

COMING IN FROM THE COLD

By Peter Mork

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¹ This novel is inspired by the John Ajvide Lindqvist novel, Let the Right One in, published in 2004, and the Film by the same name released in 2008, screenplay also by John Ajvide Lindqvist.

This novel and film had a profound impact on me, resulting in this 'Epilogue,' in which, in my obsession, I tried to make up for the darkness of Eli's past, and the loneliness both she and Oskar endured before they met.

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Part 1: Karlstad

Chapter 1: Eli and Oskar – The Outing

Eli and Oskar walked slowly across the courtyard, leaving soft footprints in the still-falling snow. They had made their final choice this afternoon, and waited until well after dark to set out from their little apartment. The Biology Building at Karlstad University was barely visible through the snow as they turned onto the well-lit walkway towards the main entrance. Oskar could see the lights in the window on the second floor, where Professor Dawson's office was located. On a sudden impulse, Oskar moved ahead, climbed the stairs, opened one of the heavy wooden doors and stepped inside, letting the door close behind him just as Eli reached the top step. He leaned back against the closed door.

Are we doing the right thing? he thought to himself. *We've talked about this for days now, and I'm still not sure. What will we do if he doesn't understand? I'm so frightened! What if they take her away? And Eli thinks you can't depend on adults for anything. She's had to rely on herself for everything for over 200 years, because no one cared enough to give her a second thought -- unless they wanted something.* He felt himself getting angry all over again at everyone who had hurt Eli. The man with the dice, who used her in unspeakable ways, took her identity from her, mutilated her and threw her away when he was tired of her; her neighbors and friends, who because of their weakness and superstition, would have never taken her back; all the men like her "dad" who helped her for reasons he couldn't understand, even after Eli had tried to explain it to him. *A vampire! A vampire who was nothing!* Just as she had told him that night, 'Not a boy, not a girl, not old, not a child,' nothing! All these people took everything she was away from her and gave her the gift of loneliness, despair, and isolation, and made her into a legend, a thing that can't look at the sun and is considered evil and Godless. *Only she is everything to me! Everything! And these are the people we want to ask for help! But I have to help her do this because I love her so much!*

There was a light knock on the door. "Oskar? Is something wrong?"

He sighed, and slowly opened the door. Eli stood outside looking at him quizzically. "Oskar..."

"I know, I know! Maybe we shouldn't..."

"Oskar, we've discussed this! We agreed! You know I can't wait much longer, and I'm not sure I can you know." She shuddered.

He had already noticed some changes in her; the subtle changes that indicated that she was in the beginning stages of starvation. That seemed to be the way she looked most of the time lately.

"Okay, Okay! You can come in." He saw the dust of snow in her hair and absently brushed it away as she quickly stepped inside. "Oskar. Please don't be like that! Everything will be fine. If this doesn't work out, we'll find another way."

“What other way? This is all my fault! If it wasn’t for me, you would be ... doing just fine. You would be healthy and wouldn’t be hungry all the time!” Eli pulled him close and hugged him. He hugged her back, hard.

“Silly Oskar! Don’t you know that I could never be happy without you?” She kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Now let’s get going. I don’t want him to leave before we can see him. He sometimes leaves early.” She put her arm around him, and they went up the stairs together. *We look just like a couple of ordinary school kids, with our backpacks, boots, and gloves*, Oskar thought as they turned the corner towards the library. *Oh how I wish it could really be that way. I would give anything for it to be that way!*

At the entrance to the library, they took off their packs, jackets and gloves, stomping their feet to get rid of the excess snow.

Mrs. Holmberg looked up from her desk. *What on earth are these kids doing here in this weather? Even my grad students had enough sense to go home when the snow really started coming down.*

She smiled, “May I help you two?”

Eli stepped up to the desk. “Excuse me. We’re students in 7th year science class, and would like to ask Professor Richard Dawson some questions about evolution.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Is he expecting you?”

“...No. Our teacher, Mr. Molin, was supposed to call, but he said he couldn’t reach him. He told us the Professor would be in his office tonight and ...” Eli pleaded, “Please, we really need to talk to him. We have to turn in our report by Friday.”

She really didn’t like to bother the professor, but the girl was so earnest, she felt she had to give it a try. “Just a moment.”

She picked up the phone and punched a button. “Professor, there are a couple of children here from a local school who have some questions they want to ask you for their science class. ... I really think you should. They’re such nice children... Okay...I’ll tell them.”

“He’ll see you right away. Go down the hall, third door on the right. You can leave your wet things on the table outside the door if you wish.”

Oskar smiled at her. “Thank you so much!”

“You’re quite welcome.” She watched as they took each other’s hand and walked quickly down the hall. *They seem so happy*, She thought. She had always enjoyed being around young people. They were always so full of life, so excitable. She sighed. *It’s so hard to take life seriously when you think it will never end. They’ll have plenty of time to do that later*, she thought, and smiled grimly to herself.

As they approached the Professor's office, Eli became more tense. *I can't let Oskar see how scared I am. He gave up everything for me. And now he's willing to do it again, even though he knows this could turn out bad for him -- and me. I had no choice when I left everything behind. Oskar HAD a choice and he chose me. Me! Even after he knew what I was! I just KNOW I'm too weak to have made a choice like that. How could Oskar make a choice like that?* She smiled to herself. *He thinks he's such a wimp, but he has never let me down. He saved my life! He's so sweet and kind. I love him so much I could never let him get hurt!*" She became angry just thinking about all the people who had stood by while Oskar was beaten and humiliated at school and all the teachers, and even his own mother, and his drunkard father, who all looked the other way because it was too inconvenient for them to interrupt their day by paying any attention. *Well, I'M paying attention now!*

They paused at the door, looked at each other and took a deep breath. "It'll be fine Oskar. You'll see." The sign on the door said "Professor Richard Dawson, Molecular Biology Department" They didn't have a chance to knock before the door suddenly opened, and a tall, thin man with horn-rimmed glasses towered over them.

Oskar said quickly, "We're so sorry to bother you sir, but we have some questions to ask you for our class project on evolution. It'll only take a few minutes..."

Eli broke in, "I'm sorry we didn't make an appointment. I know you must be very busy. We've been discussing your book, 'Unknitting the Rainbow' in class and picked you as our class project."

He smiled, "I don't think I've ever been a class project before."

He ordinarily wouldn't have taken the time for this, because he was so inept talking to children. He sincerely felt that he was wasting their time. He tended to digress, and before he realized it, their little eyes would already be glazed over. But these two looked so eager and were so polite, that he couldn't resist. And the girl, although a bit slimmer, reminded him of Mrs. Holmberg's granddaughter.

Well, maybe I could give it another try, he thought. *Richard, try not to use too many big words, but don't talk down to them either. What a balancing act this is for me! I've been away from children far too long.* For a brief moment, he thought about his son and his beautiful wife. It had been so long...

"Come on in!" He gestured to the two ancient leather-upholstered chairs in front of his desk. The boy sat down purposefully and took a notebook and pencil out of his backpack. The girl sat upright on the edge of her chair with her legs crossed at the ankles, looked down, and placed her hands in her lap.

He looked across the desk at them, crossed his arms, smiled and said, "Right, then. What would you like to know?"

Oskar and Eli looked at each other for a moment, then, hesitantly, Oskar asked, “Do you know of any diseases that would make a person do something he doesn’t want to do?”

Dawson hesitated, a bit puzzled. “Why do you ask? Is this related in some way to cultural, rather than physical evolution perhaps?”

Oskar looked away, a bit embarrassed, “No, its just that ... would it possible for a dog or something to have a disease where he couldn’t eat anything but maybe the blood of another dog? You know, kind of like the stories about vampires ... or like vampire bats?”

Dawson smiled “What have you been reading? It certainly isn’t one of my books.”

Neither of them reacted. Their earnestness made him a bit uneasy.

“...There are some parasites that may take vital nutrients from their host, which the host then unconsciously replenishes by modifying its eating habits, but nothing that would cause the host to completely change its diet to something it would never have eaten in the first place... although there have been cases where an extreme deficiency of some necessary nutrients, has manifested itself in a ‘disease’ called Pica, an eating disorder that causes some people to eat things like sand, or metal shavings, but at the same time there can be a link to mental illness in many such cases.” Their expressions didn’t change. *Ease up a bit*, he thought.

He winked at them. “Then there’s Gourmand Syndrome, a much more expensive eating disorder caused by damage to the frontal lobe of the brain, which causes its victims to crave gourmet food. These people often make excellent Michelin Guide restaurant critics ” He paused, and noticed that his notorious dry humor had no effect on the children at all. He sighed. Another time and place maybe.

Eli looked directly at him, pleadingly,. “But what if the ... parasite... needed blood. Would the person be a bad person just because he needed blood to survive? What if someone like that became so hungry that he had to have blood or he would die? What could be done for him?”

Dawson frowned, “I think society in general would be a bit reluctant to let someone with this ‘parasite’ roam freely among us looking for lunch, but we are far beyond the torches and pitchforks of our distant ancestors. Modern medicine would certainly make every attempt at finding a cure for his disease.”

Oskar turned and smiled at Eli. A ray of hope? Maybe this WAS the right thing to do, after all.

Oskar had always enjoyed reading about Forensics and Forensic Science, which was one of the lesser reasons he kept his scrapbooks. He had been doing a lot of such reading since he and Eli left Blackeberg. He had followed all the articles about the murders at the Pool, and all the theories that had been discussed as to what had actually happened there, and he was impressed with the objectivity that these scientists seemed to have. They didn’t make emotional judgments and seemed to go where the facts led them. That’s what originally gave him the idea to look for help from a scientist. That was why they were here. *But what if we were wrong?* he thought.

Dawson stood up. "Are you planning to ask me any questions about evolution? I would be quite happy to answer those, but I'm not sure I understand where your line of questioning is going and I do have a bit of work to do. Perhaps you could give me a list of questions and come back tomorrow at this same time... no ... Friday, for your answers?"

Oskar stood up quickly, "I'm sorry! Maybe we shouldn't have bothered you. Maybe we should leave...."

Eli grabbed his wrist firmly. "No! We need to explain ourselves so he will understand. We have to do this...now! Before it's too late." Eli was determined, and couldn't understand why Oskar was trying to stop now. He had worked so hard to convince her that this was the best chance they had. And now she was convinced! "Please, Oskar."

Oskar saw the faint shadows in her eyes and noticed a few strands of white hair, and slowly sat down.

Eli stood up, placed her hands on the desk, and spoke firmly, "We need your help and don't really know how to ask for it properly. I'm frightened that you won't understand, and that I will have to go on doing..." her eyes filled with tears. Oskar quickly rose and put his arms around her. She laid her head on his shoulder.

Dawson became concerned. "Are you two all right? Can I call anyone for you? Your parents?"

Oskar looked down, embarrassed. "We really aren't from a science class. We came to you because we thought you might be able to understand..."

Eli interrupted. "Maybe I should just show him." Her gaze rose to meet Dawson's, she leaned forward, and brushed her hand against his

He noticed her eyes for the first time. Deep, blue-grey, and ...enormous. As he watched, they began to change – to become iridescent. The pupils elongated, became cat-like, hypnotic. He found himself becoming a bit dizzy. His concern for her swelled suddenly and he felt an urgency; a need to do something. He wanted to help her. *She is so lonely and afraid! What can I do to make her feel better?* He felt like sweeping her up in his arms and comforting her.

Eli slowly closed her eyes, leaned back from the desk, shuddered, and sat down quickly.

He stood there for a moment, feeling suddenly quite stupid. *What was that? Did she hypnotize me? What the hell was that with her eyes?* He shuddered, shook his head, and sat down. *She's so small! How old is she, 11? 12 at the most. Where could she have learned such things? And why?*

His eyes slowly focused on her face. With difficulty, he looked directly at her. "Who are you?" *And what have you done with my composure,* he thought.

Eli and Oskar snuck a quick look at each other, remembering a similar question from Oskar, seemingly years ago. The answer this time would be more difficult to give; and it could be much

more dangerous for them. At this point, Eli didn't even know if she would have the fortitude to stop him if he took this the wrong way and went screaming out of the room. Lately, it seemed that the Changing was causing her more and more pain, and she knew it was because of Oskar and everything he meant to her. And because of this reconnection with her feelings she could no longer maintain her detachment with the ease that more than 200 years of being a predator, had made second nature to her.

"That's what we've been trying to tell you. I'm sick, and I've been sick for a long time."
"I got ... bitten, and have ... been this way ever since."

"What way? I don't understand." He tried to compose himself. The sensation he felt was slowly fading, and he began to think maybe it was just his imagination, or something he had eaten – or hadn't eaten, he realized, since he hadn't had anything but coffee since this morning.

She sighed, "You saw what I can do. Do you think that's normal? Is that something that you think a ... normal person could do?"

"Possibly – with training. I admit, you took me completely by surprise, but where DID you learn how to do that? Especially the illusion with the eyes? For a moment, it looked as though you had a coloboma, but those don't come and go."

Didn't he get it? Why is he not able to understand? Eli suddenly realized why. *He's a scientist. He believes there is a rational, objective way to approach everything in his life. He thinks he understands the way things work, and anything that doesn't seem to fit, he is certain that, with enough thought and consideration, it Will. Eventually. Fit. How can I get around THAT!? Or do I really want to? Is that what Oskar tried to warn me about?*

"What's a coloboma?" Oskar asked.

"It's a distortion or small opening in the eye that in some cases makes the pupil elongated. Its caused by a genetic defect in Chromosome 22..." he realized he was doing it again, and stopped abruptly.

"The important thing is, I am still confused as to what it is you want of me in particular. How does this ... ability of yours relate in any way to a disease? A colleague and good friend of mine is a physician. Perhaps you and your parents would like to speak with him."

"Maybe I shouldn't have shown you that. I've never shown that to anyone before!" *At least not to anyone who had survived*, she thought. "I don't know how to do this, Oskar. How can I do this?" she put her face in her hands in exasperation.

"Maybe you could show him....something else?" Oskar whispered.

"But I don't want to" she thought for a moment *Yes. I have to do it. If this doesn't work, I don't know what else we can do. Maybe we'll have to just leave, try something else NO! This has to work!*

“Let me show you,” she said, as she quickly pulled her sweater off over her head. “And please – don’t be afraid.....” Oskar quickly stepped back out of the way, as she tossed her sweater on the chair.

Dawson stood up, startled. She was now standing before him, rigid, naked from the waist up, her arms at her sides. She was so thin he could almost count her ribs. Her skin was unnaturally white. Against all that whiteness, her face, framed by her coal-black hair, suddenly appeared almost unbearably angelic, ethereal. *My God, what a beautiful child*, he thought fleetingly, before he fully realized what she had actually done. “Please, don’t do that! Let me get Mrs. Holmberg in here right away!” He turned to Oskar. “What’s she doing? Please stop her!” He reached for the phone as Oskar stepped further back, away from Eli.

Eli stood completely still for a moment with her head down and her thin, pale arms tightly against her sides, her hands balled up into tight fists. As she looked up, she slowly raised her arms, revealing dark, shimmering spider-web-like threads expanding in intricate patterns radiating outwards between her sides and arms as they rose. Simultaneously, long white gracefully-curved spars grew from her wrists and elbows, supporting the intricate structures. He heard a faint crackling sound as the still-damp threads, one after another, trembled, then became taut. As he watched in amazement, the space between the web strands filled in like spilled ink flowing over a lace tablecloth. The streetlamps outside his window were suddenly dimmed, then completely blocked out by the empty blackness of the shimmering, pulsating wings that now filled his field of vision as she raised her arms in an arc over her head.

The contrast between the child and her... wings was more than stunning – it was almost apocalyptic! His jaw dropped, and he stumbled back, weak-kneed. “Please!” she said softly. “Please help me!”

Chapter 2. The Bargain

He dropped into his chair, his mind spinning, trying to process what he was seeing. *Impossible! Impossible! How can this possibly be?* He saw the sudden look of concern on the child's face as she saw his reaction.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! But I had to do something! I had to make you believe me..." She quickly brought her arms back down to her sides.

The wings collapsed and folded with a rustle, and hung, drape-like from her arms, moving and flowing as though they had a mind of their own. They seemed to take up no space at all. He caught a fleeting glimpse of an edge, and saw that they were thinner than a sheet of paper, yet he felt a strong sense of their tensile strength, subtly implied by the way the folds moved against one another. Suddenly they began to tremble, and accompanied again by a faint crackling sound, became thinner yet, transparent, and then ... gone, followed quickly by a few lingering wispy threads, which faded and seemed to retract into her arms. All that was left was a beautiful apparition, smiling gently down on him.

She hesitated a moment, took a step toward him, raised her arms level with her shoulders, palms out, made a slow full-turn in front of him, and finished with a mischievous grin on her face. She stood there like that for a moment, then quickly reached for her sweater, pulled it on over her head, and sat down in her chair, looking for all practical purposes, like the cat that swallowed the canary.

The Professor smiled in spite of himself. *Why, she's just a child! Amidst all the upheaval, uncertainty and fear in her life, she is still just a child. How does she summon up the courage and fortitude to deal with this on a daily basis?* His heart went out to her.

Dawson took a deep breath. "How did this happen to you? You said you were bitten?" Visions of the old legends swam in his head. *If this is real, it is clearly the source of much of the lore.*

"Yes"

He was still trying to fathom the consequences of what he had just seen. *She is either a master magician, or I'm going to have to rewrite several of my books,* he thought wryly, *Perhaps all of them.* Surprisingly, he found himself hoping it would be the latter.

"How did your parents handle this?"

Eli turned to Oskar and nodded almost imperceptibly.

Oskar went over the story in his head to make sure he didn't make any mistakes. He and Eli had spent days working on it *But this guy is smart. Maybe we won't be able to fool him.*

"We only had a father and he died. We live by ourselves. We ran away because they were going to send us to different homes and we didn't want to be separated from each other. We live near

here on money our Dad gave us. My ... sister was bitten by a big – rat one night about 6 months ago and has been sick ever since. She can't go out in the sun, she can do ... all the things you saw, and she can't eat regular food any more. It makes her sick and she can't keep it down."

"But how has she survived all this time without eating?"

"She found something that she could eat."

"I found out that I could eat...blood." Eli said. "And that seems to be all that I CAN eat."

"How on earth did you figure that out?"

Eli hesitated, "I would rather not talk about that. It was...an accident. But I am absolutely sure that I can't eat anything else."

He thought about that for a moment, and decided not to pursue it. "How have you gotten by over the last few months? How much do you need and how have you gotten it?" His mind was going to dark places now. *But she's so small and weak-looking. I can't see her as a danger to anyone. Unless she flew* He dismissed the idea angrily. *Stop it!. It's not even a possibility!*

"We bought it."

"Bought it? How? Where?"

"We went to a part of town where ... people stayed who were willing to let us take some of their blood for money."

Dawson leaned back in disbelief, "But, how did you collect it? How did you keep it sterile? Refrigerated?"

Oskar and Eli said nothing.

"My God! It's a wonder you're still alive! You could have gotten any number of diseases that way, not to mention being killed for your money, or worse." He thought about all the possibilities and shuddered. He stood up "You can't continue to do that! Your lives are in danger for a variety of reasons, the least of which is starvation. If something were to happen to you, you would simply disappear. No one would know you had even existed!" For some reason, that thought frightened him. The research on her condition and everything it could mean to modern medicine would certainly be lost, but ... that didn't seem to be his concern. All he could think about at the moment was their safety, how they had worked so hard to stay together, their bravery and resolve in the face of what, to children, must seem to be impossible odds.

And, they had come to him for help. A heavy burden for him to bear.

Dawson thought for a minute. "Have you figured out how much you need to survive?"

They looked at each other. "At least one liter a week," Eli said.

"How long has it been since you last ..."

"Almost 2 weeks."

She must be starving to death, he thought, remembering her ribs, how thin she had looked. She can't have much time left before she suffers some permanent effects of malnutrition, but I can't allow them to continue doing what they have been doing.

"Let me make a phone call." He held up his hand as they started to protest. "I promise. I won't say anything about you to him. I'm calling my colleague. He's a physician"

He picked up the phone and dialed. "Arvid? Sorry to bother you but I have a favor to ask of you. Can you help me obtain two liters of blood? Type O Rh D negative as usual. The Molecular Biology lab needs it as soon as possible.....Our new Human Genome research project is falling a bit behind schedule.How about tomorrow?.....Afternoon would be fine. It'll be delivered here as usual?Thanks. How are the kids? Is Janice still scheduled for the swim meet this weekend?Great! I'll be there of course. Thanks again."

He looked at them solemnly, "Can you hold out until tomorrow? That's the best I could do without attracting undue attention. I'll have to do a bit of juggling to explain this in any case. "

Oskar turned to Eli, "Can you really do that? Can you ...eat blood like that?"

"I don't know! I've never thought about it before. When would I have ever had the chance to find out?" She turned to Dawson. "Yes. I can wait a while longer. I'm okay, really."

"Is there anything else you need? Can I count on you to come back tomorrow night around....8:30?" He looked down at his calendar. He could clear a couple of appointments and he would have the rest of the evening free.

Oskar and Eli nodded, and smiled at each other for the first time. Eli looked at the Professor with appreciation, "Thank you....so much! No, we don't need any thing else. I..." she took a step forward, put her arms around him and gave him a quick hug, then stepped back and looked down, embarrassed.

"Promise me something," he said as he leveled his gaze at Eli. "Promise me you won't buy any more blood."

She looked at him for a moment, hesitated, then, "I promise."

"We have a lot to talk about, but I know that the shuttle stops running at 10:30." He smiled, "and unless you also managed to acquire a car when you left home, you had best be going."

Oskar smiled, "Ha, Ha. You think you're so funny. Well, I DO know how to drive a moped."

Dawson smiled at him.

“Promise me one more thing. In return, I promise you both I will never discuss what happened here tonight without your permission.”

