

Genre: Original/Fantasy

Rated: PG-13

Disclaimer: No disclaimers are required. The characters and this story are mine, though they may remind some of us of two characters we all know.....

Sexual Content/Violence: Contains some vividly described violence and the mention of physical abuse. As regards sexual content... well, let's just say there will be a kiss or two and yes this fiction involves a romantic relationship between two adult women. That is what we all want to read, isn't it?

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This is my first story ever and English is so not my mother tongue...

The Matchmaking Festival

“It’s late at night and I’m feeling down
there are couples standing on the street
sharing summer kisses and city sounds ...
so I step inside for a glass of wine
with a full glass and an empty heart
I search for something to occupy my mind ...
‘cause you are in my head
swimming forever in my head
tangled in my dreams
swimming forever.”
The Corrs, ‘Radio’

Everything started with my roommate Monika's decision to give fate a chance. Since she turned thirty-two and was still single, she felt like she had to do something dramatic to find a husband. At an after-work party, one of her friends – drunk, of course – suggested Monika should pay a visit to the matchmaking festival in Lisdoonvarna, Ireland. I had never heard about the festival, and neither had Monika, but being curious we looked it up on the Internet that same night.

The Lisdoonvarna homepage stated that the festival takes place every year during September, and during that time ten thousand people from all over the world visited the area looking for their match. The notion was unbelievable to me. How desperate some people seemed! But I thought that if you wanted to try something like that, Lisdoonvarna appeared to be just the right place, being Europe's biggest single's event.

One of the festival organizers was quoted on the website, stating that: "*Matchmaking is one of the oldest traditions in Ireland, and began when there were two classes, the rich landowners and the poor peasants.*" I wondered why there was still a need for a meeting like that in the modern age. I couldn't really imagine that there were still any kind of classes or castes in Ireland today like in the old times.

Monika, however, read the information, and decided to go and give fate a chance. But traveling alone to Ireland was not really her thing. Who else would she choose as a companion but me? It wasn't really a question that needed much thought on either of our parts. I had all the time in the world, being unemployed with no job in sight, and she was in need of a friend she could trust. When Monika suggested paying for both of us, I didn't argue a lot. She earns more than enough money as a lawyer in one of those big international law firms. My only assignment was to look after her and share my humble opinion about prospective future mates.

I had some doubt, though, if I was the right person to give an opinion on a potential match, since I had failed so miserably at my own choice. I wasn't sure I was that good of a judge of character. At the time, I had not yet recovered from my former relationship with Jennifer, which lasted over four painful years. After spending far too much time in the hospital, and having three of my ribs broken after my last "accident," Monika lost patience with me. We

had been friends since we bumped into each other at the start of our studies. Looking back, she was my hero that night in the hospital when Jennifer came to take me home.

It was a scene that had played out too often in the past for Monika's liking. Monika did not listen to Jennifer's lame explanations, and she finally convinced me to leave the hospital with her instead of going home with the woman who had put me there. I don't know why I listened to Monika *that* particular night – she'd never managed to convince me before – but I do know something changed inside me. I couldn't take the lies anymore, or the veiled threats, the violence I could sense seething beneath Jennifer's loving words.

To this day, I don't really know why I didn't leave her the first time she hit me. It certainly took me a long time to decide that I didn't want to be a victim anymore, and to understand that I acted like one all the time I was with her. Jennifer was always sorry after a beating, of course, and had more or less good explanations and excuses of why she wasn't able to control her temper at that particular moment. She was also very good at pointing out when I had done something wrong to trigger her outburst. Manipulating me into feeling guilty, like the beating was *my* fault, was Jennifer's specialty.

I realized after that fateful night in the hospital that it was a good thing I left her, but I didn't really feel like my life was changed for the better for some time afterwards. I felt disoriented, disconnected from everything that was familiar.

Monika was supportive in every imaginable way. She let me stay in the guestroom of her house and insisted that she was happy to have me there. I knew that there would be a time when I would need to move on with my life, but I needed a safe haven so desperately that I didn't decline her offer of letting me live with her in exchange for taking care of the household.

At such a low point in my life, I couldn't imagine that I would want to have another partner anytime soon or ever, not after the disaster that was Jennifer.

Sure, in the past, like most people, I had dreamed of someone who would love me for the person I am. And sometimes I dreamed of a knight in shining armor rescuing me, the damsel in distress. Believe me, I was none too happy when I discovered that I'd rather find a Mrs.

Right, not a Mr. Right, and that my knight in shining armor would have to be the female version. It was one more hurdle to overcome in trying to find my happily-ever-after.

During the process of discovering myself, I lost contact with my parents, so I had no family to support me. After my time with Jennifer, I was quite sure that I would be alone for a very long time, if not forever. I mourned the inability to trust myself even more than the loss of being capable of trusting someone else.

Besides, who would be interested in someone like me? I asked myself often. There are some ugly scars on my back, mementos from a unique night with Jennifer. I always had a weight problem, which made my puberty a living hell and didn't help my unpopularity later on. Since Jennifer's 'lessons,' I had developed some funny quirks on top of that, like having difficulties sleeping without a light on, or being seated somewhere unable to see the nearest exit. Finally, I often suffered from the feeling of being stalked, which didn't make my life easier at all. The only thing people always commented positive about were my eyes – an inheritance from my mother's family, green as the sea on a sunny day. But not being noticed by others was mainly okay with me, because that attitude made me feel safe enough to be able to disappear in a crowd. That was all I wanted for a long time after leaving Jennifer.

Things went a bit better for me after I started seeing a therapist on a regular basis. A good lawyer as well as a good friend, Monika was able to get some money from Jennifer for things we had bought together when we were still a couple. Jennifer wanted to continue living in our apartment and wanted to keep the stuff, so she paid, if grudgingly.

Having money to help me forge an independent future apart from Jennifer seemed like a good idea. I used a lot of that payment for therapy, but the therapist wasn't able to perform miracles. Sometimes I was frustrated and wanted to scream because it seemed like nothing was changing. It felt like I was stuck in a rut and would never break free, but the good days eventually outweighed the bad days, so I considered it money well spent.

Still, I resigned myself to taking one small step at a time. My therapist and I decided that the next step after my holiday with Monika would be to find a job. Due to my troubles with Jennifer, I had finished my legal studies with lousy grades. This left me unable to find work except for a position at one of the big fast food chains. Not as a lawyer, though. I was one of

the people behind the counter wearing a funny hat while smiling constantly, pretending to be the happiest person in the world, serving food which was already half-cold to customers who were in a hurry. I quit working there after my separation from Jennifer because I had to start somewhere to build up my self-respect again.

All of this went through my head while Monika and I were on the plane to Ireland.

My only reasonable hope for the coming two weeks was that I would be able to enjoy myself a bit and maybe, just maybe find my center again. It makes me sad to remember that even my hopes on that being the case weren't very high. Nothing I could perceive then – was it really such a short time ago? – seemed too good or hopeful, not even the future. There was always a bit of a dark cloud over my head, and no end to the misery in sight.

It was a rather sunny day when the plane touched down in Shannon Airport. It was nice to continue our travel towards Lisdoonvarna in a rental car, and I was able to enjoy a first glimpse of the marvelous Irish landscape. There was something very special about the country, something inexplicable which touched me deeply.

I guess a lot of people have a country they always feel drawn to, wanting to visit once in a lifetime, or even better, be able to live there for a while. For me, it was Ireland that haunted my dreams. This was one of the reasons why, despite my misgivings, I agreed so eagerly to join Monika on the journey. I had always associated Ireland with wide open space, a bit of melancholy and lots of history. And I loved history, was rather melancholic myself, and craved open spaces, perhaps because I always felt so limited. I was drawn to the island, but was never able to visit before my trip with Monika. I was pleased to see that it was as green as I expected it to be. It remained to be seen if the country would meet the rest of my expectations. The landscape was definitely more breathtaking than I had imagined. Driving through the countryside, I realized that I felt a growing longing, a yearning for *something*. I couldn't put my finger on anything more definite than that, but was positively surprised to experience feelings that were connected with a wish for something more.

We arrived in Lisdoonvarna shortly before nightfall and were able to find our three star luxury hotel, *The Hydro*, without difficulty, since it was in the heart of the city. Two beautiful rooms had been reserved for us. I took my time admiring the nineteenth-century style architecture and décor while Monika checked us in with the desk clerk.

Since we were both really tired, Monika and I decided to stay in for the night and enjoy a movie on television after ordering dinner from room service. I had no difficulty falling asleep that night on the amazingly comfortable and large four-poster bed. I dreamed of walking around an old stone structure while my body was bathed in the bluish shade of the moon. I felt surprisingly refreshed on waking up the next morning, but was nevertheless a bit irritated about my dream. Ireland seemed to be inspiring me already with all that mystical stuff that seemed to be so important here. I remembered that Lisdoonvarna was not too far away from the Burren, which was famous for its landscape but also for its megalithic tombs and portal dolmens. Legend has it that some of that dolmen or tombs were portals to the fairy world. I decided my subconscious must have worked overtime that night, probably from eating dinner too late and being on overdrive because of our journey. I was definitely in need of a coffee.

Over breakfast (including an awful coffee) we decided to walk around town and get ourselves slowly acquainted with the Festival. Although I was feeling kind of shy, not enthusiastic about the anticipated crowds, Monika talked me into accompanying her to a disco which would take place in the town hall that evening.

Lisdoonvarna surprised me in a very positive way. It turned out to be a beautiful place with little streets, lots of shops, tons of pubs and an overall nice atmosphere; there was a deep sense of history which I loved immediately. I remember thinking what a shame it was that this beautiful town was mainly known because of the matchmaking festival. However, even though it was only Thursday, the streets were already rather crowded with festival-goers and spectators. I enjoyed our sightseeing, but became exhausted from running around after Monika and staring at people for nearly two hours. I definitely needed a break and already knew where I would like to spend it.

I wondered if Monika could be coaxed in joining me to rummage around in an antique shop I had seen a few streets earlier. Well, I thought I could give it a try, knowing that something

like that would not be high on her list of things to do during our stay in Lisdoonvarna. But still....

“Monika?” I asked, trying not to sound too plaintive.

“Hmmmhh?” she replied, distracted. I had disturbed her watching a young man on the other side of the street, who was watching her back just as eagerly. Her attention was obviously elsewhere.

I tried again, a little more forcefully. “Monika. Hello?”

She finally tore her gaze away from the young man, and looked at me with a smile I knew too well – the expression told me that she already guessed what was on my mind.

“Yes, Julia, what can I do for you?”

We smiled at each other, enjoying the playful banter of a long and stable friendship.

“If I survive another hour with you in this crowd, would you maybe consider going with me to this antique shop I saw back there?” I pointed into the direction we had come from, down one of the little streets that formed an atmospheric tangle around the town.

She didn’t even pretend to think about it, and said with a bright grin on her face, “Julia, don’t you think you’d enjoy spending time in the shop much more without me nagging you all the time to make friends?”

I knew about her total disinterest in antiques, but my conscience was prickling me about leaving her alone in a strange place. “Well, ...,” I began, unsure what to say. Monika laughed and gave me a friendly pat on my shoulder.

“Oh, stop it already, Julia,” she said. “I know you hate these overcrowded streets. Why don’t we separate and meet again in two hours in that pub over there?”

“Aren’t you angry or disappointed?” I tried to read her body language but couldn’t really get a clue.

She smirked. “Come on, Julia. We already walked around quite a bit together. I know when to give you a break.”

“You really don’t mind?” I’m sure I looked totally hopeful while asking her; my relief at being free must have been reflected on my face.

Naturally, Monika read me with ease. “Nope! You were really brave until now and I don’t want to stress my luck too much. I’d rather have you by my side tonight at this dance thing. I am honestly not mad at you for wanting to get away a while.”

We smiled at each other, both of us aware of how much I hated events like the disco I had promised to visit with her. Nevertheless, I was grateful to Monika for the opportunity to enjoy some peace and quiet, even if it was only for a couple of hours.

After we parted, I went off to look for the antique shop. My main goal was not to buy anything; being unemployed, I couldn’t afford much. However, to this day I love wandering around dusty old shops and imagining the stories behind the things on the shelves, tucked away in forgotten corners. To me, going to an antique shop was like walking around an old city, imaging the people that walked over the same stones centuries ago. It always gave me a sense of belonging to realize that there were other people with similar feelings, hopes and dreams who had been there before me. I often felt much closer to those who were already dead than to the ones walking and breathing next to me. I guess I always was and will ever be a dreamer, something which drove my parents crazy. Even as a child, I preferred the company of a good book to a living person. It didn’t take me long to realize why I loved reading so much. While I always found it hard to relate to those around me, books always provided a refuge for me, and offered proof that somewhere, there had to be someone else who had the same thoughts and feelings or would at least be able to understand mine. ‘*We read to know that we are not alone*’ was a statement I once heard in a movie and could easily relate to. Next to reading, rummaging in an antique shop was just as good.

Finding the shop again was pleasantly easy, although it was in one of the smaller streets. It was located in a beautifully weathered house with an antique front door studded with large iron nails, similar to the other houses in that particular street. I needed to push hard to open the heavy door and was surprised when instead of a bell, I heard a sound like the humming of thousands of bees. Like all its ilk, the shop was rather gloomy and dusty inside, filled with the peculiar smell that old things seem to emanate. I guess that owners work hard to keep their antique shops that way because of the customer's expectations; shops like this one just had to be dusty and somehow creepy, and this shop in particular proved to be everything I expected.

The man behind the counter fitted in rather nicely with the atmosphere, and hardly nodded when I came in. His clothing had seen better times, but the worn look perfectly emphasized the shop's atmosphere. He continued reading his book without harassing me, and I took his indifference as a sign that I was free to take my time looking at all the different things without having an overly motivated salesman glued on my heels. The more I pattered around, the more I found the shop to my liking. There was a vast variety of things, including vintage weapons, tons of old books (oh, what a temptation for my tight budget!), and some very nice jewelry locked in an Art Nouveau case. One wall was crammed with painted portraits in their frames.

Those were really fascinating. Some of them showed people in antique clothing, the typical dresses and doublets you would expect. Some were even wearing jeans and t-shirt, and didn't really fit in an antique shop but were nevertheless funny to look at. I wondered what the story behind those were. Some other paintings were portraits of, well, I would guess mermaids from the fish tails, and one looked like something I would call a fairy, complete with gossamer wings. One portrait in particular took my breath away and left me reeling.

The artist must have been a master to be able to produce such a stunning image. The woman in the painting was beautiful and emanated a sensuality which nearly swept me off my feet. She had pale blue eyes, long black hair, high cheek bones and a look which showed an impressive authority that did not sneer, but was quietly confident. She was wearing black clothes which didn't look ladylike at all, but were nevertheless impressive. I never saw an antique portrait of a lady with trousers like that; one would rather expect her to wear a fashionable, expensive dress to showcase her femininity, as was probably common around the time the portrait was done. But this woman, standing in front of the beautiful manor in the

background, not only wore tight black trousers and a mail shirt, but held a coiled bullwhip in her right hand and a long gleaming sword in her left. I had to think of an old drawing of a dragon slayer I saw once. Her stunning appearance plus the most seductive smile I had ever seen caused my libido to awaken. For the first time in I didn't know how long, I felt desire burning inside of me. All of that caused by a simple painting!

What fascinated me most were her eyes. I read once that the eyes are the window of one's soul. Staring at the portrait, I remember thinking what a rich soul that woman must have owned. I imagined seeing a great strength, but also a great loneliness lurking behind that steady blue gaze. The painter portrayed a domineering vibrancy in his subject which was close to palpable. I almost expected her to breathe. It was a great piece of art.

I felt totally drawn to her, and found myself wanting to know if there was a story behind the painting, and if she was a real person or just the imagination of the artist. I went to the man behind the counter, who was still reading his book and appeared undisturbed by my presence. I finally cleared my throat to get his attention.

"Hi," I said. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but do you know by chance who the woman on that painting is? The woman in black over there, with the whip and the sword. Was she a real person?" I pointed to the wall in question.

The man finally looked at me and his gaze followed my pointing finger. For the second time that day, I was sure that I had never seen eyes like that before. But unlike the woman's, his were totally lifeless, nearly all black and dull. His pale skin didn't look too healthy, either. He didn't answer me immediately but took his time looking me over. After what seemed an eternity, he opened his mouth, giving me a glimpse of ugliest teeth I'd ever seen. He was definitely not an advocate of personal hygiene.

"Her name is Eileen O'Shane," he said.

I waited for more information, but his gaze drifted back to the cover of his book, then back to me again as if he was waiting for incentive to continue. I prodded, wondering what his problem was. "So, she really existed?"

He just nodded and continued staring at me with a rather curious expression on his face. Well, I could play the question and answer game. I asked, “How old is the painting?”

He took his time, closing his book carefully and giving me his full attention for the first time. “Around a hundred years old.”

In my experience, people who want to sell you something usually talk your ear off, but that guy was different. Under normal circumstances, I would have capitulated at that point, said my good-byes and left the shop rather than strain my patience dragging answers out of a reticent salesperson. I was not one to be persistent, having learned the hard way that even asking for something once was often one time too much, and I certainly didn't like to pester people. But an instinct stopped me from leaving the shop right there and then. I decided to give it one more try, even though I didn't know the guy, and didn't feel very safe around him. Still, I just couldn't go and leave the mystery unsolved. I needed to know more about the beautiful and strange Eileen O'Shane. I felt that I couldn't leave it like that and needed to satisfy something which was more than simple curiosity to me.

“Well, is there a story behind this Eileen O'Shane?” I asked, leaning an elbow on the counter, trying to look a bit taller and more impressive.

He played a bit with his book, looking at me again with one of those totally piercing glances. “Well, yes, I suppose so,” he said. “Maybe you would find it interesting that the people say she's a *dearg-du*.”

I was getting irritated by his half-assed responses. “A what?”

“A *dearg-du*; that is a being similar to what's called a vampire in other countries.”

A vampire, I thought, startled. That was definitely different. I guessed Eileen O'Shane had been rather impressive in her time; she certainly seemed like a capable person judging from her portrait alone. Since independent women were not wanted back then, I imagined that the people hereabouts made up a story about her being not mortal to explain things they didn't want to understand, or couldn't otherwise reconcile with their limited world view. I guessed letting someone paint you with a sword, a whip and a mail shirt around a hundred years ago

was a definite way of showing that you were different. If her real self came close to what the painter portrayed, it was no wonder that people with a fear of the erotic and the sensual would have considered someone like her dangerous and evil as a vampire.

I don't know why I did what happened next, but I acted completely on the same impulse that had kept me in the shop despite my inclination to the contrary. I had not done something like that for a very long time, not since I learned— via Jennifer and her short-fused temper – to be overcautious.

“How much would someone have to pay for that painting?” I heard myself ask with a sense of astonishment at my own daring.

