presence. I think, perhaps, that had it not been for the unique privileges of the Tasmanian landscape, I may not have survived so well here. It was intended to be my prison, but instead had been the source of many great opportunities. I had managed to make a decent wage in

the early days of colonisation returning to my preferred skills in apothecary. As time passed, I moved from one colony to the next, starting over and accumulating funds each time. Most recently, I had graduated from university and now held a stable position in a lovely town. The future was brighter now than it had ever been in the past and the lifting of the spell for reasons unknown last spring had opened a whole new world to me. One day I could leave Tasmania, not because I had to, but because I wanted to and was free to do so. I had no intention of doing that just yet, but when the mood took me, it was comforting to know that I could. Guinevere had been right so long ago. I felt the darkness as it ebbed from my heart and basked in the glory of a light that had only recently returned. I still had an ache in my heart, and I appreciated that that may never dissipate, but I could now hope and that was enough to make a huge difference.

The river flowed gently in the direction of Bruny Island and I happily sat and watched the sunset reflected on its surface. My cat, an ex-stray, a kindred spirit, wound herself around my ankles purring as she rubbed against my legs. A great mass of starlings ducked and swerved as they descended for the night, like a school of fish darting and turning in unison, the birds seemed to communicate with some hidden means, which ensured they all wheeled in formation, the only noise the simultaneous flutter of one hundred wings. The sky was beautiful tonight, my glass of wine sweet and the memories of past love and loss exiled to the back of my mind.

Chapter 11

Resurrection

Their arrival surprised me, vampires like me, but different all the same. It was the magical community that told me of their ordeal in the forest. I had long been cultivating my relationships with those from the other realm here in this most magical place. Tristan's decision to place me here had been unwise for him, the reality of the situation revealed to me once I started exploring the island. Here, like nowhere else on the planet, I felt a connection with the other realm – here I was more than an apothecary, here I am a witch, blessed with the power of Wicca. The magic of the natural forces is abundant here; primal connections with the elements build an electro-magnetic field that encompasses the entire island and some of the ocean beyond the land's borders. The aurorae that dance across the sky are the solar ions interacting with this field; their beautiful beams glowing, bringing light to the darkness. When Guinevere told me, so long ago that I would return to the light, she had been absolutely correct and I believe it was my interaction with her that had given me a key to the magical door hidden to all other vampires but a few in a precious blood-line; a Guardian blood-line.

Three identical triplets stood before me asking questions about hair-care products and I knew they were special. I could smell the blood on their breath that suggested that they had fed in the past six hours, but that wasn't what pulled me in to their world – it was the rose birthmarks on their exposed backs. I believe this is a message for me. The blood-rose was my creation, my attempt to rid the world of vampires, but it had also been my link to Guinevere and she was something special. I believe that she has sent me these three and their siblings, and I believe that she has painted them each with the rose so that I would find my connection to them and to the Light that they so fiercely protect. I looked from one sister to the next, each one a marvellous creation; a clone of the others. There were legends about three magical sisters, a perfect trinity of Light energy. There were legends about their entire family, carefully hidden legends in this realm, but in the other, very well known. The Guardians of the *Blood-Rose* were here to protect the world from a Darkness even more pervasive than the depression of my past lives; they were here to

save the world and it is my job to help them. I am convinced this is the path Guinevere promised would lead to my salvation. Finally, after all of this time, through exile and exploration, I find them here in Tasmania.

Their minds are closed off to me, which is interesting and probably a good thing for them, but an unusual dilemma for me, for one of my developing skills since my arrival here has been my telepathy. Now, after centuries and a deep connection to this land, this is one of my most powerful skills. I can read minds and if needs be, project thoughts into them. I needed to make contact with these girls, let them know that I was here to help...that I was sent by one of their own, but how?

“Excuse me,” I said to the closest girl, I needed to duck out the back to extract a phial of blood.

“Sure,” she replied, “we are nowhere near making a decision.”

I disappeared out of view and collected a new sample jar on my way past the counter. The door has a combination lock and in the time it takes me to open the lock, the girls have all turned to look at me. I find myself suddenly nervous and wary of the vampires in my midst.

“I’ll be back in just a second,” I called out and pulled the door closed behind me.

I bit my wrist and collected the blood in the sample jar. I let it run until the jar was half full and then healed the wound with a lick of my tongue, then I sealed the jar and washed my hands. I put the jar in my pocket and returned to the girls in the shop front of the pharmacy.