“What is it?” Eli asked.

“That you will never look at me with those ... eyes again. Believe me, you don’t need to. I’m sold without the magic.”

Eli grinned at him. “I promise.” *I could probably never do it to him again anyway, she thought. He’s too nice. Like Oskar, grown up.*

He put his hands on their shoulders. “I know you’ve been through a lot. I’m sure I can’t begin to imagine how much. But please trust me. I’ll do everything I can for you. If you need anything, please call me on my private line, or at home.” He handed them his card. “Can I give you a ride anywhere? ...No of course not. The bus stop? Do you need any money?”

Eli held up her hand, “No, thanks!” She smiled at him again. “We’re sort of used to taking care of ourselves. And of course, we don’t want you to know where we live....yet. We have enough money to last a while, but not enough to keep buying blood. That’s another reason we came tonight.” She avoided his eyes, “I hate being like this...”

He got a mischievous look in his eye, “Are you really so sure about that? You’re going to have to tell me tomorrow in great detail how it feels to fly. That’s something I used to dream about when I was your age. I could easily envy you.”

Eli blushed. Oskar looked at her in amazement. *She looks happy! Happier than I’ve seen her in months.* He hugged her tightly and felt warm inside, like he felt when they were together at home, lying next to each other.

They gathered up their things and followed the Professor out into the hall toward the library. Dawson waved to Mrs. Holmberg as they put on their coats, gloves and boots, and headed down the stairs.

They opened the door and stood there a moment, looking at the snow. The walk was covered by this time, but there was only a light snowfall and they could see the bus stop across the courtyard.

“Please. Be careful. And stay safe,” he said gently as they started down the stairs. They turned and waved to him, as they headed down the walkway.

He slowly walked back up the stairs. He had a lot to think about and some important decisions to make before tomorrow. Her sensitivity to sunlight worried him a great deal. They probably weren’t in school either. He’d have to do something about that...

§

Oskar and Eli got off the bus, crossed the street and walked slowly past the row of apartments. Eli had a troubled look on her face. “Oskar, what if he finds out we were lying to him? We can’t expect him to keep helping us if he knows what I’ve really done. If he thinks we are dangerous to others, he has to turn us in. I know! I could sense what kind of person he was when Itouched him. He would have to hate me if he knew!”

“Don’t say that! I think he really likes us – much more than Mr. Avila liked me, and Mr. Avila was the only one who knew I had set the fire and he still didn’t turn me in. He told me that he was there for me any time I wanted to talk about it. And we weren’t completely lying. We have been buying blood. You’ve only eaten once theother way, since we left Blackeberg.”

“I know, but I’ve been killing for over 200 years! And it wasn’t until I met you that I couldn’t any more. And even then it wasn’t a choice. I HAD to stop. It hurt too much to kill after I was ... with you.”

Oskar put his arm around her, “But you ARE a good person. You are! Anyone can see that.” He kissed her on the cheek.

“You don’t count. You’re under my spell” she said solemnly. Her eyes gleamed as she waved her arm slowly back and fourth in front of him.

“I am not! Take that back!”

She laughed, “And what if I don’t? What are you going to do about it?”

He lunged at her, caught her off guard, and they fell together into the snow. “I’ll show you who’s under whose spell,” he said, pinning her arms to the ground, and straddling her chest. “Now, I command you to make a snow angel,” he said as he forced her arms up and down in the snow.

“Your wish is my command, Oh, great Wizard,” she said solemnly. Suddenly, she twisted over on her stomach, straightened her arms, and pulled herself quickly out from under him. Oskar landed on his face in the snow, turned and jumped up just in time to catch a snowball between the eyes. “Take that, evil Wizard!” she shouted. He turned, bent down and gathered a huge handful of snow, but just as he began to straighten up, he caught another one in the rear end that knocked him over again.

“Aha!” she shouted, “A fatal blow to the brain! Once again, good has triumphed over evil!”

Oskar leaped up, and threw his snowball directly at her head. She easily dodged it, lunged, and caught him around the waist, sending them both sprawling and laughing back into the snow. Oskar began tickling her hard, and as she jerked back giggling, he grabbed a big handful of snow and rubbed it in her face.

She shook it off, grabbed him again and they rolled back and fourth for a while, until Oskar, out of breath, cried “Enough!”

They hugged each other a moment then got up, brushed each other off, and walked quickly towards their apartment door, growling at each other.

Eli stopped suddenly, and looked into the dark passageway next to their apartment building. “What are you doing here?”

A short stocky man in a tattered black jacket stepped out of the shadows. “Hello, Eli”

“What do you want?” she said coldly.

“I’m not doing too well right now, and thought you might give me a little extra cash in appreciation for what I did for you before”

“Who’s that?” Oskar whispered.

Eli didn’t answer.

“Didn’t she tell you? I’m the guy who, out of the goodness of my heart, rented the apartment for her.”

“I gave you the rent money, and paid you a reasonable fee for your trouble. You’ll get nothing more.” Eli said.

“Yes, but I’ve given it a lot of thought since then. I wondered where you got enough money for three-months rent in advance, and figured there was probably a lot more where that came from. I figured you’d be alone, but I see you’ve found yourself a nice little boyfriend to share your little love nest with,” he snickered.

“Get lost!”

He stepped in front of them and pulled out a small pistol. “I have other plans. Now walk slowly in front of me and unlock your door.”

Oskar quickly stepped in front of Eli, “Please don’t hurt her ...”

“Shut up, kid!” Oskar felt a sudden pain above his ear and went sprawling to the ground. As he rolled over and tried to get up, he heard a sharp growl as Eli leapt over him, and a dull thud as she struck the man in the chest with her head. He heard a shot, then saw two bodies roll across the sidewalk into the street. There was a sharp snap, then silence.

Oskar scrambled to his feet and ran toward the dark mass. barely visible next to the curb. Eli slowly rose, saw Oskar and rushed towards him her cat-eyes glowing menacingly. “Oskar! Are you alright?” She grabbed him and hugged him so hard it hurt.

“Are YOU okay? I heard a shot and thought he had killed you.” Oskar was shaking all over.

“I’m fine, but I need to get rid of him.”

“Is he ... dead?” Oskar looked over her shoulder, but couldn’t see the man well enough to tell. The snow had begun to come down hard again and they couldn’t even see across the street.

“Yes. Why don’t you go inside and I’ll move him someplace farther away. We can’t let them find him here.”

“Did you ...”

“No! I told you I would never do that again. Besides, the professor..... Please! Go inside. I have to do this quickly, before anyone sees.”

Oskar quickly opened the door to their apartment, climbed the stairs, and went into the living room. He stepped over to the front window, bent back the cardboard, and could barely make out Eli’s tiny figure carrying the body down the street into the darkness.

He stood there for a minute, took off his boots and jacket, then turned and sat down at the table. He picked up the solved Rubik’s cube and started absent-mindedly twisting it, until the surfaces were randomly mixed. He put it down and carefully picked up the reassembled egg and turned it over, examining it closely. It had taken her the first three weeks to reassemble it. She had done it while he was sleeping; while he was trying to adjust to staying awake at night so he could be with her. He knew it would have taken him years to do it.

He put it down, and picked up the rings strung on the piece of string. There were only four left. They had pawned several, to extend their diminishing money supply. Since she stopped ... feeding, their money had gone pretty fast. The guys that sold them blood may have been a bit shady, but they weren’t stupid. By the time Eli and Oskar had become good at bargaining, over half their money was gone. That was yet another reason they needed help.

He suddenly realized that he was bleeding from above his left ear. The blood had run down his neck and was beginning to stain his undershirt. He quickly got up, went into the bathroom and cleaned himself up. He vividly remembered that night in the basement, and knew Eli was hungry. He didn’t want her to have to go through that again, after everything else that had just happened. He opened the cabinet, reached past the hair dye and toothpaste, and grabbed the first-aid kit. He had just finished changing his shirt and putting the bandage on his head when he heard the outside door open and close. He quickly stepped out into the living room and sat at the table. Eli came in, looked around, dropped her wet clothes on the floor and settled into the chair across from him, with a concerned look on her face. “Are you okay? Let me see...”

Oskar flinched and turned his head away from her. “No, its fine, really”

“Oskar, let me see. I promise I am okay with it.”

He turned his head so she could see the bandage. She reached up, touched it briefly, then put her hands on either side of his face, looked at him seriously and said, “Oskar, please don’t EVER do anything like that again! He could have shot you rather than just pistol-whipping you.”

“ ‘**Pistol-whipping?**’ ” he grinned. “ ‘**Get Lost?**’ Maybe we shouldn’t have gotten that TV set. You’ve been watching way too many American Westerns.” Eli swung at him across the table, but Oskar ducked away, still grinning.

“What shall we do tonight?” Eli asked, “We still have lots of time before daylight.”

Oskar thought for a moment. “Why don’t you tell me all about how you got the egg?” He suggested. “... Unless you don’t want to.” He said hurriedly.

She smiled, “Okay. Once upon a time, in a great castle in the *Fjällen* on the border of northern Sweden, there was a magical goose that laid Faberge eggs. On one particular day he had eaten something that didn’t agree with him, so his ... plumbing was a bit backed up and...”

“Eli!!”

Chapter 3: Dinner in Karlstad

Eli crouched low on the branch in the darkness, her claws digging into the bark. She watched, detached, as the last few people got off the bus and it pulled away from the curb. Two of them were talking and waving their arms at each other, clearly arguing about something. Their breath rose in a small cloud above them and dissipated slowly in the still night air. The other one, a bit smaller, watched for a minute, then turned and walked down the darker path towards Eli. Her muscles tensed. She calculated how long it would take him to reach her, as the other two, still talking loudly, went off on the main path. She really wanted them to be out of sight before the other one reached the tree. No sense in attracting any attention. The smaller one stopped, looked at something in the snow next to the path for a moment, knelt down, picked something up, then continued on. There were no lights where Eli was waiting. He would barely be able to see well enough to follow the path at this point. Eli leaned slowly out over the branch, her claws ready. *If he screams, I'll have to work fast*, she thought to herself. Her eyes glowed and became even larger as she completed the Change. The night faded and she could see everything, in minute detail. She could see his dark brown jacket, the fur collar partly covered by the wider collar of the heavy blue sweater she could see through the partly unbuttoned jacket; the blue scarf, the brown wool cap with the red, black and white stripes around it, his blond hair barely visible where it met his collar; dark blue pants – even the tread pattern of his footprints in the snow. She could hear his breathing; even his steady heartbeat; his corduroy pants as his legs moved past one another as he walked. Her vision narrowed until all she could see was the exact spot where he would be in the $\frac{3}{4}$ of a second it would take her to drop straight down from her perch.

At exactly the right instant, she dropped like a rock, catching him on the right shoulder and sinking her fangs into his neck. He fell on his side as she grabbed him, reached around his neck, put her left hand over his mouth and gathered both his hands in her right, holding them close to his body. He offered no resistance. She felt exhilarated! The blood was pulsing out of his wound as fast as she could swallow. She felt a deep, intense sense of nirvana as his warm blood flowed into her. He struggled feebly for a few moments, then was still. She felt his heartbeat speed up, then slow down until it thumped to a stop. She felt his last breath as she released him and eagerly licked his neck and the side of his face, savoring the last few drops of blood as the steam rose from the wound and dissipated in the cold night air.

She lay there on top of him for a minute, breathing hard, as the intensity of her exhilaration faded. She sat up quickly, and looked around. No one near. Good!. She straddled him, grabbed his head firmly in both hands, and gave it a sharp twist. She could hear the tendons snap and the bones break. She stood up, looked around again, and knelt beside the body. She checked his pants pockets, pocketed a few bills and loose change, then turned him over and went through his jacket pockets. A small hunting knife, and.....

She looked at his face for the first time. His sightless blue eyes, surrounded by strands of blond hair were staring directly at her. He was much younger than she had initially thought. He looked like.....OSKAR!! She leapt to her feet. *Oh my god, its Oskar!. How can this be?* She felt her stomach heave, as she bent over and vomited gouts of black blood. She screamed in agony and

smashed her head against the tree trunk again and again until her eyes were clouded with her own blood and she could feel her skull cracking and splintering...

“Eli! Eli! Wake up! Please wake up!”

Oskar was terrified! Eli had jumped out of bed screaming, scrambled into the corner with her back against the wall, held her hands out as though she was shielding herself from some unimaginable horror, while her feet were trying in vain to push her further into the corner.

Oskar ran over to her, grabbed her and held her tight. Her arms waved aimlessly in the air as she sobbed in despair. Gradually she relaxed, laid her head on his shoulder, and cried softly into his neck, her tears dampening the side of his face.

“You had that dream again!” he said as he held her tightly.

“Yes! I’m sorry. I’m sorry!”

§

If only he knew! She remembered that night in vivid detail, how when she finally picked herself up off the ground and stumbled over to the body, and saw – not Oskar, but a stranger. Young, yes, but not Oskar. Just another no one...like the ones she had been killing for years. Just another nobody, probably with a mother, father – someone who loved him and would miss him and would feel just like she had when she thought it was Oskar. She couldn’t bear the thought. How had she done this for two centuries? She remembered how she had gently closed his eyes, buttoned his jacket, and carried him deep into the woods. She was going to bury him, like she had done to so many thousands before him, to cover her tracks. A missing person, however bad that was, was not as much a danger to her as a bloodless corpse with its neck torn open lying on the sidewalk. But not this time! She couldn’t bear the thought of his poor mother agonizing day after day, year after year, not knowing what had happened to him. She laid him carefully on a large rock, crossed his arms over his chest, and brushed his hair away from his eyes. She sat there with him for over an hour, willing herself to heal. Then she got up wearily and walked slowly home. She was over 10 miles from their apartment, so the light was already visible in the east when she arrived, climbed the stairs, walked past Oskar and climbed into their bed. She curled up into a ball against the wall.

§

Oskar sat with her. He caressed her face, kissed her, and held her close, until she stopped crying.

He gently helped her up, and they walked back over to the bed together. She climbed into bed and he snuggled up against her and held her hands in his.

§

Dawson sat at his desk, deep in thought. The ice chest and his old medical bag were next to his chair.

What am I going to do about these kids? I can't just let them continue to live alone; it's too dangerous. What happens when they run out of money? She'll sicken and die if she doesn't get a steady supply of food and they've already shown that they're not very good at doing it for themselves. And I certainly can't keep supplying them with blood on my own. It's too well-regulated for me to be able to get away with it indefinitely without justifying its use. I'll try to convince them to let me tell others, but I already have a feeling which way THAT will go. They clearly don't trust anyone. It was an act of desperation that made them seek me out in the first place. And if I force the issue, they'll run. We might be able to find them, but it's not worth the risk.

He had already warned Alma, one of his lab assistants to be prepared for some blood, skin, urine, and stool samples for a tentative side research project he was exploring. He looked at his watch. "8:35." They were late. *I hope they are okay, he thought, Anything could have happened to them.*

He heard a light knock.

He quickly walked to the door, opened it, and breathed a sigh of relief. They were both there, seemingly intact. He looked closer at the boy, saw a bandage over his left ear, and was immediately concerned.

"Hi there!"

"Hello, Professor Dawson"

"Come on in! Have a seat. Are you both Okay?" As they sat down, he pretended to just notice the bandage and said lightly, "Boy, is that going to hurt when you take it off. You're going to lose a lot of hair. What happened?"

"I fell on the ice by our apartment."

"Well, before you leave tonight, I want you to let me take a quick look at it. No sense in risking an infection," he said.

"Now, first things first. Let's get you fed. He turned to the girl. "How would you like to do this? I have two liters in four transfer bags." He opened the ice chest and removed one. "They each have slip lock adapters that you can remove, like this. "He went through the motions, then handed her the bag. He tried his best to act nonchalant, but, he couldn't shake off the surreal feeling of the entire conversation.

Eli took it gingerly, looking at him, then the bag. She seemed very uncomfortable.

"Would you like me to show you again?" he asked."

“No, but... can I do this alone? I don’t want anyone...”

“To watch you?” he asked. “Of course! You can use the bathroom over there.” He said, pointing to the door in the far corner of his office. She smiled, picked up the ice chest and walked into the bathroom, closing the door quietly behind her.

Eli sat on the edge of the toilet, undid the clamp, brought the tube to her mouth, and began to drink. *Cold.! So Cold!* As soon as it touched her tongue, the Change began. Her eyes changed, the euphoria surged...*NO! GO AWAY!* She calmed the urgency as best she could; she willed her eyes to be normal, pushed the primitive urges back, and concentrated on the taste, the heavenly taste. There was a slight antiseptic flavor, but otherwise nothing objectionable. She quickly finished the first, then the second. Then she paused, holding the third one in her lap. Her eyes had finally returned entirely to normal. She took a deep breath, *Try this again*, she thought. She carefully raised the third bag to her mouth and sucked on the tube, drawing the blood in slowly. Nothing changed. *If I were doing this in public, I would probably look like a little girl with a juice cup*, she thought humorlessly. *But at least people wouldn’t be running out of the restaurant, screaming, if they saw me.* She emptied the fourth bag, and sat for a minute. Would her stomach complain? Would this all be for nothing? It had tasted so good! Not like Oskar’s candy ... or like some of the blood some of the ... others had brought her. *That’s a good sign isn’t it?*

§

Dawson looked at Oskar, “What do you want most for your sister?”

“I want her to be normal. I want her to be safe. I want us to be together!”

“Let’s see what we can do about that,” He said, opening his medical kit on his desk, and laying two syringes and a few blood collection tubes on a white cloth, next to some alcohol swabs. “You do understand that this could take a while; possibly years. I’ve heard of no disease that begins to compare with your sister’s. Are you sure that it manifested – showed – itself immediately after she was bitten?”

“Yes, I’m sure” He thought back to Eli’s description of her first Changing and the awful things that had happened the night before. “...I’m sure!”

He looked at Oskar intently, “I swear to you I will never compromise your or your sister’s trust in me for any reason. No matter how long this takes.”

Oskar nodded, solemnly. They both looked over as Eli came out of the bathroom. “Are you okay?” Oskar asked anxiously.

She smiled at him, “I’m fine.” She put the ice chest down and turned to Dawson, “Thank you so much. I feel much better.”

“Well, you probably won’t after you see this.” He smiled, and raised a syringe. Eli’s smile vanished and she stepped back. Dawson laughed, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I just need

to collect preliminary blood and skin samples from you, to help us find out more about your “illness”.

“I – I’ve never done this before. What do I do?” she asked.

Just have a seat here next to me, and I’ll show you. Don’t worry I just need a little, and it’ll just sting a bit.”

She sat next to him and gave him her arm. He applied the tourniquet

Oskar smiled to himself. *I’ll bet he would be quite surprised at how much pain she can take.*

As Dawson went to work, he kept talking to her. If this was her first time, he didn’t want her to be afraid. “We need the blood samples to see what kind of disease we are dealing with: Bacterial, Viral, or Parasitic – or something else altogether. We can also tell some things about your allergy to sunlight, but I will also take a small skin sample to narrow it down a bit more.”

Eli watch intently as, one after another, the three collection tubes filled with her blood. She shuddered a little as she realized that this was the only time someone had taken her blood since – Him. *But this is MY choice.* She thought.

He brought out the second syringe, hesitated, then warned her, “This one will sting a bit more. It’s a shorter, but larger diameter needle, designed to take a small bit of your five epidermal layers.” He watched her face as he took the sample. She looked at her arm intently but didn’t move a muscle. *Her focus is amazing,* he thought to himself. *She’s been watching me like a hawk. She’s so intense; I have the odd feeling that she could repeat the whole procedure herself without batting an eye.* “Okay. Now there’s only one more thing,” he said handing her a small cup with a lid, and a piece of folded white cardboard, “I need you to go into the bathroom and give me a urine and stool sample.”

“Eli looked at him, puzzled. “What’s a “stool” sample?”

Oskar grinned, “He wants some of your poop!”

“But ... I can’t.”

“Let me explain how it works.” Dawson said, “If you can’t right now you can take the kit home and...”

“No! You don’t understand.” She said firmly. “I haven’t had to ... use the bathroom since I got sick.”

“But that’s impossible!” Dawson said in astonishment. *What could that mean,* he thought. *That means her body generates little or no waste when she eats. She has to lose the weight somehow. Maybe she loses it when she perspires; otherwise it would mean that she converts all the blood to energy in some form or another. It’s just not possible! A nuclear reactor can’t convert matter*

to energy that efficiently. I must be missing something. In fact, it looks like there are a lot of missing pieces.

“Well!” he said, “You are certainly full of surprises. Amazing surprises! Then I guess this will have to do, for now.”

“How do you feel?” He looked at her carefully.

“I feel -- not hungry.” she smiled.

There was no sign of bloating. Her stomach was still as flat as a board. *Where did all that blood go? This seems to be more than just a disease. Whatever this is, it's much more sophisticated. It has many of the unique characteristics you would expect to find in a species after eons of evolution along its own distinct branch. It has affected her metabolism her digestive tract, possibly her skin, and perhaps her mental abilities, in radical ways. The fact that she can spontaneously grow wings and fly, obviously without a steep learning curve, indicates a basic change in her inherited instincts. Whatever bit her has caused major rapid changes in her DNA. What's in store for her? Will she survive this?* He felt suddenly frightened.

“I am extremely worried about you,” he said quietly, not wanting to alarm her too much. “I don't know whether your condition is even stable. If I had my way, I would put you directly into the hospital.”

Eli stood up quickly, “No! We only trust you!” her voice rose, “They would take Oskar away from me. We'll leave and never come back!” she looked toward the door.

“No, no! I made you a promise and intend to keep it, but I never said I wouldn't try to convince you.” *So his name is Oskar*, he thought to himself, filing it away for future reference.

She relaxed and sat down slowly.