At least now I really had his interest. Even his eyes looked a bit livelier, but he surprised me again by answering my question with a question of his own. “Why would you like to buy it?”

“Excuse me?” I had a hard time believing what he had just said. It was the oddest question! Shouldn't he be happy that someone was interested in buying an item? The shop wasn't exactly crowded with customers; from the depth of dust on some items, I had a feeling it wasn't the most popular place in town. I also knew that I wouldn't have enough money to buy the painting, but *he* couldn't possibly know that. So why was he doing his damndest to put me off buying the portrait of Eileen O'Shane?

“I wonder why you would like to buy a painting of a stranger who doesn't mean anything to you,” he explained.

“And it would mean something to other people?” I asked, raising my brows.

He looked a bit surprised and thoughtful. I had to suppress the impulse to grin. *Gotcha! Never play word games with someone who studied law*, I thought. At least this was something useful left over from my time at university.

Suddenly, out of nowhere he began to roar with laughter, which took me by surprise. I wasn't sure if I should stay or if I ought to flee this spate of merriment. At last, he regained enough

control of himself to say, “Well, as you really seem to be interested – let’s say for €10 it is yours.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. The frame alone was surely worth more than that – but who was I to argue when it finally seemed as if luck was on my side? Feeling somewhat cocky, I looked straight into his dark, creepy eyes. Beginning to enjoy this battle of wits, I said, “I’ll take it for €8.” I tried to look firm and held my breath for a second, not sure how to interpret the grin which grew on his face, but he did not take offense. It seemed like he was having fun, too.

“Okay, lady,” he said, still grinning. “Shall we say €10 and I deliver it to your hotel without extra charge, and on top of that I give you a ring which belonged to the O’Shanes once?”

I was very excited but a bit surprised about his sudden change of attitude. Even though I only owned €50, which would have to last for the whole two weeks, I couldn’t resist such a tempting offer. I might not have had an apartment, or even much of a life, but I was the proud owner of an old painting of a beautiful and mysterious woman – a painting that made my blood run hot and cold from just looking at it, and which made me feel more alive than I had felt in years. On top of that, I got a ring which was not really my style, but it was part of the package and connected in some way to Eileen O’Shane. This made me feel better, as if by having these things, I had become a more substantial person. That feeling alone was worth every cent. Buying the portrait, I made my first spontaneous decision in years, apart from leaving Jennifer, of course.

We agreed that he would deliver the painting to the hotel. I believed Monika wouldn’t be too happy about carrying the old big thing back home with us in our luggage, but I thought I was the luckiest person alive. When I said my good-byes and left the shop, I was walking on air.

I went back to the pub and waited for Monika to arrive. We ate a late lunch together when she finally showed up, and walked back to the hotel to rest a while in our rooms before going out again. I didn’t tell her about the painting; there was no point in making her angry so early in our vacation. She would see the portrait soon enough, and I was sure Monika would give me her opinion no matter what.

I was not really tired and far too excited to be able to sleep, but lying on a bed, listening to my own thoughts, was something I enjoyed tremendously. During my relationship with Jennifer, I was on constant alert, unable to relax. Always being prepared to deal with a violent eruption is a tiring thing for the body, mind and soul. Even today, I value peaceful moments highly and don't take them for granted. I learned that appreciation the hard way.

A short time later, I was disturbed from my daydreaming by a knock on the door. After opening it, I found a woman standing there who resembled the guy from the antique shop so much that I was sure they must be related. She was really pale, favored black clothes, and had the same kind of dark lifeless eyes that reminded me of a shark's. On top of that, like her male relative, she didn't look like a model for personal hygiene, and her gaze made goosebumps pop out over my entire body – a rather unpleasant feeling.

Since she only grinned and ogled me but didn't open her mouth to talk, I started the communication by saying, "I guess this is the painting I bought?" I pointed towards the package she was carrying under her arm.

But she seemed to be one of those people who believe verbal communication is overestimated. The only reaction I received was a short and rather amused nod, and then she simply turned around, walking down the floor, giggling the whole way. That left me standing in the doorway with the painting leaning against the wall. A little box was attached to the frame. Weird, weird people around here, I thought. Honestly, I had *no* idea.

I took the portrait into my room, tore off the wrapping, and was again at once captivated by Eileen O'Shane's eyes. To simply say that they were blue doesn't do them justice. They were the most fascinating blue eyes I have ever seen, even if they were only swirls of oil paint. I should have asked the guy in the shop about the painter, since there was no signature to be found, but I had totally forgotten about that.

It was difficult laying the painting aside, but there was another part of my purchase nagging for my attention. I opened the little velvet box and took the ring out, studying it in more detail for the first time. I noticed a rather special design – two hands were clasping a heart. I tried it on and was surprised to see that it fitted exactly on my finger, as if it had been made for me.

For a moment I thought I heard the very same sound as I had when opening the door to the antique shop – the humming of a swarm of bees – but it was gone the next instant. That was the second time that I heard that particular sound, and I made a mental note to get my ears checked after our holiday. Maybe I developed some kind of tinnitus.

I couldn't stop wondering why the ring had been given to me so freely. Maybe Monika could add something to solve that riddle. I decided to wear it tonight and see if Monika would be able to tell me a bit about the ring, since she was into jewelry.

Since I still had another hour or so before Monika was supposed to show up, so I went back to bed and took my time looking at the painting, trying to glean more information about the mysterious Eileen O'Shane. Who had she been? What was her life like back then? What had her family situation been like? And what was it that made people think of her as a vampire?

It didn't take long before sleep finally overcame me while I pondered all these questions. Once again I had a strange dream. Someone was chasing me, and when I was caught I was beaten. Next a woman with blue eyes – a woman whom I felt had claimed me as her own – showed up and rescued me. There were bits and pieces of living a long and intense life together afterwards. Funnily enough, I felt safe and secure with her, despite her attitude of ownership. Some might call it arrogance, but on her, the strong sense of pride fit. This was a weird dream for someone like me; bitter experience had left me suspicious of such strength of character. However, not once was I frightened while I was with her.

Monika interrupted my weird dream by knocking on my door. She did not enter, though, merely called out that it was time to eat, thus saving me from explaining my purchase to her. The ring would be easier to explain; she understood the allure of sparkly things. I thought that maybe I would tell her that I bought the ring in the shop, and that the portrait went with the ring. She didn't need to know it was the other way around.

After refreshing myself in the bathroom and trying to clear my thoughts, I joined Monika in the restaurant. The room was crowded, so her choice of reserving a table for today made us one of the lucky people who would be able to eat in the hotel instead of fighting for space at one of the local pubs. She laughed a lot when I told her about my conversation with the guy in the antique shop, and she really admired the ring. As I had guessed, Monika had some

knowledge of jewelry; she was able to tell me that the ring was made of plain iron. That meant that the material in itself wasn't worth much, but the ring looked quite old and so she suggested that I visit another antique shop during our stay in Ireland and let someone else value it. Both of us wondered about the words inscribed on the band – '*Mo Anam Cara*'. I remember us joking later on about Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and if throwing my new ring into a fire would reveal some secret message hidden on the inside.

We left the hotel straight after our delicious dinner of local fresh-caught salmon, and made our way down to the town hall. Monika had heard rumors that the live band would be playing mainly songs from the '80s; we were both looking forward to that, enjoying that music so much more than the modern noise that passes for tunes these days.

I had enjoyed myself thus far, and the pleasantly creamy taste of dessert still lingered on my tongue. I felt content, happy about the outcome of the day so far – a feeling which was still very new to me. Suddenly, I got a funny feeling while walking through the dark streets; a prickling on the back of my neck, a sensation I hadn't felt in a long time and had hoped to never feel again. I felt like I was being watched, and I didn't like it at all. I thought I was over that kind of paranoia and unsuccessfully tried to repress the feeling for a while, but Monika noticed my growing nervousness.

"Julia, is everything okay?" she asked, watching me with concern.

She took my hand, which I knew was cold and sweaty. I felt sick to my stomach, and had difficulty breathing through my growing panic. I couldn't believe this was happening! The last thing I needed was an anxiety attack in public. Monika took hold of my other hand and forced me to look at her.

"Julia, I want you to breathe slow and steady. Concentrate on breathing slowly in and out," she said with enough force to get my attention.

I tried to focus on her voice as she continued, peering intently into my face, "Good, honey. That is good. In and out. Breathe slowly."

Her closeness and the soothing tone of her voice steadied me, and I felt a bit more relaxed. I was still somewhat on edge, though, the panic reluctant to be banished entirely. At last, after spending several minutes controlling my breathing, I was able to talk. “I have to sit down somewhere for a moment, please,” I whispered, hardly able to recognize the sound of my own voice while I tried to tell my hands to stop shaking.

Monika guided me up some steps. “Sure, honey. There’s a bench.” She helped me sit down, all the time observing me closely. “I think it would be better to go back to the hotel. Don’t you?” she asked, looking worried.

I took a breath and shook my head. That was not how I wanted the evening to end. Though I felt like shit, I really didn’t want to give in to a totally unwarranted, irrational sense of paranoia. I wanted control over my life, and I sure would be able to calm down if I was just allowed to sit and work on it. I took another breath and said: “No, Monika. Just give me a moment. I really want to go in and listen to that band.” I knew she wouldn’t leave me alone at the hotel, and I didn’t want her evening spoiled. I was totally frustrated; just a moment ago, I had felt content and nearly happy, and at that moment I felt like I had made a journey backwards, like in a time machine, visiting a place I thought I had left behind for good.

We sat together, not speaking but simply listening to the night and the people walking by. I felt a bit calmer after some time, but still very tense and alert. At last, Monika asked, “What happened back there, Julia? You haven’t had such an attack for such a long time.”

What should I have told her? That I felt stalked? Who would do that here? I knew that it was a leftover sense of hyper-vigilance that being in an unstable relationship had taught me. It had to be. That was the only explanation that made sense. So I answered, “I don’t really know, but it’s okay now.” At least the first part of my statement was true.

I could see that she didn’t quite believe me, but it was equally clear she remembered the long and heated talk we had had a while back, when we reached an agreement that I had to be the one to decide what was best for me, even if she disagreed with my choices. I was open to hearing her opinion, but I had to learn to take responsibility for my own life. As thankful as I was for what she did back at the hospital, we both knew that I had to make decisions for myself, and be answerable for my own well-being.

We continued our walk a while later, though I still felt like someone was watching us – me, in particular. I had no idea what to do about that feeling, but had to try and suppress my instincts. I couldn't and wouldn't allow these irrational feelings to dictate my life and Monika's as well. Therefore, even though every molecule in my body screamed '*run away*,' I decided to act as if everything was fine.

When we arrived at the town hall, there was already a huge crowd inside the building. When Monika and I went straight to the bar, I realized that the town hall really had no atmosphere at all; it reminded me a lot of the sports hall in my old school. Thankfully, the odor of stale perspiration was missing that night, or my flashback of that particular memory would have been note-perfect.

Despite my usual reticence, I felt a little better being surrounded by so many people; there was safety in numbers, of course. I wasn't too partial to alcohol since experiencing what liquor did to Jennifer; she was a mean drunk with a solid right hook. However, I decided that maybe tonight one Guinness wouldn't be too bad for my nerves, and anyhow, when in Rome do as the Romans do, right? So Monika and I each ordered a Guinness, and found an miraculously unoccupied table in the corner where we had a good view of the dance floor.

I was happy to have a wall behind my back, and decided to try and enjoy watching people from my secure spot while I encouraged Monika to go and dance. She didn't like leaving me alone after the episode outside, but I didn't want her to baby-sit me the whole evening. I reminded myself – and her – that we were here on a mission and not merely for fun: we needed to find Monika's perfect match. That was the reason for being here, and our priority for that evening, despite anything else. Monika was inclined to disagree.

The band showed up on the stage and begun playing while we still argued about that point. They were really good for a cover band, I decided when Monika reluctantly agreed to stay. I had some hope that the rest of the evening would go better than the start. As far as I was concerned, it couldn't get worse. Nevertheless, there was something nice about sitting there, enjoying a Guinness and listening to well-played music. After two enjoyable songs, a man came over and asked Monika to dance. She declined without hesitation. I couldn't believe it! I shoved my elbow into her ribs and glared at her. She understood without words what I was

communicating, and stubbornly shook her head. Sometimes she was as obstinate as a mule, and often enough I was surprised about her rather butch need to protect me.

I smiled at the man, asking him to excuse us for a second before turning to her.

“Monika. Please do me the favor of not treating me like an invalid. I would feel really bad about that. We picked a good spot for me to feel as safe as can be, and it’ll be more than okay if you come over from time to time. Go, dance and have some fun.”

“But...”

“No buts! I’m okay, I swear.”

I’m sure that I sounded more convincing than I felt, because Monika hesitated a long moment before getting to her feet and joining the waiting man without making any more complaints or protests. I felt good about my little victory and continued sipping my glass of Guinness with a rather satisfied smile on my face, thinking the stuff was not too bad after one got used to it.

Monika’s travel agent had tried to convince her that we needed to visit the Guinness brewery before leaving Ireland via Dublin. That wasn’t really high on our priority list, but enjoying the drink right now got me thinking that maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

During my pondering, I had the opportunity to watch Monika and her partner on the dance floor. I always liked to watch her move; she’s incredibly graceful and confident. Perhaps I’m a little biased since we’re such good friends and I admire her a lot, but it seemed to me any guy would be happy to have her as a partner. I really wished for her to find the special someone to share her life. Nothing would have made me happier than Monika finding that person here, even though I wasn’t sure how a long distance relationship could work.

At the same time, I was afraid. I knew that between her job and a possible partner, there wouldn’t be enough time left for me anymore. It was a reality that made me suddenly feel like a center of loneliness surrounded by a crowd of people, but I knew that what was supposed to happen would happen no matter what. My fears weren’t important; her happiness was.

During the next hour, Monika came back to the table every so often to have a sip of her really lukewarm Guinness, and was almost immediately asked to dance by another man. I only had to discourage one very drunk guy who asked me to dance. It was not too hard to turn him down; he was drunk but really good-natured, and no threat to me at all. In a way, his slurred invitation was a bit flattering to my ego. Poor guy. He had to go back to his group of peers without success, but I figured when he sobered up and the “beer goggles” wore off, he would be glad not to have embarrassed himself with an unattractive wall-flower like me.

The only thing bothering me more and more was my desperate need for a toilet. Monika was dancing the second song in a row with one of her admirers, who looked really cute and was exactly her type -- a bit taller than her, with brown hair and green eyes, not to mention the cute dimples and sexy smile that even I couldn't help noticing. I decided that I didn't want to disturb her. It shouldn't be too hard to find the toilet in the town hall, I thought. It was a public building after all, and I was definitely over my earlier panic attack, thanks to the Guinness and the time I had spent watching Monika have a good time.

Experience told me that the best place to start looking for the facilities was near the entrance, so I went away from the lights and the crowded dance floor and found the toilet as expected, but there was a sign on the door which said ‘closed for repairs – look for the outhouse’. I couldn't believe it. I really needed to go!

I thought for a moment about asking Monika to accompany me during her next break, as I didn't feel too good about being out there alone, but decided the request was absurd. I was an adult, nothing untoward had happened so far, and surely I could manage going to the toilet by myself. I took a deep breath, tried to center myself and went outside, looking to my left, then to my right, but didn't see an outhouse. I walked further and finally asked a girl who was smoking outside with some of her friends. She pointed me into the direction of another small building not too far away, and mumbled something about ‘have fun’. It didn't sound too encouraging, but there was no way I could suppress my need anymore, and I didn't want to go in any of the bushes around here. Apart from the possibility of getting caught by the local constabulary, I had no idea what kind of nasty surprises I might find.

The way to the outhouse was rather dark – there were no street lights, and the moon was obscured by clouds. After taking a few more steps, the feeling of being observed came back,

as well as the panic that tightened my chest. What a night! I was not sure how much more adrenalin my body could produce, or how I was supposed to cope with the mood swings. I tried to breathe slowly and to remember my therapy lessons about how to calm myself down, while I began to play with the ring on my finger. The ring's presence had slipped my mind earlier, but touching it now was oddly soothing, and relaxed me a trifle.

Still very tense, I wondered if it wouldn't be better to turn around, return to the disco, swallow my pride and ask Monika to accompany me. My dismay grew when I realized the area I found myself in was deserted, and there was no one else around. I guessed other people didn't bother finding the outhouse, but were used to relieving themselves wherever they could. That left me alone in a dark place in a foreign town – a frightening prospect, apart from the sense of being stalked.

I firmed my resolve and concentrated on walking when suddenly I heard a husky male voice saying, "Hi, sweetheart. Fancy meeting you here."

Despite being shocked and afraid, I hoped at first that this would be a situation I could handle as well as the one with the drunken boy back at the town hall. How wrong I was!. Within the next second, he put his arm around my waist, drawing me closer and putting something sharp on my throat. He turned me around and breathed into my ear, "If you try to scream, I'll make sure you have something to scream about, honey, so don't even think about it. You will follow my lead here. Then maybe nothing too bad will happen to you. So just do as I say, sweaty. Okay?" His ugly laughter made me feel even sicker.

I was sure that I didn't know the guy and thought that maybe this was some kind of mistake, maybe a mix-up. It seemed like a good idea to explain that to him, but he left me no chance to speak. He put more pressure on what I guessed was some kind of knife; I could feel a well-honed edge digging into my skin. The cold sensation made me freeze in place.

"You do not speak any word, but will just obey. Is that clear, honey?" he asked.

That's what I did, as unbelievable as it seems. I didn't struggle at all. I nodded and followed him like he asked. It didn't matter to me how much time had passed; my mind seemed to stutter in instinctive reaction to threats like that, reminding me so much of the ones I had

received from Jennifer. That experience left me incapable of anything except gaping at him dumbly and following his orders. Fear sent a rush of ice through my veins. In the past, obedience had the highest priority, and survival meant doing what I was told.

Jennifer's painfully taught lessons were over, but my body and brain seemed to remember them very well. Without hesitation, as if what I'd learned was tattooed on my soul, I let him lead me through the dark and deserted streets of Lisdoonvarna. I was in a total daze, trapped in my own personal nightmare seemingly without hope of waking up.

He kept me close, one hand gripping my arm and the other one holding the knife positioned at my back, not giving me any chance to escape. To make matters worse, there was still no one else on the street, no one who might at least call the police if I cried out for help.

Hopelessness weighed me down until I had difficulty shuffling along in front of him. At that point, I was close to surrendering and letting him have his way with me, letting him do whatever he had planned. It seemed like that was my destiny.

It felt like we spent an eternity trudging through the town before we finally stopped. I tried to figure out where we were but could glean no clues from our location, except that we seemed to be more on the outskirts of town. My heart sank even lower, and my eyes burned with unshed tears. Even if I had been able to orientate myself, there wasn't anything I could have done to change my situation as he was so much stronger and had a knife.

