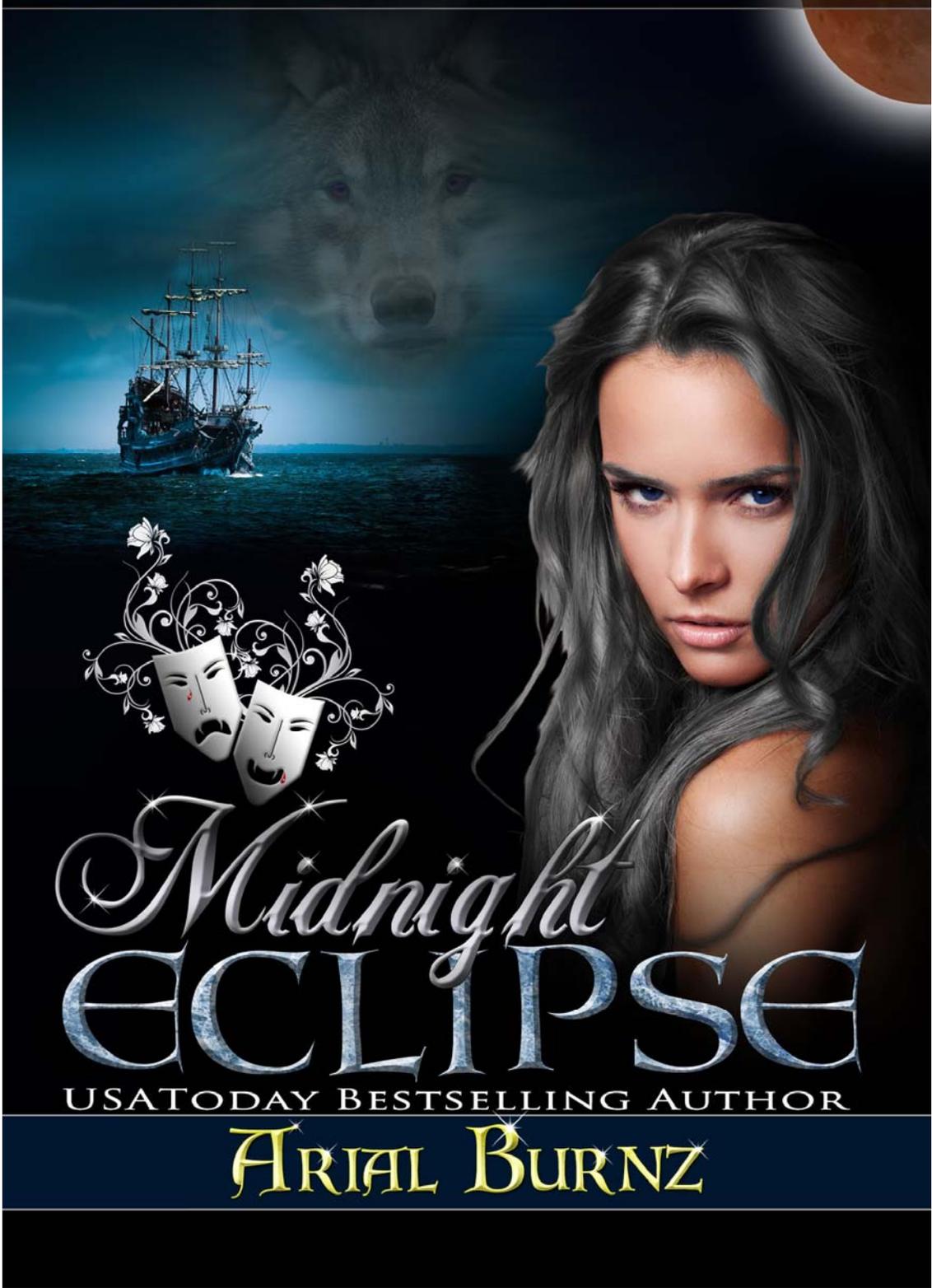


BONDED BY BLOOD VAMPIRE CHRONICLES - BOOK 4



Midnight
ECLIPSE

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ARIAL BURNZ

Midnight Eclipse

Book 4 of the Bonded By Blood Vampire Chronicles

(Approximately 86,000 words)

[Arial Burnz](#)

Broderick MacDougal follows the familiar yearning of his soul to a fierce warrior who is as seductive as a siren at sea—and she is just as deadly. Broderick not only finds himself in the midst of an ancient war of shape shifters, but the devious Cordelia Harley has re-entered his life and has a few of her own surprises.

Born into a hated race of Norse werewolves, **Celina Hunter** knows all too well the dangers of trusting anyone other than her two brothers. And yet the survival of her family hinges on trusting the strangely familiar Broderick MacDougal, a natural enemy of her kind...yet one her tribe's Shaman advisers confirm is her soul mate. Enemy or not, Celina slips into the spell of this vampire's promises of eternal love, gambling with all she holds dear.

Broderick and Celina are bound by a curse, but having come this far through the centuries, Broderick is not about to risk his chance at having his soul mate for eternity. The price, however, may be more than Celina is willing to pay as there is more at stake than just her immortal soul.

Reader Advisory: This story contains hot, steamy sex scenes describe in graphic detail (RAWR) and violent swashbuckling scenes of sword fighting and wolf battles.

Midnight Eclipse

Book 4 of the Bonded By Blood Vampire Chronicles

by

Arial Burnz

FIRST EDITION

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Prologue

Somewhere in Europe—1637

“Are you certain?” Rasheed tossed his book aside and rose from his chair on the balcony overlooking the lower level of their parlor. In two strides, he was gripping the wrought iron rail and assessing his companion below.

Ammon nodded up at him from the center of the large Turkish rug. “Absolutely. I saw Broderick MacDougal and his new wife actually cure her father.”

“You realize this will win us favor with the king?” Mikhail put his wine glass on the marble table before him and sat at the edge of his chair, eyes aglow.

Ammon chuckled. *Ah, my delicious friends don’t yet see the full potential. This will be fun.* “That isn’t all.” He strolled to the gilded beverage cart and poured himself a glass of the blood-laced vintage from a crystal decanter. “Angus has created a cloak that makes him immune to the incantation.” He swirled the ruby liquid before drinking.

“What?” Rasheed stalked to the staircase and descended with rapid steps.

“Yes. Our prophecy brothers have been busy.” Ammon joined Mikhail at the twin chair by the hearth, sitting back and savoring the memories of the young peasant man whose blood flavored the fine vintage. “From what information I could gather, Angus has been feeding from members of the Army of Light—he has some method to taint their blood so it won’t harm a Vamsyrian—and then harvesting their blood to stain the cloak. I can only imagine that since their blood is blessed, it is immune to the incantation and one just needs to be encased within. I don’t know for certain, but I would guess the leather is lambskin.”

Rasheed crossed his arms and frowned. “I suppose you weren’t able to obtain this cloak from him, were you?”

Ammon pursed his lips. “As you ordered me, rather emphatically, I was not to engage with him or Broderick because we did not want them to know we’ve been following them. Besides, I’m not sure it works anymore. It was burned during their dramatic battle.”

“This cure for the werewolf curse and the cloak will soften the blow of this prophecy business.” Rasheed paced the length of the rug. “I’m tired of running, but I’m not sure it will be enough to save our necks.”

“Ammon, you are too full of yourself at the moment,” Mikhail said. He grabbed his glass and sat back, mimicking his companion’s lazy twirl of his wrist as he played with his wine. “You have saved the best news for last. I know that expression.”

Ammon’s grin spread wide. No one knew him like Mikhail. “The Elementals are not extinct after all.”

Mikhail choked on his beverage, staining the front of his laced cravat.

“You’re a liar!” Rasheed scowled and pointed an accusatory finger. “There has been no sign of them in over fifty years.”