“You say you trust me,,” he said, “Can I ask you to trust me a bit further?”

Oskar and Eli looked at each other. Oskar asked, “What do you want us to do?”

Dawson took a deep breath, “Let me take you home tonight.”

“No, we can't let you do that.” Eli said.

Dawson proceeded carefully, directing himself at Oskar “I am extremely worried about your sister. I want to make sure you are protecting her from the sun properly. I want to make sure you live in a safe area. I want to make sure you can safely store any future supplies of blood I obtain for her.” he paused as he felt the sadness well up in him, “And I want to be able to sleep at night knowing you are safe and well.” He directed this last at Eli, looking her straight in the eyes.

He had been aware that she had been looking directly at him the whole time. When he finished, her eyes remained fixed on his. “Okay,” she said quietly.

Oskar turned to Eli. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. We have to trust him. I know we can trust him”

“Good! That’s settled! Now, let me look at that bandage”

§

The old Volvo pulled up to the curb in front of their apartment. As Oskar and the girl got out, Dawson wrote their address in his notebook, then followed them through the door and up the stairs. The neighborhood was quite old, but definitely not in one of the bad parts of town. He felt a bit better.

As soon as he entered the living room, he noticed the heavy drapes and the cardboard taped over the windows. They watched as he examined all the windows carefully, making a few adjustments. “I’ll bring you some heavier cardboard later, but this looks pretty good for now. At least until our tests tell us how sensitive you are to light – and to what wavelengths.” He smiled at them. He went into the kitchen, and opened the refrigerator. There was some milk, a bit of bread some sliced meat and assorted condiments. He saw a couple of cereal boxes on the shelf. “You’re going to have to let me help you stock up with a better-balanced supply of food.” He said as he playfully poked Oskar. “Your sister isn’t the only one who needs to eat properly.”

He stepped into the bathroom, checked the window. There were two toothbrushes in a glass by the sink. He opened the cabinet, saw the toothpaste, first aid kit, a few towels and ... brown hair dye? He smiled to himself. *It looks like they really thought this out. Oskar is probably a blond.*

He went into the only bedroom, saw the small bed in the corner and the chest of drawers on the opposite wall. On top of the dresser were several model cars, a troll doll, a white rabbit, and a few Smurfs standing around idly. He smiled as he remembered how much his son had liked Smurfs...his son. He hadn’t thought about him much since the funeral. The funeral 10 years before when he had buried his wife and their miracle son, who had been born just before he published his first book. He remembered how he had smothered the aching loneliness by doubling his time at work, and when he had finally looked up, 10 years had gone by. He finally gathered himself together again, and jumped at the chance to come to Karlstad University on sabbatical. He loved the area and had done some graduate work here in his younger days. And he had met his wife here. He shook it off and walked back into the living room. Oskar and the girl were sitting at a table against one wall, there was a couch under the front window, and a small television on the opposite wall. He walked over and sat down at the table on the remaining chair.

“You’ve done a good job here. If I may, I’ll pick you up a few things over the weekend that I think you could use, but I’m impressed. How did you rent the place, and how do you pay the rent?”

“A friend of our father’s signed the lease, and we paid six months rent when we moved in.” Eli lied, “We pay for the blood with this.” She reached under the table and pulled out a cardboard box, half full of various denominations of bills and assorted coins.

“We’ll have to set up some sort of savings account for you. It’s not safe to leave this much money in your apartment,” he said as he went through the box.

He looked at the puzzles littering the table. A Rubik’s cube, some string and wire puzzles and...what on earth? He picked up the egg, saw the intricate patterns, the gold strands of wire, the extraordinary detail. “Why this looks like a Faberge Egg,” he exclaimed. “Where on earth did you get it? I’m not an art expert, but it could be worth literally millions!”

They looked at each other, “Our ... dad had it. We didn’t think it was worth anything.” Oskar said.

He shook his head and put it back on the table. *More surprises*, he thought to himself. He would look into this when he got back to the office. *There’s something very odd about all this...* “Well, perhaps it’s just a copy; but a good one”

He sat back down, and thought for a minute “I want to put in a phone for you, so you can call in an emergency or for any reason whatsoever, day or night. Promise me you’ll do that.”

“We promise.”

Then, I think that’s about it for now. Will you come back to see me tomorrow at 8:30?”

“We’ll be there,” Oskar said.

Okay, then,” he said as he got up and put his jacket on.

“Professor Dawson.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“My name is Eli, and this is Oskar.”

He smiled, “Glad to meet you both – finally.” He winked, “Are those your real names?”

Eli and Oskar smiled at each other “Yes, sir” Oskar said.

They walked him downstairs, and watched as he waved and drove away. They carefully locked the door and went back upstairs. Neither of them felt like talking. They turned on the television and snuggled up on the couch together until programming ended, and snow filled the screen.

They went into the bedroom together, took off their clothes and climbed into bed.

Oskar lay there on his back for a while, then turned to face Eli, “Eli, when did you get the apartment?”

“I rented it the night I left you. When I thought I would never see you again.”

“But... after you...saved me at the pool and we took the train to Karlstad, and we went to the apartment, this bed was already here. If you didn’t think you would see me again why did you have a bed?”

She smiled, “Because it reminded me of you and all our nights together. I slept in it that first day, alone. It was so awful! I missed you so much! Don’t you see? THAT’S why I went back. I had to see you again, because I was so lonely without you.”

Oskar and Eli hugged each other tightly. And that’s the way they woke up together the next day, just as the sun was going down.

Chapter 4: Surprises.

Eli and Oskar sat quietly at the desk as Professor Dawson went through some papers. “Is everything all right? Do you need anything?” he asked.

“No, nothing, thanks.” Oskar said.

“Are you going to get into trouble by getting blood for me?” Eli asked.

Dawson looked up at her and smiled, “I think you have enough to worry about, without worrying about me too. I’ll be just fine.”

“So, let me get this out of the way first,” he said, as he handed Oskar a sheet of paper. “I set up a savings account for you at a bank near your apartment. All you need to do is sign your names on this form, and you can withdraw money at any time with just your signature” He looked at Eli. “Apparently, nicknames are not allowed, so I used my best guess at completing yours. If it’s not correct, we can change it later.”

Oskar looked at the form, and saw the two typed names at the bottom of the form: Oskar Dawson and Elisabet Dawson. He looked up, “But... we can’t...”

“It’s the only way you can access the money. As far as the bank is concerned, you two are my children. I have already signed the papers. All you need to do is sign this one, and I’ll get it all finalized Monday morning.”

Oskar signed his name, and handed the pen to Eli “I think we should do it. It would make things so much easier for us.”

She nodded, took the pen hesitated, then signed under her name: ELISABET DAWSON. She felt a twinge of sadness, a sense of loss. She remembered the look in her mother’s eyes as she was dragged away from her. She never spoke to her again.

He handed Oskar the Passbook. “I took the liberty of making your first deposit for you.”

Oskar looked at the balance on the first page: 10,000 kroner. He quickly looked up at the Professor.

“I counted at least that much in your box. You can reimburse me when I drop you off tonight.”

He looked again at Eli, *She looks so ... healthy today. Her cheeks are filled out, her hair is shiny, her arms don’t seem to be as thin as yesterday.* He opened the folder that Alma had brought him earlier. The blood and skin sample results. “Well, lets see what we have here: You have type AB Rh D positive; the universal recipient blood type, particularly useful with your specific condition,” he smiled. “Extremely high red cell count: not necessary bad, probably a result of your lack of proper nutrition, but your red cells also contain more than four times the amount of oxygen as is considered normal -- high levels of metal contaminants in your skin cells:

phosphorus, potassium, iron, magnesium..." *This is very odd I have no idea what this means.*
"Do you feel Okay? Are you in any pain at all?" He took her hand and lightly massaged her arm.

"No, I feel fine," Eli said.

He turned the page: "This is where things get very interesting! Your DNA has 24 pairs of chromosomes. The normal human DNA only contains 23. It turns out, you have two pairs of sex chromosomes identical to those in a particular species of Phyllostomatid bat, found in South America; one female XX and one male XYY. The normal human female XX chromosome is absent."

"What does that mean?" Oskar asked, glancing quickly at Eli..

"I really don't know at this point. I'll have to do more tests. But I think, for the time being that any future tests will be done without any outside help" he said.. *I'll be able to handle Alma, she's new and I'm sure doesn't understand the significance of the tests so far. The additional chromosome pairs confirms my original concern about the rapid DNA modification going on in her body ,and may in some strange way confirm the existence of another species' DNA influence here.*

"Other than the high concentration of various metal free-ions in you skin samples, there were no signs of the normal conditions for sun sensitivity." *Although the combination of free ions of metals like potassium and phosphorus, together with the extremely high oxygen content of her blood produces a potentially unstable situation, chemically speaking.*

"I'll schedule some lab time for tests next week. In the meantime, we need to do something about your schooling. What grade level were you both when your father died."

Oskar thought quickly, "I'm a year older than Eli, but we're both in the 7th level. Eli was advanced a level because she was so smart." He saw the dirty look she gave him. *Someone had to be the oldest if we are brother and sister, and it might as well be me.* He smiled at her, smugly.

"Okay! You're both about a semester behind then, but I'm sure you can catch up quickly. I'll check into books for the 7th year curriculum. For now, we'll have to set our own home schedule, which I'll prepare for you. Since Eli has advanced, we'll let her set the pace. She can help me set up the specific daily study schedule."

Eli flashed Oskar an evil grin.

"I think that's enough for tonight. I'd like to continue taking you home for now, if that's all right with you; at least until we can get your phone installed." He looked at Eli, "Just to ease your concerns, I'm looking into another source for your... food supply. There are extremely strict rules in the handling of blood for transfusions. However, in spite of the care taken, there is a percentage of blood which, although still viable, has been rejected for use in transfusions due to time in storage or storage temperature variation limits, among other problems. This blood is

much easier to get for lab use, and is not as strictly inventoried. I promise you, I will make sure it is safe before I allow you to use it. Do you understand?”

“I...think so,” she said, “but what if I can’t ...use it?”

“Then we’ll think of something else. Don’t worry about it; I’ve got a few more ideas we can try.” He looked at both of them, “Any other questions?Good! Lets get you home.”

§

The three of them sat at the table as Eli showed Dawson how quickly she could solve the Rubik’s cube. “It took me several hours the first time I did it but I’ve gotten much faster with practice,” she said proudly.

“Well, I’m certainly impressed. It still takes me a couple of hours to do it, but I probably haven’t practiced as often as you have.”

Eli looked at him, smugly “Is that an excuse?”

He laughed, “No, not an excuse, just a reason.” He looked at the other puzzles on the table, and noticed that some were extremely old; wooden blocks and spheres made of small square cross-section pieces with unique notches and grooves, that he hadn’t seen since he was a child, plus others, well-worn, that he couldn’t identify at all.

He picked up the egg again and examined it more closely. When the light reflected off the surface just right, he could suddenly see that it was made of very tiny slivers of what appeared to be black jade that fit together in intricate patterns outlined by the already intricate patterns of the fine gold threads. He looked up at Eli, surprised, “Is this a puzzle also?”

Eli nodded. “Yes, but it’s much harder to put together than the others.”

“I would say so! It looks quite formidable.” He put it down gingerly. *It’s clearly not Faberge but is almost certainly worth a great deal. This is more of a mystery than I thought.*

“Why don’t you two relax over the weekend and we’ll start again on Monday. I’ll have your books and curriculum by then and we can set up a daily routine. You are scheduled to have a phone installed in about a week, so we can get our testing routine and school schedule running smoothly before then.” He put on his jacket and started down the stairs. “I’ll stop by Saturday and Sunday evenings to make sure you are okay, if that’s all right with you.

Eli smiled at him but said nothing. “Okay,” Oskar said.

They followed him down the stairs, and waved to him as he drove away.

Oskar poked her as they went back up the stairs, “So, you think you can ‘set the pace’ for me? How long has it been since you were in school – if you ever were?” He scrambled up the stairs ahead of her fleeing for the bedroom.

“You’re older than I am?? Maybe I’ll tell him I’m old enough to be your great, great, great, great grandmother ... father.” She leaped to the top of the stairs, grabbed at him and missed.

“Male and female chromosomes? From a bat? What are you then, ELISABET, a batty girl, or a batty boy!?” Oskar jumped onto the bed and pulled the blanket up over his head.

Eli crouched, then in one quick movement, leapt from the bedroom door, flew through the air, her arms spread and landed squarely on top of him. “No, a batty bomb!” she yelled. The mattress collapsed to the floor as the bed frame fell apart, banging into the wall and sliding across the floor. Eli quickly rolled him up tightly in the blanket and tickled him until he was completely out of breath, laughing and squirming. “You look like a giant blue caterpillar, and you know how much bats like to eat caterpillars,” she said in a low, somber voice. She grabbed the edge of the blanket and pulled hard. Oskar spilled out of the blanket onto the mattress, but before she could pounce, he grabbed her leg, threw her off balance, and landed squarely on top of her.

“What are you going to do now, bat girl?” Oskar pinned her arms to the mattress.

There was a sudden loud thumping on the floor. “Keep it down up there! What do you think this is?! A bowling alley?” they heard an angry muffled voice from downstairs. They looked at each other, grinned guiltily and put their hands over each other’s mouths.

“Be quiet!” Oskar hissed through Eli’s hand.

“YOU be quiet!” a grinning Eli hissed back, pushing his hand away from her mouth. Oskar flopped down beside her, breathing hard.

They listened intently for a few minutes, then quietly got up and carefully put the bed back together. When they finished putting the room back in order, Oskar grabbed their two books off the dresser, ‘Children of Dune’ for himself and ‘The Fog’ for Eli, and they snuggled up on the couch together.

Three days. So far so good. He doesn’t seem to suspect anything. Eli thought. She was feeling more and more guilty. She was beginning to really like him and was afraid of what he would think of them if he found out they had been totally lying to him. She sighed, laid her head in Oskar’s lap, and picked up her book, *Now, where was I...*

§

What a great week this has been for me, Dawson thought to himself as he headed for their apartment. He had forgotten how much he missed having children around him. *Especially these two. Both of them are bright, eager to learn, and completely devoted to each other.* He had

grown intensely fond of them. He enjoyed helping them with their schoolwork, and the evening routine that was, in itself, becoming an enjoyable part of his life. Their childish enthusiasm was contagious. He found himself looking forward to work, and most especially the interaction with Eli during the tests. She was so mature and self-possessed sometimes, that he found himself surprised when she reverted back to being an ordinary 12-year-old. Their good-natured competitiveness was fun to watch and the results were encouraging. They would both be caught up in no time.

I just wish the tests were going as smoothly. The genetic tests showed strange patterns in her DNA, but because the human genome project was in its infancy, he couldn't understand the significance of most of the differences. He hadn't told her that, when he accidentally exposed one of her discarded skin samples to sunlight it had spontaneously ignited, confirming his initial concerns about its stability. He also couldn't understand the extremely fast rate of growth that occurred in a subcutaneous sample he had taken, when placed in agar; up to 10 times as fast as normal. The cells also seemed as healthy and vigorous after the 1000th division as after the first. The cells seemed almost immortal. He was becoming more worried about her every day. It didn't seem likely to him that there was anything good going on here. A system this unstable can't survive long. The fact that she had been bitten less than 6 months ago concerned him the most. He had dreamt one night that she had died suddenly, and he woke up in a cold sweat, as the feelings he had when his wife and son were killed came flooding back in all their intensity.

After one mishap, they had found blood that was still palatable for Eli. *What a trooper she was – no complaints, no whining, nothing.* So that problem was solved for now.

He pulled his car up to the curb, behind the phone company van. The repairman walked with him to the door, as he knocked lightly.

Oskar opened the door and whispered, "We'll have to be quiet. My mom's asleep right now, and I don't want to have to wake her up."

Oskar and the professor sat at the table, while the repairman worked on the phone. "Here's your study schedule for next week. I included Eli's changes and typed it up this morning. She really wanted you to begin reading Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew" She told me she thought it would be particularly meaningful, given your current circumstances. What do you suppose she meant by that?"

Oskar gave him a dark look, "I have no idea." He was already plotting his revenge.

They heard the phone ring in the hall. The repairman came over and handed Dawson a piece of paper. "Here's your new phone number. Everything is up and running. Give us a call if you have any questions.

Dawson wrote the number down in his notebook and handed the slip of paper to Oskar. "I want you both to memorize this number as well as both of mine."

The repairman closed the door behind him as he left.

Oskar immediately went into the bedroom to check on Eli, then came out and sat at the table. “She’s still asleep.”

Dawson, looked at him for a minute. “Oskar, are you ever out during the day anymore?”

“No, not really.”

Why don’t you do a little shopping? I’ll stay and make sure she’s safe until you get back. I’ve made a short grocery list here of things you really should be eating. It’ll do you good to get out in the sun for a change.”

Oskar hesitated, “But... Eli...”

“She’ll be just fine! I promise!”

“Okay, I guess...” he reached for the list.

Dawson watched as Oskar went down the stairs, paused, then opened the front door and closed it quietly behind him.

He sat at the table for a minute, then took his camera out of his briefcase and snapped a couple of quick photographs of the egg, making sure the intricate patterns were clearly visible. If what he had been told was true...

He closed his briefcase, paused for a second, listening. He heard a hard thump against the bedroom wall; a second later, a scream of terror, followed by another and then another. He threw open the door and rushed into the room. Eli was writhing on the floor, her legs kicking and arms waving. He rushed over to her, threw himself over her body, trying to keep her from hurting herself, but she threw him hard against the wall knocking the breath out of him. He jumped up and threw himself over her again, slipping his legs under the bed to get better leverage. She jerked powerfully, but this time he was able to keep her down, though it took all his strength. Her fist caught him in the side of the head, and stars obscured his vision for a second. He ducked his head and tried to wrap his arms around her, but she was moving too violently for him to get a good grasp. Suddenly, she became rigid, arms at her side, legs straight. And stiff. Her eyes were closed, and she was not breathing! “Eli! Eli!” he shouted. No response. She had completely stopped breathing. He slapped her hard on the face. Nothing! He quickly straddled her and began trying to resuscitate her. Chest compressions. *One – two – three*; he held her nose, covered her mouth with his, breathed hard and...

AGONY! He felt unimaginable pain in his groin. It was as though someone had poured molten lead between his legs. He was strapped face down on a table, couldn’t move, saw a smiling white-wigged man drinking from a bowl...Blood! *He’s drinking my blood!* Saw dark castle walls, blood on the floor, children crying everywhere...the scene dissolved into another; he was trembling in fear, naked, his back against a stone wall in a small, dark room; the man came in smiling, fangs showing, half crawling, cat like towards him, gently put his hand behind his head

and ... he felt the fangs sinking into his neck, felt the blood running down his chest, heard a slobbering, sticky sound, soft purring... Saw himself being dragged and dumped in a ditch filled with bodies, children's bodies; felt the cold, the darkness, saw the faint light of sunrise, felt the burning as the sun touched his skin, how he desperately shielded himself from the sun with the bodies of the nameless children; felt the intense hunger as the nights passed; and the long endless days, hiding in the darkness, ... felt the first kill, the rapture, numbness, withdrawal, guilt; saw the endless nights of despair, loneliness, hopelessness. Saw the endless tapestry of year following dark year of unspeakable bargains, compromises, death, more death, Håkan, Oskar? --- Oskar!... blackness.

He felt a hand touch his cheek. He opened his eyes, saw that he was sitting on the floor against the wall in ... their bedroom. Eli was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of him, watching him intently.

"Eli...Elias?" he said, hesitantly.

Eli looked sad, resigned, "What now?"

Dawson sat for a moment as the powerful feelings faded. "Why didn't you ... tell me?"

"You wouldn't have helped us. You would have taken Oskar away. He would have been sent...back to his own awful life. He risked everything suggesting that we come to you. I would never betray him. I knew what you were like when I first ... read you. I knew you were a good man who could never compromise his principles. You would have to..."

Dawson interrupted, "As old as you probably are, you seem to know so little about ...adults. Perhaps it's because, as a child, you see the best of us as more perfect, wiser somehow than you, in spite of the centuries you have lived. What you don't realize is that you and Oskar, in spite of everything, are far more perfect than I. Life takes its toll on us as we age. We become more compromised, less perfect, more uncertain. We each desperately take refuge in our own dogmas, certain that we each know better than the other the path to "enlightenment," Our wisdom comes at a great cost. One I have paid dearly over the years. It made me imperfect enough to love you both, for reasons I can't quite understand...nor want to. Perhaps if you had merely told me your story at first, I MIGHT have done just what you think, if I had believed you at all. But, even then, I'm not certain ... and now this ..." *There is no going back!*

He had a sudden thought. "You could have killed me easily, while I was ... unconscious. You could have gotten away with it. No one knows where I am. No one knows the connection between us. You have certainly had experience disposing of bodies. Why didn't you?" The cold reality of what Eli was had finally sunk in.

Eli leveled his gaze at him, "I thought about it. You're right. I could have ended your life in an instant, and Oskar and I could have gone on as we are for a while longer. Perhaps we could have thought of another solution. But I couldn't! I couldn't let Oskar down. At first, I was going to leave a note and just leave, telling Oskar to trust you and do whatever you said, but I realized I couldn't love Oskar and continue ..." there were tears in his eyes. "I decided to let you make the

decision for us. I'm so tired of this! So tired! I am willing to do whatever you think is best. I trust you more than anyone, except Oskar." He looked down, ashamed. Ashamed of everything he was, everything he had done. *I don't deserve to live. I don't deserve Oskar. I should have died in that ditch 200 years ago.* He began sobbing uncontrollably. Dawson leaned forward and gently took him in his arms.

§

"I'm back! Where is everybody?" Oskar put down the groceries and walked into the bedroom, saw them on the floor. "What's going on?" he quickly sat on the floor next to Eli and looked at the professor.