Suddenly my tormenter pushed me against an expensive looking car and opened the passenger-side door. "After you, my lady," he said, giving me a self-satisfied smirk.

I was terrified of what would happen if I left with him, and finally *that* fear was bigger than the fear of what would happen if I disagreed. For the first time that night, I had an opportunity to take a closer look at him. There were bruised shadows under his dark eyes, and his expression was as hard as granite. There was something 'hunted' about him, something which seemed disconnected from reality. I couldn't put a name to it, but there was a dangerously fragile, unstable air around him, as if he might snap in a moment. That finally did it for me. I think at that point, I realized that resisting couldn't be worse than giving in. At least I had to try and put my few hours of self defense classes to some kind of use.

My stomach roiled with nausea, but I finally forced myself to say with a small voice, “No. I will not go with you! This must be a mistake, I don’t know you. Leave me alone, please.”

His presumptuous smile was immediately replaced with a stare that seemed capable of turning water into ice. He growled angrily: “You better get into the car right now before I lose patience with you. You don’t want to find out what I’m really capable of. You really don’t, believe me. Now get in the car!”

I realized that there wasn’t much I could do except try to run away, or hop into the car and lock the doors, and pray he didn’t smash the windows to get to me. I don’t know why I did what I did next, but I tried to push past him. He was ready for my feeble attempt.

The blow took me hard in the face and sent me gasping to my knees. He grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled me up straight. The pain was incredible, like he was tearing off a chunk of my scalp, and the starburst of anguish in my battered cheek intensified. My eyes watered as I was levered to my feet.

I could smell his foul breath when he hissed into my ear: “Stop that, you human slut. Now get in the damned car. We have a long way to go tonight and we’re already late.”

I was shoved into the car’s passenger seat. Not seeing any possibility of escaping what seemed to be my fate, I did not resist him any more. I slumped against the closed door, feeling defeated and terrified.

We drove for what seemed an eternity. I have no idea how much time passed before we finally reached our destination. I stayed huddled on my side of the car. My whole body ached, my head felt like it was going to explode, and the pain in my cheek didn’t subside at all.

Every attempt of getting information out of him during the drive failed as my tormentor didn’t answer any questions. He quickly let me know that I should just stop being so damned nosy when his fist lashed out. Another blow to my injured cheek left me in absolute agony. I tried to stay quiet for the rest of our drive even though I felt like screaming.

When we finally came to a halt, he made clear that I was to leave the car and follow him, and that's what I did without any more questions or hesitation.

I stepped out of the car and was enveloped in a chilly mist; fog swathed the area completely. I wasn't able to see much as we seemed to be in the middle of nowhere with no streetlights around, and the moon was hidden behind clouds. Since one of my eyes was already swollen shut, I had only one functional eye left to get used to the gloom. When we finally came to a halt, I was able to make out the ruins of a rather large building that seemed abandoned

I realized at the same time that we weren't alone anymore. For a split-second, I felt a flash of hope that maybe some help would be nearby, but that hope was destroyed immediately as my tormentor pushed me to my knees and bowed down himself. That didn't feel like help at all, but more like the next step of my nightmare. My heart thudded in my chest until I was dizzy and wasn't sure how much more I would be able to take before I died of sheer fright.

A female voice cut through the darkness: "Get up! I'd really like to know what took you so long, Loarn."

I was hauled to my feet, and noticed a rather tall and lithe woman standing in front of me. She was surrounded by a small group of heavily armed people who held torches which formed a small circle of illumination that made it a bit easier to see what was going on. The fact that the group was armed with swords and lances only added to my confusion and to my fear.

Loarn, my tormentor, was showing a rather submissive attitude, totally different from his earlier behavior. There was not so much left of the proud and priggish personality he shown me before. He kept his head down when answering her, and he sounded like a child who knew it had just been caught doing something wrong. "I am sorry, mistress, please forgive me. I had to wait longer than expected to fetch the prey. But I brought her here, just as you wanted."

I kept my head high enough to be able to study her and still show the kind of respect that she obviously expected. She certainly was very impressive in her own way – tall with long, blond hair and a regal air, looking as though she found everything rather boring. She dismissed Loarn with a nod. Her cold gaze shifted to me, and made me feel like an insect about to be crushed. Loarn's obvious reference to me as *prey* didn't make me feel any better.

Suddenly, the blond looked rather bemused, as if she was able to read my thoughts. She was looking me up and down, making me feel naked and even more vulnerable. She stepped closer and ran her finger over the hurt side of my face, making me flinch.

“Well, well, well, look who showed up,” she purred. “To be honest, you don’t look too good, darling.” She patted my cheek, which hurt like hell. My stifled moan of pain caused her to let out an hysterical sounding snigger before she continued a bit louder “But let me introduce myself, where are my manners? I am Madeleine O’Shane. Does that name ring any bell with you?” She looked at me expectantly. I was confused and unable to speak any of the thoughts rushing through my slow working brain as I tried to figure out why I should have heard of her.

She went on watching me, switching to a thoughtful expression when I didn’t answer immediately. “Come on, don’t play possum here,” Madeleine said. “Why did you buy the portrait and who told you?”

The portrait? They had kidnapped me because of the stupid painting? My confusion must have shown on my face.

“Does that mean you have no idea? That is even better,” she said.

She shrieked with mocking laughter. I was sure that she was more than a bit insane, and that made my fear treble. I began to shake. The others began to laugh as well. I felt tears stinging my eyes, and knew I was utterly helpless against her.

Madeleine’s laughter gradually ran down to occasional giggles. She asked me, “But blondie, what did you do in Ryan’s shop? That is unbelievable.”

I didn’t get it. What was her interest in all this? Her name was Madeleine O’Shane, not...

I wasn’t able to follow that train of thought any longer since my silence was apparently the signal for Loarn to stalk forward and hit me without warning in the stomach. The blow was so hard that it made me vomit until I’d emptied my dinner on the ground,, but the blazing pain kept me retching until I thought I was going to bring up my internal organs as well. I tried to

breathe through the spasms; lack of oxygen as well as terror had my lungs cramping. Loarn waited patiently until I attempted to stand up straight, then he hit me again. This time, I collapsed. A vicious kick to the back of my head made me pass out for some time.

After drifting back from a blissfully oblivious place I wasn't too sure I wanted to leave, the next thing I became aware of was Loarn hissing in my ear, "If the mistress asks you a question, you will answer her immediately. Is that understood?" As if to prove his point, he punched my already damaged jaw again, causing me to scream in pain until my throat was raw. If there had been something left inside my stomach, I would certainly have vomited again, but it seemed like I had reached the limit.

I heard Madeleine's insanity-laced voice ringing in my ears. "Loarn, let her live for now. I want to have some more fun with her, but our playtime here is over. Let's go home."

Something was pressed over my mouth and nose which smelled sharp and disgusting. I stopped breathing and struggled, trying to get free from Loarn, but his grip was too strong and I couldn't avoid breathing any more. Sucking in a lungful of air was my undoing. Immediately afterwards, I simply couldn't move any part of my body. I was conscious, saw what was happening around me, felt all the pain in my abused body, felt that Loarn was holding me roughly, but I was paralyzed. I could not move, one finger, not one limb, nothing.

If I was afraid before, I don't have the words to describe my state after Madeleine's purred in my ear, "I am really looking forward to being able to show you my humble home, and I hope that you will enjoy my hospitality as much as I will enjoy having you there as my guest. I am sure we will have lots of fun – or at least *I* will. It was time to get a new human pet. The last one died so easily and was a disappointment in most areas. But maybe you will last a bit longer and show some more spunk. What do you say, hmm?"

She continued in the same sing-song voice, a bright and rather dirty grin on her face. "Don't try to struggle too much, pet, it wouldn't do you any good. You just inhaled a very fascinating nerve poison, which I had the pleasure to develop and use on some of your own kind. It will make sure that you don't try to do anything stupid on our way. Experience shows that the more you try to move, the faster it will spread through your body. And you simply cannot

imagine the headache you will experience afterwards. I am always amazed that your race survived so long. You are so... so... how shall I put it? Let's just say – disgustingly weak.”

Her gaze was intense. She stared at me until a satisfied and evil grin covered her face. Taking my hand, she tried to remove the ring from my finger with force, but that didn't work. I couldn't cry out, but I wanted to scream from the pain. It felt like she was wrenching my finger off my hand.

“Ah, well,” she said. “Who care? I'll take care of that later, when we'll have more time. Let's go. We have some nice tools at home to remove such a ring from your finger... or rather, with the finger.” She turned around laughing, waving to the people with torches to follow her. Loarn flung me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carried me along with the group

I felt empty of everything save hopelessness. I was terrified and unsure if I could have resisted even if I had been able to move. I simple couldn't understand what was happening to me. I didn't know any of these people, and had no idea why I had been kidnapped and beaten. What was it about the painting? I remember wondering about the salesman's behavior, but the situation seemed so unreal, including the words Loarn and Madeleine had used, describing me as *prey*, a *human slut*, talking about *my kind* as if they were not human themselves.

Without warning, I felt as if something soft brushed against my face. The touch did not hurt me at all. I heard a strong female voice, different than Madeleine's harsh whispers, saying directly in my ear, “Call for me. Call for help. Now. There is no time to waste.”

The ghostly caress was gone as suddenly as it came. I couldn't tell if my concussion was making me hear voices, or if pain and fear were driving me mad. .Despite my doubt, I remember hissing through clenched teeth with the last bit of strength left in my body, “Help me. Please, help me!” although I was quite sure that there would be no help, and that I had imagined the voice, possibly as a side effect of the poison Madeleine had gloated about. Still, trying couldn't hurt more than I already did, and I had nothing left to lose.

Almost at once, I heard a gurgling cry and I was unceremoniously dropped from Loarn's shoulder. I fell on my knees, and then slid down until I was lying prone on the ground. I heard

a woman – not Madeleine – saying in a tone as sharp as a well-honed knife, “Don’t you dare to touch my fiancée again, you worthless pig.”

Something heavy fell down next to me.

My eyes were screwed shut. I opened my one good eye, when I heard the woman’s voice again and recognized it as the one I thought I had imagined. Now it was raised in my defense. There was too much confusion, pain and fear inside my mind for me to truly grasp what I was seeing, except the fact that there was Loarn, silent and face down on the ground near me. There was a figure hovering next to me, dressed entirely in dark clothes; it was difficult to make out any details, since I couldn’t move and only had limited eyesight, but it seemed to be a woman. I remained silent, hoping to be forgotten at best.

She and Madeleine sneered at each other for some time before Madeleine broke the silence. “Damn, Eileen, he was one of my better men; believe it or not,” she said. “Don’t you think it a tad impolite to show up out of the blue and kill one of my men without provocation?”

When the other woman answered Madeleine, it made me shiver. There was no mercy in it at all. Those two seemed to be antagonists, and there I was caught in the middle between them, in the midst of whatever fight seemed to be going on.

“Cut the crap, Madeleine,” the woman replied, “and just leaves this place before I kill even more of the scum that belongs to you.”

Madeleine gave the other woman a bow, and answered with a cold smile on her face, “I will leave if that is your wish, but not without my new pet.”

One of her men stepped closer to me as if to lift me up, when a sword was pointed at his heart. Without further paying attention to him, the woman turned to Madeleine and said, “You will leave without my fiancée. And you will leave now!”

I had no idea what was going on. Who was the fiancé they were talking about?

Madeleine retorted, “Oh, come on, Eileen! Is saving runaway peasants and unfaithful tenants not heroic enough for you nowadays? Do you really want to waste time and energy saving a small, blond and above all human damsel in distress on top of everything else? I really wonder what it is that draws you to those stray and unworthy kind of fools? You could have had so much more. You really waste yourself on a piece of trash too low for your clan.”

At the sound of the woman’s name, I would have gasped had I been able. It was such a strange coincidence, but after a night of such weird occurrences, what was one more?

“You are so full of shit!” Eileen snapped.

Madeleine clapped her hands, laughing out loud before running towards the other woman without further warning. I heard the screech of metal hitting metal and saw two sword blades clashing together. A moment later, it seemed that Eileen had not come alone, as suddenly all hell broke loose. Dozens of people were fighting around me. Even though I had some time earlier given up on trying to grasp what was happening, I was once again left in a state of even more confusion. I felt like nobody would believe me if I told them what had happened to me on what was supposed to be a simple holiday.

The fight continued around me for some time. More often than not it seemed a miracle to me that no one stumbled over me or hit me or killed me. I was only able to see bits and pieces of what was happening around me because of my position, but all of the weapons I was able to make out were swords, daggers and lances. I could see no pistols, guns or rifles. There were definitely no shots, only metal meeting metal, again and again. From time to time, there were angry shrieks, screams of pain and anger, and curses exchanged between fighters. I was exhausted and in pain, but tried to make some sense of it. Was this some kind of medieval revival happening between psychotic killers?

There was no sense to be had. Instead of enjoying the disco with Monika, I was lying in the dust, nearly beaten to a pulp, not sure who was the ‘good guy’ since I had no idea what the other woman was up to, and if she would not continue what Madeleine had started. Sure, she had *killed* Loarn, but that was it – she had killed him without further warning, and I didn’t know what to expect. It was entirely possible that any treatment I might receive at Eileen’s hand would be worse than Madeleine’s sadistic plans for me.

A little while later, I was able to recognize a pair of female voices. It seemed as if the two women were coming closer to me while continuing their fight.

I heard Madeleine saying a bit breathlessly above the clash of arms, “I don’t understand what you want with her. She is human! I thought that would even be a bit too low for you, bitch.”

I wasn’t able to understand the response, as the noise of battle was increasing again, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Eileen flipping high above Madeleine’s head. She was forced to turn around and the fight continued out of my field of vision. Nobody could do a flip like that in real life without technical help. Unless I was in the middle of a kung fu movie, there was more going on here than there seemed at first glance.

I have no idea how long the fight went on. I had a hard time keeping my good eye open, and I was still not able to move, although I hurt everywhere. Suddenly, a hysterical and piercing cry rang out and everything went disturbingly quiet. I lay there terrified; my heart feeling like it was beating its way out of my chest. I was gathered carefully in warm arms, and a hand softly touched my face. When I was able to focus, I saw it was the one called Eileen who was holding me, which had to mean that Madeleine had lost the fight.

I remember thinking that now would be the time to find out what her intentions were, and I tried not to get my hopes too high.

She smiled and said, “Relax, you can trust me. I am here to help you, like I said.” Then she whispered words to me in a language I didn’t understand.

I felt a burst of warmth all over, and was suddenly able to breathe more easily. My last thought was something like “what the heck?” and then everything went black as I lost consciousness.

Eventually, I came around again. When I did, I was lying on something too soft to be the ground. Every one of my muscles felt sore, and every part of my body felt beaten and abused. There was also the terrible headache that Madeleine had told me about. When I tried to move

a little, even more pain shot through my body, making me groan. The throbbing in my head got worse. I took my poor condition as a sign that what happened had not been a bad dream but harsh reality, and that unwelcome thought caused another moan to escape my throat.

“Ah, little one you are awake, finally,” a woman said from nearby.

Despite being in a strange place, I carefully tried to open my eyes – only partially successful since my right eye remained swollen shut. I noticed how little light was in the room, but I couldn’t make out much more detail. But one thing I did know – this place didn’t seem like a hospital, and it sure wasn’t my hotel room at *The Hydro*.

The female voice I’ve never heard before spoke again. “Don’t move around too much, little one; you’re not well and it will take some time for you to heal. What you need will be a lot of rest and good care.” She paused and added, “The mistress will be back soon to look after you.”

Mistress. I was confused, sure that this could only mean Madeleine was back again, couldn’t it? She had been addressed that way by Loarn, who was dead. Dead because he was killed by Eileen. I struggled to stay awake and follow that train of thought, but was too weak. Despite my fear that I hadn’t been able to escape Madeleine, in the end I fell in an uneasy sleep.

When I awoke the next time, I felt as if my bladder was close to exploding. I noticed that it was not as dark in the room any more, and forced my good eye open. There were heavy curtains drawn across the windows, but a bit of sunlight was still filtering through. I wondered how long I had been there. Time seemed to have little meaning. I couldn’t hear anyone moving around, but I clearly felt someone close by, which made goosebumps rise on my skin. Trying to carefully move my head, the pain hit me nevertheless like a lightning bolt shooting down my spine, and I couldn’t stop an agonized moan. There was the scrape of chair legs on the floor, and someone carefully smoothed a lock of hair out of my face.

When the woman spoke, the voice was the same as the one I had heard when Loarn tried to carry me away from the ruins. Madeleine had called her Eileen. “Try not to move around too much,” she said. “The healer was here and took care of you, but you are still injured and need to stay put. One of your eyes is swollen but seems otherwise undamaged, as you may have

noticed. But more importantly is that you're safe here, I promise. You'll get all the rest and help you need to get well again."

I opened my functional eye with difficulty, and looked into a beautiful face with an intense blue gaze that sent shivers through my body. I wanted to ask her where I was and who she was, but at that moment, there was a much more pressing request. It took considerable effort for me to be able to croak, "I need to use the toilet, please."

She smiled at me, turned around and said, "I should have guessed since we made sure that you drank a lot of water to flush the poison out of your body. Wait a second." She rang a bell.

The door opened almost immediately, admitting another woman who said, "Ah, the little one is awake again. How can I be of help, mistress?"

So it was not only Madeleine being called mistress, I thought.

"Lena, she needs to use the toilet," said my blue-eyed benefactor. "See that you tend to her; I have to leave again and look after the other guests." She graced me with a smile that made my stomach do flip-flops. She was the most beautiful person I had ever seen, but there was also a near palpable wave of melancholy around her, which I noticed despite my condition. I stared at her while she went on speaking, switching her attention to me, "Julia, this is Lena. She's in my service, and will take care of you while I'm away. Just tell her what you need. I will be back soon."

"Wait. Please," I gasped.

She turned around slowly and came back to my bedside. The woman looked so familiar, and she knew my name, but did I know her? Had we met before? Déjà vu was not always reliable, and my memory was fuzzy at best, the headache still bothering me. Observing her closely, I felt like I needed to know more. I said, "You know my name, but I don't know yours."

She studied me for a moment and said, "My name is Eileen O'Shane. I promise that we will take some time to talk when I return from taking care of our other guests. Please rest in the meantime; you need to regain your strength."

Eileen left the room, and left me speechless. Suddenly, I remembered where I had seen those arresting blue eyes and heard that name before. My pain was forgotten. I tried to get up and go after her, which was not the brightest idea. I nearly fainted because of the pain and dizziness following the sudden movement. Lena helped me to get back into a position that eased my pain somewhat. I was thoroughly confused. I had seen those eyes before – just swirls of oil paint yet mesmerizing all the same – but it just couldn't be true. What were the odds that I would find a woman named Eileen O'Shane with the same unmistakable eyes as the ones in the portrait I owned? And didn't Madeleine say that her last name was O'Shane as well? She had asked if that name was known to me.