“Now have you made a decision?” I asked.

“Yes,” said one of them, “we have decided that you are a vampire, but that you are different to normal vampires.”

“You tried to read our minds before,” a different one stated, “why?”

“I was trying to figure out if you were the Guardians I was sent to help,” I replied honestly.

“You were sent to help us? By whom?” Asked the third girl.

“Guinevere,” I replied.

“Oh...can you prove it?” She asked suspicious and with good reason I suspected.

“Um...I can show you the memory or you could take this,” I said handing over the specimen jar containing my blood.

“We’ll do both, if you don’t mind.”

“Okay – who will I show?” I asked.

“We’ll all see,” declared the first one, “hold out your hands”.

The girls formed a circle with me, each of us holding hands, it was strangely reminiscent of a Wiccan practice. We all closed our eyes and opened our minds. The steel doors of their minds came down and allowed me entry to the foyer of their mental mansions. I took a deep breath and recalled my interaction with Guinevere.

“Welcome, Isölde, friend of the Guardian Guinevere – we appreciate your help and friendship,” they all offered in unison.

“We’ll be in touch when we need your help.”

They dropped my hands, gave me a smile and left the store without any hair care products but with the phial of my blood secreted away in one of their handbags. I was a little taken aback – they needed my help now...how could they not know that? They were clearly young vampires, but experienced in battle and should have been wise enough to ask me what I knew – why I had bothered to introduce myself in the first place. As my salvation into the Light, waltzed out the door, I realised I might need to find a different Guardian – at least there were plenty to choose from! The greatest obstacle would be getting in contact with another one here in Tasmania because I am still not ready to leave these protected shores.

Weeks went by before the Guardian girls contacted me, but by then I had come across another Guardian. It coincided with the decision I had made to stop being a pharmacist for a while so that I could concentrate on the changing magics in the

environment. Since meeting the triplets, I had noticed significant changes in the way Tasmania seemed to vibrate. Things felt as though they were out of tune. It was normal for me to escape the busy, people-filled world by hiking in the wilderness; it helped me to reconnect with my origins and I felt much better alone in the forest than trapped behind a counter in a shop. I was much better at isolation and the wild places than dealing with a populous so far removed from that which I had known as a young woman. The biggest complication, I think, is that I still look like I am a young woman, but I have no real desire to do any of the expected young woman things. I don't like night clubs – though they are a great place to get a blood meal, but the music and flashing lights are an unnecessary onslaught to my senses. I'm not really into water sports, having been trapped on islands for most of my very long life. In all honesty, I don't have a thing in common with modern youth. I am distracted by other things and find disgrace in the behaviours of my 'peers'. I am also sick and tired of being treated as a young adult rather than the oldest amongst all who dwell on the island. The men, in particular, are condescending and treat me as though I am both naïve and inexperienced in the ways of the world! I may not yet have been on an aeroplane, but I have seen my fair share of flying machines, and it is true that the last large boat that I have been on was made of wood with sails, but that does not mean that I have not kept up with the technology of the world. My garage is full of devices long since surpassed by new and improved technological advances. It looks like a museum in there. I must admit, I do prefer the modern technologies – machines that do your dishes for you, wash and dry your clothes, televisions and DVD players that show movies at the click of a button. Devices, that enable instant communication across the world – of course, I have a far more ancient and private method of doing the same thing, and with my method – I didn't need to worry about other people listening in!

Thomas was a fortunate find. He was already on the path of the evil in the depths of the Tasmanian wilderness and when I introduced myself to him, he seemed happy to have the help. He will be a fine ally in this cause. His mind was a complicated mess of memories, but it seemed he was working desperately to get a hold of them. I introduced myself as a guide into the wilderness, but I was also willing to guide his magical development and ensure he was prepared to fight whatever demons our excursions into the wild places would find. His fiancé startled me, and further the revelation that each of

the Guardian Elizabeth's nine children were in the process of, or already had formed, an alliance with a magical creature so pure in their magical essence that they could have only been direct descendants of the creator or all beings of Light: Isis. I could envisage a great connection between myself and the Guardians and I believed whole-heartedly that Guinevere had spoken the truth when she had stated that I would find my way back to the Light. Whether or not, this particular set of circumstances was what she had foreseen, was irrelevant as I knew from the core of my being that I was...finally...on the right path.