"We've been having a talk." Dawson said.

Eli, red-eyed, turned to Oskar." He saw everything! I had a nightmare, and he thought he was saving my life, and he saw...everything."

Oskar took Eli's hand in his, and looked at Dawson, "What are you going to do? Are you going to put him in jail? You can't take him away! I won't let you! Eli..."

"Oskar, I've decided to do whatever he wants me to do. I'm so selfish! I should have known this wouldn't work. I wanted you to be with me, but I didn't think enough about what your life would be like. You have a family."

"No! I don't! You're my family! You can't let him decide for me!" He suddenly became quiet. His mind was spinning! He looked at Eli, then at the professor. "Please! If I promise to tell you who I am and where I live, will you let Eli go? Just wait until it gets dark, then let him walk out the door. Nobody will ever know. As soon as he's gone, I'll tell you everything."

Dawson held up his hand, "Enough! You two have been lying to me since the beginning. I completely understand why, but before I decide anything, you have to promise me you will stop as of this moment. Are we agreed?"

"I won't tell you who I am until he's gone!"

"He's not going anywhere! Now, I have a few things to say – before I leave." He turned to Oskar

"You know what Elias is, what he's done. Yet you allowed him into your life unconditionally. You see only those things that are worth loving in him, because you are a child. I wouldn't expect anything else, and find no fault with you for it. And yet, knowing that he has the power to kill me in an instant, and a great deal of experience doing it, it never entered your mind to ask him for that, even though you know it would, at least for the short term, solve all your problems. You have earned my gratitude at the very least." He smiled

Oskar returned the smile and began to relax a bit.

He turned to Elias. “You have lived through many, many years of darkness and despair. I know! I saw only a small part of it, but enough to know! You didn’t ask for any of it. And after all this time, you found someone who understood you and stood by you anyway, and loved you. How you, a child who has for so many times a natural lifespan received no comfort, love, meaningful companionship, could so quickly give it up to protect the one person that matters in your life is stunning to me. And you could have, on your own, removed me from the picture while I was lying on the floor unconscious long before Oskar returned.”

“Frankly, your answer to my question isn’t good enough. You’re just a child, in spite of everything. I am certain that you don’t have any idea why you spared me.” Dawson realized immediately why. *It’s because, in spite of the horror he had seen and the endless rejections he had experienced and the scum he had to deal with to survive, and the thousands of horrible deaths he had caused, he has an inner strength, rare in anyone, let alone someone so young. After all these years, he found something so valuable to him that it became possible for him to take control of the dark side of what he had become. He was so sure it was valuable that he was willing to give it up, rather than kill me.* “But I know; and I’m convinced. You’re a good child; a decent child in spite of everything. And Oskar has made you realize it just in time to save my life.”

Elias could feel the tears welling up in his eyes. *What’s he saying? Is he saying there is something good in me? He can’t believe that!*

Dawson walked over to Elias, hugged him tightly and said, “I thank you for my life. I thank you for being the miraculous, timeless child that you are. I promise you I will do everything in my power to protect you and Oskar from harm.”

Elias felt as though a tremendous weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He put his arms around his new friend and buried his face in his chest.

Dawson looked down at him, squeezed him again and asked “Now that we know each other better, what do you want me to call you? Eli? Or Elias?”

She smiled at him. “Eli”

Chapter 5: Eli's Vengeance

Oskar and the professor faced each other across the table. They had just finished dinner, and Eli was sitting on the couch, an intense look on her face as she rapidly turned the cube in her hands, rotated one side, and without pausing, flipped it over and rotated a different side.

"I have much more information about Eli right now than I ever expected to have, and this, of course, changes everything from a scientific point of view. But we'll get to that interesting problem later. I need to know more about you. I am assuming you are normal in the usual meaning of the word?" Dawson smiled.

"...Yes, I guess. I'm not an Eli if that's what you mean."

He leaned forward. "Why are you with Eli? I know you love her, but why did you choose to go away with her? Why did you leave your family, and why did you both come here?" He saw a flicker of fear on Eli's face as she looked up from the cube. *There's more that I don't know? Of course! There has to be a compelling reason they left home – or at least why Oskar left home.*

Oskar stammered, "I'm with her because I want to be with her. I love her. She came here, so I came here."

Eli stood up quickly, "I'll tell you! It wasn't Oskar's fault. They were going to kill him and I couldn't let that happen. I killed them both! And then we left together and came here! Because I was so lonely without him, and he had nothing to keep him there."

Oskar stepped up behind her, and put his arms around her.

"Where? When? Why haven't I heard about it?"

"You have heard about it. Everyone has. That's why we dyed Oskar's hair brown. It happened in Blackeberg, last November, at the Pool."

He remembered. Two children had been killed, one was missing, feared dead. The two boys had been decapitated, and their heads thrown in the pool. Blood stains on the ceiling and walls; suddenly it all fit. He looked at Eli, "That...was you?" Her killing had, of course, continued right up into the present, or at least until she came here. For some reason, that hadn't registered before. He hadn't yet made that connection between her past and her present. This gave him new issues to deal with.

She nodded. "I was very frightened. They were trying to drown Oskar. All I could think about was saving him; getting him out of the water."

Dawson felt a tightening in his chest. "You threw yourself through a reinforced-glass window? And you flew? You tore their heads off with your bare hands?" *The wild stories about an Angel, dismissed by the police, were true then. She certainly was, and is, Oskar's angel.*

“Please, don’t be angry. I had to do it! I couldn’t let them...they beat him, they cut his face, they tried to throw him in front of the train. They made fun of him, and no one did anything to stop it. They were killing him! I was so angry!!”

“I know! You were angry and frightened, and you did the only thing you could think of to do. I understand. But the strength it must have taken to do that. I can’t get that out of my head. Are you always that strong? Or is it only when you are ... that way?”

“I can do it anytime, but there’s more when I’ve Changed.”

So! Besides being able to drink my blood and then kill me, she could have snapped me in two like a twig. Nice! How could I have missed that? It was suddenly funny to him Here is this innocent-looking, beautiful child, who could, at the drop of a hat, wring my neck like a chicken --- after she had plucked me herself! I’ll never be able to look at her the same way again. He found himself smiling at the thought. I should be afraid, but I’m not. I actually trust her with my life – and for good reason. She has already given it back to me --- in more ways than one.

Eli cocked her head and looked at him, puzzled, “Why are you smiling?”

“It’s just that you are so full of surprises! And I so enjoy surprises,” he said, grabbing her and spinning her around in his arms.

Eli felt a sense of relief – and a warmth that only she and Oskar had shared before. *He really seems to understand! He really loves us.*

Dawson felt happier than he had in years. He reached over and tousled Oskar’s hair and grabbed him around the waist and spun them both around, faster and faster until they were poking him in the ribs, laughing and trying to get him to stop. He felt as though he was being given a second chance, a chance to make things right somehow.

§

Dawson had been doing a great deal of thinking since Monday. He was still trying to reinterpret his findings since Eli had revealed her past to him so vividly. He had only seen a small part of her life. There were many missing pieces, and what he had seen was disjointed. After many discussions with her, he now knew she was about 220 years old or so, therefore her condition was extremely stable. The amount of energy she expended just by living an essentially immortal life meant that she was able to draw much more energy from the blood she drank than would be obtained by normal digestion. Would she be able to utilize it the same way if she was transfused? No way of knowing at the present. The fact that her great strength had to be available for use at all times meant that a great deal of stored, or potential, energy was available to her at all times. In other words, it took huge amounts of energy to sustain her on a daily basis. And all this on a liter of blood every two weeks? This seemed unlikely to him on the face of it. He was beginning to wonder what she would be like if he regularly provided her with two, or even four liters of blood a week for an extended length of time. He needed to find out what her optimum food intake was before he could work out her true energy needs and usage. Her hard life and her small size over

the 220 year period made it likely that she had seldom taken in the ideal amount of blood. How much energy did it take to grow and retract wings? Claws? Talons? Fangs? And god knows what else? Were there any limits? Could she grow a second pair of arms? Could she regrow an arm if it was cut off? Could she be killed at all, other than by being exposed to sunlight? She had told him that she could be killed by being pierced through an area just above her heart, but he wasn't convinced. X-rays would have to be taken to verify this possibility. One aspect of her condition that concerned him was her insistence that she couldn't enter a residence without being invited. If Oskar hadn't verified it with a vivid description of the consequences, he still might not have believed it. There might be some connection between this and her obvious ESP sensitivity, but for the life of him, he couldn't think of a logical reason or a positive survival advantage that could begin to explain it --other than a better survival rate for the victims, which of course, gave no evolutionary advantage from a vampire's point of view.

He found that the consequence of Eli's power that bewildered him the most, was that she had somehow still remained a child, and a basically decent one, in spite of it. Why wasn't he deathly afraid of her? She's a vampire in every sense of the word. A highly-intelligent predator that lives on human blood, and is elegantly equipped with all the tools necessary to obtain it, with or without permission. And she never grows old. She has near super-human strength and agility, and has the physically immature mind of a 12-year-old child. Would we allow a 12-year old child, even with the best of intentions, to wander the streets with an automatic rifle, grenades, and wearing a bullet-proof vest? Of course not! We don't even allow adults to do this. A child doesn't have the maturity to recognize the consequences if these weapons are used carelessly or as a result of a child's anger. Everything in him told him that he shouldn't be able to trust her, yet he did.

He suddenly realized that he **WOULD** trust Eli to wander the streets with assorted weaponry. Why? What makes her so different? He went over again in his mind everything he had seen when he was in her nightmares. Suddenly he realized what it was! He had been thinking so much about the loneliness and hopelessness of her life and sympathizing with her, that he had ignored the rest of Eli's life experiences, and the more important things she had unconsciously learned.

She is like a battle-scarred veteran of countless wars. She knows the power of her weapons, but has seen the consequences of using them so often, that their power no longer holds any fascination for her; indeed, all she can see is the endless trail of death and sorrow she has caused by using them. They are a constant reminder of all her failures to live up to her perceived responsibility -- to end her own life. They paradoxically remind her of her weakness. And being an eternal child, she can't put these feeling into words, and will never be capable of doing so. Many times, when she thought he wasn't looking, he had observed a somehow familiar, hollow and haunting look in her eyes that he couldn't quite place. Now he remembered. In old black-and-white documentaries, he had seen the same look in the eyes of men returning from World War II. He had never forgotten it. But why hadn't she become bitter, angry and reclusive as so many of those men had?

Because she has had to live through experiences that most adults could not survive without incurring serious mental problems, at the same time she is an eternal child. However, even as a child, these things have given her a quiet wisdom and directness, less the overpowering

bitterness and anger that an adult ego would use to defend itself with -- emotions a pre-pubescent child cannot possibly avail herself of. In other words, she is STILL an Innocent. A defenseless Innocent, whose very life experiences are at constant odds with a normally sweet, child-like view of the world.

Dawson knew then, why he loved her so much. Her untenable situation and her 12-year-old perception of reality emphasizes the difference between what we wish the world were like, and what it actually is, seen through adult eyes. How can you not love someone who is cursed with this crystal-clear, pure vision of reality?

And Oskar! Sweet, kind, unassuming Oskar! The only person who, in over 220 years, was, with amazing unpretentious ease, able to break through all the barriers she had built up so efficiently. Oskar, who after delivering a well-deserved defensive blow to a nasty little monster, who had been tormenting him for years, took off his own sock and offered it to him to hold against his bleeding head. As hard as he tried, he didn't have it in him to be a monster. No wonder Eli fell in love with him -- and he with her. Perfect soulmates.

He looked at his watch. He had a stop to make at the University Museum before he headed over to their apartment. It was time to come back down to earth and be practical for a change. Their future lives may depend on it and he absolutely was not going to fail them.

§

Dawson parked in front of the apartment, knocked twice, and opened their door with his own key. He went up the stairs slowly, thinking about the best way to approach the issue. He had no idea how either of them felt about the egg; it seemed as though it was just another puzzle to Eli, and Oskar seemed completely indifferent.

When he stepped into the living room, Oskar was in the kitchen getting himself something to drink. He looked up at the professor as he entered the room.

"Hi! Can I get you something?"

"No thanks. Could I talk to you and Eli about something?"

Eli looked up from her book. *He seems serious today. I hope nothing's wrong.* "Are you okay? Did...something happen?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that. But I'd like the two of you to sit down on the couch while I talk to you." He slid a small end-table away from the wall and moved it in front of the couch as they sat down next to each other. He took a chair from the table, picked up the egg and placed it carefully on the table between them, and sat down facing the couch. Eli and Oskar looked at each other.

Dawson opened his briefcase and placed a three-ringed notebook on the small table, next to the egg. "First, I need to ask you a few questions, Eli. Is that okay?"

She looked at the egg and nodded.

“First, in your own words, could you tell me where you got the egg?”

The corners of her mouth turned up subtly, her eyes sparkled mischievously, “Once upon a time, in a great castle in the *Fjällen* on the border of northern Sweden...

“Eli! He’s serious!” Oskar whispered.

She stopped, composed herself and began again. “At the beginning of my life after He bit me and left me for dead -- you saw parts of that --” She looked down for a moment,. “I was hungry all the time, but I was afraid to go too far from home. I watched my house every night, but no one ever saw me. I was too ashamed of what I was to let them see me. I could see my mother crying on the porch, but I knew it would be much worse for her if she knew what I was. I was so ashamed! During the day, I slept in a cave that only my brother and I knew of. I knew I was safe because he was too old to want to come there any more. At night I went ... hunting along the two or three roads that led to and from His estate, finding people traveling alone. I left soon after my mother died and never saw my family again.

About 100 years later, I’d had a much harder time than usual finding ... food and, for some reason, went back home -- I don’t know why. Nothing was the same. No one knew where what was left of my family had gone. I moved back into the cave and slept for two or three months; I’m not exactly sure how long. If I haven’t eaten well for a long time, I sort of hibernate, and when I wake up I am even smaller and weaker than usual. When I first arrived, I had seen that He was still at the Estate, so I knew I could find food along the same routes as before.

The first night after I woke up, I followed two men on horses, who were moving slowly along the road toward the Estate. I had already passed four others who were about five minutes ahead of them, who looked like they were part of the same group. One horse had a large, heavy load on its back, and was led by one of the men. The other man was on the other horse, bent over as though he was sick, or weak. I smelled blood, and realized that he was probably wounded.” She looked at Dawson guiltily, “I became so...excited that I couldn’t control myself and went through the Change. I flew into the man on the horse, knocking him over and then quickly attacked the other one. I” She put her face in her hands.

Oskar put his arms around her and held her tightly. “Please, don’t make her go on!”

The professor reached over and took one of her hands. “You don’t have to go any further. I’m so sorry! I should have realized...”

“No! I’m okay. I know you wouldn’t ask without having a good reason. I don’t know why it’s so difficult for me to talk about it. I did it for over 200 years...” She sat quietly for a few moments, took a deep breath, and continued.

“The man I knocked off the horse got up, screamed and shot at me. I knocked him down and threw his rifle in a ditch “Then I ...After I ... finished, I quickly went through the stuff on the back of the other horse, but the ropes broke and everything fell in a pile at my feet. I went through some bags, took some money and was looking through another bundle when I heard men shouting and saw four horses racing down the road toward me. I grabbed one of the bundles and ran off into the woods before they reached me. I don’t think they saw me, but I’m not sure. When I got back to the cave, I opened the bundle and found the egg inside. I knew it must be valuable, but once I saw that it was a puzzle, I kept it.” She grinned wryly at him. “There’s not much to do when you live in a cave, and I got bored. I’ve probably put the egg together over a hundred times.” She looked up at him and placed her hands in her lap.

Dawson looked at her for a moment to make sure she was okay, then picked up the binder and opened it in his lap.

“Now it’s my turn. I’m going to tell YOU an interesting story. Once upon a time in Denmark, there was a beautiful princess named Maria, who had an aunt that she loved dearly. She often visited this aunt, and especially loved to play with a beautiful egg she owned called the ‘Hen egg’. It was crafted from gold, and had an opaque white enameled ‘shell.’ Inside, it contained a yellow gold yolk. When this yolk was opened, it revealed a multi-colored gold hen, which also opened. Inside the hen was a minute diamond replica of the Danish Imperial Crown from which a small ruby pendant was suspended. Maria loved it dearly.

“When the princess grew up, she was betrothed to Nicholas Alexandrovich, heir to the throne of Russia. She loved him with all her heart and was devastated by his death from cerebro-spinal meningitis before they could be married.

“Before his death however, Nicholas, knowing of Maria’s love for the Hen Egg, secretly commissioned two special eggs to be made for her by the same Danish artisan. One of these eggs was crafted from black jade and fashioned into an intricate puzzle comprising thousands of tiny pieces delineated by delicate gold threads in complex patterns over the entire surface. Inside was a gold yolk containing miniature gold replicas of the Danish Imperial Crown and The Crown of the Russian Emperor, or Tsar; in complete detail, but intertwined. The Second egg was identical to the first, except it was crafted from pure white jade and the crowns were mirror images of the others, but in platinum. It is also thought that all of the thousands of unique puzzle pieces were mirror images of those composing the first egg.” He looked at Eli. “It seems that you are in possession of the first of these two eggs.”

He continued, “An expedition set out from Denmark heading for northern Russia, but, in southern Sweden, it was set upon by bandits who killed the artist and most of the guards accompanying the treasures to the heir apparent. The few that escaped brought the news to him.

“His younger brother, Alexander III was so angry, he immediately led an army to recover the eggs, defend the future Tsar’s honor, and avenge the deaths of the artisan and his royal guard. The details get a bit murky at this point, but Alexander’s men eventually caught one of the thieves, who, in turn led them to a huge Estate and serfdom ruled by an eccentric Lord Törnkvist, who’s ruthlessness was known throughout that part of Sweden. Alexander’s men surrounded the

estate and demanded the return of the treasure, but Törnkvist denied having them. There were several skirmishes, resulting in the capture of one of the Lord's generals, who under torture, confessed that they had indeed stolen the eggs. He told Alexander that they had only one egg, which they would gladly return to him – the other had been stolen before the thieves reached the Estate. Alexander refused to believe him, and sent him back to Törnkvist, demanding both eggs be produced at once. When two days passed without a reply, his patience ran out. Early one morning, without warning, he attacked, and in the ensuing battle, the entire estate was burned to the ground. The only survivors were tortured and killed, but the fate of the eggs was unknown. Törnkvist's burned body, or what was left of it, was discovered by Alexander's men who identified it by the rings on his fingers and the sword still strapped to his waist. His mission a failure, Alexander returned to Nicholas, dejected.

“On his death bed, Nicholas expressed his desire that Maria marry his brother, Alexander who was now to succeed him on the throne. The late Heir Apparent's family had become very fond of her, and welcomed her with open arms. Their marriage was a happy one and lasted until his death in 1894. During their very happy marriage, still stinging from his inability to recover the eggs, he commissioned many more beautiful eggs for her from the House of Faberge, all famous and now in museums and private collections all over the world. The white egg was recovered about 75 years ago, without the intertwined crowns in the yolk, and now resides in a private collection in Denmark. Obviously, the black one was never recovered.” He winked at Eli.

He turned the page in the notebook, and looked at Eli. “Now, I want you to look at a picture, a copy of the only one known to have ever been painted of the estate's Lord Törnkvist. The odd thing about the painting is that it appears to have been painted over 100 years before his reported death. Art experts have concluded that it was probably dated improperly.”

He passed the notebook to Eli, who held it in her lap for a moment, held her breath and looked down. She saw a familiar castle-like structure in the background, the full moon rising over the right side of the roof, and in the center of the picture, smiling directly at her, was....HIM! She leaped up, dropped the notebook on the floor and ran into the bedroom, her hands over her eyes. Oskar was right behind her. Dawson listened for a moment, then got up slowly and quietly looked into their room. Eli was curled up in a ball on the bed, her head in Oskar's lap. He was stroking her face and gently running his fingers through her hair, as she lay sobbing. Dawson quietly sat on the edge of the bed and gently put his arms around the both of them.

§

Dawson had already put away the notebook and was examining the egg when Eli and Oskar returned to the living room.

“Eli, there are a couple of things that I don't believe you realize yet about the history of your egg. I think you will want to know about them.”

Eli looked at him solemnly, and nodded.

“The pair of eggs had been stolen by the Lord’s henchmen, who murdered their creator and many other innocent men in the process. In other words, you not only stole from the man who tore you from your family and has caused you over 200 years of misery and loneliness, but you were the direct cause of his death. You and you alone – Caused – His – Death.”

She looked up at him and smiled, gratefully, *I’m glad he’s dead, but I don’t feel any joy in it. It just leaves an empty feeling where the fear was before.*

“The second matter will require the two of you to make a decision. Much of this information, including the picture, was obtained through the University Museum’s curator, from that collector in Denmark who owns the white egg. He assured the curator, that, if the black egg were ever found intact, it would be worth over 22 million kronor. He also assured the curator that he would pay that price for the egg himself if it were ever found, no questions asked.”

He leaned forward, “I have a proposal for you both. I know that I can take care of you while I’m still alive, but both of you, and especially Eli, are most assuredly going to outlive me. If we sell the egg, I can set up a blind trust for you through a bank in Switzerland, which should guarantee you an income for a long time – I won’t say forever, but long enough for a cure for Eli’s ‘disease’ to be found, if I am unable to do it myself.” *Which, at this time, seems extremely unlikely.*

“And, with Oskar in your life now, I’m sure you don’t need the egg for entertainment any longer.” He smiled at her.

“I don’t know about that,” she said solemnly, “He IS a bit young for me ... by about 200 years. Perhaps I’ve outgrown him. He IS getting a bit boring,” she yawned.

Oskar punched her hard on the arm, “You need me around to remind you to wear clothes when you go outside – and to wash them occasionally, and to brush your....fangs. And to keep you from trying to buy things with gold doubloons instead of kronor.”