Lena distracted my thoughtful mood with an embarrassing bedpan episode, after making sure that I didn't do any more harm to myself, like trying to pull more stitches. This was followed by the woman tending to my wounds, assuring me that most of them were only superficial, but nevertheless hurtful and simply needed time to heal.

There were too many questions whirling through my head, and not enough answers. Perhaps Lena knew something that could help me understand what was going on, I thought. She seemed to be nice, but I didn't know how much I could trust anyone here – wherever *here* was. Still, I could start my investigations with Lena, and that was what I tried.

“Lena?” I asked.

She continued to apply salve on my wounds but started to chuckle. “Little one, I won't tell you anything, so don't ask. The mistress said that she'll be back soon to talk with you, but let me assure you again that you are safe here. Nobody is going to harm you. Relax. You need the rest. Let me take care of your face. I haven't seen so many bruises in one place for a long, long time. You really need to take better care of yourself, you know!”

Very funny! I settled back, frustrated, and continued observing her. There was something very aristocratic in Lena's bearing, even though she seemed to be Eileen's servant. She had dark eyes, a color I couldn't figure out (probably due to my limited eyesight) and her face was framed with long, very wild, springy brown hair. She must have been quite a beauty when she was younger. Nevertheless, there was still something very appealing about her, although time

had left its marks on the skin of her face, neck and hands. I was sure she was a person worth getting to know better.

Lena's attitude made it clear that there was no point trying to wheedle information out of her, so I saved my energy. She finally put a blanket over me, and ruffled my hair as if I was the child she had named me. What else was left for me to do except wait for the mysterious woman who promised to return and answer my questions?

I tried my best to stay awake, but the painkillers I had taken earlier made me really groggy, and I found myself dozing off time and time again, though still fighting hard against the lure of sleep. I wanted to know what was going on, where I was, what had happened to Madeleine and what would happen to me. I knew that Monika would be wondering where I was. Hell, I was sure that she was freaking over my disappearance, and I had no idea how long I had been unconscious. It was hard to force myself to stay awake, but at last I heard footsteps and people murmuring outside. The door opened, and in came the woman who had told me her name was Eileen O'Shane.

"Hello, you're still awake?" she asked gently.

I had to stifle a yawn before answering her, but I was more than eager to learn about what happened before I lost consciousness again. There would be no more waiting, no matter how tired I felt! "Yes, I didn't want to go back to sleep," I said. "I... I really want to know where I am, and you promised to answer my questions." I was nervous and afraid, remembering what had happened when I asked Loarn some questions, but I was also determined to find out what kind of situation I had gotten myself into. I was also desperate to know the reason why I had been pulled, very much against my will, into the frightening situation.

Eileen sat down on the chair next to my bed, just within reaching distance, and switched on a dim lamp that sat on a nearby table. She handed me a glass of something which looked a lot like water, encouraging me to drink. Never had water tasted better to me! I had to force myself to sip rather than gulp. Eileen was sitting a bit too close for my liking, since I still had no idea what her agenda was, but I didn't dare complain. Anyone who was able to stop Madeleine and her group of vicious blockheads was certainly strong enough to subdue me easily, especially in my injured state. At the same time, I was puzzled to realize that I admired

her, much as I did when I first saw the portrait of the woman who was her namesake in the antiques shop. I couldn't get a grip on my inner turmoil and was shaken to the core, unable to understand all of the feelings washing over me. I closed my eye to concentrate and tried to get a grip on my emotions.

“My apologies, Julia,” Eileen said suddenly. “Please feel free to ask me anything you want, and I'll try to relieve your curiosity. But let me ask you something first – what do you remember of the incident which brought you here?”

Yeah, what did I remember? I thought. Everything was a bit cloudy. “Well, I was at the town hall with my friend Monika. Monika she'll be out of her mind with worry...”

Eileen put her hand on my arm in a calming gesture. “I've already made sure your companion received word about you. One of my servants is going to meet with her today. We could even bring her here if it would make you feel better.”

That made me curious. “Thank you, I really appreciate that. But how did you know about her?”

“Well, I observed you as soon as I was informed about your purchase of the portrait and the ring. But please go on. What else do you remember?”

I took a deep breath, not really sure how much I really wanted to remember, before I tried to continue with what was left in my memory. “I remember being ambushed after I left the town hall. I was beaten when I tried to escape and was brought to her, Madeleine O'Shane, and beaten some more. They gave me some poison, didn't they? And then ... then you showed up and ... you rescued me?”

I waited for her response. She smirked and answered, “Aye, that about sums it up.”

I took another sip of water, wondering if I dared push her for more information.

“Well, then, let me know your questions,” she said.

Eileen did not sound angry or irritated, but good-humored enough that I gathered all the courage left in me – which wasn't much at that point. I knew it was an opportunity I couldn't waste. "Well, why don't we start with where am I, who you are, did you really kill Loarn, who is Madeleine, and did you really fight with swords?"

I tensed, unsure about her reaction. I was honestly expecting a violent outburst because of my rather bold questions. Despite my nervousness, Eileen stayed calm, waiting just a short moment as if gathering herself to answer me.

"All right, the short version," she said, settling back in the chair. "You're in O'Shane Manor, my family's home. As I mentioned earlier, my name is Eileen O'Shane. Yes, I had to kill Loarn, or he would have killed you without hesitation. Madeleine, well ... she is my biggest enemy and yours as well, after tonight. Finally, we do fight mainly with swords, because that is the only way to kill our kind."

She was obviously waiting for me to say something, but I just stared at her, not sure if she was joking or not. This sounded a bit too much like a bad movie. Finally, I said warily, "You can't really be Eileen O'Shane, or that guy in the antiques shop was pulling my leg with his story."

Now she was the one who looked puzzled. "Why would you say that?"

"I was told Eileen O'Shane lived a hundred years ago." The only plausible explanation hit me, and I cursed myself for an idiot. "You're a descendant of hers, right?"

She looked down at the ring on her finger. She was playing with it, and I noticed her ring looked a lot like the one that came with the portrait I had bought. The ring – *my* ring – was sitting on the bedside cabinet. I found it the similarity to be a curious coincidence.

Looking into my eyes, she answered, "No, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm the only Eileen who was ever born to the O'Shanes." She looked rather bemused and continued, "Look, Julia, would you like to hear the whole story of why you're here in O'Shane Manor, and who I am, and what all this means to you?"

I nodded, glad to get some answers at last but still very tense. I was afraid that there was more to it than just a simple kidnapping... not that that wouldn't have been bad enough.

Eileen put her feet up on the bed, clearly relaxing – a contrast to my continued tense state. “Right,” she said, “let’s see... where to start? And please interrupt me if you don’t understand something I say. I guess what I’m going to tell you will be a bit too much to take in at once, and you’ll likely be confused.” She inhaled deeply. “First of all, I *am* Eileen O’Shane and I am the head of the house of the O’Shanes. I know you bought my portrait from Ryan O’Patrick. He’s a matchmaker for people like me. I don’t mind telling you he was having the time of his life when you bought the painting.” She chuckled, amusement shining in her eyes.

I had to interrupt. “What do you mean, ‘people like me?’”

“You heard Madeleine calling you a human?”

I nodded, my throat gone very dry.

“Well, you are human and I am not.”

I stared at her in disbelief, but she remained calm and continued, “Did you ever hear of the *sidhe*?”

Stunned, I shook my head.

“Right. Let me try to explain. People like me would be the *sidhe* and the other ‘children of the night,’ like *dearg-dus* – the ones I belong to – *pookas*, *leprechauns*, *merrows*, and beings like *werewolves*, ordinary *vampires* and so on. Ryan doesn’t offer his service to *grogochs*, who are very sociable beings, but are definitely not noted for their personal hygiene and therefore, it is nearly impossible to find a mate for them.” Eileen wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Though some people say that Ryan just has to have a *grogoch* as parent, judging from the way *he*’s handling his personal hygiene, which is to say not at all. Anyway, in the modern age, it becomes more and more difficult for the likes of us to find suitable mates. Our worlds are changing and colliding at such a fast pace nowadays; it’s hard for us to keep up. Many of us have abandoned the old ways and some, well some are really lost...”

She took another deep breath, paused as if to gather her thoughts, and went on, “Through the centuries, we’ve remained in contact with your kind but kept a healthy distance between us. Our worlds collided from time to time; some decades were better than others. But most of us ‘fairy folk’ had a rather good relationship with humans, sometimes giving protection, healing if necessary, and even teaching some of our skills to humans.

“Some of us decided that we ought give relationships between humans – meaning mortals like you – and us *sidhe* a chance, that maybe it was time not to try so hard to separate our worlds so much anymore. Some, like the *merrows*, always had an attraction to mortals, which is no wonder if you ever saw a merman. Even though *merrows* were usually more promiscuous in their relation with mortals, there were examples like the McNamaras of Clare that showed us that long-term relationships between our kinds could work out. Some *sidhe* had human lovers before and were quite satisfied as well. However, some of us decided that it would be best for our race to be more open towards bonding permanently with humans. Therefore Ryan adjusted his shop a bit, so that the likes of you would be attracted, as well as other races you haven’t heard about. This has been going on now for some decades, but there weren’t really many humans showing up until now.”

She sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. It seemed like all of this wasn’t easy for her. I waited patiently for her to continue. She opened her eyes and said, “I didn’t really want a human mate, but was persuaded by Lena to go along with it to support the others. She always has a tendency of making me do things I rather wouldn’t do. And then you showed up, buying not only the painting but taking the ring as well, which made you my fiancée by our rules, and therefore put you under my protection. Ryan thinks it’s hysterically funny and had the time of his life telling me about it. He had a blast handing you the ring and not explaining what it was all about. But you don’t need to worry; I have to honor the law, which means we are engaged and I’ll protect you until... well, just don’t worry.”

Looking back on that moment now, I remember she had the most adorable self-deprecating smile. At the time, I couldn’t appreciate it. I felt like I was going to pass out from shock. Eileen was clearly insane, or at best seriously delusional. I was close to another panic attack, being bound to a bed in a house I didn’t know, with people who believed they were supernatural beings. My doubt and fear must have shown in my expression. She frowned.

“Julia, are you in pain?” Eileen asked. “Do you want me to ring the bell for Lena?”

I took a deep breath, as deep as my bruised ribs allowed, and told myself to calm down. It wouldn't do any good panicking. No one had offered me any harm; in fact, Lena and Eileen had shown that they cared about my well-being. Maybe I had misunderstood, I thought.

“Let me clarify that,” I said. “You really want me to believe that you are a... a supernatural whatever?” Suddenly remembering what Ryan had told me, I stared at her and continued, “Are you ... do you ... are you a vampire? Oh my god...”

“No, no,” she broke in, holding up her hand as if in defense. “I am not a vampire. I am a *dearg-du*. There's a big difference.”

I guess I should have been speechless, or tried to run screaming from the room, but surprisingly enough, I stayed put and tried nothing of the kind. I thought about a different approach to the situation and just asked the next question that came to my mind, “So you say you are a *dearg-du*, and you want me to believe that because I bought the painting in this shop, which is really a matchmaking office for mythical creatures, I'm now your fiancée?”

The only way to describe the grin on her face was: decidedly goofy. “Well, yes, I guess it sounds weird to you, but accepting the ring made you my fiancée. And we have to honor the commitment.” She paused for a moment. “Julia, I know this is hard for you to understand, but I can assure you that you really don't need to be afraid, because you won't be forced into anything at all. We can even break the engagement, though this will be difficult. But the house of O'Shane is a really respectable clan to marry into, even today.”

She was drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. We looked at each other for some time before Eileen continued, “Let me assure you that I never expected a mortal to buy my portrait and the ring. Hell, I didn't expect that anyone would buy it, and I really need some time myself to get used to the idea. But what is done is done.”

Eileen played with her ring before she went on tentatively, more speaking to herself at first, “I was on my own for a long time now and I didn't plan on changing it. Hell, maybe I needed

something like this to happen, so that I could let go of the past.” She switched her attention to me, speaking with more emphasis. “Julia, I wish we could use the time that you will need to heal to get to know each other a bit, and see where everything will lead. Without strings attached, I promise.” She gave me a pleading look, so different from the imperious expression I remembered on the portrait’s face.

This couldn’t be true, I thought. I was sure this was a joke. Was there a hidden camera somewhere? Was I being punked? My horrified suspicions of insanity aside, somewhere deep inside myself, I believed what Eileen had told me could well be the actual, literal truth. Thinking back at everything that happened after my arrival in Ireland – my weird dreams, the discovery of the antiques shop, getting kidnapped, being beaten and tormented, then Eileen suddenly showing up out of nowhere, the fighting with swords, her doing unbelievable kamikaze flips, killing someone without turning a hair, living in a house with people calling her mistress and having servants – well, it all seemed definitely strange, like something out of a fairy tale. Suddenly, it dawned to me that if what she just said was true, I was engaged to a lesbian vampire! I was instantly dismayed.

If only half of all that was true... I felt sick.

How much worse could my life get after surviving a relationship with a violent abuser like Jennifer? Out of one abusive relationship and right into a marriage with a vampire? That sure could be considered a therapeutic success, I thought sarcastically. I had only my limited knowledge of vampires to draw on, but being engaged to a murdering, blood-drinking killer most definitely did not seem like a change for the better. In the past, I had dared to imagine being rescued by a female knight in shining armor, but I would never have imagined a creature like Eileen being the one destined to help me when I was attacked. Surely I would need rescuing from a vampire, not the other way around! My head began to spin.

I needed time to think, but I needed more information as well. So I tried carefully, “Can I ask you some more questions, Eileen?”

She gave me an encouraging smile, looked relieved and nodded her head. She seemed a bit nervous as well, but I thought that had to be a figment of my imagination.

I gathered my courage and said to her, “Let’s just assume that what you told me is true. How can I be engaged to you when I only got the ring because of the painting, and had no idea what I would cause with my purchase? No one asked me if I wanted to get engaged to a vam... er, a *dearg-du*. And I’m still not sure if I believe that you’re not a human yourself.” The last sentence came out as a soft mutter. I went on in a more normal tone, “What will happen to me now?”

While asking the questions, the import of whole situation suddenly crashed down on me, and I couldn’t stop the tears that sprang to my eyes when I realized what it meant for me if Eileen’s story was true. Bound to a vampire! A VAMPIRE!

The walls around me shrank closer and closer, until my chest was too tight. I tried to breathe, to get some air into my lungs – but the only thing happening to me was hyperventilation. I was close to a complete panic melt-down when suddenly strong arms wrapped around me.

I tried to struggle, but she held me close and made soothing noises, speaking words in a language I didn’t recognize but nevertheless sounded like promises of good things for my immediate future, and better things to come. The loving tone of the words went straight to my soul, even if I didn’t understand their actual meaning.

Instead of being afraid of Eileen’s touch, I suddenly remembered a dream I had had some time ago about a woman claiming me as her own and making me feel safe in spite of everything. Keeping that memory in mind, I was able to breath again, and began to relax in the arms of someone who claimed to be a *dearg-du*, a deadly being whom I assumed would not hesitate to commit murder, and had actually done just that when rescuing me from Madeleine and her minions. She was the first woman after Jennifer, and next to my best friend Monika, to hold me close like that. I wondered how I could feel so terribly afraid, yet completely protected at the same time. A part of my brain realized that she smelled unbelievable good; I was reminded of a breeze on a summer days, of earth, of something really spicy and delicious that made my mouth water.

I finally managed to get a sufficient amount of air into my aching lungs. The panic began to ease. Being held by Eileen was something of a guilty pleasure. She held me close but very carefully at the same time, and I could sense a great strength held in check for my benefit.

How could my body betray me like that and enjoy her closeness so much? Instead of trying to run away – not that I could have done that anyway with my broken body – I found myself wishing to snuggle deeper into her embrace. Because of our closeness, I could feel her steady heartbeat, which grounded me even more. The last of my panic eased until I realized something that sent my pulse sky-rocketing again.

Heartbeat?

I looked up at her and hiccupped, “I hear your heartbeat. I thought vampires don’t have a pulse because they’re undead.”

She touched my cheek with unbelievable gentleness, looking deep into my eyes, while answering with a bit of a growl, “I tell you once and for all, Julia! I am no vampire, but a *dearg-du* – definitely not one of the undead! Never was, never will be!”

That statement was followed by a cute pout, which caused me to relax as I trusted it meant she was not really angry. Eileen continued, “Vampires are humans who died once, and are now undead. But I am closer related to the *sidhe*, and was never human. We are a different race of our own, and a supernatural race besides. We are more related to the *feys* and *elves* of your tradition.”

I considered her statement for a moment. “What are *sidhe* exactly?” I asked, still not feeling ready to believe her story totally.

She seemed to search for the proper words. “Well, the *sidhe* are descendants of the ‘*Tuatha de Danann*’, the people of the goddess Dana. They lived in Ireland long before the first Celts arrived on the island. The Tuatha are ‘gods and not gods,’ meaning something in-between divine and mortal. There are a lot of different *sidhe* today, like *aes sidhe*, *bean sidhe*, *leanan sidhe*, *sluagh*, *cat sidhe* and so on. And then there are the *dearg-dus*, and others who are kin to the *sidhe*. You would probably say that we are Irish fairies, but we differ very much from the fairies of the other countries around us. However, there is a vast variety of us here, a whole different universe existing next to the Ireland you humans usually are only able to see.”

You humans...

I listened intently to her, still wrapped in her embrace, surprised there was hardly any fear left inside me right now, just a feeling of utter contentment. Something about Eileen touched me in a way I hadn't been touched before. At the same time, all of that seemed to be surreal; it couldn't really be happening to me. It was like being caught in a rather bad dream...

We didn't talk for a while, letting the peace and quiet develop around us.

I was still pondering what she had just said, studying her declaration for any trace of a lie or deliberate misdirection. It sounded like the truth to me, or at least like something which didn't sound totally untrue. There was a question running through my mind, nagging to be asked, proof of my somewhat twisted brain and of my rather relaxed state I was in right at that moment. And I just had to ask it. "Eileen?" I murmured, careful not to disturb the spell which seemed to hang around us.

"Mmmhh?"

"Do you have fangs?"

She arched an eyebrow and countered without hesitation, "Why Julia, do you need to open a can?"

Both of us broke into a fit of laughter which really hurt my bruised ribs; damn it! It was awhile before the pain eased, and I recovered my breath enough to speak. "I... I really am sorry Eileen. I have no idea where that stupid question came from. My curiosity must be more morbid than I thought."