Thomas accidentally shared many details with me and I was glad, for his sake, that his ally was making him work on closing his mind. He had, for example, revealed that it was his family who had freed me from the spells and bindings of Tristan when they had destroyed most of that most-wicked family in Paris. I also knew, that the demons Thomas and his family had faced were far more physical than the metaphorical ones I had spent my life facing. I no longer believe in coincidences, destiny had bought me here and had given me time to amply prepare for my journey toward the light, meeting the Guardians was decreed millennia ago and, finally, after all of the waiting, after all of the hardships, my time had come!

I quit my job and set to work converting one of the spare bedrooms in my house into a proper, traditional apothecary studio. There were potions and elixirs to make, new ingredients to source; maps to dust off and correct as urbanisation had impinged on the wild places. There was much to do to be ready to help the Guardians in their most honoured endeavour. I needed to review the old texts and seek out any information about the final battle; Armageddon was on the horizon and I needed to be prepared because this time – I would have a front-row seat!

Boxes, long since relegated to storage in my garage were dusted off and returned to the light. I had collected all that I could, given my circumstances in the past, but, being trapped in Iceland with its regular visitation from Irish monks, it turned out was quite enlightening and I was able to procure several books from their weary hands. It had been much harder here in Tasmania until the first benefactors of science and history turned up and then procurement took a steady leap forward. The museum and later the university,

had offered up many goods and, by the final quarter of the last century, devices that could copy a page instantly, meant that I could collect much information without needing to procure an entire book. Then, the World Wide Web was invented and everything changed! Information was at my fingertips. I could collect it and save it and read it at my pleasure. Oh, how things had changed when that was shared with the world. The first computer I learned to use was the size of a bus – a large bus, and, by today’s standards, did little more than an abacus, but now my iPhone and laptop store more information than that first computer ever could. They, too, give me access to more information in one seating than I had in all the years between my birth and the arrival of the white colonists in Tasmania! The world is at my fingertips and I am able to explore much of it despite my lack of physical connection to anything outside of Tasmania. In hindsight, there is more that I could have learned about the wider world since my departure from it, but most of it had not been necessary to my life here at the bottom of the world. I could have sought out people significant to my past and perhaps my future through the social media networks now so prolific, but I hadn’t, instead I had lived my peaceful life here unencumbered by the debts of the past. When I had been so unceremoniously deposited here so long ago, there was no way but forward and so I had put one foot in front of the next and made it through a day at a time. Soon, however, those days became weeks and weeks transformed into years. Time started moving forward at an exponential rate once the Europeans colonised this place. I moved from a period where time mattered not, into one where there was so little time in each day to do all that was needed. Originally I had used the time at my disposal to survive – to hunt, find shelter and make the tools and furs I needed to stay alive, but now I can wander down to the local supermarket and collect a basket full of food – enough for several meals in a row; I can purchase clothes to keep me warm in a matter of minutes and I can drive my car from one side of the state to the other in a few hours and yet, with all of these time-saving abilities, I seem to have less time now than I ever did in the past!

The first time I saw Thomas, he was coming out of a meeting, briefcase in hand and a pained expression on his face. His suit was neat but not expensive, it was a navy blue – professional yet understated and completely appropriate for his position as a new lawyer in a firm. He had walked with purpose; clear intent registering in his persona as he walked to a nearby motel and then came out again moments later dressed casually and

carrying a note book. I followed him, secretly, through Hobart itself and then up to the Domain and around its based until we entered the Botanic Gardens. He moved around the garden, map in hand crossing areas off as he went. Every so often, he would casually lean against an old tree, large in girth and wide of canopy...it was clear he was looking for something in particular, but I had no idea what that might be. Eventually, I approached him and introduced myself. I handed him the phial of my blood, just as I had with the triplets, Thomas, though, was far more responsive of my offer for help.

This first encounter was months ago now, and time moved faster and faster from that moment. Once he had revealed to me what he was looking for and how I might help him find it – our relationship quickly built and I moved from hired help toward friendship. His fiancé, Amelia, was most gracious in her inclusion of me into their world and I could immediately discern her wisdom, time-old knowledge and experience of one so ancient that she made me look like I was still an infant! In this friendship I found new purpose, and I think, my path back into the Light.