Eli grabbed him in a headlock and scrubbed the top of his head with her knuckles. “You can’t talk to your elders that way. Have a little respect!” she turned to Dawson, “Honestly! I just don’t understand children’s behavior these days.”

Dawson laughed, “Well, at least neither of you is the least bit boring to me.”

“Now! Tell me more about this ‘hibernation’ thing. I don’t recall finding any Grizzly Bear genes in your DNA, but if I do, I won’t be a bit surprised.”

Chapter 6: Eli Flies

It had been a long, emotional day. Eli seemed to have no problem with the idea of selling the egg, but Dawson sensed that she was a bit too eager. He suspected that she was unconsciously trying to please him; after all, she was only 12 years old. Initially, he was positive that this was a good thing for them, but the nagging feeling that he was missing something made him decide to step back and be a bit more cautious. He decided she needed time to put the egg in its proper perspective now that she was aware of the vital part it played in both her and Lord Törnkvist's destiny. Another factor was Eli's odd way of offhandedly dismissing the value of any of her possessions, including money. The three of them had finally decided to wait awhile before making any decisions. After all, they had plenty of time. They had also decided to put it in a safety deposit box at the bank until the final decision was made. He had finally convinced them that, if it were ever stolen and the thief tried to sell it, its great value could attract enough attention to eventually lead the authorities back to Eli. Dawson had assured her that if Oskar became too boring, or if she just felt like she wanted it around for a few days, she could retrieve it at any time. He thought that this would be the best way for him to see how she really felt about it.

He was going over all his notes in detail, making sure he had adjusted all his conclusions based on his original understanding of the infection timeline. He had prepared some injections of Eli's blood plasma in preparation for animal testing, mindful of the consequences of infection. He had also stripped out the Phyllostomatid Bat sex chromosome pairs from another cultured batch and replaced it with a standard human male pair, which Oskar had been happy, even eager, to provide for him. Standardized tests with human DNA worked better if the DNA appeared to be human.

Now that he knew Elias had been born a boy, he had looked for the normal XY male chromosome more carefully. Since Elias had stopped aging before puberty, he was uncertain what he would find, although it looked like the human male sex pair had been completely dominated or replaced by the others.

An interesting consequence of this to Dawson was that Eli's mannerisms and body language were more feminine than masculine, while her thought processes were more generally like those of a 12-year-old boy. If he hadn't known her special circumstances, he would have just considered her an average tomboy. Could this be some sort of primordial confusion, or blurring of the sexual identity lines, caused by the presence of both male and female sex chromosomes? She also had almost no sense of modesty. Recently, she had walked in on Oskar and him several times completely nude, without any sign of embarrassment. Most 12-year olds -boys OR girls - wouldn't do that under any circumstances. Oskar's joke about him having to remind her to wear clothes when she went out might have been at least partially based on experience. Could this also be a result of this sexual confusion? Or is it merely because of her 200-year isolation from society and her final psychological acceptance of her sexual neutrality?

His next step was to examine her ability to grow wings, claws, and fangs or anything else. He wanted to watch the process carefully, and take samples (if she'd let him) He also needed to

decide what Eli's real grade level was. He smiled as he realized that she was probably better than most at Scandinavian history, having lived it herself for over 220 years. But she was also able to keep up with Oskar effortlessly in everything else. What would her upper limit be, as an eternal 12-year old? High-school level? College? There was no way of knowing – yet.

He also wasn't sure what he really wanted to find a "cure":for. Super strength? Flying? Ability to regenerate body parts? Absence of aging? Acute vision? Super-sensitive hearing? It would be too bad if she had to lose these, in order to lose the worst of them: Extreme, almost uncontrollable predatory instincts? Savage aggression? Blood-drinking? Carrier of Infectious disease? Fangs? Claws? Talons? He was almost certain that it would end up being all or nothing.

If he found this miracle cure then, Eli would become a normal, aging 12-year-old child. At least as normal as is possible for a child who had experienced an unspeakably horrible, unimaginably painful total castration and amputation, while still conscious. He shuddered as he vividly recalled the memory – and the pain. How on earth had Elias remained sane after everything that happened to him? Not only sane, but basically decent, and even altruistic. There seemed to be more to Elias' character than met the eye. What kind of man would he have become if he had been allowed to lead a normal life? Did his experiences turn him into this remarkable, exceptional child, or would he have been the same as an 18th century adult? He shook his head. These didn't seem to be questions he could answer as a scientist.

§

Eli rinsed the shampoo out of her hair, turned off the water and climbed out of the tub. She grabbed a towel, dried off, went into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, drying her hair. Oskar looked up from his math book, "It's about time!." He peeled off his clothes, picked Eli's clothes off the floor and gave her a dirty look, "You know where these go, right? In the clothes hamper?"

She stuck out her tongue, and threw the towel at him. "Since you're heading that direction anyway, take this with you." She smiled pleadingly, "Please?"

Oskar grumbled, pretended to be mad, and went into the bathroom.

As soon as she heard the shower running, Eli tiptoed out into the kitchen, threw some ice cubes into the water pitcher, filled it up, and snuck back to the bathroom. She peeked around the corner. *All clear!* She snuck up to the shower curtain, jerked it aside suddenly, and poured the ice cold water over his head.

Oskar's eyes got huge and he gasped for breath as the ice cubes bounced against the wall and clattered in the bottom of the tub. "ELI!!! I'm gonna get you for that!" He jumped out of the tub, just as she was disappearing around the corner, after trying unsuccessfully to slam the door shut behind her.

The bathroom door slammed against the wall as he lumbered after her, his wet feet slipping on the floor as he turned the corner and bounced off the opposite wall. He caught a glimpse of her

back, before she disappeared around the corner at the end of the hall as he scrambled after her. Too late, he realized she was going to backtrack through the kitchen and head for the bathroom, where she would be able to lock him out.

He skidded to a stop, reversed direction and was just able to grab her arm as she rounded the corner towards the bathroom, but she slipped out of his soapy grasp easily, and, without losing any speed, lunged for the door. Oskar threw himself after her and caught the door just before she closed it, but his momentum carried him right into her as she was scrambling back into the tub. They both fell in a heap in the bottom of the tub, as Eli, laughing hysterically, tried to fend him off, but he was so slippery she couldn't get a grip on him.

"You're as slick as a greased pig!" she yelled, still laughing.

Oskar flipped her over face up, slid her toward the drain until her face was directly under the shower, and began tickling her mercilessly. She was laughing so hard by this time that even **she** couldn't catch her breath. "You... should.... have seen....your face!" She puffed out her cheeks, opened her eyes super-wide, and started laughing again.

Oskar grabbed her around the neck with both hands, and shook her. Eli crossed her eyes and let her tongue hang out, pretending to be choked. She flopped around for a second, threw her arms up, sighed melodramatically, and feigned death, her eyes closed, and her tongue still hanging out. Oskar gave her one last shake, but she didn't move a muscle. "That'll teach you!" he said sternly, and then gently took her head in his hands. He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "I love you! So much!" he said quietly.

She smiled at him, grabbed him around the neck and kissed him back. "I love you too, Oskar."

She stood up with him, carefully stepped out of the tub, grabbed a new towel and dried herself off again. She flashed him a grin, and stepped into the bedroom. Oskar finished washing off the soap, turned off the shower, and, as he began drying himself, could hear Eli still giggling in the bedroom.

Oskar carefully lifted the corner of the heavy cardboard and saw that the sun was just coming up. They had actually stayed up a bit longer than usual. He hung the towel up and went into the bedroom. Eli was already in bed with the covers pulled up to her chin.

He climbed in beside her, lay on his back and put his hands behind his head.

Eli turned toward him and watched him for a minute, "Are you okay? What are you thinking about?"

"I was just thinking about something the Professor said last night. He said that I, and especially you, would certainly outlive him."

"I can't think about that. It's too sad to think about."

“But you don’t understand! By the time the Professor dies, I’ll be old. You won’t want to be with me any more. And what if I don’t want to be with you? Right now, I don’t hang around with kids that are even two or three years younger than me; and I’m sure they find me just as boring. What if you don’t like me any more when I’m older?”

“Oskar, I will always love you. You are MY Oskar and that will never change. I have thought about what would happen if you were to grow up and find a girl your age and want to have a family. But I know I could understand and be happy for you. I have even thought about when you will ...die and leave me alone again. It’s an almost unbearable thought! I know I’ll be alone forever after you die!”

“But, if you were to infect me, we could be together forever. Maybe...”

“NO! Oskar, I asked you once if you wanted to be like me, and you said no. Since then, I have decided that I will NEVER infect you, even if it means I’ll lose you. I will never deliberately make anyone have to go through what I have gone through. I’ve even thought about killing myself on the day that you die.”

Oskar was horrified, “How can you think like that?! You can’t die! You can’t!”

She smiled gently at him, “Oskar, we are here together now. Let’s just think about that. We’ll be together for a long time. Let’s not spoil it by worrying about things we can’t do anything about. I love you more than anything. That’s all I want to think about.” She took both his hands in hers and pressed them to her chest.

Oskar snuggled up against her. But he could now see clearly that as every day went by they were being separated more and more by time. He had always looked forward to growing up. Now he knew that, by growing up, he was leaving behind everything he cared about. He fell into an uneasy sleep and dreamt that he was on a train, looking out the window as it pulled away from the station platform. He was crying as he watched Eli’s beautiful face disappear in the distance.

§

Dawson climbed the stairs, walked into the living room, took a quick detour into the kitchen and unloaded his ice chest into Eli’s small lab refrigerator. “Come and get it!”

Eli and Oskar came into the kitchen. “Why did you bring it here?” Eli asked, “You usually give it to me in your office after our tests, except on weekends. Besides, isn’t tomorrow my normal day?”

“Well, since we’re going on an excursion, and you are going to get a good workout, I thought you might need a booster – and I really want to make sure you’re very well fed this evening.” He remembered her warnings about how easy it was for her to lose control when she was hungry, and he didn’t want to take any chances.

“Okay. Would you hand me one please?” She had become so good at staying in control when she ate, that she often joined them at the table. Not as often as she would like, however, because she had noticed that it now bothered them more than it did her. Dawson handed her a bag, and she casually walked past them into the living room so they wouldn’t have to watch.

“Where are we going, exactly?” Oskar asked.

“It’s a small lake 20 or so kilometers north called Fårsjön lake. It’s just south of Forshaga. There’s no one around for miles, and there’s a large open field next to the lake, so we should have plenty of room.”

Eli walked past them, and helped herself to another bag. “You’re sure there’s no one nearby that could see us?”

“It’s pretty inaccessible and the lake is relatively shallow, so ice fishing is no good.... Where on Earth did you get those pants?!”

Eli smiled at him, “These are my lucky pants. I was wearing them when I met Oskar, and I feel lucky tonight for some reason.”

“Oskar must have been very understanding, or perhaps color-blind. I know! He must have felt sorry for you,” he joked.

“Don’t laugh at me! I really like these pants!” She pretended to pout.

Oskar chimed in, “Just look at them! They’re beautiful” Eli spun around a couple of times.

Dawson looked at his watch, “Well kids, we’d better get going. We’ve got a lot to do before morning. He threw a few soft drinks in the ice chest and headed for the stairs. Oskar and Eli put on their jackets, and followed him out the door.

§

He pulled the car up to the railing at the end of the road. Eli and Oskar got out and stood together at the edge of the lake, while Dawson opened the trunk and took out his briefcase and a medical bag. He set up a light, collapsible table on the small stretch of beach and started laying out his notebook and a few sample racks. The full moon and clear sky provided plenty of light. They could actually see their shadows against the snow in the moonlight.

He looked up as Eli took off her jacket and shoes, and walked barefoot back to the car. She took off her sweater and threw it with her clothes into the back seat and walked over to Dawson, waiting for him to get set up.

She looks so frail and small, he thought, Well, looks are certainly deceiving. “Are you ready?”

Eli nodded.

“Okay, now. Do your thing” He watched as she placed her fists at her sides, and in one smooth motion, raised them over her head. The wings seemed to appear as if by magic, more fluid, and more quickly than they had in his office that day. The whole process only lasted a few seconds, accompanied by a sound like someone softly uncrinkling a ball of plastic wrap. Much quieter and smoother than before. She had obviously done it slowly the first time, for the exaggerated effect it had close up, and in the light of the office. He barely got a glimpse of the spider-like threads before the inky fluid filled in the spaces and solidified into the familiar, almost sinister, bat-like wings. “May I?” he asked as he reached out to touch them.

Eli grinned and nodded, as she brought her arms down a bit from the vertical. Dawson ran his fingers along an edge. *How thin they are! He thought. They feel velvety like the skin of a Manta Ray, but they’re not damp. They’re too black, almost surreal.* “Can you feel this?” he asked, as he ran his fingers over them again.

“Yes. I can feel everything. When I’m flying, I can feel every little change in pressure, every small change in the wind, and even temperature differences. I can almost feel your fingerprint patterns where you are touching them. The feeling is ... very hard to describe. All I can tell you is that sometimes when I am flying, I feel ... really really happy.”

He stepped back and looked at the overall structure. The basic framework supporting the webbing seemed to be three gracefully curved bone-like projections, all as long, or longer than her arm, one coming off her elbow, and the other two forking away from just below her wrist. All three seemed to originate at peculiar ball-and socket joints, that seemed to allow free movement only along a line parallel to her arm. *Of course! Otherwise, they would flop around uselessly.* The effect was striking. When her arms were directly over her head, the tips of her wings were over ten feet above the ground. “May I take a small sample of the webbing?” He picked up a syringe.

Eli nodded. “Will it hurt?” She stepped closer to him.

He looked up surprised. Normally, Eli had an extremely high threshold of pain. Then he realized – she had already told him how sensitive her wings were and he had just blown it off. He was so interested in the wings’ construction and composition that he had forgotten that this was Eli at the other end of the syringe.

Enough! I’m not going to do this any more, at least tonight! He abruptly turned and began putting his things back in the bag.

Oskar, who had been watching from the shoreline, walked quickly over to the table and stood next to Eli.

She looked at Dawson anxiously, “Did I do something wrong?” She lowered her arms to her sides, and Dawson, in spite of himself, couldn’t help but notice how beautifully the wings folded and nestled perfectly together, all three spines against her arms, pointing upwards, framing her face like an ancient portrait in the dusty halls of an old museum.

“No,” he said, “**I** did something wrong! I’ve been treating you more like a lab rat than a person. I’m sorry! Please forgive me.”

“But you didn’t do anything wrong. I’ll do anything you want, if it helps you to find a cure for me.”

“All in good time. Tonight, I just want you to have fun, show off, and tell me more about how it makes you feel. Please, just fly for me.”

Eli smiled, and in one fluid motion, turned, spread her wings, crouched, and with silent grace, leaped into the air. The wind from her wings brushed his hair back and blew a sample rack off the table. Dawson didn’t notice. All he could see was Eli as she quickly gained altitude over the lake. She suddenly banked quickly to the right, then left, flapped her wings and went into a near-vertical climb. She spread her wings out, and let the inertia carry her another 100 feet higher into the air, then just as she stalled out at the top of her climb, folded her wings against her sides and fell straight down over 200 feet. At the last second, she spread her wings and, just before she reached the ice, pulled out of the dive, and glided parallel to the surface, three feet above the ice, heading straight towards them.

Oskar leaped up and shouted “Bravo!!” clapping his hands. He ran over to the car and began honking the horn, spelling out “Eli, Eli, Eli” in Morse code.

Dawson heard a loud snort behind him. He spun around, just in time to see a huge Moose 30 feet away with its ears back and head down, starting toward Oskar. “Oskar! Get behind the car!”

Oskar tried to scramble over the hood but slid off, directly into the path of the charging moose. He tried to scramble to his feet, but he knew it was too late. He could see the moose bearing down on him, antlers lowered.

He dropped to the ground and rolled up in a ball, his hands covering his head, just as he heard a loud bark and saw a dark shape pass over his head, smashing head-on into the moose with a sickening thump. He watched in horror as Eli’s wings were shredded on the antlers and her body tumbled over and over in the air before hitting the ground hard and rolling to a stop, leaving a bloody trail in the snow. The moose shook its head, snorted, turned and charged at Eli’s motionless form, but just before it reached her, she stumbled to her feet, eyes blazing, fangs out and her clawed hands in front of her, the wreckage of her wings hanging in tatters from her arms. He could see blood on her chest, just before the Moose hit her again. She dug her claws into his neck and bit down hard as he pinned her body to the ground and twisted his head back and forth. Her fangs ripped open his jugular and blood poured out as he shuddered, then slowly collapsed on top of her.

Oskar and Dawson rushed over to her. She was lying on her back, the Moose’s huge antlers still pinning her to the ground. Her eyes were open and blood was everywhere. As Dawson leaned down, her golden eyes turned menacingly towards him; she hissed, bared her fangs, and swung at him with a clawed hand. Her other arm was lying motionless at her side, twisted at an odd angle.

He ducked and stepped back quickly, just as Oskar fell on her and wrapped his arms around her. “Eli! Please be still. You’re hurting yourself!” She struggled for a few seconds, making guttural animal sounds, but gradually her struggles subsided, and she became still.

Dawson ran to the car, grabbed the ice chest and an axe out of the trunk, went a few meters out onto the lake and smashed a hole in the ice. He filled the chest with water, grabbed his bag, and rushed back to them.

He motioned for Oskar to get out of the way as he dropped his bag next to her, dampened a towel and began clearing away the blood. He had to be able to see her wounds before he could help her. Eli’s eyes followed his every move. She tried several times to say something, but couldn’t. His hands started to tremble, but he forced himself to concentrate. He knew that she would be as good as dead if she were human. Could she really survive this? He wasn’t going to take any chances. He took off his jacket and put it under her head to make her more comfortable. She managed a faint smile, then grimaced and closed her eyes. He looked down and saw a huge tear in her chest just below her rib cage. He cleaned it as best he could, but blood welled up in it as quickly as he wiped it away. He finally gave up and pressed the towel against it, “Oskar, hold this here. Press down but not too hard. We have to stop the bleeding.” Oskar quickly sat down beside her and held the towel.

Eli opened her eyes again. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Shh! Don’t try to talk. What could you possibly have to be sorry about? You saved Oskar’s life – again.”

“I’m sorry I tried to hurt you before. When you tried to help me.”

“Is that the best you could do? I don’t think you’d win any vampire medals for that feeble attempt.”

She smiled, reached down, gently took Oskar’s hand off the towel and removed it. The wound was completely healed. Only a faint jagged red line remained. She reached across her body, picked up her other arm, straightened it, and laid it on her chest, the broken bones still visible through the wound. Dawson watched in amazement as the bones knit and the wound slowly healed itself before his eyes. He stood up, relieved. “I guess you don’t need me after all.”

Eli reached up and took his hand, and held it tight. “Please, stay.”

He knelt back down beside her “Can I give you anything for the pain? Oskar! Help me move the Moose’s head. We need to see if she has any other injuries.”

The two of them were just barely able to lift the head enough to pull it to the side. Dawson carefully removed her blood-soaked pants, then looked up at her sadly, “Your beautiful wings!” He was afraid to touch any part of them, for fear the pain would be excruciating for her. He saw that there were tears in her eyes, and quickly grabbed her hand, “What’s wrong?!” He took a new

towel, dipped it in the ice chest and began cleaning the blood off her legs, looking for more damage.

“It's just that ... no one has ever...taken care of me before. No one has ever said kind things to me, until Oskar. And now, you.” She closed her eyes, as more tears welled up.

Dawson continued to clean her up, making two or three more trips to the lake for water. He watched in amazement as what was left of her wings seemed to wither, dry up and turn to a fine powder. The remains of the gracefully curved bones slowly retracted back into her arms. He wrapped her in his heavy wool blanket from the back seat, while Oskar rinsed out the towels and cleaned himself up as best he could.

She suddenly got a concerned look on her face as she tried to raise herself up on her elbows, “Oskar!! Are my pants okay?”

“They’re fine,” Oskar grinned as he raised them up, dripping wet, from the pile of rinsed towels.

After readjusting the blanket around her carefully, Dawson began to load up the car. *I almost lost them both tonight. Oskar would have died instantly, and Eli... I'm not sure she is as immortal as she thinks she is. She seemed too close to death to me. And I don't know if I could survive losing two people I love, a second time.* He held his trembling hands in front of him, then crossed them over his chest, trying to get control. He took a deep breath and walked back over to the children. “Okay, let’s get out of here before something else comes out of the forest.” He reached down to pick Eli up.

“That’s okay, I think I can walk now,” she said as she pulled her knees up.

“No! Please...let me at least do this for you,” he said gently, as he carefully tucked the blanket in around her, and lifted her in his arms. She smiled at him, and wrapped her arm around his neck as he carried her to the car and gently laid her in the back seat. “Now, I want you to stay put until we get you home.”

Oskar climbed into the front seat, and they started back for Karlstad. Nobody spoke.

The lights from the city were visible ahead, when they heard Eli stirring in the back seat. “Professor?”

“Yes, Eli?”

“I’m hungry.”

He laughed, “Well, that’s something I CAN do for you”

Chapter 7: Oscar Makes a Decision

It was 5:00AM when they pulled up in front of the apartment. Oskar got out and opened the door, while the Professor carried Eli up the stairs, against her protests. Oskar followed him up the stairs with the medical bag. Without saying a word, Dawson carried her into the bedroom and carefully placed her on the bed. "I'll get your food. Please, stay here." He looked down at her, hesitated, and then slowly walked toward the kitchen.

Oskar sat down beside her, "What's wrong with him? He's acting odd."

"I'm not sure...he seems...upset. What should we do Oskar?"

Dawson came back in the room with two bags for Eli. He sat down next to her, lifted her up, and watched carefully as she emptied them both, all the while absently running his fingers gently through her hair. When she was finished, he took them back into the kitchen.