She just hugged me more tightly to her chest, careful of my poor abused bones, and chuckled, exposing impressive fangs at the same time. They were sharp ivory curves that hung slightly over her full lower lip. The fangs vanished the next moment, and only the grin remained on her face, showing normal 'human' teeth. I really should have been afraid of those fangs. Those were proof that what she told me had to be right. But the only thing I saw right then was the warm expression in her eyes, which made my stomach contract and did funny things to other parts of my body, which I had thought were not capable of desire anymore.

Eileen cupped my cheek with her hand and said, “You really don’t need to be afraid, Julia. I understand that all this is a lot to take in and must seem unreal, but believe me when I tell you that I would never, ever harm you.”

I squeezed her arms and said, “The thing is – and I have to confess that it confuses me terribly – I am not so much afraid anymore. I can’t remember that I ever, I mean ever, felt so content and ... I ... I don’t understand. Did you entrance me, maybe put a spell on me or something?”

She didn’t blink an eye while answering me, “No, I didn’t entrance you. I never needed to entrance someone, really. If you were under a spell, you wouldn’t ask me any questions, but just follow my orders, no matter what they were.”

I thought that through; it sounded like a reasonable explanation, but nothing about this situation could be called ‘reasonable.’ I said, “But how, if I’m not dreaming ... I don’t understand how I can feel so safe and I don’t know like, like... I just came home.”

I was utterly confused.

She took my hand in hers, picked up my ring from the bedside table and slid it onto my finger, then said, “Because your soul begins to recognize the bond that is between us.”

I must have shown my puzzlement since Eileen continued, “Well, I told you that we are engaged because you took the ring. Actually, from the point when you put it on your finger – that’s when our bond became alive again. I know that this is not common with your kind, but is a tradition with us. Didn’t you wonder why the ring fit exactly?” She held her much larger hand next to mine – she was a tall woman, a full head or even more taller than me – and I saw that our rings really had the same design. I remembered the Gaelic words that were written on mine, and I could see letters on hers as well.

“What do the words mean?” I asked.

“They say *mo anam cara*, which means translated *my soul mate*.”

I thought that I had heard the term before, but couldn't decide when or where. "Soul mate sounds so esoteric. What does it mean?"

"It's a Gaelic phrase. What it means is that there are two... well, let's say beings, you would probably say people, who are each one half of a soul. It is a relationship which can't be broken by time or space or anything else, not even death. It's as if both people have an ancient affinity towards one another, a bond latent in their spirits. This bond awakens and becomes alive when they meet. It's different from the usual friendship or romantic relationship. It's so much more." Eileen offered me a rather shy smile and... a blush?

I thought for a moment about what she just said, then it hit me. She thought *we* were soul mates? "Do you... do you, I mean the rings?" I stammered in disbelief, sounding and feeling rather like a fool. It seemed more and more like I had lost the ability to form whole sentences.

Eileen continued talking in a very calm, but nevertheless emotion-filled voice. "They are *Fede* rings, only differing from those the humans in Ireland still wear today insofar as the human *Claddagh* rings use a crown on top of the hands and the heart as another symbol. The rings of the *sidhe* and their kin are enchanted. They are made to only fit soul mates, and no one else can wear one of a pair belonging together. Worn on the left hand with the heart outward means that the owner is engaged to be married. That is the way you put the ring on your finger, Julia. Subconsciously, maybe, but nevertheless a binding gesture of intent."

We fell silent afterwards. I stared at my ring, which indicated from the way I had been wearing it that I had indeed become engaged. I remembered how surprised I had been in the hotel room about the way the ring fitted on my finger, like it had been made just for me. And I also recalled that Madeleine had not been able to get it off my finger...

"But I am human, and a woman. And you are a ... a *dearg-du*," I said, "so how can we possibly be something like soul mates if such a thing exists? Maybe this is a mistake, or a mix-up, or the ring isn't working right." Surprisingly, that thought made a lump form in my throat. I steeled myself for rejection.

Eileen looked amused, and I realized I had been babbling. I let out a heavy sigh. Eileen ruffled my hair affectionately. "I don't think so, Julia, do you? Really?" she asked.

I had to admit that I didn't really believe that, either. Even though my head screamed 'no' – my heart actually believed her. But then, it was my heart which had got me into trouble in my past. Suddenly, I felt exhausted. The recent revelations, surprises and – to be honest - shocks were too much for me to handle. First being beaten to a pulp, then being rescued and learning about the existence of mystical, supernatural beings, and being told that I am engaged to a *dearg-du, sidhe*, whatever, and feeling so very safe at the same time despite everything I had gone through. I felt like I had a potato instead of a brain sitting inside my skull.

“Eileen, I really need to digest this,” I said, nevertheless still leaning into her.

She looked at me with warmth and understanding in her expression. “Yes, you sure do, and you'll have all the time that you need.”

I took hold of her hand, not really wanting to let go. Not yet. “How do we go on from here? What will happen now?”

“We take things slowly,” Eileen replied. “I guess you need to stay abed for at least another two days. Perhaps we can accelerate the healing process, but most of our medicine has to be used carefully on humans. It wouldn't do to heal your wounds just to poison you again in turn. I would also guess that you want more background information about the whole situation. So I think it's best if I brought you some information about my family and our history. I have a huge library where you should be able to find a lot of answers to any of your remaining questions. I don't use much modern technology like computers if I don't have to, but like to rely on the written word. It takes more time when looking for something, but can't be as easily manipulated as these modern electronic devices. We'll be able to spend some more time talking, getting to know each other if you like, and you'll be able to ask me whatever you want. I will have to attend to some matters, but I'll try to deal with most of the manor's business without traveling too much. That way, when you are healed and able to better decide what you want to do, you'll have learned enough to make an informed decision.”

Curiosity roused me from my lassitude. “What kind of decision?”

That brought a rather shy and sweet smile to her face. “Well, I... uh, like I said, I’ll ask you to marry me if we see that, well, if we really fit, and you’ll have to decide if you want that or not. Among my people, an engagement cannot be broken easily. I thought that maybe, if we got to know one another a bit better... but that’s up to you, really. And there are some things I need to tell you, about my past and well, anyhow....”

Good, it seemed like I wasn’t the only one not being able to speak whole sentences. She was so cute, I couldn’t believe she wanted me, and I knew we had still to talk about a lot of things. There were a lot more questions for me to ask, but in my exhausted state I couldn’t keep my eyes open much longer. Feeling that she was rather nervous, I tried to put all of the affection I already felt for her in my smile and in my next comment.

“Eileen,” I said, “I promise to consider everything carefully, and I can assure you that I most definitely feel something towards you that already runs deep enough to scare me, not only because I don’t really know you. But I’m not really good at getting a grip on my emotions, and much of what you said is hard to digest, and I am just really terrible tired right now. I don’t really see why you would choose someone like me. There is a lot of stuff I should and will tell you about me, just not right now.”

I stifled a huge yawn with my fist and went on, “I’m sorry. But I think I have to sleep right now. Is that okay?”

Eileen simply nodded, stood and helped me get comfortable in the big bed, handing me two white pills and a glass of water. I didn’t hesitate to take my medication, already trusting her not to poison me, and was tucked in by her after I finished.

Before drifting away totally, I heard her say in a soft voice, “Sleep well, *mo anam cara*. I will be here when you wake.”

Those were the words that followed me into sleep, where I dreamed of vampires who were defending my honor. I swam with mermaids, chased the Tooth Fairy and argued with Santa Claus about the presents he was supposed to bring me for Christmas. I had always had a vivid imagination, and the medication I took added to the kaleidoscope of visions playing behind my eyelids.

Eileen was there when I woke up, just as she had promised, sitting in her chair and reading a sheet of paper that I thought might be a letter. She looked beautiful, still favoring black for her clothing. The color suited her; I had to admit, adding to her mysterious aura. She definitely was a beauty of the classical kind and sitting there in tight fitting black leather trousers ... well, let's just say I could get used to this particular sight. I was positively surprised about my awakening libido, and shocked that my hormones were doing happy dances.

It seemed to be day outside, since there was light filtering through the heavy curtains. When I asked if her daylight 'allergy' was why the curtains had been drawn, Eileen laughed, pointing out that due to my headache and my still swollen eye, it would be better to prevent me from too much light exposure. She wondered aloud when I thought it would be before I got rid of all my misapprehensions about vampires. She told me that *dearg-dus* don't disintegrate when exposed to light; at least that was something less to be afraid about. I would never forget the icky scene in *Interview with a Vampire* when the undead woman and child were exposed to the sun and disintegrated into ash. That awful picture has stayed with me a long time.

After taking care of my need for the bedpan, and eating some jell-o – my sore jaw wasn't up to much more solid food – I asked Eileen if she had heard anything regarding Monika. I imagined Monika going crazy with worry, and felt bad for my friend. Eileen told me that she had received a message during my beauty sleep that Monika was on her way to O'Shane Manor at that moment, making me even happier.

Eileen left the room to get some fresh tea for us which gave me, alone and alert for the first time in what seemed days, the opportunity to observe the room I was occupying. Candles were lit everywhere, and I couldn't see any proof of electricity, but a fire burned in a stone fireplace for warmth. The interior was rather dim and antique. I noticed nothing that could be described as fairly modern, but the whole atmosphere was cozy.

I wondered what kind of room I was lying in, and how huge O'Shane Manor was, since to my knowledge there were at least two servants working here. I remembered that Eileen hadn't

been alone when she had shown up for my rescue, and guessed that there had to be more people living here in her service. I made a mental note to ask her later.

In the midst of my pondering and daydreaming the door opened, and Eileen came back with our tea. She sat down on the edge of my bed, setting the tray with its cups and teapot on the nearby table. I already enjoyed her presence very much; it was as if I had never been afraid of her, or if I had known her for a very long time. I was able to relax in her presence, and realized I was beginning to trust her. I was more than a bit torn though, because I had sworn to myself after breaking up with Jennifer that I would never trust too easily or too quickly again. In spite of this resolution, I couldn't deny what I already felt towards Eileen.

I wondered if it was foolish to allow those feelings to develop. But on the other hand, what did I have to lose? Eileen had had enough opportunity to kill or hurt me if that was her plan.

“So, how are you feeling, Julia?” she asked.

I took her hand, wondering about what had happened to my ‘don't touch’ and ‘don't come to close’ attitude. I seemed unable to keep Eileen at a distance. “I have still a bit of a headache, but feel a lot better compared to the last time I was awake.”

I smiled at her, squeezing her hand, already craving the contact and giving in to that craving without a struggle. I received a warm smile from Eileen. Her fingers curled tentatively around mine.

“Do you feel up to some more talk?” she asked. “It's still going to take some time before Monika arrives.”

“Yes, that would be great. I do have some more questions. Like, where exactly am I?”

“I can show it to you later on a map if you like. We are still in County Clare. The Manor is set in wonderfully secluded woodlands, and isn't easy to find for those who are not invited. As you may know, there isn't much forested land left in Ireland, but this has been my family's home for a very long time and we did everything to conserve our old growth woodland and even try to expand it. I'd love to show you around once you are allowed to leave the bed, if

you like to.” She smirked, but not unpleasantly. “Shall we continue our discussion while I make myself comfortable in my chair?”

I immediately felt the loss when she released my hand and stood up.

I was still confused. My picture of vampires – and that was the image that still kept running in my head – had been culled from television and movies. I learned that a vampire was a creature who was more or less invulnerable; also sadistic, powerful, immortal, bloodthirsty; a serial killer who murdered for food and fun. Madeleine and her gang fit that description as far as I was concerned. But Eileen O’Shane with that shy smile on her face, looking and acting like an angel, didn’t fit the profile. She was no cinematic Dracula, but my recollection insisted she had the fangs for it.

The need to be close to her warred with the need to keep myself safe, so my emotional rollercoaster continued. I was torn between wanting to trust Eileen and beginning to believe that maybe I had really found something that I hadn’t dared dream about for such a long time, and being careful and alert at the same time, believing that life had once more played a cruel joke on me. I was really looking forward to Monika’s arrival, because I knew that I would trust her judgment of Eileen much more than my own.

“Eileen, I still don’t get it,” I admitted finally.

She waited for me to continue, looking at me with her beautiful blue eyes.

“I have a certain image of vampires in my head,” I went on, “and Ryan told me that a *dearg-du* is something like a vampire. Since you showed me your fangs yesterday –” both of us had to grin at the memory – “there seems to be some kind of similarity between *dearg-dus* and vampires, right?”

She nodded. “Yes. How shall I put it? I’ve already told you that there is a difference. Beside *dearg-dus*, there are nosferatus, daywalkers, vampires... a total of around twenty more species which you would probably all lump under the same ‘vampire’ header because we all have to drink blood to survive. There’s a great diversity between the species, though; we differ very much but some things are similar. Like I said, one main difference is that I am

closer to the *sidhe*, a totally different race. I am not undead, and have never been human, as it is the case with most of the others.”

We were interrupted by a knock on the door. Lena entered with a mug that smelled heavenly, and made my hollow stomach howl for a meal.

“Mistress, I bring something for the little one,” Lena said, putting the mug into my hand. Wisps of steam rose, and so did my appetite. She went on, speaking to me, “It’s chicken broth, lass. Your stomach still wouldn’t be able to handle more solid food right now, but it’s a good way to start regaining your strength. I suppose you’ll enjoy warm food much more than that disgusting jell-o stuff. Whoever invented that must have had a sick brain. I will bring you more broth later if you like.”

Lena left the room, shutting the door behind her. I sipped the broth carefully, and it was either delicious, or I was just plain hungry and hadn’t noticed until that moment.

“Don’t drink it too fast,” Eileen warned. “Take your time, Julia.”

I smiled at her. “Thanks. Would you like to continue, please?”

“Aye. Where was I... oh, yes. We differ very much from species to species, and race to race. The thing which unites us is that we all need blood to survive – some more, some less. The amount needed is dependent on age and on some other things.”

At the mention of drinking blood, I nearly dropped my mug and wasn’t sure if I wanted to continue with my meal. She frowned and said, “Sorry, Julia. Sometimes I forget that things like that are disturbing for squeamish humans, but let me assure you that most of us *dearg-dus* don’t suck humans dry anymore. Oh, things were different in the past, I admit; it was a rather long process before we found out how we could change things, and it was an even longer and tougher process to convince the others to try walking this new way.”

Her answers only added fuel to my burning curiosity, which was strong enough to make me forget – or at least, try to put aside – the notion of Eileen as a blood-sucking vampire. In no

way did she fit my expectations of the breed. “And *you* live like that? Without drinking human blood?”

“No, I don’t. We just don’t need to kill anymore to be able to survive: There is synthetic blood, which lacks some substantial ingredients but is a good substitute if the real thing is unavailable. We can buy blood from blood banks and store it, and there are people who sell us blood privately. There are also people who offer to be used as a kind of mobile blood supply in exchange for, let’s say, other things than money. I myself usually stick with the synthetic blood or buy my supply from blood banks, but I have to admit that there was a time when I relied on those offering their services as mobile blood supplies. And not all of them always offered themselves freely.”

She paused and stared at the floor. I realized that although I hardly knew her, I was already able to read some of her body language. At that moment, I saw that she was lost in her thoughts and the aura of sadness definitely expanded around her. Despite my curiosity, I decided not to ask her what she had meant by other things beside money that one could expect as payment in exchange for blood. And besides, I wasn’t sure if I really wanted to know anyhow, definitely not about those not offering their service freely.

Eileen went on after a minute, “I have to admit that I miss the taste and smell of fresh human blood sometimes. And I do miss the hunting.” She grinned sadly and continued, “I made a decision a long time ago not to harm humans because of my blood thirst anymore, and I stick to it. Unfortunately, there are *dearg-dus* who don’t. And even more of the *leanan sidhe* still rely on the old ways, drinking blood or sucking life out of humans in other ways. One of them is my former wife.”

Surprised by the unexpected revelation, I choked on the broth in my mouth and swallowed the wrong way. It hurt terribly when I had to cough; my ribs protested, paining me until I was sweating.

Eileen immediately came to my help, touching me and murmuring words in the same unknown but already familiar language to me. A warm feeling spread over my body, just as it had after my beating. The warmth helped stop the coughing. Eileen mopped at the spilled broth with a napkin.

“Are you okay, Julia?” she asked.

“Yes, sorry. It took me a bit by surprise.”

“That I was married?”

“Yes. Married and to a woman, to boot.”

I watched her closely. The blue eyes turned really dull now and were shadowed with old pain. I instantly regretted my rash statement, even though it had been the truth. Eileen seemed to be a thousand miles away, emitting a melancholy that I had first noticed in the portrait, and never since we had met in the flesh. I think I shocked us both when I obeyed my instinct and grasped her hand, but her fingers curled around mine quickly, and she gave me a grateful smile, returning from whatever inner place she had briefly drifted.

“It was a marriage of convenience made a long time ago, and it is a rather shameful part of my life,” Eileen said, speaking reluctantly as if each word had to be dragged out of her by the force of her will. “I found out pretty quickly that we didn’t fit together one bit. But I did many stupid and sometimes simply horribly things during that part of my life. Things I regret deeply today.” Defensive walls came up in her blue eyes, which made them nearly turn dark grey. I was fascinated and frightened at the same time because her whole appearance changed.

“You actually met her,” Eileen went on. “She was the one who had you kidnapped.”

Madeleine? Madeleine and Eileen had been married?

Thinking back on it now, there was no reason to be too much surprised, since Madeleine had told me that her last name was O’Shane and asked me if I had heard of her. How stupid of me not to put the puzzle pieces together!

“Did you kill her?” I asked.

She stared at me, obviously shocked. “Who?”

Who did she think? “Well, Madeleine....” I said.

She relaxed a trifle at hearing that, pushing her hand through her hair. “No, no. I can’t kill her... well, I could, but... it’s difficult.”

She looked so sad, my heart ached in sympathy. I believed there was a longer story behind this marriage of hers that I would want to hear when she was ready to tell me. Perhaps this was the cause of Eileen’s grief, which I still felt coming from her in waves. But I wasn’t sure if I wanted to push her, or if I should just leave the issue alone. I had more questions and thought I could try to distract her from the bad memories I had inadvertently dredged up.

“Eileen, it isn’t important,” I said. “It was Madeleine who kidnapped me and you were the one rescuing me. And since I haven’t said it before, I do it now – thank you.”

I leaned forward and surprised the hell out of both of us when I brushed my lips softly over hers before reluctantly leaning back again. I realized what I just done, but felt no regret at all as I was sure that this kiss spoke clearer as any of my words ever could, telling Eileen that I certainly didn’t hold her responsible for Madeleine’s actions.

Eileen was pole-axed, but I wasn’t too concerned about her health, noticing the slow smile and the healthy color on her cheeks. Both assured me that my spontaneous move was the right thing to do – and a very pleasant one as well. My lips were still tingling, and not only my lips, either. Thinking of something, anything to say to avoid embarrassing one of us, I picked one question that was running through my mind since she told me that she was *the* Eileen of the portrait. “Eileen, how old are you?”