“You can thank the blasted church for that,” Ammon snapped. “As you know, they all went into hiding because of these ridiculous witch trials and religious wars. However, with the Peace of Prague and the new accession of peace between the Protestants and Catholics of the Imperial Free Cities, the bloody trials are finally dying out, making it safe enough for them to resurface.”

“How do you know this?” Rasheed’s doubt-filled eyes assessed Ammon.

“MacDougal’s new wife is a Fire Witch. Her grandmother, Wilhelmina, an Air Witch. I believe her father is an Earth Mage, but I couldn’t confirm it since the werewolf curse seemed to be blocking his powers and I wasn’t around long enough to watch him after he was cured.”

“You saw them wield their magic?” Mikhail’s face near shimmered with excitement.

Rasheed rolled his eyes.

“Wilhelmina stirred the air to feed the fires of the pyre so Monika’s bonds would burn, thereby setting her free. Monika was not only unharmed by the flames, but commanded them around her.” Ammon sat back and grinned, taking another long sip from his glass.

“We would have to work very hard to reestablish those alliances.” Rasheed paced. “That will mean a lot of money to court the leaders of their Groves and—”

Mikhail swatted Ammon’s knee with the back of his hand. “Come now! There’s still more. I can see it in your eyes!”

He grinned and sipped his wine, dragging out the moment. “Broderick was not harmed from the flames either.”

Rasheed and Mikhail stared with blank expressions.

My darling, dense lovers. “Shall I spell it out for you?” Ammon leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and cradling his glass. “He fed from her...thereby—”

“Gaining her abilities?” Mikhail leapt from his chair, dropping his wine glass and didn’t flinch as it shattered across the stone floor.

Rasheed sat down on the shallow marble table, his mouth hanging open.

Ammon smiled. “Yes, Rasheed. I am certain. We won’t need to make *alliances* with the Groves. We make them our blood slaves. We breed them like cattle and not only use them for sustenance, but gain the abilities of their powers as well. As long as their hands are bound, they are helpless against us.”

Rasheed threw his head back and laughed. “*This* will please the king!”

Ammon rose and strutted to the cart to refill his glass. “Might I make a suggestion?”

“For this information, you may have anything you like.” Rasheed’s voice held seductive promise.

Ammon glanced over his shoulder, a wicked grin on his lips. “I like the sound of that.” He slid the crystal bottle top into the decanter and stalked toward Rasheed, circling him like a predator.

Rasheed’s handsome frame shuddered and he cocked an eyebrow.

“Why bring any of this before the king? What if *we* decided to harvest their powers?”

The blood drained from Rasheed’s face.

Mikhail clutched Ammon’s shoulder. “He would have us skinned alive for centuries!”

“Not if we had all these weapons at *our* disposal,” Rasheed whispered.

“Both of you are mad!” Mikhail’s gawking face swerved between Ammon and Rasheed.

Ammon winked at Mikhail. “Imagine...the king couldn’t touch us if we wielded the elements and had an army of werewolves at our command.”

Rasheed lifted Ammon’s wine glass from his fingers and downed its contents. Setting the glass on the marble table, he smirked and glanced down at the erection straining against Ammon’s breeches. “You do love power, don’t you?” Rasheed rubbed his palm over the bulge and Ammon shivered.

“Oh, no,” Mikhail scolded. He tugged at his blood-and-wine-stained cravat and began unbuttoning his shirt. “*I* am the one who needs convincing. You two have a long night of kissing my ass...among other things...before I’ll bend to your will on *this* one.”

Ammon smiled and slipped his fingers into Mikhail’s waistband, pulling him in for a kiss.

“You gentlemen have a lot of balls to think you can pull off something like overthrowing the king.” The taunting voice echoed off the stone walls and stole the strength from Ammon’s limbs. When Mikhail whirled toward the voice, he stepped aside enough to reveal their unexpected guest. The three of them fell to their knees in homage and terror.

“Your majesty!” Mikhail stammered. “Please, forgive us!”

His Royal Highness, Jesse Amir, glided casually to the beverage cart and helped himself to a glass of wine. Sniffing the dark liquid, he grinned. “Lovely bouquet,” he murmured and sipped. “Poor delicious creature.” In spite of his seemingly concerned remark, the amusement never left his face. Slowly pivoting on his heel, he appraised each of them still groveling on the floor. “I’ll give you marks for ingenuity and bravery, but it’s going to take a lot more than magic and werewolves to overthrow my father.”

Ammon cringed. The Prince had heard their entire conversation. More importantly, how had he found them?

The sixteen-hundred-year-old prince strolled to the tapestried couch and lounged. “You executed your plan well enough when you resigned from the Council right after you allowed that ordeal with the prophecy to happen. Though no one else seemed to know why you resigned from your coveted positions, I don’t think many cared. Your seats were filled quickly enough. Such power is not so easily surrendered, so I would imagine no one wanted to waste any time with questions.” He sipped his wine and swirled the liquid around his mouth before swallowing, self-satisfaction coloring his face. “At first, when the three of you vanished without a trace, I thought you had made a grave mistake. I couldn’t believe you were fools enough to think running from facing your responsibilities would salvage your lives.” He leaned forward with a prideful grin. “And yet when I couldn’t find you, much to my surprise, I had to rethink my initial assessment. Masterfully done, gentlemen, although I’m still not sure how you managed it.”

We were careless. That's how he found us. Ammon clenched his jaw.

“Unfortunately, killing the two Vamsyrian guards who had witnessed that...*miracle* with Broderick and that member of the Army of Light served no purpose. They must have said something to someone or were overheard when they came running to you. Word leaked out prior to their deaths. You weren't quick enough. And still...I couldn't find you. Whispers of the prophecy, which obviously reached my father's ears, have him putting a price on your heads...yet here you are.” Rising from the couch, he refilled his glass. “By the way, how did you think my father would never find out about this prophecy business?”

“Your Majesty,” Rasheed began. “We didn't think—”

“Yes, I know...you weren't thinking.” He sighed. Returning to his seat, he settled down once more, crossed his legs and stretched his arm across the back of the couch and shrugged. “In truth, what other choice *did* you have but to run if you wanted to live? Surely coming forth and telling my father what you had allowed to happen was out of the question. He most certainly would have had your heads decorating his gates. So, now is your chance to confess. Tell me what happened the night Broderick MacDougal was brought before the Council.” The prince waved his hand dismissively, indicating they were permitted to rise.

“Cordelia Harley requested MacDougal be transformed because he was a blood slave,” Rasheed explained. “We were under the impression she was trying to save him from this condition. Though we knew she had also transformed Angus Campbell a few months before, we made no connection to the two men.”

“The prophecy never entered our minds, your highness,” Mikhail was quick to interject. “Except, of course, to ensure MacDougal was there willingly.”

“With all due respect, my liege,” Ammon argued. “I don't understand what we did wrong. Our job was to ensure those making the choice were doing so of their own free will. Broderick MacDougal had the choice to choose the Army of Light and let them heal him, but he did not.”

Jesse nodded in agreement. “Quite right. But then...why did you run?” He pondered his wine before he glanced at their guilty expressions. “He was, after all, a blood slave, privy to Cordelia's manipulation.” He raised his eyebrows. “But none of that really

matters now...does it?" He took another sip of his wine and searched each of their perplexed faces. "What happened the night MacDougal brought the woman before you?"

"When MacDougal brought Davina before us," Ammon continued, "we recognized her blood slave condition and, since Cordelia had come to us with such a plea regarding Broderick, we were immediately suspicious. We asked who had made her into a blood slave."

"MacDougal said Campbell had done this to her," Mikhail spilled forth. "As a way of seeking revenge against Broderick. It was only then that we'd learned MacDougal and Campbell were brothers, my prince. By then the deed had already been done."