"Oskar, why don't you go ahead and take your shower? I'll take mine later, if he'll let me"

Oskar nodded and went into the bathroom.

The Professor came in with his bag, set it on the floor and looked at Eli, "If you don't mind, I'm going to check you over. I want to make sure you're okay.

"But I'm fine! You know that I can heal myself."

"I just want to make sure!" he sounded irritated.

"I'm sorry. What do you want me to do?"

"Please, just lie down." He carefully checked her over, felt her ribs and looked closely at the faint line where the moose's antler had pierced her chest. He lifted each arm, felt the bones carefully, and flexed her wrists. "Does anything hurt?"

"No. I'm fine"

He poked and prodded her until he was satisfied. "Now, I want you to stay put, until tomorrow afternoon."

"Are you angry with me?" she asked softly.

He looked startled, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be abrupt with you. I'm certainly not angry with either of you. I'm just a little worried and want to make sure you're both okay."

Oskar came in, and climbed into bed with Eli.

He hesitated a moment, "I have a favor to ask of you two. Would it be alright with you if I slept on your couch tonight?"

They looked at each other. Oskar said "Sure, but why? We'll be fine."

"I just want to make sure you're safe tonight. That nothing happens as a result of your ... injuries"

Oskar started to say something, but Eli interrupted, "Okay. Oskar? Why don't you get him a couple of blankets?"

Oskar hopped out of bed and went to the closet.

Eli took the Professor's hand. "Thank you"

"You're very welcome." He smiled at her and kissed her on the cheek.

He took the blankets from Oskar and stepped out into the living room. A few minutes later, the lights went out.

Oskar climbed into bed with Eli and put his arms around her. Eli kissed him and turned out the light. She lay there for a few minutes, feeling warm inside. *I wonder if this is what it feels like to have a family? I can't remember.* She drifted off to sleep.

The sun had been up for an hour. Dawson sat motionless beside their bed watching them sleep. He felt at peace with himself for the first time in many years. He looked at his watch. *They'll be up in about 5 hours. Maybe I'll try to get a bit more sleep.* He quietly stepped back into the living room.

Eli opened her eyes and watched him as he left. She smiled, put her arms around Oskar, and drifted off to sleep again.

§

After a month, Dawson was becoming increasingly frustrated. Nothing seemed to be going well at all. All the lab mice he had injected with the unprocessed blood had either died within a day, or there were no effects of any kind. There didn't seem to be a pattern. Eli had told him that she didn't think the infection spread to other animals, at least, not in her experience. He smiled grimly as he thought about the diminishing likelihood of a vampire moose roaming the forests north of Karlstad.

The cultured batch had provided mixed results. Mice injected with this strain exhibited a brief doubling of their red cell count and elevated oxygen levels in their blood similar to Eli's, but returned almost completely to normal within a week. The only residual effect seemed to be an odd behavior change. As they normally ran around in their cage, if two of them brushed against one another they would both simultaneously stop dead in their tracks for a second or two, and

then move on again as though nothing had happened. It's something that, if only a couple mice were involved, would pass unnoticed, but when you had ten or more, the pattern became obvious. He had isolated this group from the others. It was as though the effect of replacing the bat's sex chromosomes removed some factor that prevented the infection from taking hold. However, once it took hold, it appeared that the mice's immune system made short work of it. He had just harvested a second culture that tripled the concentration of the segment of the altered DNA strand that he suspected was the active part of Eli's infection, and prepared it for the next series of injections. The guesswork involved was frustrating for him. He was used to a more methodical approach, but he didn't have the budget or time for such luxuries.

He was also going on the theory that this was some sort of viral-like infection, because antibiotics seemed to have no effect on the test cases, and tests designed to detect generic bacterial infections continually came up negative.

Oskar had proven to be quite adept at learning his way around the lab. He helped him prepare the injections, took meticulous, easy-to-read notes, and was a great help in taking care of his small contingent of mice; so much so that he didn't need to spend his limited resources on a lab technician. Between that and his school work, Oskar was kept pretty busy.

Eli was just as cooperative. She helped him with the tedious process of recording the DNA sequences and was getting quite good at using the lab computer. She seemed to have unlimited patience, and would go over everything several times before she let him look at her work. She really put her heart into it. She told him it was like putting together a giant puzzle.

He had finally obtained samples of her wing webbing and bone structure, but couldn't yet pin down why the webbing was so strong, although he had some ideas. The underlying structure seemed to be made almost entirely of carbon in the form of C_{60} molecules. He had read that an Eiji Osawa of Toyohashi University of Technology had discussed such a carbon molecule and had predicted that, in mass quantities, it would have great strength and stability. He had predicted that the individual atoms in C_{60} would form a sphere replicating the pattern on a soccer ball – an extremely strong and stable structure, it turns out. This was apparently the case with respect to Eli's wings. Osawa was clearly on to something – but Eli had beaten him to a usable product by 220 years.

He looked up as Oskar and Eli came into the lab. "You're a little early this evening. Good, because we have a lot of work to do tonight." He noticed that Oskar looked upset. "What's wrong, Oskar? Did Eli beat you at arm wrestling again?" he joked.

Oskar said nothing as he looked down at his feet.

"He's upset because he saw his mom on TV before we came over. She was begging for whoever had him to let him go. She was crying."

Dawson quickly put his arm around his shoulder, "I can imagine how upsetting that must be for you." *I've wanted to talk to him about this since the beginning. Perhaps now's the time.* "You must love her very much. I can imagine how hard it was to leave your family behind."

“No, it wasn’t hard at all. Sometimes I feel awful about it, that I’m only thinking about myself. But I can’t help it. Eli is the only person who has ever really cared for me or understood me. With my parents, I always felt like I was in the way of something they would rather be doing. I could never talk to them about anything important, especially my Dad. He talked to me like I was still a little kid. And I just know that if I had gone home after Eli saved me, Mom would be more afraid about what the neighbors thought than anything else. Half the time I felt like I was older than she was. You’re the first grown-up that ever REALLY cared about me at all.” There were tears in his eyes. “I wish you were my dad. I love it here. I love doing things with you. You treat me like...a real person.”

“But you still love her. You can’t help it. She’s your Mom and you don’t want her to be sad because of you.”

“I’m sad because I’ve hurt my Mom, and can never go back, and I’m going to lose Eli, too. I’ll be right back where I started, but even more alone, because I love her – and I love my Mom.” He dissolved in tears.

Eli grabbed him and held him tightly, “I’ll always be with you...”

“No!! You won’t! We both know what’s going to happen.”

“You’re wrong Oskar! I promise you! Please, please, believe me.”

Oskar was inconsolable. He sat down, became quiet, and stared out the window. Dawson put his finger on his lips, and motioned for Eli to follow him to the back of the lab. “Let’s let him calm down for a few minutes, then I’ll try to talk to him. He needs to get this worked out in his own mind, and we have to help him. Why does he think he will lose you?”

“He thinks that when he grows up, I won’t love him any more. He’s wrong! But he’s even more afraid that he won’t love me anymore because I’m just a child.” Her voice broke. “Do you think he’s right? I couldn’t bear that!”

He hugged her, “I’m sure he’s wrong. He loves you too much. Unless you get too bossy and win at arm wrestling too often.”

She smiled and hugged him back. “Thanks. I promise I won’t.”

Dawson felt sorry that he had lied to her. He had seen this very possibility almost from the start. Unfortunately, Oskar was probably right. He shook his head. “Why don’t we do a little work? Maybe Oskar will join us when he feels up to it, but keep an eye on him.” He smiled at her. Eli sat down at the computer, as Dawson went over yesterday’s notes.

After awhile, Oskar got up, and slowly began cleaning the animal cages and feeding the mice. When he was finished, he came up behind Eli, and gave her a big hug and kissed her on the

cheek. Before she could respond, he went over to the lab refrigerator and methodically took out the new samples and set them on the bench next to his notebook.

Dawson looked up, "Oskar, we won't be injecting the new group for an hour or so. Why don't you leave them in the refrigerator until just before we need them?"

Oskar seemed not to hear him, as he laid out several syringes. Then, in one quick movement, he tilted up a vial and filled a syringe.

"Oskar! Don't!!" Dawson jumped up when he realized what Oskar was about to do, but he was too late. Oskar rammed the needle into his stomach through his shirt and pushed the plunger all the way in.

Dawson reached out, grabbed both Oskar's hands and twisted, forcing him to drop the syringe. It shattered on the floor.

Eli screamed and scrambled over to Oskar, who was now standing stiffly in front of Dawson.

"I'm sorry, Eli," he said softly. "Please don't be angry with me."

"Oskar! You could die!!" she screamed.

"But maybe I'll be like you." His voice was just a whisper.

Dawson grabbed him firmly, forced him to the floor, and opened his shirt. He could see the spot of blood where the needle had broken the skin. He looked up at Eli and shook his head. "He's done it! All we can do now is wait...and hope."

"But what's going to happen? It'll be awful if he ends up like me. He can't! What if he dies?" she was in an absolute frenzy.

Dawson grabbed her firmly by both shoulders, "I don't think he's going to die. The most probable outcome is that nothing at all will happen. Look at the batch of mice from the previous test. Aside from that minor behavior change, there were no lasting effects whatsoever. There's a good chance that nothing will come of this." *But the possibilities are frightening. This is an infection that DOES take hold in humans. Oskar is not a lab rat.*

"But what should we do?! We can't just stand here and do nothing!"

Oskar stood up, a little shakily. "I want to go home."

"To your Mother?" Dawson asked, startled.

"No! To OUR home. Eli's and mine. I want to go home!"

“We’ll do that, but first I want you and Eli to sit down, while I think this through.” Taking him to the hospital would be useless at this point, but if he goes downhill at some point, I’ll have no choice. Taking him home is probably the best idea. If he is infected, being there with Eli to help control him is the wisest option. I can bring my medical bag and monitor his vitals. In a pinch I could probably get Arvid to help me decide on the best plan of attack. We have to keep him alive at all costs – even if it results in his exposure to the police.

“Let me clean up the lab and get some things together. Then we’ll ALL go to the apartment. Eli, let me know instantly if you sense any changes in him.”

Without taking her eyes off him, Eli took both his hands in hers. “Oskar, I’ll take care of you. I love you so much! I can’t lose you.”

Oskar sighed, “Eli, I’m so sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t think of any other way. I wanted to be with you.”

Dawson quickly gathered up his things. They locked the lab behind them and went down the back stairs to the parking area.

§

Oskar went on into the apartment as Eli and Dawson got everything out of the trunk. Eli had reminded him that they might need extra blood if Oskar was turned, so they brought a loaded ice chest.

Upstairs, Dawson put the blood in Eli’s refrigerator, and they all sat around the table and waited. Every half-hour Dawson took Oskar’s pulse, blood pressure and temperature, while Oskar wrote it all down in his notebook. Every two hours, Dawson took a small blood sample.

By 3:00AM nothing had changed. Oskar was reading a book, while Eli was pacing up and down.

Oskar put his book down, “I’m really hungry!”

Dawson went into the kitchen and made a couple of sandwiches.

Oskar wolfed the first one down and started on the second. He finished it in short order, and had a glass of milk. “Could I have another one please?”

Eli and the professor looked at each other. “Oskar, you’ve already eaten twice as much as usual, and you’re still hungry?”

“I’m starving!” He headed for the kitchen ahead of Dawson and made himself another, and poured another glass of milk. By morning, he had eaten five sandwiches and a bowl of oatmeal.

Dawson peeked out the window, “The sun’s coming up. Oskar, come with me.” He started down the stairs.

Oskar followed and reached the foot of the stairs as Dawson opened the door a crack. Oskar eagerly put his hand in the beam of light. Nothing! He opened the door wide and stepped out into the sun. He couldn't hide the disappointment in his eyes. "It didn't work! Shouldn't it have worked by now?" He closed the door, dejected and went back up the stairs. Next thing he knew he was on the floor being covered with kisses.

"Oh Oskar!! It didn't work. You're still you!" she hugged him so tight he couldn't catch his breath. "Please, please, don't you ever try anything like that again! After all this time, I can't lose you! Promise me you won't try that again!"

Dawson managed a smile, but he was still worried. All that food was out of character for Oskar. Something was going on in his body that required a lot of energy. There had been a similar increase in appetite in the mice he had given the previous cultured injections to. Oskar wasn't out of the woods yet.

The two of them finally calmed down enough to go to bed. Dawson settled in on the couch, determined to wait it out at least another day. He finally fell asleep about 11:00AM.

Oskar and Eli were still awake, talking quietly in bed. "Oskar, you have to promise me that you won't try that again. The professor will find a cure. I'm sure of it. Wouldn't it be horrible if you had died for nothing? I would be cured, and all alone."

"I guess it was a stupid thing to do – and selfish." He looked at her, "I promise. Really. I really mean it."

She held his face in her hands, and put his lip between hers for a moment, then smiled. "I know you do"

He looked at her, astonished, "I didn't know how frightened you were. I'm so sorry." He gave her a big hug.

They lay together quietly for a while, as Oskar slowly fell asleep. *How did he know how frightened I was?* she thought fleetingly, just before she nodded off herself.

§

Dawson spent the next few days confirming his suspicions. Oskar's red cell count had gone up just as in the mice, but his had, for a brief time, reached the same level as Eli's normal count. The oxygen content had also neared her level. However, everything had dropped down to 50 percent above normal within three days. It was almost as if he had briefly succumbed to the disease, then successfully fought it off. His next step would be to look for antibodies to confirm this. Oskar's appetite had also dropped, but had leveled off at about 50 percent above what he normally ate. Yet he had actually lost about a pound since the first day.

At first, he had been reluctant to allow Oskar back into the lab, but Eli had finally convinced him that he wouldn't try anything stupid again. Finally, things were almost back to normal. Oskar had apologized to him many times, despite his assurances that he wasn't angry with him, and really understood why he had done it.

To relieve the tension, they had made plans to go downtown this evening to get their minds off the work. They all needed a little time off. Most of the snow had melted, since it was now Mid-March. It still got cold at night, but not so cold that you had to bundle up. He was going to take them to a film and let them experience the city at night. Eli was okay with them having dinner out. She thought it would be fun to sit in a real restaurant for the first time, even if she couldn't eat. She told him she would imagine what it would be like when she was cured.

Dawson had come in early to get a few things done and to free up more time for this evening. He was well under way when the phone rang.

Eli started talking before he had a chance to say a word. "Oskar's gone! He left to go buy me some nice clothes for tonight, but he hasn't come back yet and it's been over four hours. He was supposed to call me when he left the store. But he didn't call. I didn't want to worry you, but I'm so worried I had to call. Please, he was going to the big department store downtown. Could you go see if you can find him?"

"I'll leave right away! Stay by the phone. I'll call you as soon as I learn anything." He hurried downstairs and headed for the car. *He could be anywhere. With all the attention his mother has been getting lately, I should have warned them to lay low for a while. This is my fault!* He merged into traffic and headed for downtown. He listened for sirens and turned on the radio. If he had been recognized it would be on the news soon enough.

He pulled into the department store parking lot, parked, and started up the stairs. His heart sank as he saw a poster on the wall at the top of the stairs. "Have you seen this child?" it said, below a picture of Oskar with blond hair and another identical one showing Oskar with brown hair.

He stepped into the store, and looked around. He caught sight of another poster near the front door, and another near the cash registers. He could feel his pulse rate go up as he grabbed a pair of socks off a shelf, and as calmly as he could, walked over to the cashier. He took out his wallet and paid for the socks. "I hear you had a bit of excitement earlier. What happened?"

"I'm not sure. It was right before my shift, but they told me that the police came and took a boy away. There were four or five of them and they were with a woman who kept saying 'That's him! That's the one'."

Dawson's heart almost stopped! "That's interesting. I wonder who it was."

"I don't know, but it had to be important for it to take five policemen to bring him in. He was a little bit of a thing, according to Maria. Couldn't have been older than 12 or so, and he went away with them real quietly. He had a package with him. Maria said it was a real nice girl's dress that she had just put in a nice box for him. Imagine that!"

Dawson thanked her, pocketed his change and headed for the stairs. He rushed down to the car and headed for the apartment, his mind racing. *We've got to get Eli moved out of the apartment. It's only a matter of time before the police find it. Our only hope is that their neighbors don't put two and two together before we get it done.*

§

He pulled up to the curb, and rushed into the apartment. Eli was waiting at the top of the stairs. "Where's Oskar? Is he okay?"

"No! I think he's been taken into custody. Has there been anything on the news?"

"I've had the TV on all day, but there's been nothing! What are we going to do?"

"For starters, start packing. We need to get you out of here right away. Pack anything that will lead them back to the University. You're going to be staying with me for a while." Eli quickly went into the bedroom.

Suddenly, Oskar's face appeared on the screen. "Eli! Get out here! Quickly!"

He sat down on the couch as Eli rushed in and sat down beside him.

They watched as Oskar got out of the police car and was escorted into the police station.

"Oskar Eriksson, the young boy who was kidnapped during the gruesome murders and decapitations in Blackeberg last November, was spotted alone in Karlstad shortly after noon today by an alert shopper who immediately notified the police. He was successfully taken into custody by the Karlstad Police department. As of this time, he hasn't given them any information as to his whereabouts over the last four months, but the authorities are confident that he will eventually lead them to the murderer and they will finally be able to bring him to justice. His parents have been told the good news."

Eli broke down in tears, as the Professor put his arms around her.

Chapter 8: Oscar Flies

The Professor and Eli carried the small lab refrigerator down the stairs and placed it in the trunk. It was 3:00AM, and they had already made three trips to his house. This would be the last. No one had noticed anything; they had made sure of that. With Eli standing guard as he made trips to and from the car, he was confident that no one, even by chance, had seen them at all. Eli had already cleaned the apartment and wiped all the surfaces to remove fingerprints, but the odds of getting them all were against them. They had also removed all the cardboard from the windows, but had closed the drapes. Everything looked more normal that way.

Eli climbed into the car and they pulled away from the apartment. “How is Oskar going to find us if they let him go?”

“He could always go to the University, but I think it’ll be our job to find him – with your special help.” He smiled at her.

Thank God I put the phone on the phony name that Eli used to rent the apartment. But the phone repairman saw my face. He didn’t see Eli, though. Oskar had put the envelope with 3-months rent in cash into the landlord’s mailbox last week, so there will be no reason for him to be suspicious. I left a small light on in the bedroom, and Eli will carefully check the mailbox every few days. That way, we can keep up with the monthly bills. I’ll close out their savings account in the next few days. I just have to hope that they don’t connect it with Oskar, or else I’ll have a lot of explaining to do, and Eli will be in grave danger. All we can do now is hope they don’t find the apartment.

§

They pulled into the winding driveway that led to Dawson’s house. It was an old two-story brick house surrounded by trees, owned by the University for the use of visiting professors, and was secluded enough so neighbors would have to go out of their way to snoop. Eli would be safe here.

They moved the last of the boxes into the storage area, and moved her refrigerator into the kitchen. Then Dawson showed Eli her room, just down the hall from his on the second floor. It had massive wooden shutters on the window, so sunlight wouldn’t be a problem for her. These old houses didn’t let much light in anyway, so making it safe for Eli was a trivial task.

He sat next to her on the bed. “We need to be patient, and wait until the dust settles. Then we’ll figure out the best way to communicate with Oskar, and let him know that we’re working hard to get him free. Do you have any thoughts as to how we can do that?”

Eli had a dark look on her face, “I want to get him out – now. He’s scared and alone! I could do this!”

“No! You can’t! I don’t want innocent people hurt. You have to remember that and have some patience! We’ll get him back, I promise you. It’s almost morning, so I suggest you try to get some sleep”

He gave her a quick hug, and closed the door behind him as he left.

Eli listened until she could tell by his breathing that he had gone to sleep. She took off her clothes, folded them neatly on the chair, and opened the window. She carefully unlatched the shutters, and pushed them open slowly, making as little noise as possible.

She closed the window, crouched on the sill for a moment, then leaped into the darkness. She spread her wings, banked to the north and headed for downtown Karlstad.

§

“Sorry we had to be so abrupt with you, but we couldn’t take any chances that the killer might still be nearby. Are you okay? Can I get you anything?” The detective was sitting across the table from Oskar in a small room on the fourth floor of the police station. Oskar had counted, as he was escorted up the stairs by two burly policemen.

“Could I have a sandwich? And a glass of milk?”

“Sure! Odvar, would you get Oskar here a sandwich and a glass of milk?” The policeman by the door turned and went down the hall.

“Now, Oskar. Tell me where you have been the last four months.”

“I don’t know. He kept a hood over my head. He dropped me off at the department store this morning and drove away”

“I’d like to believe you, but if that’s true, why did you have a considerable sum of money in your pocket? And why would you buy a girl’s dress?” He opened the box on the table and pulled out a blue dress, leggings, and a pair of black shoes.

Oskar didn’t say anything.

“Why are you trying to protect him? He can’t hurt you anymore. We’ll keep you safe and get you back to your parents in a day or so. Is he holding a girl captive too? Is that why you’re not talking?”

“No! It was just me.”

Odvar put the sandwich and glass of milk on the table in front of Oskar and stepped back outside the door.

Oskar ate the sandwich eagerly and started on the milk. He was really hungry.

“Listen! We need to get to the bottom of this. Why do I get the feeling that you don’t want to cooperate with us? Is he threatening your family? We already have them under 24-hour surveillance. They are completely safe.” The detective was becoming impatient.

“I just don’t want to talk about it. I’m really tired. Could we talk about this tomorrow?”

“By tomorrow, your kidnapper could be out of the country. This is serious! You could actually be in trouble by not cooperating with us. We might even have to keep you in custody. Don’t you want to see your parents as soon as possible?”

Oskar looked down at his feet, with tears in his eyes. “I just don’t want to talk about it right now. I’m sorry.”