Chapter 12

Redemption

Information flowed freely between Amelia and I. She had much to share and many concerns for the welfare and safety of her beloved, Thomas. She was clearly new to the concept of love and I saw in her a reflection of myself in my youth. She was excited and enlivened by the emotions and embraces that she shared with Thomas – her Guardian. Her pregnancy left me jealous, but hopeful that miracles could always occur when you had magic on your side...and I did now. The Guardians trusted my advice and guidance. They were keen to learn and appropriately thankful of my assistance in their cause. My contact with the triplets remained limited, but both Thomas and his mother were frequent visitors. I was honoured to have captured the interest of Elizabeth and found in her a great friend; someone who understood me because she had lived through similar ordeals and in a similar time. Granted, she had been able to maintain her existence in Europe, but like me, she had felt the wrath of Morgan and Marcus. She had lost siblings and parents at their hand, she had lost the love of her life for centuries and she had discovered her magic later in life too. Elizabeth was so much like me that we could have been sisters. When her son sent her to me as the Blacksmith and the vessel for the Flame of Love, I was not surprised that she would be worthy of roles so important to the success of this fight. Until that day, our communications had been brief and not personal, but as occurs when two women are put in a room together for a long period of time, the sharing begins. She told me of her hardships and her great joy in being reunited with Adam; the magic that had allowed her to conceive nine children and the great delight and terrible fear she experienced in being the mother of the Guardians. She shared with me her hopes and dreams for their futures and, perhaps darkest of all, her plan to keep them safe.

“Elizabeth, such a course of action would see you lost from this realm,” I had advised her when she had revealed her intention to make her children stronger.

“That may be so, but they are my children and it is my duty to protect the Light: Isölde, they are the Light!”

“You would lose yourself...they would lose you as their guide and tether, are you sure that such a decision is wise?” I asked her, astounded at her decision.

Elizabeth’s intention to link her essence into the talismans that we were creating was generous, but it would kill her in no short order – I had no doubt of that. The more talismans she made, the greater the drain on her magic and her life essence. Elizabeth was setting herself a death sentence and she had convinced me that it would be the wisest thing to do given rising power of her adversary.

“Tell me of your role in this adventure, Isölde,” she asked, “what bought you to us?”

It was then my turn to reveal the loves lost and hardships I had faced at the hands of Marcus, Morgan and Tristan. Elizabeth worked the silver while she listened to my story. She asked me questions about William and each of the Tristans. I found myself spilling my soul to her. I talked about my love for William and how he was taken from me, about my heartbreak when our child was lost and that dream ripped to shreds by the invasion of Marcus. How I was, effectively, sold into prostitution and held there with magic and then how I had escaped but later been discovered by Tristan and how that had led me here.

“I am sorry, that we must have caused you pain when we killed him,” she apologised.

“Don’t be, you freed me from his curse,” I replied and squeezed her shoulder.

Elizabeth had been the first person to hear my story. She had been the first person that I had been able to share my ordeals and pleasures with. There had never been another vampire in my life that I could talk to like I could with Elizabeth. I hadn’t realised how sad I had been, how alone, until Elizabeth listened to all the pain and suffering that poured from my heart. She was so much younger than me, and yet seemed to have been wisened by her time as a vampire in the torment of this particular wing of the Medici family. She sympathised with me and empathised with me. When finally I revealed Guinevere’s message to me and how I had come to track down her children and offer them my services because I thought that might be the right path, she took my hands in hers.

“I am certain that it is... you have found keepers of the Light, all you need do now is walk through the gate when they open it.”

“I...thank you, Elizabeth.”

“Thank you, Isölde, but I do ask that you see this journey through to its completion. Watch over them, guide them, help them see with wiser, more experienced eyes...my children are headstrong and impulsive and I fear that this journey will need a steady hand and a reasoned voice.”

“I will,” I agreed.

“Do this, and I feel that Guinevere will ensure your path is true, for, dear Isölde, you have been touched by a Guardian and she has left a piece of magic attached to your soul. Your gifts, are her gifts, she saw fit to raise you to a higher station because of the light she saw in you; I, too, see that light, shining out through the shadow in your heart. Steer the course, Isölde, you are almost there.”