She seemed to relax and to be thankful for the change of subject, though the color and the wide grin stayed on her face. “I’m four hundred years old, born shortly after the reign of Elizabeth I, and before the time of Cromwell’s invasion of Ireland. But most days I feel a lot younger, honestly.”

The diversion worked. We laughed, which caused explosion of pain around my ribs that virtually ended any merriment. Again, Eileen murmured in her own language and touched me, which eased the pain a little. This foreign language stuff came sure handy.

“Julia, we really shouldn’t overtax you,” Eileen said, pulling her hand away from my weak grasp. “For you to regain your strength, you need a lot of rest and a lot of pampering. Between us, Lena and I will make sure that you receive plenty of both. But you have to work with us and let me know when you need a break. No arguments!”

I reached out and took her hand again, noticing that not touching her was already difficult for me. The hand was a bit cold, but very soft, and for some reason I didn’t want to let go of it. I didn’t want to let go of *her*. Everything I had learned about Eileen until now was positive and felt good, despite my earlier misgivings about her nature. I should have been more afraid, but I had already begun to feel so very comfortable with her that I didn’t heed my instinctive fear. I only longed for Monika to confirm my feelings, to tell me that I could really trust Eileen, but even more myself.

“I’m easily tired, I have to admit,” I said, “but my head is running wild with all the questions I have, and I need to get some answers as well to feel better.” I had to stop and cough in order to swallow past the emotional knot in my throat. “All of this is still so new to me and ... and I need to know more about you, and about all this. I want to know who you are, and what you are, and what all of this is about. What does it mean to us? To me?”

Eileen squeezed my hand. “You will, I promise. We have lots of time. But I don’t want you to have a relapse; I am so happy that you feel better. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I didn’t take good care of you.”

Both of us fell silent, just looking at each other. All of a sudden, I realized what the expression ‘drowning in someone’s eyes’ meant. There was an awkward silence between us, not exactly uncomfortable, but I thought it best to break it by asking some more questions which were still nagging at me. “How did you know about me? You said Ryan informed you.” I said, hoping for more information.

“Well, Ryan couldn’t wait to tell me about your purchase and I never lost track of you once I was informed. I was curious about you, about what happened. I didn’t know how to tell you the import of what you had done in his antiques shop, I didn’t know what your intentions were, so I followed you for a while, wanting to find out more first. You have to understand that your action really caught me with my pants down, so to speak. I wasn’t prepared, but it didn’t take me long to notice that Loarn was following you as well. Still, I wasn’t sure how to approach you after your panic attack and I wasn’t sure what was really on Madeleine’s mind.”

My heart leaped in my chest, and I burst out, “How do you know...?”

“Well, I felt you responding to me, noticing me around. It’s difficult to describe, but I told you before that becoming my fiancée set the bond between us alive. Since that moment, I felt your emotions rather soon. It’s only the first stage, but you’ll also be able to notice my presence and emotions more and more, since the bond will grow every day if we allow it.”

I thought about that, putting two and two together, and feeling sick to my stomach once I realized that she had been there the whole time while I was being beaten and hadn’t done anything. “You were watching it the whole time... watching Loarn beat me, hurt me? I thought that you showed up shortly before I heard your voice for the first time.”

When she didn’t respond at once, I went on furiously, “Why did you wait so long before coming to my rescue when you were watching me the whole time? Did you like to see me violated?” I shouted at her, scarcely believing what I was saying. She could have come to my rescue earlier, before Loarn became violent. I felt cold all over. How could I have trusted her? Someone like her... here I was again, full circle at the mercy of an abuser. Maybe she was one who rather got her kick from watching someone being abused than inflicting pain herself.

It seemed to me as if the picture I had in my head about beings like her was right after all, and my feelings had betrayed me once again. I trusted too easy and too early. What a fool I was. Over and over again. Damn! There was no need to wait for Monika anymore.

Eileen stared at me with an unreadable expression which only added fuel to my fire.

I had to get away from her and from this place. Without thinking, I threw the duvet away, tried hard to block out all the pain I felt in my body and... was pressed back into the bed by Eileen, who was at my side faster than anything I've ever seen before.

"Don't do that please! You are going to hurt yourself." she begged me.

I screamed at her: "What do you care?"

I was in no mood to give in and tried to fight her. I wouldn't have been able to match her strength even if I had been a model athlete, but I didn't care. Trying to resist her in my injured state was totally ridiculous and just left me nauseous and covered in cold sticky sweat by the time exhaustion and pain forced me to submit to her. I closed my eyes, trying to suppress the tears that came with the feeling of total defeat and helplessness. I was at her mercy. Saphead that I was, I should have never trusted her.

"Julia, please look at me." Eileen's voice was soft. I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of seeing the fear and the defeat in my eyes, so I turned my face away, trying to pull my wrists out of her tight grip. She let go, only to cup her hand under my chin, trying to tilt my head up.

Even though I felt as if I pulled every stitch and intensified all the damage done to my body, I just screamed at her, "Leave me alone, you damn creature! You demon! Do you like hurting me? I bet you just rescued me to have your own blood supply and toy at home. Damn you, you monster!" I started to sob hysterically, thrashing around as much as I was able.

For a moment nothing happened, but then she touched my head with her other hand and said, "Sorry, Julia, but you leave me no other choice." She murmured some more words and I felt my body go limp and not respond to my will any more. I drifted off, thinking that there was some truth regarding vampires and hypnosis. Not for the first time in the past few days, I thought that this was the end of my life. I never expected to wake up.

Unexpectedly, I did wake up again, realizing soon that I wasn't dead at all, because the afterlife wouldn't mean lying on the same bed as before. My first priority, therefore, was to

try and sense if a particular someone else was with me in the room but I felt ... nothing, only a lot less pain than the last time I was awake.

Next, I carefully opened my eyes, happy that both of them seemed to be working again. Then I moved my head to observe my surroundings, and felt sick when I realized that there was a person sitting close by on a chair. I was afraid and hopeful at the same time that it would be Eileen. But it wasn't her – it was Monika, sleeping in a funny position, drooling on her sweater but seemingly unharmed. Neither Eileen nor Lena were around as far as I could tell.

“Monika?” I realized how raw my throat was. But my harsh croak served its purpose because Monika awoke with a start and an aching expression on her face.

“What ... oh, sweetie, you're awake.” She grinned like the proverbial Cheshire cat and stood up, immediately offering me something to drink, but allowing me only two small sips of water before asking, “How do you feel?”

I tried again, noticing that my voice sounded a lot better now, “I'm okay, but Monika, since when are you here? And where is Eileen O'Shane? We must leave this place! They are dangerous creatures, not humans, and...”

Putting her hand on my shoulder, she more than surprised me by saying: “No, no, no – calm down, will you? I know everything. Eileen told me what happened, and even though all of that is hard to take in, I believe her. Trust me Julia, I really believe we are as safe as safe can be.”

My heart pounded in my ears. What could I say? I sure wouldn't be able to leave without Monika's help. Maybe they had put a spell on her or something like that, because I was sure she couldn't mean what she just said. My thoughts must have shown on my face, because Monika sat down next to me, giving me a much needed hug. Despite my inner turmoil, I happily absorbed her warmth and reveled in her familiar smell, which always meant safety to me. Monika was the solid rock in my life and somehow we would be able to escape that situation as well, if we acted together. I just had to convince her.

Before I was able to say anything else, she whispered into my ear, “There is no need to be afraid, Julia. Honestly. Eileen explained the whole situation to me: the portrait and the ring, about the fight, about the *sidhe* and her being a *dearg-du* – as unbelievable as all of this is – and she told me about your argument.”

I stared at Monika in total disbelief. How could she betray me like that?

She stood up and paced up and down in front of my bed for a moment, then continued, “I have to admit that this was not how I envisaged our holiday, even in my wildest dreams, and I never was someone who believed in supernatural or mystical stuff. But after having a long talk with Eileen before she left“

“What?” I interrupted. “What do you mean with ‘before she left?’”

Her look was rather pensive and it took a moment before she answered my question. “Well, I wasn’t here long when someone arrived with a message for her. She left soon after reading it. I have no idea what the whole ruckus was about and Lena doesn’t want to tell me. But yeah, Eileen’s left the manor.”

She left? Why would she leave? It made no sense. What did she want to achieve? It was hard to think clearly, but it began to dawn to me that if Monika was not enchanted and really believed Eileen, I was the one in the wrong. If so, it was possible that I had really misjudged the whole situation, and cursed Eileen who had done nothing to deserve that. Not for the first time in recent memory, I was utterly confused.

“Do you really believe her, Monika? The stuff she told you and that and ... well ... do you think she is one of the good guys? I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

Monika nodded without hesitation, granting me one of her warmer smiles. “Yes, I do believe her, as weird as it is, and as hard as all of this is to accept. But I guess the real question is – do you believe her?”

I felt ashamed and embarrassed. Why had I reacted so hysterically? Eileen saved me, cared for me and made herself vulnerable, and instead of trusting her, I turned her down flat,

accused her of wanting to do me wrong. I had to apologize even though I still needed to know why she hadn't come to my aid earlier. "When will she be back, Monika? I have to talk to her."

Monika dropped her head, avoiding my gaze. She, looked uncomfortable.

"Monika?" I asked, a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach.

She looked up again but still avoided my gaze, glancing the interior of the room instead.

"Well, Eileen said that she probably won't be back before you're healed properly, and that maybe it would be better for both of us if we left the manor as soon as you feel able to move."

I was stunned. "What... how... why?"

"She didn't say much more, only that probably it would be better to leave things like they were before, and that we would be safer somewhere else."

Shit! That was a polite way of saying, *Go, before I throw you out*. I said aloud, "Didn't she say anything else?"

Monika watched me carefully and a bit curiously. "No. Ah, well; actually, she left something for you." She took something out of her pocket and laid it in my hand.

Eileen's ring.

I felt like throwing up.

I was so very ashamed and angry. This was one of those times where I just wished I could kick myself in the ass! But I was in a mood to kick Eileen's ass as well. How could she just leave and avoid talking to me? She had been the one telling me all that stuff about being soul mates, being bonded, and now she left because of a misunderstanding, a heated argument? Not that I wouldn't be able to understand that she didn't want me in her life, as I never really understood why she should have wanted that in the first place. But she had been the one believing in all that soul mate crap and making me all mushy inside Coward!

I needed to do something. I wouldn't just leave and give in! "I would like to get up, Monika; could you help me please?"

My first priority was to talk to Lena. I was sure that she would know where Eileen was. I needed to visit her. Since I was doing much better now, and surely needed some exercise to regain my strength back, I would start with looking for Lena.

But Monika refused to give me a hand. She stood in front of the bed with her hands on her hips, tapping a foot on the wooden floor. "No way. You stay put! You're still not up to any stunts like that. Eileen told me you should take it easy for at least one more day."

We stared at each other, both not moving for a moment. I was too frustrated to be cautious. I pushed the duvet away and tried to sit up on the edge of the bed. Fine, I thought, if she wouldn't help me, I had to help myself. I was nauseous and my vision was not very clear, but that was soon gone. I was determined to make it on my own, no matter what.

Monika shook her head but finally gave in, steadying me when I tried to stand up. I guess she was simply not interested in seeing me fall over and kiss the floor. It was quickly brought home to me that I was hardly able to walk a few feet before my legs gave out and I had to sit on a chair she thankfully provided. Lingering pain and exertion left me breathless.

Monika didn't need to say anything, since her whole face expression just screamed 'I told you so.' After a short rest, she had to help me back into bed. There was no way I would be able to walk around. I had to give in and rely once again on the philosophy of taking one small step at a time. I hated that stupid philosophy! I needed to talk to Lena, the sooner the better.

Monika insisted on hearing the whole story from my viewpoint before helping me do something stupid. So I did, only to find her staring at me open-mouthed when I finished.

"You are engaged to Eileen?" Monika asked her eyes wide as saucers. "She told me that the ring was supposed for someone else and that you bought it by accident. Why did she tell me a different version of that story?"

I felt a stupid, but I had a feeling about Eileen's motive for lying which didn't make me feel better. She was trying to make it easy for me. Damn her! I felt tears stinging in my eyes. "Well, no," I said. "The truth is that by buying the portrait and the ring I became her fiancée. At least I was – but now she left the ring behind. So I don't know..."

Monika shook her head. "I still don't understand her version of the story, but anyhow and for future reference, I honestly am never ever going to leave you out of my sight. Unbelievable! You have a chance to marry a drop dead gorgeous, seemingly rich, caring, interesting woman and then you accuse her of being a sadist... really, Julia!"

It did sound kind of bad when she put it like that. I hastened to make my excuses. "But Monika, she is a *dearg-du*, and she didn't try to stop Loarn from beating and nearly killing me. And I don't really know her well enough ... "

Monika closed her eyes and counted out loud until she reached ten, which annoyed me no end, before opening her eyes again and telling me, "In a way I understand your reaction, but why didn't you give her time to explain? Maybe she had a reason for not helping you earlier, because she sure came to your rescue later."

Could it be so easy, and could I have been so wrong? Maybe – but maybe not. And even if I was wrong, I would have expected her to stay and not just run away. Or was there another reason for her absence? But why did she leave the ring behind? I really needed to talk to Lena.

As it turned out, luck was on my side. I should have trusted Lena to be a good caretaker and arrive just in time to provide us with food, although she didn't even deign to grant me a glance after entering the room, only communicating with Monika in short sentences before turning around, ready to leave us alone again. I couldn't allow that to happen. It was my chance to get some desperately needed information, and maybe find out where Eileen was and when she was destined to come back. So I gathered my courage, because I could clearly feel that I was not in Lena's good graces at the moment.

"Lena, please," I begged.

She hesitated for a second before continuing on her way to the door, ignoring my plea, but it seemed to me as if her steps were a bit slower than before.

“Lena, I need to talk to you,” I said. “Do you know where Eileen is, please?”

She turned around and we stared at each other for a short while. I immediately noticed that she didn’t look very good; there were dark circles under her eyes and not much left of her graceful appearance. I was speechless, wondering what could possibly have happened.

I tried again. “Lena, please. I need to talk to Eileen. When will she be back?”

Lena’s glanced coldly at me. “Why would you be interested in that?”

I was embarrassed, guessing that she had more than just an idea about what had happened between Eileen and me. I knew that if I wanted to have a chance of finding out more, I needed to be open, even though it wouldn’t look too good for me.

“I want to apologize for what I said to her,” I told Lena. “I... gosh... I made a fool out of myself and I think I hurt her somehow and...”

Lena interrupted, looking daggers at me. “You *think* you hurt her *somehow*? If I am not very much mistaken you called her a monster. And you *think* you *hurt* her! Humans! We should have left you alone, really. You are not worth all the trouble, thinking you know everything. Worshiping your modern technology and science, trying to rule everything with logic. But when you are alone for a night in the dark, listening to your feelings when hearing the noises you can’t explain... then you run away screaming, feeling hunted. And hunted are you, even if only from your fear, but sometimes from something or someone more substantial. And then, then you are more than happy to have someone like the mistress to help you. But you, you call her a monster...”

She turned around again, walking to the door faster. For the second time that day, I jumped out of bed, and before Monika was able to stop me, I hurried after Lena... well, at least that was my plan. I quickly realized that my body was not up to something like that, and I fell straight on top of the table and into the trays of food. Even though I hurt myself, I at least had

gotten Lena's attention, and found a way to stop her from leaving the room. Getting a bump on my forehead and being decorated with food was worth it, I decided.

Both Monika and Lena helped clean me up and made sure that I was okay apart from the headache that had returned with a vengeance. I waited until Lena stopped fussing over me, and then seized the chance to get some information out of her. "Lena, could you please sit down for a moment. Please!" I said.

She reluctantly sat down, still giving me rather unfriendly looks. But she did not run away, and waited for me to continue, which I considered was another small step successfully taken. Monika chose a chair a bit farther away to give us some privacy, though she watched everything attentively. I cleared my throat and hoped for the best.

"Lena, I realize that I am a bit of a fool and I really would give everything to be able to undo what I said," I told her. "You cannot imagine how much I regret my words, but I can't apologize and try to mend what happened if I am not able to talk to Eileen."

That didn't seem to break the ice between us and I didn't know what else to do. There was an awkward silence, but she finally asked me in a cold voice, "Why did you do it? Calling her names like that? Causing her to feel as she did before! You cannot imagine how hard it was for Eileen to achieve acceptance from the other *sidhe* with her new ways of living, of not hunting humans anymore. And you cannot imagine her pain when she lost her parents and her brother; she always blamed herself for their deaths. On top of everything else, she found out that her own wife had betrayed and used her, the one person she hoped to be able to rely on, then she was called monster and betrayer and more because her kin thought she was behind the plan to kill the rest of her family so she could become the chieftain of the O'Shane clan."

Lena got up from her chair and took a step closer to my bed, which made me feel like a cornered animal. Monika was getting out of her chair, stepping closer to Lena, who continued her speech. "And then, when she, after living in chosen isolation for a very long time, rather unexpectedly finds someone whom she against all odds believes to be her soul mate, and she begins to hope that maybe, maybe there could be something good for her, you call her names like that. Being a soul mate sure doesn't mean you cannot be an asshole at the same time! She was happier than I've seen her for decades. She hadn't really been able to trust that maybe it

was her time to be happy again, to have found the someone special, but she was hoping nevertheless and then... why? Why did you accuse her so unjustly?"

What could I possibly say? I could see the tears in her eyes, and felt like shit and absolutely helpless at the same time. "I really didn't mean to hurt her, Lena," I said, "but I was simply afraid, shocked about everything that happened. And I think we both pushed buttons somehow." I tried to bite back the tears that threatened to fall. "I've been in an abusive relationship for so long that I really don't trust myself anymore with all the things I feel and... and ... I was afraid ... and ... I can't understand why she let Loarn beat me."

My tears flowed freely. I tried to hide my face behind my hands, feeling so very ashamed, when I felt someone stroke my hair. Expecting it to be Monika, I was more than surprised to realize that it was Lena.

"Ah, little one," she said. "Come on now, that is not going to help any of you and is not going to make you feel better."

"But, but..." I hiccupped, trying and failing to form a coherent sentence.

"Shush. You get yourself together while I get us some fresh tea from the kitchen; it will do us good. And then we will talk some more. Right?"

Lena stepped out of the room, leaving Monika and me alone. We just stared at each other before Monika stated what I felt as well. "She really is something else, right?"

I had to concur, sniffing. "You know, I always feel like a little child when she is around, and not like a grown-up person."