Another detective stepped into the room, squeezed Jocke’s shoulder a bit too hard, and sat down in front of Oskar. “Jocke, back off a little. You’re scaring him. Remember who the victim is here.” He gave Oskar an encouraging smile. “Let’s get you set up for tonight. We’ll talk more in the morning when you’re feeling better.” He put his arm around Oskar’s shoulder and walked him out of the room.

Jocke yelled after them as they continued down the hall. “I’ll be talking to you tomorrow morning, and you’d be wise to have some better answers for me then!”

“Don’t mind him. He’s a bit of a blowhard.” He smiled at Oskar as he led him down the hall to a barred metal gateway, where a guard unlocked the door for them.

“I know how this looks, but you’re really not under arrest. We just want to make sure you’re safe tonight.” He led Oskar into a room with a bed, nightstand, and a small separate bathroom. “This will be your bedroom tonight. It’s set up for the detectives on short shifts at night, so it’s not fancy. If you need anything, there’s an intercom on the wall here and someone will come right away. Your parents will be here tomorrow morning when you get up. There’s some reading material in the nightstand if you get bored and a small TV mounted on the wall over there. Any questions?”

Oskar shook his head.

“Okay then, We’ll talk to you tomorrow morning.” He closed the door behind him. Oskar could hear the key turn in the lock.

He went over and looked out the window. His room was on the corner above an alley. To the right, if he pressed his cheek against the window, he could barely make out the police cars lined up on the main street in front of the building. He went over and sat on the bed for a while, then pulled out a magazine and absently leafed through it. *What am I going to do? I won’t tell them anything that will lead them back to Eli and the Professor, no matter what they do to me. I won’t!! I think it would be better if I just don’t say anything at all. I’ll just say I can’t remember anything.*

He lay down on the bed. *This is the first time in four months that I haven't been with Eli. I miss her so much!* He fell into a fitful sleep.

He dreamed that Eli was flying over the city, back and forth as though looking for something. He saw through her eyes as she spotted the row of police cars, descended quickly and landed quietly on the roof. He watched as she looked over the edge of the building on each side, paced back and forth for a while, then sat down with her head in her hands, frustrated. *ELI! I'm here! ELI!* He jerked, then sat up in bed completely awake.

On the roof, Eli's head jerked up. *Oskar? Is that you? Where are you!?*

Oskar could feel his heart racing. Was Eli really nearby? Or was he still dreaming? He concentrated, *Eli! I'm in a room on the fourth floor in the corner by the alley, near the front of the police station. Eli? Can you hear me?*

Nothing! His hope began to fade. He knew it was impossible. But he was wide awake now and knew he would never get back to sleep. He paced the floor for a few minutes, then sat down on the edge of the bed.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

Startled, he looked up at the window. Eli! He saw her face framed in the window, smiling at him. The rush of joy almost overwhelmed him. She gently put her hand on the window and looked at him. He placed his hand over hers. *Eli! I've missed you so much! I'm such an idiot. I saw the poster when I went into the store, but I had to get you some clothes. I really didn't think anyone would notice, and at first no one did...*

Oskar! Do you know what you're doing? I can hear you but you're not talking! I heard you while I was on the roof. You told me where you were. It's like when we are kissing.

Oskar smiled at the thought. *Eli, can you get me out of here? I want to go home.*

The Professor told me not to...but... She raised a clawed hand to the window and pressed gently, and then more firmly against it. It didn't give. She began methodically digging away at the mortar surrounding the frame, and gradually was able to force a couple of fingers on both hands in between the window frame and the brick wall. She pulled hard, and the window made a cracking sound as the safety glass fractured and deformed. Finally, the window frame came loose in her hands. She disappeared for a moment as she climbed up and quietly placed the broken frame on the roof.

"Say that I can come in" she whispered.

"You can come in!!" he whispered fiercely.

She dropped to the floor quietly, took him in her arms, and hugged him tightly. “I hope I can carry you. I’ve never tried to fly with anyone before. I’m not wearing anything for you to grab hold of.”

Oskar took off his belt and fastened it around her waist. “Maybe this will help. I can put my arms through it like this and...”

There was a knock at the door. “Oskar? I’ve brought a doctor along. You need to be checked over before your parents arrive this morning – and we can have that talk afterwards.” They heard the jingle of keys as the lock turned.

Eli jumped up on the window sill and hesitated a moment as she thought her wings a bit bigger than usual. The door opened just as Oskar was slipping his arms between the belt and Eli’s waist.

Jocke couldn’t understand what he was seeing, but he yelled and pulled his gun reflexively. “Stop! What are you doing?” Oskar gasped as he was suddenly jerked rapidly out the window. He got a better grip, pulled himself forward, and laid his head in the small of her back. They fell like a rock two stories toward the pavement below as he hung on for dear life. He almost lost his grip when she suddenly leveled off, banked right, and flew out into the well-lit street in front of the police station about 20 feet above the ground. The shift was just changing and uniformed policemen were milling about in front of the station. Twenty pairs of eyes followed them as Eli flapped her wings powerfully and disappeared over the low wall on the other side of the street. She smiled wickedly. The devil was in her!

“Oskar, you’re heavy! You’re going to have to stop eating all that candy.”

“No, it’s not that! You just need to get a bit more exercise and stop **hanging** around the apartment all day. You’re not a bat, you know!”

She gracefully banked to the south and headed back toward the Professor’s house. Oskar could feel the muscles in her back rhythmically tightening with each powerful thrust of her wings. Suddenly, it was as though he were Eli. He could feel the wind in her face, could feel the air currents and eddies as they flowed under her wings, the pressure with each downward thrust, and the calm serenity when she glided on the updrafts. He felt exhilarated, as night became as clear as day and he could see into the windows of homes almost to the horizon. The stars in the sky were almost unbearably bright, and the street lights twinkled unevenly as the shadows of tree branches and power lines passed between them as they flew past. He could see the red glow of animal eyes as they went about their nighttime business, and off to the east, he could see the first signs of a lightening sky. He ever so gently tightened his grip around her waist, and he could feel Eli smile.

As they approached the house, Eli descended quickly, then abruptly pulled up and circled around the house. *The window is wide open. I left it closed.* She listened carefully, then slowly descended again and dropped gently into the room. *The Professor is here!* Oskar stood up and removed his belt from Eli’s waist. She quickly put on her clothes.

The Professor was sitting in a chair in the dark, watching them. “Eli, didn’t I ask you to wait? That we would work this out together?” he sounded angry.

“Yes, but...”

“If we don’t trust each other, how are we going to get through this? I need to know that we’re together on these things.” He went over to Oskar and gave him a big hug. “Are you all right? Did you see your parents? I was so worried about you both when I saw that Eli was gone.”

“I’m fine! My parents were supposed to see me later this morning. Please don’t blame Eli. She wasn’t going to rescue me. She just wanted to find me. She told me you didn’t want her to, but I talked her into it. It’s my fault!”

Dawson turned to Eli, “I should have asked you what happened first. I’m sorry. I’m sure Oskar’s request would be hard for you to turn down. In fact, for you, I know it would be impossible.” He smiled at her.

“Now! Tell me all about it. What happened?”

They both started talking at once. When they got to the part after the leap out the window, Dawson interrupted them. “You mean to say that you deliberately flew out into the street when you could have just as easily turned left down the alley and gotten away relatively unnoticed?”

Eli nodded and flashed him a huge grin. Dawson shook his head, but smiled in spite of himself.

“I should be angry with you, you know. They’re going to scour the city looking for you. They’re going to be especially angry now that you both have made utter fools of them all.” He was surprised that somehow he felt relieved. He knew his sabbatical would be up soon and he dreaded the decision he would have to make. Now, Eli had pretty much made it for him.

“Oskar, you realize you can never go back now don’t you? They will make life miserable for you until you tell them who and what Eli is, and that would be the end of it for your chances to be together.”

“Yes, I know. I understand and I’m okay with it. I will want to write my Mom a letter sometime soon though.”

“Yes, of course. I understand perfectly.”

He paused a moment, “I’ve given our situation a great deal of thought and have come up with what I think is our best long-term option. What I’m proposing is that you two return with me to England when my Sabbatical is over in June. You would be living with me permanently, and I would take steps to become your legal guardian. It will be difficult, especially for you, Oskar, because obtaining fake papers and passports with your photograph all over the news, could cause us problems. Assuming it can be done, how do you two feel about it? Obviously you would be

much safer there, and I would have access to many more resources to make sure Eli has an adequate food supply. And my research could continue uninterrupted. What do you think?"

Eli looked at Oskar, "I say yes. It means we won't have to stay hidden."

"I agree! And I'll be able to work in the lab again. Won't I?"

"Of course you will. Now then, how's your English?" He looked questioningly at both of them.

"I speak English just fine," Eli said, in almost perfect English. "I spent 15 years in England about 50 years ago."

"Well, you're full of surprises. Oskar?"

"I speak some English, but I've only had a couple of years in school."

"Good! Eli can tutor you. For the next couple of months, I want you to concentrate on it. Any questions or concerns?"

"I'm hungry" they said in unison, then laughed.

"Well, come on in the kitchen and we'll see what I can come up with."

As he prepared breakfast for Oskar, Eli went to her refrigerator and helped herself.

They had a long talk with the Professor about the details of the "Great Escape," as Oskar called it. He was astounded that Oskar was able to communicate with Eli over real distance.

"Oskar, obviously the injection had an effect on you. Let's try something." He took a deck of cards out of a drawer, shuffled them, and placed them on the table. "I'm going to look at each card, and you are going to tell me what it is."

He picked up the Four of Clubs, and looked at Oskar. "Well?"

"I'm sorry. I don't see anything."

They tried a few more cards, with no success.

"Okay. Eli? You try it."

She took the deck. "Ready!"

"Six of Hearts?"

"Yep."

"Three of Diamonds?"

"Yes"

"Two of Clubs"

“Yep.”

Oskar correctly guessed the rest of the cards in the deck.

“Okay! Now, according to both of you, Eli was able to communicate her thoughts to you sometimes before you injected yourself. How did she do that?”

“I’m not going to kiss you!” Oskar said, red-faced.

Dawson laughed, “No, of course not.” He paused. “Not even in the name of science?” Oskar turned even redder.

The Professor shuffled the cards, remembering his attempt to save Eli’s life when she stopped breathing. *Physical contact must be the key here.*

“Why don’t you just take hold of my hand, like Eli did when we first met.” He reached across the table and took Oskar’s hand, and looked at the first card.

“Eight of Clubs.”

“Correct.” Dawson looked pleased.

“Ace of Spades.”

“Correct again”

“Nine of Hearts?”

“Nope. Try again.”

“Nine of Diamonds.”

“Correct!.”

It wasn’t perfect, but he guessed about 2/3 correctly the first time, and the rest on the second try. Chance obviously played no part in it.

“Okay, each of you take a piece of paper and a pencil. Oskar, go upstairs to the study at the end of the hall. Turn over each card and write it down. Eli will stay here and do the same. Just yell when you are ready to begin. Oskar went upstairs.

“OKAY, I’M STARTING” he yelled.

Eli started writing, *Slow down, Oskar! I can’t write that fast.*

Okay, Okay! Try abbreviating them. It goes faster! You know, 3s for three of spades, kd for king of diamonds, and so on.

I was! Do you think I’m stupid?

Well...

She could see him grinning.

“What’s wrong? Can’t you hear him?” the Professor asked.

“Actually I hear him a bit too well,” she said sarcastically.

Dawson looked up after checking their papers “Well, that was a complete success! You both get A plus on the test. Now, we’re going to try something a little different. Oskar, this time I want you to look at the cards, but don’t communicate them to Eli. Let’s see if she can still pick them up. Then we’ll reverse it to see if Oskar can pick them up if Eli tries to block them.”

When they had finished, Dawson checked the papers twice just to make sure he had gotten it right.

“Well, Oskar. It seems you have the advantage on this one. You were able to successfully block over 50% of your ‘transmissions’ to Eli, but she was unable to block any of hers to you.”

“So that means Eli’s mind is an open book to me?” he grinned.

“Well at least my ‘book’ isn’t full of blank pages like yours,” she snapped.

“Now, now. I don’t think it’s as simple as that. Oskar, can you actually read her mind right now?

He hesitated for a minute, “No, I can’t. It must be empty.”

“Eli? Can you read Oskar?”

“No.” she glared at him.

“I can now!” Oskar said, laughing, as he dodged away from her just before she grabbed at him.

The Professor laughed, “Neither of you need to worry about your personal privacy. Communication only seems to happen when you are both trying at the same time, or,” he paused, “trying not to at the same time, if that makes any sense. Strong emotions seem to play a part also, which is why you were able to communicate with Oskar on the roof of the police station. Remember, he heard you first – he saw through your eyes. That’s why you were ultimately able to save him.”

Eli and Oskar smiled at each other.

Truce?

Truce!

“Well, that’s enough for now. We all have a lot to think about, and the sun is already up. Let’s get some sleep, and tonight, we’ll check the TV and newspapers and decide what to do next.”

He put his arms around their shoulders as they went up the stairs together. He waved them down the hall, as he went into his own room and closed the door. *Every day is better than the one*

before! This is the most fun I've had in years! But there was a dark side, he remembered. What else about Oskar could have changed since the injection? Were there others still incubating?

§

Eli and Oskar took their showers, brushed their teeth, and practiced thinking at each other.

Oskar, were you afraid we wouldn't come?

No, I knew you would come, but I was afraid it would be too late. I was afraid my Mother would take me back to Blackeberg, and I wouldn't see you for a long time. But you came. You came!

I couldn't stand not knowing where you were. I was so afraid. The professor didn't want me to go, because he thought there was a chance I would hurt innocent people, and maybe he was right – but I didn't.

Finally, Eli and Oskar climbed into their new bed together. Oskar hugged her tightly, “Thank you for saving me – again.”

“I just felt sorry for you. I knew you couldn't stand being without me for even a single night.”

Oskar looked at her for a moment, then closed his eyes and kissed her.

Suddenly Eli saw herself as a beautiful kneeling angel, surrounded by light, head down, and wings folded in front of her. As she rose and spread her wings, Eli saw her face, more beautiful than she could ever have imagined. “Oskar! That's not me! I'm not like that at all!”

“Stop talking!” He kissed her again. Eli saw herself as a slightly more disheveled angel with tangled black hair tumbling chaotically around her face, but this time she was wearing her favorite pants.

“Oskar!!”

They both started laughing hysterically.

Dawson smiled to himself, as he heard them laughing down the hall. *In spite of Eli's strengths, they're both so fragile, like two little fireflies. And it will take all my strength and determination to keep them from flying into the flame. They are each other's greatest weakness – and strength. I'm lucky to have them both in my care. I suppose that makes me selfish, but at this point, I don't care.*

Chapter 9: Laying Low

Oskar and Eli heard the car pull up outside. The professor came in with the newspaper.
“Anything on the news yet?”

“The evening news starts in half an hour. Anything about us in the paper?” Oskar asked.

He grinned at them, “Yes actually, and it’s quite interesting.” He opened the paper to the front page and read:

“RESCUED CHILD KIDNAPPED AGAIN.

Early this morning, a person or persons unknown were able to somehow breach security at police headquarters in downtown Karlstad, and retake Oskar Erickson, the boy who had been recovered only yesterday. The police were in the process of questioning the boy about his experiences with his abductor, who is the prime suspect in the gruesome murders and decapitations in Blackeberg last November. Somehow, he was taken from a high security area at the station. Inside sources tell us that a heavily reinforced window was literally torn out of the wall on the fourth floor. Officers found the remains of the window on the roof of the station, and concluded that the perpetrators made their escape over the roof somehow. Chief Detective Jocke Ellstrom is convinced that the boy went willingly, as he was hostile and uncooperative when first questioned.

“There were also conflicting eye-witness reports of a huge, dark, bat-like ‘bird’ that flew out of the alley and across the street in front of the station at about the same time the kidnapping occurred. Some said the bird seemed to be carrying two children and insisted that one of them, based on clothing and appearance, was the missing boy. The other was dressed all in white. The mayor and chief of police both dismissed the reports as ridiculous and unbelievable. An unnamed uniformed officer insisted it was some kind of glider or small plane, but no trace of it was found in the surrounding area. A curfew of 8:00PM has been imposed on the city for a week’s duration, while the authorities conduct door-to-door searches in the immediate area and monitor all air and rail services in or out of the Karlstad area. Roadblocks have been set up on all major and most minor routes out of the city.”

Eli clapped, “Hostile and uncooperative? Bravo, Oskar!”

“I wasn’t hostile!”

The professor broke in, “You two will have to stay inside until further notice. You can’t even step out for a second. My neighbors are respectful of privacy, but in this climate, they will be alert. Unfortunately, I will have to leave you alone for most of the day. I need to make my work schedule as normal as possible to avoid attracting attention. I am going to shut down our work in the lab until we get to London. Call me on my private line immediately if anything happens. If I need to contact you, I will let the phone ring twice, then hang up. Call me back immediately.”

“What about the mice?” Oskar asked.

“Sorry Oskar, I am going to have to destroy all those we injected with Eli’s unaltered blood. It’s too dangerous to others to allow them to survive.”

“But what about the others? You can’t just kill them!”

“Oskar, we have to... I’ll tell you what! I’ll bring home the last ten, the ones we injected with the last cultured batch and you can take care of them until we leave in June. There are enough cages and equipment in the storeroom in the back of the garage. You’ll be responsible for them however. We’ll decide on their final disposition in June.”

“Okay. I promise I’ll take good care of them. Thanks!”

“You’re welcome.”

“Eli, it’s time for the news. Let’s see what our local news folks think about all this.” They went into the living room together and turned on the TV. The news was just beginning.

“The Karlstad Police Department got egg on their face early this morning when the young boy kidnapped during the murders and mutilations at the pool in Blackeberg last November was kidnapped again while in a high security area at Police Headquarters downtown. Some of the unofficial stories we’ve heard about the incident are absolutely unbelievable! Of course excuses abound, but in our humble opinion, there is no excuse for the incompetence and gross negligence that led to this comedy of errors.

“Despite the boy being held in protective custody in a high security area on the fourth floor of the building, some mysterious person or persons unknown not only managed to get up on the roof of the building unseen, but somehow, knowing exactly where he was, were able to scale down the side of the building, noiselessly remove a case-hardened steel-reinforced window with half-inch thick safety glass, twist it like a pretzel, place it on the roof, and escape without leaving a trace, unless you count the unbelievable stories about a giant bat that flew off with – are you ready for this? – not one, but two children in its talons. One was identified by 10 or more of Karlstad’s Finest as the boy, based on descriptions of his clothes. The other unknown child was said to have been dressed entirely in white – perhaps his guardian angel? If we take these reports at face value, then all efforts to apprehend them will be in vain. After all, who stands a chance against the Almighty and his minions? We all breathlessly await future developments and are keenly interested in seeing whose heads roll first. Our own first hope would be the head of our favorite Chief of Detectives, Jocke Ellstrom, who has through his ‘grace’ and ‘kindness,’ endeared himself to so many of us. And we all have the psychological bruises to prove it. And now for other less-interesting news...”

The professor turned off the set. “Case-hardened steel? You’ve really outdone yourself, Eli. Remind me to run some tests to determine the limits of your raw strength. If it weren’t for the

laws of inertia, you being a featherweight, you probably wouldn't have lost to the moose in the head-to-head."

"What do you mean 'lost'? Where's the moose now?" Eli said sarcastically.

"I can't, and won't argue with that!" he laughed.

"So the second kid was dressed all in white? At least he got that one right, Eli. You were in your best birthday suit, just back from the cleaners. My naked guardian angel." Oskar ducked as she grabbed for him behind the professor.

"Well, at least my outfit didn't look like I had slept in it like yours did. Mine is definitely wash-and-wear. Except for the belt." She stuck her tongue out at Oskar.

"On a more sober note, it sounds like you two have a real enemy now. Ellstrom is not going to forget this anytime soon, assuming he survives the wrath of City Hall. We're going to have to be extremely careful."

§

A month had passed, and they had finally settled into a daily routine. Dawson would go into work every morning, and return about 5:30PM. Oskar would then clean the cages, feed and water the mice, and sit down with Eli and practice his English. Every third night or so, Eli would fly to their old apartment, check for mail and move the small lamp to a new location. She also decided to check the neighborhood for fliers with Oskar's picture on them, and remove any she found.

Dawson had successfully shut down their saving account with no apparent problem and, according to Eli, the apartment was undisturbed. No one had linked it to them at this point.

This particular evening, Eli and Oskar were watching the mice scurrying about in the big cage; Oskar's English lesson had been more boring than usual, and he easily talked Eli into taking a break. The mice were still exhibiting the same strange behavior, but this time, the two of them were watching them more carefully.

"Oskar, I wonder; do you think maybe they are talking to each other, like you and I can do now?"

"You mean mice with ESP" Oskar laughed. "Wouldn't that be cool! I wonder if we could figure out what they might be saying to each other? It couldn't be too complicated, whatever it is. Like maybe, 'Do you know that cute girl's name?' or 'When's lunch? Or 'M'god, I just stepped in your poop!' or 'Why don't you join me in the Kiosk? For a banana?'"

Eli laughed, "Or 'You all look alike to me. Girls, line up over there; boys, over here.' Or 'Wow! your butt sure smells good.' Or maybe every time they bump into each other its 'Pardon me' and 'Oh no – pardon ME' They could be very polite mice."

“The lunch thing gives me an idea.” He took a couple kernels of corn and quickly slipped them in the corner of the cage. A couple of minutes later, one of the mice discovered them and nibbled away at them. “Eli, watch who he touches first, while I put some more food down.” Eli watched the mouse carefully as he mingled with the others, at the same time Oskar replaced the eaten kernels. As soon as their mouse brushed up against another one, it headed immediately for the same corner and grabbed the new corn that Oskar had just placed there.