Elizabeth’s words would guide and haunt me. I had made a promise to another Guardian and I fully intended to keep both promises. If anything in my long life could give me purpose it was these promises, these debts paid forward. I would do all that I could to keep her children safe and on the right path. I would be a friend and confident for them and I would give them access to the world of potions and elixirs. They might be the gate to my path but I would be a bridge for them. I would help prepare them to fight the demons and follow them through the Darkness on my journey toward the Light.

Chapter 13

Reunion

I was more nervous about the wedding than Amelia was, in fact, she was remarkably casual about the whole affair. When Hobart puts on a beautiful day, it does it well. A stunning blue sky, a sparkling azure ocean, yellow-white sand and a breeze so gentle that it caresses the skin as a lover might. There have been many weddings in my past, but sadly, most of the people in them have passed away now. As technology increased my involvement with such things decreased. It has become harder and harder to remain invisible, that I had managed it for so long was a testament to my determination to pass through time unnoticed. Despite my accumulated wealth, I have maintained a low-key life. My house is simple, old and completely normal in the local landscape. I have had to get it retrofitted on occasion for electricity and telecommunications, both things that were not yet invented when the house was built.

I haven't worn a dress as lovely as this one in centuries, though it has far fewer undergarments than the last one. The fabric is soft and shiny and golden. I am surprised by my appearance in the mirror – the beautiful girl staring back at me has been hidden in the darkness for a long time, but this image is bright like sunlight. Though I would like to continue to help the Guardians, they are probably right to exclude me from all battles. The bunch of red roses is rich in colour and scent. I hold the posy to my nose and feel the soft petals brush against my cheeks. The scent is sweet and I am reminded of past encounters where I was given sweet posies of wild roses. Amelia's bouquet is fitting for a bride as exceptional as she, never could I have guessed this future when I first left my father's keep.

"I am ready," declares Amelia, and I am suddenly aware of the room full of people surrounding me. Thomas' sisters have been in and out all morning dropping things off and picking things up. Magical children have been running around our feet and we have had to be careful not to step on them. Azura's dress is not gold, for that would clash with her own silver locks, but it is a fabulous shade of green – one that matches Amelia's eyes. Amelia is the most simply dressed of us. Instead of the satin we wear, her dress is

cotton; white and patterned with delicate lace, but a simple sheath that skims her body. She is radiant. Her skin glows golden, like her brother Falcon who has turned up to walk her down the aisle, or rather the sand.

“Okay, everyone take a deep breath,” directed Azura and without thinking I follow her command.

“Let’s go shall we,” says Falcon and I fall into line, still amazed that I am here to witness such an event.

As we cross the road from the small motel and head toward the matrimonial destination I am greeted by the sun; it welcomes me to its fold, the breeze too insists that I am free and welcome. The sand is warm beneath my bare feet; the coarseness of its grains a reminder of the grit and determination I have had to show to get to this moment in time.

“I have a surprise for you,” whispers Falcon into my ear as I pass by him.

“What is it?” I whisper back.

“True love exists and I will show it to you today,” he tells me as though he has read my mind and heart and knows exactly where my mind has travelled back to on this day.

“I can see it already – in your eyes when you look at Gabrielle, in Azura’s when she looks at her daughter and at Xavier, in Amelia’s when she sees Charity and Thomas. It is all around me – I know it,” I reply with tears in my eyes because I can see it everywhere and I know that I once had it too.

“Trust me,” Falcon says squeezing my shoulder, “now off you go,” he points in the direction of the congregation.

I take another deep breath and, as the music begins to play, I begin to lead the procession down the beach. I scan the faces. I see many new friends that I have made in this journey, a few faces I don’t know. Thomas waiting with such excitement for his bride, Xavier standing beside him, best man, his own eagerness to see his fiancé evident. Adam, his brother Samuel, and then a face from my own past. I stop in my tracks – could

it possibly be? How could it? I want to call out to him, to make sure he is really there, but my voice has abandoned me and I stand there, frozen; still in the middle of the procession, bridesmaid and bride behind me, my mouth agape staring at a man whose face I thought had been lost to me millennia ago. His eyes catch mine and my heart skips a beat – he has seen me, and his face indicates recognition immediately. He smiles and breaks ranks to rush over to me. The entire crowd has eyes on us now – I can feel their eager gaze. The vision of my past stands in front of me and gently touches my lips and I know with certainty that I am not hallucinating for I feel the tenderness of a man who loved me body and soul. Tears are streaming down my face and I am still speechless; his time-wearied face also streams with tears. The crowd is silent, waiting it seems for us to say something, but I can't...I don't know what to say. I draw in another deep breath, but my chest is so tight that I cannot get a full complement of air; my heart is thumping, I am sure that the onlookers must be able to hear it. I gingerly raise my hand to his cheek and he closes his eyes and pushes his cheek into my hand. I drop the roses without thinking and bring my other hand to my mouth. It is him!