Jesse swiveled his head to Ammon, then Mikhail, then Rasheed. They each exchanged glances, uncertain what further information the prince sought. Jesse sighed, rose from the couch as he put his empty glass onto the marble coffee table and strolled to Rasheed, who took a tentative step backward. "So I don't spend the next two hours trying to milk this information from you three, would you mind sharing a little of yourself with me?" The prince held out his hand as if waiting for Rasheed to place something in his open palm.

Ammon's gut wrenched. Once Jesse fed from them and had all the information he came for—and then some—he'd kill them. Rasheed's pleading eyes locked to Ammon. Ammon nodded. Mikhail's head dipped in agreement. As if united as one, the three of them leapt into action—Rasheed seized Jesse's wrist and twisted while Ammon jumped the prince from behind, wrapping his arm around his neck. Mikhail snatched a silver-plated dagger from his boot and lunged at their captive. Yet in a flash even quicker than their immortal strength and speed could possibly match, Jesse flung them away as if they were bothersome children. The ancient Vamsyrian stood with his hands on his hips before the hearth, a smile dancing across his lips.

Escape would be useless. *But at least we can try!* Ammon dashed for the entryway, sweeping Rasheed and Mikhail into his arms on his way to freedom.

"Enough!" the prince thundered and shouted an incoherent command.

Piercing agony ignited down Ammon's spine and he collapsed to the stone floor, dropping his lovers and writhing next to Rasheed and Mikhail, twisting in very similar gyrations. Staggered by the intensity of pain now spreading through his bones, Ammon

could only open his mouth in a silent plea for mercy, a long line of spittle pooling on the tile.

The prince crouched with a smirk and gripped Ammon's wrist, piercing his flesh and drinking a few mouthfuls of vital fluid. Jesse smacked his lips and tilted his head as if pondering the information he gained from Ammon's blood. "Hrmmm." He then reached over and did the same to Rasheed. "Hrmmm." More smacking and pondering with comical theatrics. They were toys to him. Strolling to Mikhail, Jesse gathered the last taste of information, which would seal their doom. The prince had all he needed from them.

Ammon grunted through the persistent spasms of misery, now tearing through every inch of his body, and gazed at his two long-time lovers. *What a pitiful way to end.*

Jesse paced the room, his hands clasped behind his back, seemingly mindless of their thrashing on the floor. He stopped before Ammon. "Are you going to behave?" The prince sneered and raised his brows.

Ammon could only nod.

Jesse regarded Rasheed and Mikhail, who also managed to nod in agreement. "Excellent." He stood and uttered another strange command.

Ammon gasped with relief. The pain has left his body as suddenly as it had overtaken him. He reveled at the cool stone against his cheek, his chest heaving.

"Very interesting," the prince mumbled, and refilled his wine glass.

Ammon and his companions recovered enough to sit up. Mikhail's pale face and fear-stricken eyes darted between him and Rasheed.

Why hasn't he killed us yet? Ammon still struggled to breathe easy.

"Cordelia was your mistake," Jesse announced. "But I understand you didn't really know what she was until she escaped." He sat down and mumbled more to himself, "However, based on her determination, she probably would have raced to the next Council Fortress to achieve MacDougal's transformation anyway." Settling back into his seat, he narrowed his eyes. "The fact that she transformed Angus before the Council in Leeds proves that. She was definitely up to something. Although I *am* curious as to why she backed down after going through all that trouble." He frowned at his three subjects. "But if we knew then what we know now..." He shook his head. "What's done is done,

correct, gentlemen?" He finished his wine and the glass tinked loudly on the marble as he set it down. "Now, to the matter of your deaths." The prince rose, his face bright with anticipation.

Ammon swallowed and glanced at Rasheed and Mikhail, who both reflected in their eyes the same fear gnawing in his gut.

"My father wanted you dead, so I volunteered to do the deed. I set out to find you as soon as I heard the rumors of this prophecy and who possibly started it. Yet you all eluded me. And it's no wonder I couldn't find you." Jesse strolled to Mikhail and ripped open his shirt, exposing the glittering symbol tattooed on his chest. "Clever. Even *I* didn't know about the invisibility sigil." The prince grinned. "Too bad for the Army of Light member you tortured to get it." He patted Mikhail's chest and began pacing the room, circling the three men. "Now that I have learned what truly transpired with MacDougal, my search is over." Jesse stopped and spread his arms. "It is true—the prophecy has indeed begun. No exaggerated claims." Pointing to each of them, he said, "But what you three said this evening has given me great pause and is the path to achieving my own personal agenda. I have not found many who have had the gall to entertain the idea of rising up against the father of our race, let alone start making plans. After feeding from you, I know exactly how committed you three are to this idea." He glanced at Mikhail and smirked. "Well, two of you are committed, but based on your relationships with each other, I'm sure you'll come around...especially if you know you have the backing of your prince."

Ammon's jaw dropped, mirroring his companion's shocked expressions. "Backing?"

Jesse crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "I have been waiting for an opportunity such as this for centuries. Rising up against my father will not only take a lot of fortitude, but commitment. No one...and I mean no one is willing to do such a thing. Well." The prince glanced at the ceiling. "I know of only one other person who might have the balls, but he doesn't necessarily have the desire. However, I'm hoping to change that soon enough. In any case, I cannot do this alone and my father cannot be killed."

"He is immune to silver and the werewolf bite?" Ammon asked.

"Of course he is." Jesse planted his hands upon his hips, annoyance twisting his mouth. "How else is Satan to ensure his perfect little race continues to thrive? But the

people guarding the king and living in his palace are not so immune. Those weapons will most certainly be used when we overthrow his fortress.”

“If he can’t be killed,” Mikhail ventured, “then how are we to overthrow him?”

“Don’t misunderstand me. My father is not invincible, but the methods to kill him are difficult to achieve. The prophecy being fulfilled will most certainly do it, as God’s wrath will be unleashed and my father will be destroyed in the process...but so will the rest of us. And the other method to kill him was lost only a few short years after he became the first Vamsyrian...and that was over a millennium ago, so that isn’t an option we can explore. Since beheading a Vamsyrian must be done with a silver blade for it to be permanent, and he is immune to silver, such a deed would only slow him down if we kept his head separated from his body. Although, we might need to do that indefinitely if we do not succeed elsewhere. We need to incapacitate him on a more permanent basis and I need to get close to him to do that. That’s where the Elementals and Angus’s cloak come into play. I will handle Angus.”

“And what would you command of us, my liege?” Rasheed asked, nodding respectfully.

“You three will get that recipe to cure the curse of the werewolf and test it. I want to be sure it works. We’ll need that assurance to get the werewolves to commit to our task without turning on us. Having the cure as leverage will be crucial, but it’s too soon to amass a werewolf army now.” Jesse resumed pacing. “We all need to be on the lookout for a Spirit Elemental. How they are born or created or however they come into being was a closely guarded secret amongst the Elementals...a race I also thought was extinct until this evening. I’d wager that secret is still closely guarded, more than ever since their numbers are so few. We cannot do anything until we have one of those.”

Rasheed cleared his throat. “Might I ask the purpose of the Spirit Elemental? I’d never heard of them—only the water, fire, earth and air Elementals.”

Jesse ceased pacing. “A Spirit Elemental has power over the dead and the spirit world—and as the undead, we straddle that plane. *That* is how we will imprison my father! Right now, our main concern is to hide. As far as the Council and my father will be concerned, we will be dead.” Jesse placed his hands upon Ammon and Rasheed’s shoulders as his confidants in his master plan and addressed each of them with a devious

grin. “And I believe I know just the way to do that...with a little help from the Army of Light.”

Chapter One

Shetland Islands—October, 1739 (102 years later)

Celina Hunter nibbled on her bottom lip as she waited for The Three to finish walking on the spiritual plane. She paced, regretting the decision to bother the *spækonur* with her trivial matters. If any one of them died, she would never forgive herself.