We laughed and it made me feel a bit better. It seemed as if Lena wasn't so angry any more, and perhaps there was still a chance for Eileen and me after all. I had no idea what the future would bring for us, if there was any, but I knew that I had to apologize for my outburst and for the names I called her. She didn't deserve the way I had treated her after she rescued me and showed me nothing but kindness, especially after what Lena had revealed about her past.

I began to realize that it was not only me still recovering from a traumatic experience. It was not only my behavior being influenced by what had happened to me in the past. Eileen, too, was haunted by her own demons. What a minefield to cross!

Talking about relationships was something I did a lot with my therapist. I remember her telling me that every relationship is different because people are different, and everyone has their own baggage to carry. I found out that for me, to make a relationship work I needed to move carefully, be honest and learn to trust the other person. But trust was something I wasn't good at. Monika was the only person I really trusted, because it had been affirmed over and over again that she would never, ever hurt me, not under any circumstances. Still, it took a long time before our friendship reached that level.

As for Eileen... hell, I didn't know her until a few days ago, and I could never have guessed that someone like her existed. She was not what I would consider a safe person, or someone I would choose for myself after being burned so badly in my past. But then she touched me like nobody before ever did – like I was the most precious thing in the world to her – and I knew that I had fallen hard for her already.

I was still deep in thought when Lena showed up with the promised tea and a bottle of whiskey. After pouring us all a good amount of both beverages, she said, “I have the feeling that we need something stronger to get us through the afternoon.” She pointed to the bottle, her grin the widest I had ever seen.

Lena went on, “In Ireland, we call whiskey *uisce beatha*, which means ‘water of life,’ and I personally believe there isn't much that cannot be cured with good tea and good whiskey. Whiskey is actually one of the things you humans did a good job with. It could have been us inventing it.”

She held her glass high, and I took her last statement as a peace offering. Lena continued, “So first a glass of our water of life, lasses, to get us going, and then we solve our problem with the tea afterwards. *Sláinte!*”

She drank her shot of whiskey and we followed her example without hesitation. Hell, that stuff was strong and burned my insides, as I really was not used to alcohol and hardly ever

drank something so strong! I forgot that they drank their whiskey straight in Ireland, but it sure made me feel warm some seconds later. I decided a more relaxed atmosphere wasn't bad for what lay ahead of us.

Monika succeeded in coaxing another shot out of Lena; she always had a liking for that kind of *water*, and Lena poured her a much larger portion with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. Lena just took her cup of tea and relaxed in Eileen's chair, observing me quietly for a while.

"So, little one," she said at last, "I still don't condone what you did, but before we really start any discussion I need to know – do you want to mend what you've broken with Eileen? Are you still interested in her and what the future could be for you both?"

I looked her straight in the eye, trying not to be too impressed about her unwavering gaze, which bore into me and did nothing to alleviate my nervousness.. I tried to state with a confidence that I didn't have, "Yes, I am, Lena. I have no idea how and I'm still scared shitless. But, yes, I am!"

That brought another grin to her face, which made her look younger at once and left me wondering how old she was anyhow, knowing by now that Eileen was around four hundred years old. Geez!

Lena nodded. "Good, then tell me lass, why did you freak out like that, making Eileen leave?"

Yeah, why not start with the easy stuff? But knowing that I couldn't avoid it anyway, I told Lena about my relationship with Jennifer and how much her abusiveness continued to influence my life; about my sleep problems; my fear of crowds; how much all of what I experienced made me mistrust my own feelings; and all the other bits and pieces I suffered from without surcease. Monika interrupted from time to time, commenting on things and helping Lena to get a true picture of my past. This was something I would never get used to – telling someone else about a horrible part of my life that I only wanted to forget.

Lena listened patiently until I finished and made me damn nervous when she didn't respond right away. I was not able to judge from her expression what she thought and had no idea what to expect from her. After a while, even Monika – who was used to sitting things out as a

corporate lawyer – cleared her throat, a sure sign that she didn't like the tense atmosphere either. Both of us were anxiously waiting for Lena's reaction, which was to our surprise was to get up, pour herself another whiskey, and chug it down before returning to her chair and letting out a deep sigh.

“Oh, my, that is going to be a difficult relationship and a lot of fun for all of us being around you two. You will have the potential to heal and hurt each other immensely. I most definitely should stock up on tea and whiskey,” she said.

My expression must have shown how flabbergasted I was because Monika broke out into a fit of laughter and Lena joined in. I was not amused at all and had to fight back angry tears, still feeling unstable about everything that had happened, and feeling betrayed about them having such a reaction when I had just unburdened myself. Lena came over and sat on the bed, giving me a hug, not caring about my stiff attitude.

“Oh, little one. Eileen has a temper of her own, she's Irish, so what else is there to expect? And you seem to be a big thickheaded yourself as well, though you aren't Irish, but you will fit in perfectly. We will sure not get bored with both of you around. It was too damn quiet here for a long time anyhow.”

She laughed again. I have to admit that I was still kind of angry and upset. She drew me into another bear hug despite my trying to resist her embrace. “Lass, there is no reason to be so grieved,” she said. “I just state the obvious.”

Lena held me a bit away, tilting me chin up and smiling at me. “Does Eileen know about your past and everything you told me?” she asked.

I couldn't really remember if we had talked about it since I had been in very much of a daze when we started talking the first time, but I was quite sure that I hadn't told her much of anything at all, and I said so to Lena.

“See, little one, I can tell you that Eileen sure is falling for you, and I have the impression that you care about her as well. Is that right?”

Monika shouted a cheerful *yes* in the background, pouring herself another glass from the half-empty bottle of whiskey, causing Lena to whisper into my ear, “She is going to wish she was dead tomorrow if she continues like that.”

I had to stifle a laugh, because it was true – from time to time, Monika didn’t care about her limits, and her self-pity was always without end and rather loud the next day.

After ruffling my hair, Lena sat back in her chair, making herself comfortable and encouraging Monika with a wicked smile to have another glass of that *delicious* whiskey, assuring her that there were some more bottles in the cellar. And Monika was only too ready to oblige, murmuring something which sounded a bit like ‘*twist my arm, will you.*’

Lena giggled, enjoying Monika’s behavior tremendously. She poured herself another glass of whiskey as well, and downed it in a few swallows. “I like a woman who knows how to stand her ground,” she said. “Right, lasses. We need to concentrate and think about our next step here. Eileen will be gone for another two or three days, expecting you to have left the Manor before her return. Let’s see what we can come up with. You definitely will need to tell her about your past and make her understand why you reacted so harshly. I’m sure she will understand if she gets the whole picture.”

That left me with a question. “Lena, why did Eileen leave? Was our fight the only reason?”

She sighed. “No, little one. There was another reason. Her presence was required somewhere else, though she was happy to have an excuse for leaving the Manor. But I won’t tell you any more. That is up to her.”

I knew that she wouldn’t tell me more, so I left it like that and asked no further questions

The rest of the afternoon was spent in strategic discussion, interrupted with fits of laughter, about a way for me to win Eileen’s trust back and convince her to forgive me. An interesting discussion it was, and a ribald one at times as well, making me blush and wish I could hide somewhere. I was hardly able to stop Lena from telling us about *dearg-du* sexual stamina compared to humans in far too much detail for my peace of mind. But something I found out

that afternoon was that being able to impregnate someone was not limited to male *dearg-dus*. I filed that tidbit away for future reference.

Monika and Lena became merrier the longer the afternoon went on, the two of them ending as good friends. They left me in a good mood as well. After seeing them head off to the kitchen to prepare a nice meal, I was sure that Lena would keep me company alone for the rest of the evening since Monika's speech was more than slurred already, and I expected her to fall asleep in the kitchen. I knew Monika was no domestic goddess, and I was sure that Lena wasn't a person who would just hand her kitchen over to someone else, so that was all right.

I was happy that Monika and Lena got on so well with each other. In a way it was weird, because here we were, two human lawyers, staying in an old hidden manor which was owned by a *dearg-du* who was on the run. We were making plans and drinking a bottle of whiskey with her housekeeper, who was a *dearg-du* as well, as we found out during our afternoon chat with her. I had survived being kidnapped by Eileen's former wife, a *leanan sidhe* who had been after Eileen's heritage and was, according to Lena, the person, uh, *being*, behind the murder of Eileen's parents. Thinking about the complicated situation made me wish for another glass of whiskey. Life sure is stranger than fiction sometimes.

Fortunately, I didn't have to explain all of this to someone else. Or, hey, maybe that would have been a good opportunity to get back on my parents. I would love to tell to them something like – I know you never liked me being a lesbian, but guess what? This is your daughter-in-law Eileen, and she is what you would call a vampire. And then I would ask her to show them her fangs, oh yes...

Anyway, the outcome of our little girl's party during the afternoon was a plan. Maybe not the most creative one ever, but one I felt comfortable with. As soon as Eileen was back, Lena would hand her my invitation for a last meeting for dinner in Sheedy's Country House Hotel which – according to Monika's information – was one of Lisdoonvarna's best and most romantic restaurants. It was Lena's job to make sure that Eileen would show up, and she was positive that she would be able to persuade Eileen to do just that. It would then be my job to explain myself and make her believe that I would like to have another chance with her. She would have to take the ring back and put it on her finger again. Lena explained to me that

giving the ring to me was a sign of her intent of a ‘divorce,’ but taking the ring back made the divorce void.

She told us that in her opinion, the reason for Madeleine going mad after my purchase of the portrait and the ring was that her divorce from Eileen couldn’t be retracted any more. That would mean that everything her clan had worked on for over three hundred years – all the schemes and plans – was irreversible destroyed.

Still, I wouldn’t be able to do much more than showing my willingness when meeting Eileen; everything else would be up to her. Lena was sure that Eileen’s temper would have substantially cooled down by Friday, and that would be a good chance to reconcile with her.

One of my assignments until Friday would be to gather information in the library about the *sidhe* and Eileen’s family history to get a bit of an understanding what made her tick.

I really wanted to understand more of Eileen’s world, since it was so different from mine.

The next morning was interesting. Living together with Monika and knowing her habit of enjoying a good time made me believe I’d seen it all, but hell, did she have a hangover that particular morning! While Lena assisted me in getting out of bed and helped me dress, Monika was sitting in Eileen’s chair, whining all the time about how unfair life was and that she would never ever again so much as touch a glass of that damned whiskey, and that I was supposed to be her friend, and that Lena was cruel and so on, just like I had expect the day before. It was really hard to keep a straight face. It was a good thing that the exercise of dressing and walking took all of my effort, energy and concentration.

After enjoying a light lunch and making sure that I was able to walk or at least stumble along without falling, Lena assisted me to the library. For the very first time, I saw more of O’Shane Manor and was impressed by the understated elegance I saw on my way. Everything seemed to be telling me that Eileen was a woman of wealth and good taste. The library itself was simply magnificent and pure bliss for someone like me, decorated in a typical Irish country house style with matching sofas and armchairs in front of a blazing fire. Every wall was lined

with shelves full of books. As I sat down in one of the armchairs, I felt like I was in my own personal heaven. Books had always been a refuge for me, and therefore an important part of my life. I really fell in love with that room.

“Lena, this is just absolutely fabulous,” I said. “The house, the library, and the way everything is decorated.”

Lena smiled and sat down in the armchair opposite mine. “Yes, Eileen did a great job with the rebuilding when the former manor was destroyed by a fire. Fortunately, we were able to rescue quite a few family belongings because the fire spread slowly enough to get some things out. But still many of the old scrolls, many family portraits and a lot of furniture was destroyed. Eileen really put a lot of effort and money into bringing the old manor alive in a new location, but some things were just not replaceable. By the way, the old manor once stood where you met Madeleine.”

I took a second look around, and noticed the lack of portraits and of personal knick-knacks I would have expected in an old family-owned manor. I remembered that I hadn't seen anything like that in my bedroom or on my way to the library.

Lena brought me out of my musings. “Little one, why don't you stay right there in that chair and I bring you some books to read? You take your time and I will make you some tea.”

A short while later, I was left with some scrolls and more books, all in the English language. That was the smallest part of the library; most of the important stories were written either in Gaelic or in the language of the *sidhe* as Lena told me, neither languages I could read. But still, I had enough to make a beginning in my studies.

I started my homework about the history of the *sidhe* and the *dearg-dus*, the different tribes and houses that I learned still existed, the way their lives had changed over their centuries, how their society worked and so on. The social orders reminded me a lot of what little I knew about the old European aristocracy, but the amount of information was so overwhelming that I could only grasp the smallest part of the accumulated knowledge.

I read about Eileen's family's history and found a bit of information about the she had suffered from her former wife. Madeleine O'Kilroy was a chieftain's daughter. Both families had the hope that through marriage, their influences would be even bigger. Well, the O'Kilroys seemed to have won, the O'Shanes were nearly destroyed, with Eileen the only one of her family still alive. I wondered why Eileen's parents and Eileen herself had trusted them in the beginning, and found myself anxious to know more about that part.

I took a well deserved tea break after two hours, feeling slightly dizzy from all the information. It seemed like I would never be able to really get an understanding of Eileen's world; it was so different from the way I had lived my life so far.

At least I realized that based on what was written there, most of what I read or saw in movies about any kind of mystical creatures was ridiculous, pure fiction made up for thrill-seekers and horror fans. It seemed that some of the authors who wrote about that kind of stuff had glimpsed the things that stalked on the fringes of human society, but the *reality* seemed to be really different. Still, I found it hard to separate stuff I read or saw once from what I read about now, and I would have loved to discuss it with Eileen. That would have to wait until her return. Well, and until after our little talk about just running away, which would hopefully happen after my apology for freaking out and calling her names.

When evening approached, Lena showed up and lit some candles in the library, telling me that Monika had been put to bed some time ago after being forced to drink an old cure for hang-over, which made her get rid of that alcohol that was still in her system.

I was thankful for Lena joining me as there were quite a few questions nagging me, such as what would possibly happen if a human and a *dearg-du* were joined in marriage. She told me about the McNamara's of Clare, and I remembered Eileen mentioning that family as well. But Lena had to admit that there had never been a joining between a human and a *dearg-du* before. The only thing she was sure of was that a human marrying a *sidhe* would become a *half-sid*. Nobody knew beforehand how such a bonding would influence a human, and the few times a bonding like that took place, the outcome was different every time.

That left me wondering what could possibly happen with me and Eileen. Well, there was another bridge to cross first, but I still wondered – would I grow fangs and have the urge to

drink blood? What kind of skills would I develop? Healing, the ability to cast spells of any kind, being able to understand and talk to animals, or would I become a warrior?

The variety of possibilities was stunning, and some were certainly more desirable than others.

Monika proved fit enough to help me with some more exercises the next day, and she wanted to spend time with me in the library, too. She – an avid reader herself – fell in love with the library as well. Both of us spent our time in there reading, discussing and studying until Lena showed up and forced us to join her for dinner in the kitchen; she said the kitchen was more comfortable than the official dining-room. The kitchen was also the second room I saw and immediately fell in love with. It was exactly the kind of place where you would sit and drink a cup of tea or coffee to relax. There was a big iron stove in one corner, lots of herbs hanging to dry on racks near the ceiling, and in the middle of the room sat a huge wooden table. While we were enjoying another of Lena's marvelous meals, we were joined one after another by the people who worked and lived in the manor. Despite my usual shyness around strangers, I enjoyed the evening tremendously, listening to old stories and even older songs while more and more of the staff showed up to eat and chat. Some of them had such strange appearances, even I could pick out as not being human. Lena told me later that I saw some *Changelings* and a *Leprechaun*, while most of the others were *dearg-dus* and *leanan-sidhe*.

Lena said to me on our way to our rooms that she was hardly able to remember a gathering like that. All of Eileen's people were hoping that life for their mistress would change for the better now that I was there, and they were all willing to fight for her. Let's hope so! I thought. Because right then, I wasn't so sure about the outcome of the following night, or what would happen when Eileen and I met after our separation.

The next morning began with an early, long, very good breakfast which would keep us going for some while. We had to leave the manor before Eileen returned, and Lena expected her later that morning.

We left the estate in one of Eileen's cars, accompanied by a bodyguard as Monika put it, hoping that Lena would be able to convince Eileen to show up the same night at Sheedy's. Lena was still very optimistic that not only Eileen would come to the meeting, but she would be willing to open her heart again for me. I wasn't as certain, but I wasn't going to give up without a fight, either.

After arriving in Lisdoonvarna, Monika and I used our time for an appointment at a hairstylist, and later on a visit to one of the fashionable clothing boutiques. Even dressed in something other than my usual jeans and sweaters, and with a fresh hairstyle that Monika assured me was flattering, I still felt unready for that evening.

Sooner than expected, I was sitting at the table in the restaurant. Monika had helped me choose the venue for that evening, and Sheedy's was everything I hoped it would be. Monika elected to stay behind, sitting in front of the open fire in the foyer. I had to tell her later that if she ever planned on seducing someone in Lisdoonvarna, this restaurant should definitely be her place of choice as the whole atmosphere and the setting simply screamed 'romantic.' The dining room was done in a stylish subdued olive-grey with candle-lit tables, very cosy and stylish. It was absolutely marvellous. Lena was sure that Eileen had never heard of the restaurant since she had stayed very much isolated the last few decades.

I carefully chose our meal after Lena's instructions, who had pointed out to me that a good meal was as helpful as a good tea and a good whiskey. Taking that into consideration, I chose a risotto of asparagus and wild mushrooms as a starter, to be followed by Burren lamb served with a wild mushroom sauce and baked potatoes as a main meal, and finally lemon posset with fresh fruit as a dessert. I made sure with Monika's help that I selected a red wine which would complement the servings, having no clue myself about that part. Our waiter was instructed to begin serving the red wine as soon as Eileen came to the table.

Monika made sure that I picked a table a bit separated from the others, hoping that it would grant us some privacy. I doubted that the other guests would be interested in what was going on at some other table; it was the last night of the matchmaking festival, and all the other tables seemed to be occupied by couples who were much more interested in themselves rather than spying on their neighbours. There was a special kind of energy vibrating in the room

which couldn't be denied. I wouldn't exactly call it mating season vibes, but that was the best definition for it that I could come up with.

I grew more and more nervous sitting alone at the table and waiting for Eileen to show up, knowing that this night would be a definite crossroads in my future. Either Eileen would forgive me and we could try to explore a relationship together, or she would say 'thanks, but no thanks' – and then Monika and I would be leaving for Germany, and Ireland would be a strange part of our past, leaving both of us changed forever with a knowledge of things we never expected to exist.

Surrounded by other couples, no matter how incurious they were, would have made anyone feel vulnerable. Since I sat there quite a while, I really wished for a glass of Lena's famous whiskey to calm my nerves. I began to wonder what I would do if Eileen wouldn't show up at all. Lena had so positive that this would not happen, but now I felt like a fool and my readiness to bolt was growing with every second. Suddenly, I felt something, a shift of energy in the room, a powerful presence. A few seconds later I saw *her*, and was again simply stunned by her appearance. It wasn't only me noticing her, either; the whole room went quiet for a moment before the conversations continued.