I am shaking now, my hands are quivering and my breath is erratic.

“William...” I stammer, I have more to say, but he doesn't let me. His lips catch mine and he kisses me with such ferociousness that I am taken a little aback. Since that day so long ago when my happy future was ripped from me, I have awaited this moment, hoped for this moment but never dared to believe that I would ever find it! I wrap my arms around him and hold on for dear life in case this is a dream and it will be torn from me. Oh my goddess! He is here, he is touching me, and he is...still...

“Isölde, my heart, where have you been? I have missed you,” he whispered.

“I thought you lost, gone from the world centuries ago...when I was made this...I thought I had lost you forever...I have missed you too.”

He kisses me tenderly this time and I am swept up off my feet.

“I will never let you go,” he says collecting me in his arms.

“Promise me that, William, for I could not bear it again.”

“With my whole heart, I promise it.”

Clapping rouses us from our not so private interlude. I am jolted back to reality and realise that I am holding up Amelia’s wedding. I bend down to collect the flowers and turned to catch Falcon’s eye. He smiles and nods at me, and though my eyes are filled with tears, I smile and nod back. He had delivered exactly what he had suggested he would. He had given me back my William, the first and truest love I had ever felt. I know this is Elizabeth’s doing, as is every other carefully planned detail at this ceremony. I send a silent word of gratitude towards the heavens. William attempted to move aside to allow the procession to continue, but I held his arm firmly – I wasn’t letting go now or ever.

Azura followed me down the aisle and stood beside Xavier. Falcon delivered Amelia to Thomas. Amelia passed her lovely bunch of flowers to Azura, she smiled at me knowingly and then directed all of her focus on her beloved. The celebrant wrapped their hands with ribbon, a Wiccan ritual if ever there was one.

“Love is the key,” she began.

I tried to listen, but instead gave thanks for the journey that brought me here; for an immortal future with William by my side; for friendships with women so powerful and guided by love that they could help me keep on the path toward the light regardless of the pain and suffering of the past; for the opportunity to be a part of their Guardian world. I glanced up at William to see him staring at me. His hand slides about my back and he pulls me tight against him. His eyes glisten too. He smiles and his whole face lights up and I realise that the darkness had lifted! I feel alive, filled with love and light. Guinevere and the magic she wielded had kept their promise to me, I had been led back to the Light.

Epilogue

Hope and faith have led me here, back to the Light, back to the one I love in the deepest, truest sense of the word. True love, though it may have faded from my life for some time, I am happy to say, was there at the core of me all along. In my beloved William's eyes I see the girl that I once was, wrapped in his arms I remember a different time but look forward to a future that is so bright it dazzles me. The Darkness may still be on the horizon for the Guardians, but it has been cast back into the shadows for me because a beacon of Light brought me back to sunny shores and golden sunbeams. I trust in the Guardians and allies for all that is entrusted to them and I can say this with authority because they have changed my world. I have faith in them.

The Guardians have rescued me from the snare of night. They have shown me that two things are more important than any other in this world: love and faith. They have shown me that their faith in each other and their role in the world will be enough to bring them to the final battle and they have shown me that the love they have for each other and for love itself will guide them through with power and integrity. I am privileged to have been a part of their lives, even if it was such a short time. I have been rewarded for my service to the Light with love itself and a gift, most gracious, from the Guardians.

When William and I escaped that wonderful wedding to renew our physical relationship we did it with a gift from Elizabeth, two talismans: one phoenix and one dragon. With that gift of magic and love, the Light now grows within my womb. The baby William and I had always wanted is the gift to us for our faithful service from a family wise beyond its years, loved beyond measure and protected by the Light itself. I am Isölde, friend of the Guardians, guide and apothecary; I am William's beloved wife, the keeper of his heart; Elizabeth's confidant, the keeper of her secrets and Guinevere's witch, faithful follower and believer in the power of love. I am a lover and a mother, but most importantly, for the first time in millennia, I am truly happy and I was right all along – love is the answer!