Each *spækona*—shaman advisor and seer—sat cross-legged in a circle with her hands linked to the others. They not only represented the three stages of womanhood—the maiden, the mother and the crone—but they also wielded a mystical magic funneled from the spirits. Sorrowful chants in an unknown tongue poured from their open mouths. They swayed in unison, only the whites of their eyes visible beneath their fluttering lids. Celina rubbed her arms to stave off the goose pimples rising along her flesh.

The Three hissed a choir of gasps and Celina near jumped through the wall of the small, A-framed cottage. Gripping each other's forearms, the wise women sat ridged and jerking as if fighting an internal battle in the land of their Norse Gods. Guilt flushed hot up Celina's neck and she gripped the back of the chair before her. The *spækonur* were fabled to walk with the Gods, crossing over into the other realms of their heavenly hosts to converse with Odin...Thor...Idunn...even Loki. At times, they visited their grandfathers, Sköll and Manegarm, for guidance about their clan wars. And sometimes they were subjected to fierce spiritual warfare. These women were consulted to save lives. Yet here Celina was, asking them to journey into this dangerous realm to inquire about the romantic dreams she'd been having since the late winter. When The Three stopped thrashing and settled into their slow, swaying chants again, Celina sighed and collapsed onto the wooden chair.

I should have never told Chandler! She cursed her brother for telling their father about her dreams. Thankfully, she had not mentioned the sexual nature of these visions. She closed her eyes against the erotic images of her Scottish lover, and placed her cool hands against her cheeks as they flared. As the months progressed, the midnight caresses and acts of lovemaking grew more vivid. Though she had never seen his face, she was gifted with glimpses of his full lips kissing her skin and whispering endearments; brushes of his fiery auburn hair against her breasts and belly as he explored her body; the deep Scottish accent that always touched her soul with confessions of eternal love.

“Celina.”

She snapped out of her daydreams and rose from the chair. “Yes? I’m sorry, I was just... Is all well?”

“Yes, child,” High Priestess Katla said, the *crone*’s old and leathered skin creasing with her smile. “There is no reason for you to be concerned. The man of whom you are dreaming is your soul mate.”

The spækonur donned a trio of grins. In spite of the turmoil they seemed to have experienced, their eyes sparkled with hope.

“My soul mate?” Celina swallowed the tightness forming in her throat. “But what of his Scottish accent?”

“Love knows neither race nor creed,” said Priestess Frida, the *mother* of the three. “It most certainly ignores the wars the Scottish mortals have waged upon us for almost two-hundred years. This man’s spirit has been entwined with yours through centuries in a rare way we have heard of through our spiritual walks, but have never encountered until now.”

Priestess Rakel, the *maiden* and just barely into her sixteenth year, nodded. “He will be our path to peace.”

Celina’s grin widened and a new-found hope bubbled inside her breast.

Rakel’s brow creased in a grim frown. “However, though the devotion of this man’s spirit is true and runs deeper than the core of the earth itself, there is a dark shadow surrounding him.” The Three nodded to each other, exchanging worried glances.

“He has a noble destiny,” Katla explained, “but death follows in his wake.” The High Priestess regarded Rakel on her left, who shook her head. The crone then considered Frida on her right, who also shook her head. Katla nodded. “In spite of this darkness, this man would die before he’d let any harm come to you. You have been given a rare gift to have this knowledge. That is all we can reveal now, Chieftain’s daughter. Do not fear. He is your destiny.”

Celina bowed before each of them, offering her gift of thanks into the palms of their hands—sea shells gathered from the deep waters surrounding their island home—but not just any ordinary shells. They were obtained during her many searches for the one treasure that would one day bring peace to their clan. The Three kissed Celina’s brow

each time she offered her gifts, and then Celina exited the cottage and embraced the cool evening air as she took her time strolling back toward her house.

Her face twitched between smiling and frowning, trying to sort through the exciting yet troubling information. Her soul mate. Perhaps he would be the one to help her find the treasure she sought and why he was the path to their peace. Yet what of this darkness and death in his wake? And there was obviously more The Three were withholding. Of course, she was in no position to press the matter. Whatever silent communication they shared, about whom or what this man was, was not for Celina's ears. At least not now.

A large bonfire blazed at the center of the village, surrounded by her clan and some of the Sköllarian kin. Chandler doubled over, laughing with their brother Jericho and Peter Lund, Jericho's best friend. When Chandler glanced her way, he pardoned himself and trotted to her side. "So? What did the spækonur say?"

"It was a trivial request," she said, brushing the matter aside completely. "I told you I shouldn't have troubled them with my stupid dreams." She forced a grin.

Chandler crossed his arms and a silver lock of his hair fell across his forehead. "You're a terrible liar. You have always been a terrible liar, so stop trying. It's embarrassing."

She smirked. "I happen to be a very good liar."

"Fess up. What did they say?"

Celina pursed her lips and repeated everything The Three told her.

"Soul mate? So he's a real person and not some metaphor?"

She nodded.

Chandler cocked a lopsided, devilish grin. "Did they say *when* he would come riding in on his steed?"

"No. But I feel an urgency in my dreams. A knowing that he's near. I can't explain it, but somewhere deep in my soul, I just...I know he's close."

Chandler glanced around, as if ensuring no one was watching him, then slipped his hand inside the breast pocket of his short coat. He produced a leather-bound book.

Celina gasped and snatched it from his fingers, pressing it to her chest and grinning. "Is this what I think it is?"

Chandler chuckled. "You act as if I've found the very ring you seek."

She scampered over to the lantern hanging by the door of the blacksmith's shop, hunching over the book and turning her back to the crowd of family and friends encircling the bonfire. "Gulliver's Travels," she whispered. "I can't believe you found a copy."

Chandler leaned close. "Pebi's at the door," he said under his breath.

Celina gasped and struggled to shove the awkward tome into her hip pouch.

Jericho strutted toward them, a toothy grin on his handsome face and a mug in his hand. "Come! We're taking our festivities to the *Siren's Song* for some real drink!"

"Excellent!" Chandler proclaimed, and fell in step with his brother and Peter as they strolled toward the village tavern.

"Celina!"

She groaned and whirled to face her father standing on their cottage doorstep, beckoning with his hand.

"I'll catch up," she tossed over her shoulder to her brothers, then cantered to meet her father. "Yes, Pebi?" She kept her hands at her sides hoping to hide her pouch.

"Don't tell me you were going to keep me waiting to hear the news." Axel Hunter raised an eyebrow and tapped his foot melodramatically.

Celina smiled. "My apologies." She made an effort to keep her apprehensions at bay and remain positive. Her soul mate was, after all, Scottish and she wasn't sure her father would overlook his nationality. "The man in my dreams is real. He is my soul mate."

"For certain?" The corner of his mouth turned up. "Why, that's wonderful news! Shall we begin the wedding preparations?" He let loose a hearty laugh and rested a hand on her shoulder.

Celina released a nervous chortle. "Well, that might be going a bit too far right now. I don't know *when* he will be here, but they did assure me he was a most noble...mate."

"This is cause for celebration! There is hope for carrying on the family line after all! I only have Jericho and you, so don't disappoint me like Chandler has."

Celina frowned. "Chandler is far from being a disappointment. He's a stout warrior and defends the clan as well as—"

"That's not what I meant, young pup, and you know it." Axel crossed his arms and returned the frown. "Two men together cannot produce offspring and until Chandler

chooses a female mate, he will continue to be a disappointment for carrying on the family line.”

She punched her fists into her hips and opened her mouth to protest.

“What is this?” Her father reached forward and tugged the book from her pouch. “Why do you waste time on the musing of humans?” He sighed and opened the cover. “Gulliver’s Travels? Pure drivel and fantasy. What a ridiculous notion.”