As usual, she was dressed in black, leaving me to wonder if she ever wore something other than her black leather trousers. But I noticed the blouse was different – black to be sure – but well tailored. The style supported Eileen's commanding presence, underlining her natural authority and charisma. I was sure you had to be born with an aura like that, having the ability to tell everyone without words to respect your privacy and wait for you to advance. No seminar in the world could train someone to take control of a room like that. It was the second time I had the opportunity to see her like that – as a commanding presence.

Beside all that, I was able to feel something else, like the very first time I saw her portrait. I noticed the deep loneliness and the grief she tried to hide with her tough attitude. I noticed the dark shadows under her eyes and was able to sense her fatigue, guessing that this was partly my fault. While all of these thoughts went through my head, she suddenly stood in front of me, asking with a small smile that didn't reach her eyes, "Hello Julia. Is this place free?"

I was only able to nod as any ability to articulate seemed to have left me. Why did I allow Monika and Lena to talk me into this? The whole thing was a ridiculous idea. I felt so out of my league at this place, with my outfit and with Eileen. The waiter rescued me when he showed up and begun to serve the already ordered wine, receiving a raised eyebrow from Eileen, whom he chose to taste it, despite me being the one who had ordered it originally.

Eileen played her part well, tasting the wine like a real gourmet, doing all the things to indicate that she had some experience. She approved at last and the waiter filled both our glasses, leaving us alone and to our silence. After a while, Eileen broke it with a sigh.

“So here I am, Julia,” she said. “I don’t want to be rude and would definitely enjoy this setting under different circumstances, but I don’t have all evening. What can I do for you?”

Making it easy on me seemed to be far from her mind, not that I really expected it. But I had to blink my eyes to keep tears from falling, realizing that I simply had no idea where to start. My mind was blank, my feelings were playing havoc, and the silence between us stretched on and on. All the strategic plans that Lena, Monika and me discussed had vanished from my brain and I had no idea what to say. What could I tell her that would convince her about my honest feelings for her?

It didn’t really help that Eileen’s eyes bore harder and harder into mine. Just when the waiter showed up with some amuse-bouches, Eileen stood up, her gaze not leaving mine. “Julia, I came out of respect, but it seems like there is nothing to say, right? So I think I better leave and ask Monika to join you for your dinner.”

She turned around to go and I, knowing that this could really be my last chance, found my ability to form words, even if it sounded not much more than a whisper of despair when I said, “Don’t, please!”

Even though the attempt was pathetic, it served its purpose and made her stop and turn around, observing me carefully. For a second I had the feeling that her face looked a bit softer, but that could have been a figment of my imagination.

Nevertheless I gathered all my courage and murmured, “Please, Eileen. I know that this is an unpleasant situation. But that is true for both of us. Please stay.”

Standing beside our table, the waiter looked a bit confused but finally decided to leave the plates with us and attend his other customers. I wondered if he and his colleagues were trained for situations like that. I thought that lover’s quarrels must be something they were used to, especially during that time of the year.

Eileen slowly came back to the table, still observing me as if waiting for something else before sitting down again. I did the only thing that came to my mind – I held up my hand, showing her the ring I was still wearing on my finger. I cleared my throat and said with the best poker face I was capable of mustering, “I don’t accept you breaking off our engagement. I am still your betrothed by right. So please sit down, Eileen.”

She did as I asked, staring at me before responding, “You don’t – what?”

To this day, I have no idea where I found the courage to talk to her like that, but I felt that I needed to be a bit rough on her to be able to break through the walls she had built around herself for protection. I didn’t want to waste my last opportunity, so I did what I never was able to do before – I asserted myself and took charge.

Showing as much confidence as possible, I tried to look defiantly at her. “Lena explained to me that you leaving the ring behind like that meant that you were breaking off our engagement. But she also explained that for this to become effective, I would need to agree to it. And I don’t, which means that we are still engaged and need to talk about future plans.”

I began eating the amuse-bouches with what I hoped to be an unfazed expression. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Eileen didn’t move at all. I was not sure if she was still breathing, but she was definitely shocked by my statement. We were quiet for a while, me eating the parsnip crisps, semi-dried tomatoes and black olives on my plate without tasting much, while she downed her glass of red wine in a few gulps.

Finally, she snorted angrily. “Julia, I have no idea what kind of game you are playing and I am simply tired. So let’s get down to business: What do you want from me? Is it money? Do you want my title?”

My temper got the better of me. I found myself standing, towering over her with a finger wagging in her face. I was seething. “How dare you! You left me without leaving a note, without talking to me, without giving me an opportunity to explain or to apologize. I demand your respect, damn it, and I deserve better than that!”

Our reunion was not really going as planned. I am sure that our waiter wished he would have applied for another shift as he turned around on the spot and left again with the bottle of water he was supposed to deliver to our table. Poor guy – he had a rather unusual evening.

The whole thing between Eileen and me felt a bit like a bad match, and I was surprised about my own behaviour. The question was who would be the winner in the end, and my deepest hope was that it would be the both of us, but I knew that the most difficult part was still ahead. It was time for me to take the next step so I sat down again, hoping that it was a good sign that Eileen was still sitting in her chair, her complexion a bit paler than before.

“Eileen, I... I am sorry; could we try to act like grown-ups?” I asked contritely.

She stared at her plate, moving the olives around and didn’t look up when mumbling, “I can give it a try.”

I was afraid to be rejected again, but following my gut feelings had proved to be right so far, therefore I took Eileen’s hand in mine, causing her to jump a little in her seat. Even though she looked like a deer caught in a car’s headlights, she didn’t take her hand away. I felt the need to choke down my laughter because of the seriousness of the situation. Here I was, a human with hardly any self-confidence, afraid of nearly everything, sitting in a romantic surrounding, arguing with a *dearg-du* who was my fiancée and who seemed to be much more out of her wits than me.

I forced myself to look serious and continued, “Eileen, I don’t want anything from you right now other than your forgiveness. The whole point of meeting you here tonight was to tell you

that I am more than sorry for what I said to you, and to let you know that I am deeply ashamed about my outburst. You are most definitely no monster but saved my life, and I simply had no right whatsoever to call you names or assume that you wanted to hurt me. And I wanted to ask you to forgive me for my absolutely stupid and shameful behaviour.”

Her hand suddenly felt a lot colder, but she didn't break the eye contact and responded after a while with nothing more than a whisper, “But why did you? What did I do that made you think I would harm you, Julia?”

My heart felt like it would break any moment. I was hardly able to stop the tears in my eyes. I owed her an honest explanation, no matter what the outcome of this evening would be. “I didn't understand why you watched Loarn doing me harm when you could have come to my rescue earlier. I just don't understand it. And, well, I was in a long-term relationship with an abusive partner and... and I don't really trust myself and my feelings, and all of this came together with you and the whole soul mate thing, and... I don't know what else to say. But I didn't want to hurt you. Please, you have to believe me.”

Both of us were quiet again. Our brave waiter showed up, taking advantage of the opportunity to take away our plates and prepare the table for our starters before hurrying off again.

“Well, I guess he really deserves a good tip tonight, poor guy,” I said. I could see the corners of her mouth twitching, restraining a smile before becoming serious again.

“Julia, will you tell me a bit about the relationship you were talking about?” Eileen asked.

It only took that gentle prompting before I did just that, telling her about the most horrible years of my life. That Jennifer was my first serious relationship after discovering that I am gay; that we moved in together rather soon and that she seemed to be everything I hoped for until the day we had the first major disagreement; that I learned rather fast through her ‘special way’ that I'd better agree with her, or suffer the consequences. It was hard to explain that prior to that day, Jennifer had given me the feeling of being important and interesting, which was something I was not used to. How could I explain that she was as charming and smooth-tongued as they come, and that nobody had told me before ‘I love you.’

Eileen didn't let go of my hand throughout the story. When I finished, I needed a short break, taking advantage of the wine before continuing, "Four years is a long time to invest in a relationship, more so in an abusive one, and I found out that old habits die hard. While I hadn't had a huge amount of self-confidence before Jennifer started using her fists, it didn't take long for her to beat the rest out of me when we were together. All of this is still giving me a very hard time today; I have some physical as well as some mental difficulties as leftovers from that time, like I suffer from nightmares, can't sleep without a light on, and have to see the exit when I'm seated somewhere. On top of that, I still have some ugly scars left on my back and sometimes I have problems with breathing if it's too cold because of some damage she did to my ribs during one of our disagreements."

I said all of that in a hurry to get it over with and finally drank the rest of my wine to calm my nerves. Eileen still didn't let go of my hand. It seemed we had reversed the roles in the meantime; my hand was cold and hers had more of a healthy temperature.

Our waiter chose that moment to show up with our starters, leaving in a hurry again. I stared at the risotto, not sure if I would be able to eat anything again tonight, when I felt Eileen squeeze my hand. I shyly looked into her eyes, expecting to find disgust or pity there, but all I could see was understanding and – *love*? I didn't dare to hope so.

Her voice was very soft when she said, "Thank you for telling and trusting me with that, Julia. You are a very brave person."

"I am?" That statement came as a surprise to me.

She laughed a bit, but I didn't feel offended, noticing the gentle twinkle in her eyes. She said, "Yes, you are. And to answer a question you asked some time ago – I forgive you, Julia. I think I am able to empathize a bit better and understand where you were coming from and why you... well, let's say, went hysterical."

"Hey!" I threw a piece of bread at her and suddenly there was that cocky grin again that produced goosebumps all over my body. I felt a somewhat better; having hope again that maybe this evening would run smoother now and possibly with a positive outcome in the end.

As if reading my thoughts, Eileen held up her glass of wine, taking a sip. “Julia, I want to be as open with you as you were when telling me about your past, if you like that?”

She gazed expectantly at me and I simply nodded, not really sure what was coming now.

“Right, lass,” she said. “Well, I am sure that Lena told you a bit about what happened between Madeleine and I, and maybe a bit about my family history – even though she denies that.”

I nodded my head again, a smile crossing my face when I thought back to our little chat in the library. Lena had told me some family stories that she said ‘*Eileen would be too damned stubborn to talk about.*’ Some of them were hard to take, but some were just those kinds of stories you only heard from proud parents who told you things their child never wanted to be mentioned again.

Eileen nodded. “Good, I thought so.” Now it was her turn to drink the rest of her wine, which made our unfortunate waiter turn up again, refilling both our glasses before she continued, “My head and my heart tell me two different things right now, Julia. You really hurt me and it will still take some time for me to not feel the pain about that any more. But I still believe that we are soul mates, otherwise I wouldn’t have shown up tonight, despite Lena’s attempt at persuasion. My heart tells me to court you, and though there is still a part of me which is afraid, there is nothing I would love more than to try win your heart and have you spend your life with me. But my head tells me not only to let you go, but encourage you to do just that.”

I opened my mouth to interrupt her, to tell her that I already decided that I wanted to stay and that I knew I was already were in love with her, but she forestalled my reaction with an upraised hand and continued talking.

“Wait and hear me out, please. The situation is difficult. Madeleine and I had some kind of grudging but workable armistice for a long time, as unbelievable as it seems. I was never able to prove that she was behind the death of my family, though I am fairly sure about that point. But revenging my parents without having proof would have meant that the O’Shane line would be threatened with extinction, since that action would have resulted in a fight that likely would have ended both family lines. There is no heir left but me, and my father asked me to take care of providing for our line to continue. At any rate, the armistice was broken by

her some days ago, which was the main reason for my leaving the manor shortly after Monika's arrival. Breaking the armistice means that we have something like a war at the moment. That will result in open as well as hidden fights in which both *sidhe* and humans will die. That was always the case in the past, and will be the same now. But you, Julia, will most definitely not be safe if you stay. Madeleine knows about you and knows that getting her hands on you will be to her advantage. So I think that because of my feelings towards you, I have to ask you to leave. Fly away from Ireland and go home."

That was not at all what I expected to hear and for a second I hesitated. Finally, I asked, "Eileen, what did Madeleine do to break the armistice?"

"Julia, I am not sure if you really would like to..."

"I am no child, and I want to know!"

Her shoulders slouched a bit and she took a deep breath, before playing absently with her fork. "Over the past decades, more and more *sidhe* have gotten in contact with me and asked to be allowed to move to my domain. I guess our society structure is difficult to understand, but let me put it like this – once they move in, it is my task to protect them because they become my tenants or are working for me in another way, providing for the manor and my clan. Anyhow, they became my people, my responsibility. Madeleine didn't like that because quite a few of them were formerly under her domain, but she couldn't and wouldn't do anything about it because *sidhe* are free to choose their domain and she had to respect that.

"These old rules cannot be changed or broken. But some days ago, she brutally slaughtered some of her former tenants on my land without mercy; she didn't even let the children survive. Because the slaughter happened on my domain, I have to seek justice, and because Madeleine is not going to bow to any formal adjudication, I will have to enforce the law. I cannot back away. And because of all this and the bloody mess it will produce, you will have to leave. Madeleine has shown her real face now and will have no need anymore to hide her true colors. I simply cannot guarantee your security here."

I shivered, thinking about what had happened to those poor families. I was thankful at the same time that I had been able to escape Madeleine with Eileen's help. I sure hadn't expected

her to tell me such things; I needed to digest the information I had received. She wanted to protect me again, and it sounded as if the whole situation could become very dangerous. But then, who could guarantee that I would be safe if I left? Was Germany really any safer than Ireland? Did I want to leave Eileen, knowing what I felt for her?

Thinking about what a war could mean to me made me want to run and take Eileen up on her offer of letting me go. I'd most certainly suffered enough violence in my life, and longed for simple safety and happiness with someone I loved.

Eileen was observing me quietly, trying once again to put up an expressionless front. But she couldn't conceal her feelings from me. I sensed her nervousness and agitation as if they were my own. Maybe they were just that. Some days ago, I had been sure that I would never be able to have a relationship again. I was still not sure how much of myself I would be able to give, and if there was much of anything to give anyway, even if I wanted to.

How could the idea of spending my life with Eileen feel so terrifying and amazing at the same time? For a short moment, I didn't know what to do. In the end, it wasn't too difficult to make up my mind, considering everything I knew. I got up from my chair and left the table. I felt Eileen's immediate hurt in my bones, marveling once again about our strange bond; a bond between a *sidhe* and a human. My next step was to turn around, walk back to the table, position myself in front of it, smooth down my clothes and try to smile as warm and friendly as I could, while pushing down the fear that lingered in my body.

"Hi, my name is Julia," I said. "I am from Germany and came here with my friend Monika, who was looking for a mate. I could never have imagined everything that has happened to me while being here, but it sure was more than a surprise to meet my mate, my soul mate. And if my soul mate still wants me despite everything, I would very much like to enjoy the rest of the evening here before leaving this place to be together with her, and stand by her side for the rest of our lives and beyond that. "

To say that Eileen was surprised wouldn't really do justice to the moment. She seemed to be beyond shocked and didn't immediately understand what I said. It took a moment before she stood up as well, coming around the table and taking me into her arms, whispering into my ear: "Did you just propose to me, lass?"

Her warm breath on my ear caused my knees to wobble. Just hearing her voice so close and feeling her breath on my ear produced the most amazing feelings in some more southern parts of my body.

“Are you really sure, Julia?” she asked. “Did you consider what I told you? It’s going to be a tough time and a wild ride. And I simply could not take it to be hurt like again.”

I smiled; she really was my protector, but I was beginning to understand needed protection as well. “Yes, I am. Scared shitless, but nevertheless sure. If you’ll have me with my baggage, that is. I really need you to be patient with me.”

Her mouth still very close at my ear when she answered, “Yes, I will, and I promise you that I will do my best to protect you, and take care of you and your gentle soul, lass.”

That statement was followed by the most incredible, mind-blowing kiss I had ever experienced. After ending it and leaving me breathless, she tucked my head against her chest, rubbing gentle circles on my back. I couldn’t remember ever feeling safer in my life.

Suddenly I remembered something important. I took a piece of jewelry out of my pocket and put it in her hand. “Make an honest woman of me and put your ring on again, will you?”

That she did without hesitation, followed by another of those sweet and fiery kisses.

A polite cough brought our attention back to reality and to the fact that we were still in the middle of a restaurant. Our waiter stood there with the main course, staring a bit embarrassed at the floor. Eileen and I giggled before sitting down in our proper chairs again. I couldn’t really believe what had happened, realizing that I had actually proposed and Eileen accepted. I was sure that both of us had the silliest grins on our faces that the place had ever seen.

The rest of dinner turned out to be a more than pleasant affair for the both of us, only I was so full of adrenalin or endorphins or both that I couldn’t enjoy the food at all. My stomach did constant flip-flops. In the end, we decided to skip dessert, since Eileen confessed that she would prefer a more private setting than the restaurant. She finally insisted on paying the bill,

giving our waiter a more than generous tip, before we went to the lobby to pick up Monika, whom we found slightly drunk and in Lena's company.

Both Monika and Lena were cheering when they saw us coming out of the restaurant. All four of us left the hotel together, and for the next half hour we were mainly occupied in getting Monika into the carriage Lena brought with her to Lisdoonvarna. Eileen tethered her own horse behind the carriage and climbed inside with us.

I was able to sleep a little in the carriage, held by Eileen who didn't let go of me the whole time. Monika slept, snoring softly with her head on Lena's shoulder, and Lena carried her to the guestroom after our arrival. Somehow those two seemed to have hit it off; Lena was amused by Monika's behaviour, and Monika intrigued by Lena's differences. That was fine with me, since Eileen and I were more occupied with something else, shuffling nervously around each other while standing in the entrance hall of the manor.

"So Julia should I escort you to your room?" Eileen asked shyly.

That was exactly what I expected from her; letting me set the pace of our relationship and making me feel safe. "No, I would like you to show me your room and hold me while we sleep," I said. "I will need your patience with me to get used to us and... well, the physical aspects of our relationship. But I don't want to sleep separated from you."

Then a thought came to my mind.

"You do sleep, Eileen, don't you?" I asked.

She just laughed, took my hand and said, "You know, I really wonder if and when we'll ever get rid of all of that stupidity you seem to have learned about vampires. I certainly do sleep, come on, lass. I'd love to sleep with you in my arms. And for the rest, we have all the time in the world."

After saying that, she half-dragged me upstairs to her room.

Whatever is going to happen to us in the future, who knows? But I know that my life already changed in ways that I could have never imagined. And all of that because Monika decided to give fate a chance and go to Lisdoonvarna to participate in Europe's biggest singles meeting to find herself a match.

Fate sure is surprising us from time to time, and I am sure that it will continue to be so in the future.

Well, that was it – my first story ever. Wouldn't it be interesting to see what fate holds for our two girls... Somehow I am sure that Madeleine has some unfinished business.