“Then why is everyone reading it?” She grabbed the book, but he yanked it from her grasp. “It’s not just a fantasy book, you know. It’s a satire on human nature and an insight into the truth of how—”

“We already understand human nature,” Axel growled. “You don’t need a fairy story to give you any more insight into their shallow minds.” He marched into their cottage and tossed the book into the fire.

“Father!” She tried to reach for the volume and save it from the flames, but he stepped in her path.

“That’s enough.” He grabbed Celina under her arm and walked her to the door. “Go with your brothers.” Axel closed the door in her face.

Celina blinked away the tears stinging in her eyes and wanted to burst down the door and...*and what?* She paced, her fingers curled into fists. She loved her father, but ever since Mamm was killed, he turned into such a bitter son-of-a-bitch. She pushed the old grief aside and stomped to catch up with her brothers and Peter.

“Wait for me!” Her best friend, Runa Strand, scampered to Celina’s side and grasped her hand. “Off to the *Siren’s*— What’s wrong?”

Celina grunted her frustration, pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes, willing herself to calm down. “My father just threw my book into the fireplace.”

“What?” She clutched Celina’s shoulders. “Gods, he has turned into such a horrid man lately.”

Celina sighed. “I know it’s because of Mamm and Brennan. I miss them, too, but he’s just...” She huffed.

“It sounds like you need a drink.” Runa tugged Celina along and they caught up to Chandler, trailing behind.

“And I’m glad you’re coming with me.” Celina shoved Chandler’s shoulder. “I don’t think I can handle these three by myself tonight.”

Chandler gave them a weak smile, then pulled his sister under his arm to his side. “I’m sorry. I should have waited to give you the book. I never thought—”

“Don’t worry about it.” She squeezed him tight and he kissed the top of her head.

“I’ll find you another one.”

“Would you mind if we did another run tomorrow?” Celina asked Runa, changing the subject.

“Of course.” Runa winked.

“Now that’s just inviting more of his wrath, you two.” Chandler’s arm dropped from Celina and his brows turned down in disapproval.

Runa pursed her lips. “Just because Lord Hunter has given up on ever finding the ring, doesn’t mean we have to.”

“I’m not saying you should stop completely,” Chandler explained. “Just for a few months. Let his temper cool.”

“I hardly think a temporary reprieve from our quest is going to make him feel any better.” Runa smirked. “Besides, pulling Celina behind in the boat has made me the best swimmer on the island. Kori and Leif can no longer make such a boast.” She threw her head back and released a maniacal laugh.

Celina and Chandler shook their heads and chuckled as they continued down the road to the tavern.

* * * * *

The *Siren’s Song* was filled to the doorway with drinking patrons. Three bar maids carried handfuls of foaming beer mugs around the room, keeping people merry. And the air was thick with laughter and rowdy conversation.

“Another round, as requested!” Pyrna said, setting five mugs onto the table before Jericho.

Jericho handed her the required coins and she sauntered off to help other customers. Celina, Runa and Chandler snatched their mugs and held them high in salute before turning back to their adjacent table to resume their playful banter.

Peter finally came in through the front door and navigated his way to Jericho's table. "Thanks! Sorry that took so long." He sipped from his mug, but kept his attention directed at the crowd.

Morgan Kron, one of the peaceful Sköllarians, pushed his way through the door, his intense gaze directed at him...or was it Peter? Peter had his mug in front of his face, but his eyes were locked on Morgan. The Sköllarian nodded and worked his way to the opposite corner of the room. Though Morgan was peaceful, he was rumored to organize pirating runs.

Jericho bit back the angry retorts that fought to break past his lips. Taking a long swig from his mug, he struggled to rein in his temper. "What is this obsession you have with courting danger?" he hissed.

Peter feigned surprise. "What are you talking about?" Again, he avoided eye contact.

"I have known you way too long, Pete, and I know when you're lying. We're not pirates by trade anymore, only in appearance."

His friend sighed and surrendered the act. "And I'm keeping up appearances," Peter argued good-naturedly. "Besides, we're privateers, not pirates." He grinned. "You can't live forever, you know."

"Stop saying that. I hate it when you say that. And for your information, these days there's no difference between pirates and privateers. You're being paid to steal."

"We are *not* stealing," Peter said casually and sipped his beer. "We acquire goods at the request of our clients."

"Which they don't own," Jericho finished.

The corner of Peter's mouth puckered. "A technicality."

"Has Soren been making these runs, too?"

Peter scoffed and took a sip from his mug...but avoided eye contact.

"Son-of-a-bitch, Peter!" he gritted through his teeth. "Are you people crazy?"

Peter glanced around, then propped his elbow on the table and shaded his face. "No! We're not. It's about the sanest thing we can do to help get some of the aggression from the curse out of their spirits."

"How is pillaging and plundering the human villages a wise choice?" Jericho couldn't believe his ears.

“Would you rather they attack *your* village? Because that’s the only thing that’s been keeping them from attacking lately. Or haven’t you noticed? You know we outnumber the Manegarmians.”

Jericho put his head in his hands. He had thought the Sköllarians had control of the curse or the Selkies had stepped up their efforts to keep them calm. He never imagined this. “No, I’m not going to allow it, and I’m going to have to bring my father into this.”

Peter clenched his fist. “Damn it, Jerry, my clan is too busy resisting this fucking curse and those of us who have been released from it aren’t enough labor to keep things going. Privateering pays what we need to survive and helps keep them sane.”

Jericho huffed in frustration. “I’m sorry, but this isn’t the way to do it. We have to think of another way or we’re going to invite the humans on the mainland to start retaliating.”

Peter snorted. “*They’re* the ones paying us to rob from their own people. I hardly think we’ll have a war on our hands.” He glowered and drew a long swallow from his mug.

“You have to stop.” Jericho laid a firm hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You’re like a brother to me, Pete. Promise me this is going to stop.”

“I won’t be able to convince the others.”

Jericho dropped his hand to the table and hung his head.

Peter groaned. “I’ll try to talk to them.”

“Promise, Pete.”

The Sköllarian sighed and nodded. “All right. I won’t go. I promise. But promise *me* something. We have to come up with another option, or they’re going and I won’t be able to stop them.”

“You have my word.” He seized Peter’s hand to seal their vows. “We’ll think of something.”

* * * * *

“At last.” Her hot breath caressed his ear. “You’re finally here.”

Broderick shuddered.

Her familiar curves fit against the length of him perfectly. Her faint musky essence filled his nostrils and his arousal flared. Broderick's hands smoothed over her silken skin and explored the heat of her body. "Blossom," he breathed in response, and his heart thudded against his ribcage.

Davina was here. Once again, she was his. But for how long?

He sought her face and cupped her precious cheeks in his palms. Those glistening, sapphire eyes smiled at him and he groaned. He covered her lips in a devouring kiss, sweeping his tongue deep to taste all of her, clutching her cinnamon tresses and moaning into her mouth, as open and eager as his.

Rolling onto her, he nestled between her thighs while his mouth continued to nibble and savor her flesh—along the long column of her throat, over her shoulder and down to the supple flesh of her breasts where he feasted and reveled in the warmth of her skin against his lips.

Broderick moaned. Being in her arms was like coming home after a long journey.

Davina glided her legs up his body—her thighs caressing his, smoothing over his hips, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Her calves pressed against his buttocks, pulling him toward her, eager for him to possess her. But he didn't want to rush. He wanted to taste every inch of her, explore the smooth plains of her skin with his lips and eyes, draw out this moment as long as possible.

When she lifted her hips and the evidence of her readiness moistened the head of his cock, he surrendered. Broderick slid his shaft into her wetness and grunted into her hair. He clung to her as tears stung his eyes and he squeezed them tight. He wouldn't let her slip from his grasp again. He couldn't. Life without her was too agonizing to bear. There had to be a way they could spend eternity together!

She writhed in his arms as she reached her orgasm, her breasts brushing his chest and stroking his fervor, her sighs a symphony caressing his soul. Her sex clenched around him and he gave in to her temptation, releasing himself and rocking her to his own completion.

Legs trembling and chest heaving, he collapsed atop her and framed her shoulders with his forearms, their brows touching. She grinned and suckled his bottom lip, then tried to move from under him. "Oh, no you don't." Broderick trapped her between his

thighs and under his weight. "I'm not finished with you yet, woman." He dipped his head and nuzzled her neck.

A soft, husky chuckle fluttered against his shoulder. "Unfortunately, I cannot stay, my love." She nibbled his earlobe and then, with surprising strength, pushed him from her body and eased from beneath him. Broderick groaned into his bedding and clutched the linen, his body thirsty for hers after so many empty decades.

Propping himself upon his elbow, his eyes followed her curvy posterior as she sauntered to the chair in the corner of what appeared to be a longhouse of some kind—wooden planks held together with mud and grass—though it was difficult to tell from the inside. Bending over, she picked through the clothing on the chair and donned dark-leather breeches, knee-high boots with cuffs and a beige linen blouse. Her fingers made quick work of the laces up the front of her dark-leather armor bodice, complete with overlapping shoulder plates. When she plaited her long auburn hair, she strutted back to the bed to give Broderick a lingering kiss that curled his toes. Davina caressed his cheek with her fingertip and then strolled to the door, out of his reach.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

When she glanced over her shoulder, her height had increased to fill the doorway and her hair was now silver with black strands streaking through her braid. There stood a warrior, a short sword on the belt at her hip. The corner of her mouth turned up in a seductive smirk. She winked and walked out of his dream.

Broderick gasped and sat up in bed, half expecting to see the mud and wood walls surrounding him. The gentle sway of the ship and creaking of the hull brought him back to his familiar chamber in his cabin. He collapsed back onto his mattress and heaved deep breaths as he clenched his fists.

Davina was alive once more...and now, since he'd had a dream, this was proof she was just within his reach. Could his heart stand the pain again?

The heavy ache in Broderick's gut had been too familiar to ignore and, like it had before, it started on her birthday—February 19th. Wherever she was, she must have reached her twenty-third year...the age she was when they met and fell in love back in 1514. Davina's soul called to him now, just as she had done when Monika reached her

twenty-third year. And finally, over seven decades later, he would have her in his arms again.

However, the circumstances were different. Losing Davina had been a mutual choice and finding her again was an unexpected joy. Monika was stolen from him.

Davina, his sweet Blossom, had died in his arms as he drank the life's blood from her. But it was by *her* request, to free her from the torment of her disease. Guilt was his constant companion for eighty years after he'd taken her life, but it kept Broderick to himself. He had slipped quietly into depression.

Monika, however, was murdered by the Illuminati.

Even now, he cursed Angus whenever he thought of the new name for the Army of Light because he was the reason they now hunted all Vamsyrians...why they hunted both him and Angus. While Broderick was helplessly asleep during his daytime slumber, the Illuminati had invaded MacDougal Castle and burned everyone in their household...except Monika. As a fire witch, she was immune to the flames. So they drowned her instead. When he lost Monika, rage was his mistress and he shamelessly gave in to whatever she demanded.

Broderick swung his legs over the side of the bed and fisted his hair, resting his elbows on his knees. He'd destroyed every single Illuminati member he could find in a decade-long rampage to drown his grief in their blood. His quest for vengeance had stripped him of his humanity and Broderick had given in to the true nature of being a Vamsyrian. Ironically enough, Malloren Rune was his salvation. Her visions led her to intercept his path of self-destruction. Through her assistance, he learned the only way he was able to rise from the quagmire of death was to shut out his emotions. He encased his heart in stone, shielding himself from guilt and grief...and even the pleasure of his memories. Though Davina had been his first love, Monika was closer to his heart—something he never thought was possible, considering the depth of his love for Davina. Monika was Davina...but so much more because she had embraced everything he was in that lifetime. Thinking of her, however, was a constant reminder of his inability to protect her. So shutting her out of his heart was the only way to survive...for her sake...for her soul.

Now that Davina had returned in her next life, he would have to open himself to her again.

He lifted his head and narrowed his eyes at the unusual silence on board. Normally, his crew was bustling about the vessel, jesting with each other or sharing light conversation, sometimes barking orders. The hull creaked again, but nothing more. A chill skittered up his spine like a spider.

Jumping into his trousers and slipping on his boots, he then stalked across the room to his wardrobe and pulled a black, loose-fitting shirt over his head. He shrugged into and buttoned his black brocade vest, then fastened the stays at his shirt cuffs. Even his clothing were shields of protection. Any leather Broderick wore was made of lambskin to help shield him from the spells of the Illuminati. As an extra precaution, he had his long-coat fitted with a hood and, using the same technique Angus used when he created his Cloak of Immunity, Broderick had painted small amounts of blessed blood from the Illuminati to season his leather. Wards were sewn into his shirts, trousers, vest or any cloth covering his body. He wasn't totally immune from their incantations or Angelic spells, but he had enough to combat their constantly developing techniques and give him the edge he needed to make the odds even.

Sliding back the bolt of his door, he stepped out of his bedroom into the main area of his cabin. Inclining his head to listen, his eyes darted around the dining room and library for anything out of sorts. One of James and Cailin's journals still lay on the small table beside his reading chair, one of several volumes recording the adventures of his step-daughter and son-in-law. Monika's *Book of Shadows*, handed down from her mother Katrina, lay closed on the dining table where he'd left it. He pushed aside his grief over his last wife as he grabbed the book and re-shelved it on the row of shelves housing *The Knightly Journals* along the port wall.

Footsteps slowly plodded across the poop deck above, scraped, then slogged the other direction. The tension in his shoulders eased a bit. That was Fergus Kinnaird's contemplative pacing. Broderick had been with this crew for almost twenty years, employing them all in their younger and more impressionable twenties. His first mate Fergus was the eldest, approaching his fifties now. One did not spend so much time with people and not learn their habits and subtle gestures. What Fergus could be

contemplating, though, had Broderick stride back into his bedroom and snatch his belt and sword from the chair to strap it around his hips. With his protected leather long-coat on, he habitually shoved his silver-plated dagger into his boot sheath. For practicality sakes, he swept his thumbs from his temples to the back of his scalp, gathering the hair at the top half of his head, and secured it with a small, leather tie to keep it from his eyes. Broderick ventured back into his main cabin and stepped into the empty hall of *Knightly's Refuge V*, where he traversed the long passage and padded up the stairs to the main deck.

Moonlight sparkled on the waves of the North Sea, the large silver disk hanging low in the sky, just now rising for the evening. Broderick scaled the next flight of stairs to the poop deck above, where his first mate stood beside the helm, already holding out the extended spyglass for his captain. His brow was creased in concentration. "Good eve'nin' Cap'n. Look yonder."

Broderick raised the spyglass to his eye. On the horizon, the silhouette of a small Norse island bobbed into view...at least a mile away, judging the distance. The black line of the sea was a stark contrast against the fading sunset.

He lowered the spyglass from his eye. "Come to, lad."

"Aye. Coming to, mates!" Fergus called to the rest of the crew.

Leonard McLain, Henry McIntyre and Malcolm Carmichael hustled around the deck, grabbing ropes in preparation as Fergus turned the ship into the wind to slow her pace. Finch, Henry's ferret, scampered across the ship and leapt onto his shoulders, his little claws hanging on for dear life as Henry went about his deck duties. Ranald Blythe, their cook and fellow crew member emerged from below decks to help with the onboard tasks.

Broderick peered through the glass again and narrowed his eyes at the establishment. "The island looks like a fortress. The walls around it must be at least thirty feet high?" He swept his gaze to the guard tower of the gates and stopped on the black flag, bearing the skull and cross bones, fluttering in the breeze. "Well, that makes sense." He collapsed the spyglass into his fist and handed it back to Fergus. "Pirates."

"Aye," his first mate confirmed.

Dropping down to the main deck, Broderick stood at the port side as the ship rode the gentle waves. His stomach fluttered in nervous anticipation. Was she here with

pirates? Was this a rescue mission? Or was this just a distraction along the way? If Broderick remembered correctly, this area was close to the small cluster of islands just off the coast of the Shetlands, where the legend of the rings began, of which his step-daughter Cailin and her husband James had mentioned in their journals. “You bring me full circle, Blossom, in our continuing quest together.” Broderick sighed and squeezed his eyes shut against the echoing memories of Monika’s last words. “*Never stop searching, my love. I’m so sorry I can’t be there with you when you find them. Together forever, my Gypsy Rogue.*”

Just because he had a dream of her didn’t mean she was at this island. They would scout the area first. “Fergus, give the island a wide berth and let’s continue east. I don’t want to instigate an encounter with our thieving friends.”

“Aye, Cap’n!”

A roar of rushing water startled Broderick as a mass of people erupted from the sea and landed onboard... surprisingly dry. He leapt to the quarter deck as two brown-haired lads advanced. Spears in their fists, at least a dozen men and women slapped across the now-wet deck, pointing the weapons into the faces of each crew member, catching everyone off guard. Finch the ferret dashed below decks for safety. And though the expressions of the invaders were stern and stances threatening, a pleasant scent gave Broderick pause and he reconsidered drawing his sword. A thick aroma with a touch of sweetness, like baked pies, enveloped him. The adversely agreeable mood trying to overtake his sensibilities aroused his suspicions, so Broderick shook off the pleasant aura. However, his men were not so inclined to resist their foes. Hands raised to the air in surrender, each of his crew members smiled as if they’d reunited with old friends.

Rick’s brow furrowed and he cocked his head. He glanced from one intruder to another as this clan of brown-haired visitors herded his crew to the main deck and disarmed them.

The two lads before Broderick addressed him with the biggest, brownest eyes he’d never seen. *Not true*, he corrected himself. *I’d once seen the likes in a litter of puppies.* He smirked...then frowned. Why was he being so passive? It was as if the fight had been sucked from his spirit. In spite of the strong desire to invite these people to dine,

Broderick pushed through this conflicting demeanor. “Who are you and what do you want?”

“If it will make you more agreeable, I am Kori,” said the young man to Rick’s left, who nodded toward his companion. “This is Leif. And you are?”

“Broderick MacDougal, Captain of this vessel. Now state your business.”

“Would you mind giving me your sword?” Leif asked.

Broderick resisted the urge to obey. “I mind very much.”

Leif’s mouth dropped open, almost as if he was offended.

Kori frowned. “Chieftain Hunter wishes to speak with all visitors who come to our island.”

Broderick strained to hear their thoughts, but the only words or images he could divine with his immortal abilities were from his crew. They, too, struggled with the conflicting desires to obey every command from these strangers. “I’m afraid your Chieftain is mistaken. We are not visitors to your island, but just passing through these waters.”

Leif laid his hand upon Broderick’s chest and a warm euphoria spread over his muscles. “Remove your sword, please,” he instructed.

Broderick seized Leif’s wrist. “You lads are amazingly docile for pirates.” Broderick shoved Leif’s hand away and gripped the hilt of his sword at his hip. “But if it’s all the same to you, I’ll just keep my weapon at my side, thank you.”

They were no match for Broderick and he was confident he could easily overpower all of them with his immortal speed. However, the fact that he couldn’t hear their thoughts kept him on guard, not to mention their unusual method of boarding his ship. Of course, there was also that damned, annoying desire to invite them to sit and share a cup of mead, which was clouding his mind.

Broderick narrowed his eyes and studied Leif’s leather armor. He glanced at Kori and then at the slightly dumbfounded yet determined group of strangers. They wore the same style of armor as Davina in his dream. These were *her* people. Broderick inwardly cursed. Making enemies of what may be Davina’s kin would win him no favors with her. “Fergus, go ahead and lower the cockboat. We’ll go along peacefully...for now. Malcolm, drop anchor”

Fergus smiled. “Aye, Cap’n!” Issuing orders, he and the rest of the crew did as Broderick instructed. They packed in the sails, secured the vessel from being adrift, and then lowered the long rowboat to the water below.

Broderick, his crew, Kori and Leif descended the rope ladder and hopped into the skiff. The other people on board leapt over the sides and dove into the chilling October waters.

Kori sat astern, and Leif at the forward with Broderick. Leonard and Fergus did the rowing at the center, ridiculous grins on their faces, with Malcolm, Henry and Ranald sitting between them. Broderick rolled his eyes as the boat bobbed through the choppy waves.

Leif tilted his head and sniffed the air. He pursed his lips. “Kori, he’s wearing lavender.”

Kori harrumphed. “No wonder.”

Why Broderick’s favored herb, used for cleansing, mattered to them or had any significance, he hadn’t a clue. Rick cocked a speculative eyebrow at Leif, who continued to frown without comment.

Dark sleek shadows shot through the water alongside them, disappearing into the black depths below or heading to the small island before them. Broderick glanced in all directions. The people who had dived off the boat were nowhere to be found. He directed his attention toward the island where they headed. Lanterns dotted the side of the sheer cliffs, which seemed to be at least fifty-feet high, casting yellow halos across a lattice of platforms, ladders and steps, like scaffolding on the side of a building. Sea water sprayed as they bobbed past the artificial break, which created a cradling harbor around the floating piers. The skiff glided across the calm water to the docks and Broderick darted his eyes between the four seals that poked their heads above water. The seals regarded him with intelligent gazes, then glanced between each other and ducked back under the surface.

Selkies! Of course!

That accounted for the sweet scent and Broderick’s uncharacteristically pleasant mood in such adverse conditions. It also explained how the pirates had miraculously leapt out of the water and onto the deck completely dry. Their two escorts must be Selkies in

their human form. This was Broderick's first real encounter with them, though he had read of this influential race of Norse seal shifters in James and Cailin's journals. This was one of many bits of folklore and information about supernatural races he gleaned from, what he called, *The Knightly Journals*. Now he understood Leif's comment about the lavender. According to what Cailin had penned, it was an herbal ward against their influence. That was probably why Leif seemed shocked Broderick wouldn't relinquish his sword. Certainly, he wasn't used to his magical influence being opposed by outsiders.

Kori climbed out of the boat onto the floating dock first, followed by Broderick and the rest of his crew. They all climbed their way up the weaving and dizzying heights of the wooden walkways until they eventually reached a gate, which stood over twenty-feet high and almost as wide. Leif waved at the white-haired attendant in the guard tower, who nodded and called behind the gate below. "All is clear!"

Metal clanged. The giant wooden doors shook, then swung inward to reveal a bustling village. A-framed cottages and work buildings lined the path that lead straight up the center of the settlement. Most of the structures had living roofs—grass and brush growing on top of the buildings. Several were constructed with planks mortared with mud and straw, as he'd seen in his dream with Davina.

As the Selkie escorts guided him and his crew down the center path, Broderick distracted his rising apprehensions by studying the many curious eyes they passed. A blacksmith stopped hammering a glowing red sword at his anvil and wiped his sweaty brow, dark eyes narrowed with suspicion. A silver-haired woman, who appeared to be in her mid-thirties, stopped pulling at her loom. About half of the inhabitants were similar in size and coloring as Leif and Kori—average human height, dark-brown hair and large brown eyes. The other half were silver-haired giants. Many had dark strands streaking their dominantly white locks, just as Davina had in his dream. Only a few had all black tresses or black with silver streaks. And it mattered not how old or young they were. The platinum color of their hair seemed a natural trait versus a sign of age.

The wide center path through the village led to a massive lodge decorated with Celtic carvings and Norse designs snaking up wooden columns. Even the broad stairs leading to the generous oaken doors possessed the Celtic artwork portraying stories of old—seals arching through curling waves; wolves standing proud upon cliffs overlooking the

oceans; ships at sea; men and women with swords held high in battle. One particular figure, along a central stair panel, held his right stump to the sky, his mouth open in agony, as another ran off with his hand. The craftsmanship was impressive and bared the signs of at least a century. This establishment had been here a very long time. Perhaps Broderick could persuade them to do some business. He always had customers looking for rare antiquities and chronicles of the past, and merchant opportunities frequently settled disputes.

Kori and Leif pushed the enormous doors open and Kori did a sweeping gesture with his hand. “Chieftain Axel Hunter. Captain Broderick MacDougal and crew of the approaching vessel, as requested, my liege.”

Broderick stepped into the lodge, stopping at the entrance to survey the room. Extending his perception outward, he sensed no other Vamsyrian presence...but he also couldn't hear any thoughts. Whoever these people were, their internal musings were unavailable to him. The sides of the long lodge were in shadow, but nothing dark enough to hide from Broderick's immortal vision. There were at least two dozen people in the lodge as far as Broderick could tell—a mixture of the brown-haired folk and the silver-haired giants. Three tall women in long robes of earthy colors stood to the right of the dais. Each of them had silver hair flowing free past their shoulders and their heads adorned with silver bands, like simple crowns. The women were of varying ages and almost seemed to represent three generations—a young girl just into womanhood, a woman in the center who was old enough to be her mother, and an elderly woman, who could very well have birthed the middle-aged woman. They stood patiently with their hands clasped before them.

On the dais were two thrones with the same Celtic and Norse designs found throughout the lodge inside and out. In the throne on the left sat a brooding man with black and white hair of symmetrical coloring—black streaks at his temples and a single raven stripe running down the center of his scalp. The rest of his hair was predominantly white peppered with black strands. His moustache was black speckled with white, and his beard was white with a streak of black originating from his bottom lip. He also wore a silver band on his head with a crescent moon, woven with Celtic knots, centered on his brow. He sat back on his throne, his right elbow resting on the arm of his chair, his hand

stroking his braided beard absentmindedly, belying the intense gaze he fixed on Broderick.

Rick cocked an eyebrow and strode purposefully down the center aisle between the massive columns and toward the dais. The footsteps of his crew were close behind. Stopping at the platform, he crossed his arms and nodded—ever-so slightly—to show a small measure of respect, but that was all he had patience for. Two, towering men—at least a hand taller than Broderick—flanked him on either side. Both wore the familiar leather armor style of the Selkies and had short swords strapped to their hips. Not having much tolerance for long stretches of silence, Broderick opened his mouth to speak.

“Why is this man still armed?” The chieftain regarded Kori and Leif.

“Our apologies, Lord Hunter,” Leif responded with a bow. “He is wearing lavender, so we had no way to disarm him without...escalating the situation. He agreed to come peacefully.”

Axel leveled angry eyes at the guards. Before the towering man on his left could reach for Rick’s sword, Broderick snatched his wrist and easily pried the dumbfounded giant’s hand away from his weapon and brought him to his knees. Snapping his head to the right, Broderick glared at the other advancing guard and struck him across the jaw, hard enough to send the mountain crashing to the ground. With a quick jab to the face, Broderick finished off the guard he had in hand, who slumped to the floor.

Seething on his throne, the chieftain leaned forward. “Why are you here...*vampire*?”

Rick grumbled at the bastardized term for Vamsyrians. “So the *Illuminati* are consorting with pirates now?” He spit on the floor to show his disgust.

The chieftain’s hands gripped the edge of his armrests. “We are tame compared to your kind. Regardless of any preaching the *Illuminati* have done, we don’t need them to tell us what monsters you are.”

“Of course,” Broderick retorted with heavy sarcasm. He cocked his eyebrow challengingly.

“Now answer the question. What is your business here?”

He wasn’t going to be forthcoming with any information about his real purpose for coming to this region, and now this Axel Hunter was beginning to really piss him off. “I had no business here until your men boarded my ship. I was only passing through these

waters. I should be asking *you* what you want of me. I have done nothing to attack your village. Even now, your men lay at my feet when I could have easily killed everyone in this room. And perhaps I still should and rid the world of a band of thieving pirates who kiss the arse of a murdering organization.”

Chieftain Hunter sneered. “Kill them.”

“Lord Hunter!” the three women exclaimed in unison.

Hunter ignored their protests as the silver-haired behemoths around the room rushed forward and overpowered Broderick’s crew.

Broderick used his immortal speed to pull his dagger from his boot and charge the chieftain. He wrapped his arm around Hunter’s neck in a headlock, poisoning the tip of the blade at his ribs. “Touch my men and your chieftain dies!”

Everyone in the lodge froze.

A low growl rumbled from a dark corner behind the throne and Broderick whirled, keeping the clan leader in front of him. A massive silver-and-black wolf crouched in the shadows, its eyes glowing silver. Slinking two steps forward and into the light, it bared its fangs through snarling lips.

“Celina, no!” Axel shouted. “Stand down!”

The wolf growled louder, not appearing to listen to its master, but then nodded. A swirling mass of mist and stardust surrounded the animal and it disappeared into the cloud—which reformed into the woman Broderick met in his dreams.

Davina!

She stood almost his height, her long silver braid draped over her leather-plated shoulder, dressed in the breeches and laced armor bodice she’d donned after they’d made love. The taste of her kisses still lingered on his lips.

His heart thundered in his chest. When the chieftain stirred, Broderick came to his senses and withdrew the knife, backing away from Hunter. “I’ve come to claim her.” His voice was thick and raspy. He replaced his knife to his boot sheath. “She is the reason I’m here.”

“You knew!” Axel barked at the three women. “You *allowed* this monster to enter our village!”

Celina's lips parted in surprise and she clutched the short sword at her hip as she stepped onto the dais and into the full light of the braziers around the lodge. She was breathtaking. Those sapphire-blue eyes glistened with tears. Her full lips trembled. Her voluptuous figure stood proud and the muscular lines, accenting her curves, tensed.

"No," Celina whispered. In a swirl of light and mist, she whisked into her wolf form and leapt over the throne, teeth bared and aimed for Broderick's throat.

"Celina!" the three women chorused.

Axel hugged the air, missing the wolf as she passed out of his reach and he smashed onto the dais.

Broderick roared as her fangs sank into his forearm, her jaws closing around flesh and bone with a sickening crunch. Tucking his legs in, he thrust his feet against her chest and flung her across the room. Celina slammed into the crowd of giants and his crew, who sprawled in all directions. Broderick jumped to his feet, his arm already healing but still dripping with blood. His men scattered and sought refuge in the darkened recesses of the lodge, while every giant in the room whirled to face Broderick. Each one of them dissipated into a cloud of stars and mist, only to reform into an army of massive silver-and-black wolves.

Growling, Celina crouched at the head of the pack, ready to pounce.

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About the Author

Arial Burnz has been an avid reader of paranormal and fantasy for over thirty years. With bedtime stories filled with unicorns, hobbits, dragons and elves, she succumbed to crafting her own tales, penning to life the magical creatures roaming her dreams. Having a romantic husband who's taught her the meaning of true love, she's helpless to weave romance into her tales. Now she shares them with the world. Arial Burnz lives in Southern California, with her husband (a.k.a. her romance novel hero)—who is also, [quite coincidentally](#), a descendant of Clan MacDougal.

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