Eli and Oskar looked at each other. “Wow, how neat is that?” They tried the same experiment using different locations in the cage, and it worked every time. Soon, however, all ten were madly scrambling for the different locations, depending on which mouse they had last come in contact with. “I guess there are no secrets among these guys anymore. Just like with you and me.” Eli said.

“At least, not for the important stuff, like where the food is stashed. Too bad we don’t both have the same food requirements.”

Eli gave him a funny look.

“EEWW! No, No! Like mine. Like mine!” Oskar shuddered.

When Dawson came home, they lost no time telling him what they had discovered. He watched, fascinated, as they repeated the experiment for him.

“Well done! That would never have occurred to me. There’s nothing better than having fresh eyes looking at a dead-end experiment. This means that Oskar has picked up the same talent, so we need to watch these mice more carefully for other symptoms.”

“I guess the fact that none of them has died, is a good thing then.” Eli said.

“That’s an understatement,” Dawson laughed.

Eli and Oskar carried the cage back out into the storeroom, and put the mice back in their cages on the rack.

“I wonder what else they can do? They don’t drink blood, and they’re not strong, or else they would have made their own ‘Great Escape’ They also can’t fly, as far as we know.” Oscar said.

“You’re starting to sound like the Professor,” Eli teased.

“Well, remember. What they have, I may have.”

“You’re right! I’ll get worried when you start squeaking and running around in circles.”

They went back upstairs and started in on their English lessons. Later, they watched the news with the Professor. Apparently, Chief Detective Jocke Ellstrom had indeed been fired for

incompetence, along with several others who had been overseeing Oskar that night. Oskar hoped that the detective who had been kind to him still had his job.

§

Oskar looked at his watch. 7:00AM. It was time to feed the mice before He and Eli went to bed. He went into the garage, and immediately felt chilly. It had been unusually cold that night, dropping well below freezing for the first time in over a month. He was startled to see that the door to the storage area was wide open. Had they forgotten to close it earlier? He rushed in to check the cages. Six of the mice were huddled together in a corner of the cage, but four were lying on their backs, apparently dead or dying. The water in their water dish was frozen. He quickly turned on the heater, and opened the cage. He reached in and gently prodded one of the motionless mice, but got no reaction. He put food in the food dish and refilled the water dish, "I hope I haven't killed them! That would be awful!" The other mice slowly moved out of their huddle and went for the food and water. The temperature in the room was almost back to normal when he finally shut the door behind him and rushed up the stairs. "Professor! I think I may have killed some of our mice. I left the door open last night, and their water dish was frozen and four of them may be dead." He had tears in his eyes.

"Let's go take a look" They hurried out to the garage, and entered the storeroom. The temperature inside was stable now, and the mice were behaving normally. "Where are the dead mice?"

Oskar looked around, then counted the mice. All ten were alive and well. "I don't know! I guess they were just sleeping or something. But they were on their backs!"

Dawson watched them carefully for a few minutes. "Well, it looks like everything is okay now. Oskar, you're going to have to be more careful. You have taken responsibility for these animals and I expect you to take it seriously."

"I'm really sorry! I promise I'll be more careful from now on"

The Professor smiled at him. "I'm sure you will. Now get on up to bed. I'll be leaving for work in a few minutes." *There's something odd about this. Mice don't sleep on their backs. What could this mean?* He was becoming worried for Oskar again.

Oskar climbed into bed with Eli, looking a bit sad.

"I'm sorry, Oskar. It was my fault. I took your mind off what you were supposed to be doing."

"No, it's my responsibility, and I blew it. Now the Professor is disappointed with me."

"I'll help you! I'll make a check list on the computer for you and you can check off each job when you finish it!"

Oskar hugged her. “Thanks! You’re always on my side! I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Well, for starters, you would probably sleep at night like regular people.” She hugged him back.

§

The Professor got home from work a bit late, and hurried toward the kitchen. “Come on kids, We have something we need to talk about.” They all went into the kitchen and sat down at the table. “I’ve finished emptying out the lab, and all my notes are now in the storeroom. I even brought this home for you.” He set Eli’s egg on the table.

“I think you should have this with you now. It’s been with you every time you moved for over 100 years. I think it brings you luck And I know it’s safe here – especially since YOU are here.”

“I was going to ask you to bring it home, but I was kind of afraid! How did you know?”

“It’s my job to know these things.” *That’s the first time she’s called this home!* He felt happy for her.

“Thank you! Thank you!” She gave him a big kiss on the cheek and hugged him tightly.

Now to more serious matters. I think it’s safe enough now for us to made one last trip to the apartment to make sure we didn’t leave anything behind. I also sent our termination notice to the landlord so he’ll be able to rent the apartment out before we leave in June. I’ll feel much safer when we are out of there for good. I thought we could go late tonight. I’ve already set times for the utilities to be shut off, and all bills are paid in full. Eli, Tonight you can rest your wings and drive over there with us.”

They had dinner together, and played a few games of Scrabble, in which they could only use English words. As usual, Oskar lost. “Why don’t we play in another language? Eli, are there any languages you don’t speak?”

“Eskimo. I can’t speak Eskimo.” She said sarcastically. “But then ... neither can you. You lost! Take it like a man...I mean boy.”

He threw a couple of tiles at her. “Just you wait! Once I’m in school in London, I’ll pick up all the slang, and you won’t stand a chance against me.”

“Okay, kids, that’ll do. It’s time to get going.” Dawson got up, grabbed his coat, and headed for the door.

Eli poked Oskar and they both scrambled after him.

§

Jocke Ellstrom sat in the dark in the bedroom, waiting. He had been checking the mailbox for two weeks and had noticed that the mail was picked up regularly about every three days, but always late at night. The refrigerator was empty, and there was no sign that anyone lived here regularly. He had also noticed that the one lamp in the apartment was moved to a new location on the same days the mail was picked up. With luck, he would get his answers tonight. The fingerprint he had found on the inside of the bed frame matched Oskar Erickson's index finger. He was sure the boy had lived here. He hadn't been able to trace the renter because all transactions had been in cash. The landlord didn't remember much about the man who had rented it, but his impression had been that he was a bit threadbare and seedy-looking. The landlord had been surprised that he had enough cash for three months rent in advance. All utilities and the phone had been paid in cash under the same name. The phone repairman actually remembered nothing about the installation at all. He thought there might have been a man and a young boy at the apartment, but he wasn't sure. He couldn't identify the photo of Oskar.

Unfortunately, since Ellstrom had been fired, he didn't have the resources at his disposal to do further research, and without his badge, he couldn't use coercion or threats to get information. He was convinced the boy was a willing participant in the original murders. His limited research had turned up a serial killer in Blackeberg who had lived in an apartment adjacent to Oskar's, and had apparently committed suicide a few days before the pool massacre, and even though he had been ridiculed and not believed for his description of the events the night of Oskar's escape, he was sure he had seen a small, naked or semi-naked girl with shoulder-length black hair, jump out the window just ahead of Oskar. That would certainly explain whom the clothes he had purchased were for. And there had to have been at least one adult on the roof strong enough to have quickly hauled them up.

After he was fired, he made this case his own personal crusade. He had already compiled a list of all apartments in the city that had been rented within a month of the Blackeberg murders, and had systematically been checking them all, until, in one neighborhood, he noticed that the unofficial flyers he had been posting were being removed almost as soon as he put them up. He began watching the three apartments on his list in the area, and had finally narrowed it down to this one. Finding the fingerprint had been the frosting on the cake. He couldn't wait to see the look on the Chief's face when he single-handedly brought them all in. He wasn't going to share the credit with anyone on this case.

§

Dawson parked the car in the shadows two blocks away. With Eli in the lead, the three of them walked quietly toward the apartment. They waited in the shadows as Eli unlocked the door and stepped in. Quickly, they followed her up the stairs.

"Oskar, you check the bedroom. Eli, the kitchen. I'll go over the living room, and dining room and then we'll switch rooms and do it all again. Remember to wear your gloves if you have to touch anything, and wipe off any areas you think you may have missed before." Dawson went over to the couch and removed the cushions, looking for anything that might have fallen into the couch lining.

Oskar stepped back suddenly from the bedroom door.

“Well! It looks like I hit the jackpot this time.” Jocke stepped into the living room with his gun drawn. “Hello Oskar. Why don’t you introduce me to your friends? I believe I met you briefly at the Police Station, young lady, but you didn’t hang around long enough for introductions. Too Bad! I didn’t have a chance to give you that nice dress Oskar bought for you.” He sneered at Dawson, “And who might you be? Their pimp?”

“How dare you speak like that in front of the children? Nothing you think we may have done justifies that kind of language.”

“You three cost me my job. Don’t expect any ass-kissing from me. You can take up my rude behavior with the Mayor and Chief of Police from your jail cell, however I don’t think you’ll get much sympathy from them either. I don’t know how deeply involved these children were in the Blackeberg murders, but I’m certain of the part you played in them; and, of course, I’m sure you’re connected to the serial killer who lived next door to Oskar. It’s too much of a coincidence. You’re about to find out what happens when someone makes a fool out of me.” He hit Dawson hard with his gun.

Eli made a low growling sound as he went down, but he quickly held his hand up to stop her, “Eli! Don’t!”

Eli stepped back, her face red with anger.

“What were you going to do, little girl? Slap my face?” he laughed.

“I’m not a girl!” she snarled.

“Oh this just gets better and better! What kind of shit are you running here? Kiddie porn? Gay sex? Orgies? What happened in Blackeberg? The kids at the pool wouldn’t go along with your disgusting perversions, so you killed them?”

“I’d be careful if I were you. You’re a private citizen now. You don’t have the right to hold us, let alone arrest us. In fact right now, I could have you arrested for assault, as well as breaking and entering. We have committed no crimes, and are on this property legally. You clearly are not.” Dawson started to get to his feet.

“Stay where you are! I’ll tell you when you can get up!” He lunged forward and grabbed Oskar by the hair. “Now Oskar, will you please tell me where you are staying currently? I’m done treating you like a victim. You forfeited that right when you escaped from the Police Station. Or would your pimp here like to tell me instead?” Oskar’s head jerked back and he stumbled, as Ellstrom pulled his hair.

“Eli, back off!” Dawson warned.

He turned to Ellstrom “I’ll tell you what you want to know as soon as you let him go.”

Ellstrom pushed Oskar away. “I’m listening!”

“My name is Richard Dawson. I’m a visiting Professor at Karlstad University. These children are staying with me in my home. They have done nothing wrong and I won’t have you manhandling them and treating them like common criminals.”

“I hate to point this out, but what the hell do you think you’re going to do about it? One phone call and the entire Karlstad Police Force will be here in a matter of minutes. In fact, I think I’m done talking.” He backed up toward the hallway.

Oskar suddenly brushed past Ellstrom, bolted for the phone, grabbed the cord and jerked it out of the wall. An explosion rocked the apartment; Oskar jerked, spun around, crashed into the end table and fell to the floor. An expanding pool of blood formed around his head as Eli ran to him.

“Oskar!!” Eli screamed, and took his bloody head in her hands. He was unconscious and bleeding profusely.

“You killed him!” she screamed “You killed him! You killed him!!”

“Get back,” Ellstrom shouted at Dawson. “I didn’t mean to shoot him! It happened too fast, and I just reacted. I told you not to push me!”

“Get out of the way and let me help him! You’re going to have to shoot me to stop me.” Dawson pushed past him and knelt beside Oskar. He felt his pulse – rapid, but still strong. He wiped away the blood on the side of his head with his handkerchief and breathed a sigh of relief. The bullet had grazed his head, but left a deep two-inch-long gash that was still bleeding heavily. He pressed the handkerchief to the wound. *I left my medical bag at home. We’ll have to get him back quickly so I can make sure he’s ...*

He heard a sound he hadn’t heard in years, but louder; more sinister. It brought back childhood memories of a time he was on a camping trip with his Father, and was frightened awake in the middle of the night by two tomcats crying and growling at each other in the dark. He had never forgotten that chilling, unearthly sound.

He turned around as he realized it was coming from Eli. He looked into her hate-filled eyes, and saw them change fluidly into the golden cat-eyes he had seen the first day, only there was no trace of humanity in them; they were the empty lifeless eyes of a primordial predator. Ellstrom’s jaw dropped and he backed toward the bedroom. Eli moved haltingly at first, as though she was somehow conflicted; then she started rapidly towards him. Her body jerked twice as Ellstrom managed to get off two shots before her fangs sank into his neck. Dawson heard the two high-velocity bullets thud into the kitchen wall after passing entirely through her body. Eli’s head jerked as she ripped away a piece of his throat and flung it against the wall. The gun clattered to the floor. Ellstrom began screaming as the force of her attack threw him into the darkness of the bedroom. Dawson heard two more screams, then a third that was choked off. He could hear the

animal sounds of her feeding. He watched the door anxiously as he heard the chilling sound of bones breaking and tendons snapping, then nothing.

Eli appeared, demon-like, in the doorway, holding Ellstrom's head in her clawed hands. She raised it in front of her, crushed it like a melon, and tossed it into the living room, where it slid and rolled across the floor, coming to a stop against the couch. Her dark eyes turned toward Dawson. Her fangs were dripping blood as she crouched for a moment, then moved forward stealthily towards him. He looked directly into those awful eyes for a moment, then closed his eyes and held Oskar's hand in his. *Let this happen. I deserve this. This is all my fault. I couldn't even protect him for Eli.* He felt resigned to his fate.

He jerked reflexively as he felt her arms wrap around his neck, and her cheek press firmly against his. She was sobbing inconsolably.

"Eli, he's alive! You need to hold this against his head while I get some water from the kitchen."

She quickly sat down beside Oskar and gently pressed the handkerchief to his head. Finally, she lay down next to him and pulled him close to her. Dawson could hear her whispering to him as she gently rocked him in her arms.

Chapter 10: The Awakening.

Dawson walked into the living room, picked up the gun, and laid it on the counter in the kitchen. As he headed back toward the hall with a wet towel, he heard a loud pop behind him and turned to see a tongue of flame coming from under the stove. He saw the two bullet holes in the oven door and realized immediately what had happened.

“Eli! We’ve got to get out of here! Now!”

He ran over to her, but she showed no sign of having heard him. “Eli! Get up! We have to go! The apartment is on fire!”

He reached down, handed her the towel, and lifted Oskar off the floor.

“No! I’ll carry him!” he could hear the anxiety in her voice. He gently lowered Oskar into her arms, and they headed for the door as the flames licked up the wall. The drapes and kitchen cabinets were beginning to burn by this time.

As they went out the front door, Dawson headed for the downstairs apartment, but saw the ‘For Rent’ sign taped to the door. He breathed a sigh of relief and followed Eli down the street toward their car. Dawson opened the back door, pulled out a blanket and laid it on the ground. Eli gently placed Oskar on the blanket, still holding the damp towel to his head, while the Professor quickly wrapped it around him.

He lifted Oskar and placed him on the back seat with his head in Eli’s lap. She stroked his hair as they drove silently towards home. They could hear the sound of the fire engines behind them.

“Eli, I think he is going to be okay, but we have to wake him up, so I can make sure he doesn’t have a concussion. Can you do that?”

“I’ll try.” *Oskar! Wake up! You have to wake up. Please!* She shook him gently.

“Oskar! Listen to me. You’ve got to wake up now!”

Oskar’s eyes fluttered open for a second, then closed again. *Eli, what happened? I remember pulling out the phone cord, and then I can’t remember anything.*

“Oh Oskar! He shot you! We thought you were dead.” She kissed him gently on the forehead.

He opened his eyes. “Where are we? Where is Detective Ellstrom? What...”

The Professor interrupted, “First things first! Can you see okay? Can you move your fingers and toes? Do you feel any tingling?”

“I can see just fine. But I can’t move. This blanket is too tight!”

“Well, that’s the only way we can keep you from killing yourself!” Eli said crossly. “What were you thinking?! He had a gun. I would never have forgiven you if you had gotten yourself killed.”

Oskar grinned at her. “Boy, did that sound stupid!”

“So now I’m stupid? Who got himself shot? Who’s lying here with a bloody head?” she started crying.

“I’m sorry Eli, I just couldn’t stand the thought of you going to jail. I had to do something.”

“Well, now he’s dead, the apartment is burned down, and I broke my promise to the Professor. I killed him and then I” she sobbed, and turned to Dawson “I can’t do anything right, and I almost killed you too!”

“But you didn’t! Don’t you realize that the only reason I didn’t kill him myself is because I couldn’t? I haven’t got your strength. That’s the only difference between us in this situation. And you don’t have that by choice. You didn’t do anything I wouldn’t have done myself if I had your courage.”

Eli squeezed Oskar’s hand, as the tears ran down her face. “Please Oskar, don’t ever do anything like that again. I can take care of myself.”

“Yes, but you shouldn’t have to. Sometimes I want to take care of you myself, because ...I just do!”

Dawson smiled to himself. *He seems to be just fine. Eli will be able to keep him awake until we’re sure he’s safe. She seems to be quite good at that, it turns out.*

§

Eli carried Oskar up to their room against his protests, as Dawson put the car in the garage. He went to get his bag, then headed up the stairs after Eli.

Eli gently put Oskar on their bed. Dawson came into the room and sat down beside him. His pulse was stronger now. He checked his heart with the stethoscope; nice, even heart rhythm. He felt his arms, probed his chest. No broken bones; not a bruise anywhere. Besides being shot, he had taken a hard fall, but there were no signs of injury whatsoever. *We’re very lucky! I think we can avoid the hospital at this point.* He checked his pupil dilation response with a flashlight. The wound on his head now appeared superficial, and probably would not even require stitches. The bleeding had stopped completely. *How is that possible? I was sure it was a deeper wound than that.* He carefully dressed the wound and bandaged him up.

Eli slid over and put her arms around him, and laid her head on his shoulder. “I’m sorry I’ve caused you so much trouble. How can I ever make it up to you? You wouldn’t have had to go through all this if you had just turned us away that first night. Why didn’t you?”

“I just couldn’t! I guess I’m just a sucker for a pretty face and beautiful wings.” He smiled at her. “Eli, you and Oskar are the best thing that has happened to me for a long, long time. There’s nothing I could give you or do for you that could make up for what you have already given me. The irony of it is that you will never be old enough to understand what that gift is.” He smiled as she cocked her head.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m glad. Now, do you think you can keep him awake for a couple more hours?”

She gave Oskar an evil grin, “I’ll keep him awake --- one way or another.”

“Be sure to wake me if you have any trouble whatsoever. And, if you don’t mind, I’ll just sleep here on this big old comfortable chair. Don’t worry about keeping me awake. I can take it.” He took the comforter off the end of the bed, leaned back in the padded chair, and closed his eyes. He could hear them whispering and giggling to each other. *They’re so resilient. They don’t realize how close they came to losing everything. If that bullet had been as little as a half-inch further to the left, Oskar would be dead, and all Eli’s dreams would have been dashed.* He drifted off to an uneasy sleep.....

Oskar was lying in his arms, eyes open and unseeing. He felt his pulse. Nothing. He straddled him and began CPR; chest compressions, lung inflation, more chest compressions. He was frantic. Nothing was working! He saw that the bullet had entered his chest just below the heart, so it had probably ruptured a main artery. Finally, after ten exhausting minutes, he stopped. He looked at Oskar’s sweet face and gently reached up and closed his eyes. *He was so worried that Eli wouldn’t love him if he grew up. Now he’ll stay 12 forever.* A deep, empty sadness washed over him.

He felt Eli’s arms wrap around his neck, and her cheek press firmly against his. She was sobbing inconsolably. They held each other for a while, trying in vain to fight off the overwhelming despair and helplessness.

Finally, Eli lay down next to Oskar, pressed his hands to her chest and pulled him close to her. Dawson could hear her whispering to him as she gently rocked him in her arms.

“Eli! We’ve got to get out of here! Now!”

He ran over to her, but she showed no sign of having heard him. “Eli! Get up! We have to go! The apartment is on fire!”

He reached down, gently moved her arms and lifted Oskar’s body off the floor.

“No! I’ll carry him!” he could hear the anger in her voice. He gently lowered Oskar into her arms, and they headed for the door as the flames licked up the wall.

They went out the front door, and Dawson followed Eli down the street toward their car. He opened the back door, pulled out a blanket and laid it on the ground. Eli gently placed Oskar's body on the blanket, but as Dawson was wrapping him up, she grabbed his wrist firmly. "Don't cover his face!" Eli's voice trembled. "Please don't cover his face."

He lifted Oskar's body and placed it on the back seat with his head in Eli's lap. She stroked his face as they drove silently towards home. They could hear the sound of the fire engines behind them.

He thought about Eli's hopes, all her dreams, how easily they had all been destroyed in an instant. He thought about the 200 years of loneliness and misery she had lived before Oskar, and how she now faced an unimaginably dark eternity without the only thing that had ever mattered to her. The darkness she faced now was even more terrible than before, because, if only for a brief moment in her life, she had seen the light.

"What did you say to Oskar?" Dawson asked, his voice almost a whisper.

"I told him I would be with him soon."

Eli carried Oskar up to their room, as Dawson put the car in the garage. He realized that his failure was now complete. He had lost them both. Oskar to a nasty, small-minded nothing whose life left the world worse off for its very existence, and Eli to hard-earned hopelessness and despair. There was no way he could keep her from taking her own life if that was her wish. Ironically, suicide is easy for her kind.

Eli put Oskar on their bed, opened the window, and then the shutters. It was 6:00AM. She had an hour before the sun came up. She lay down beside Oskar, put her arms around him, and waited.

Dawson quietly entered the room, walked over to the window, and watched as the sky became lighter. He knew there was no use in closing it again; Eli would just find another way. This was her choice.

"Will it hurt a lot? When you're exposed to the sun?"

Eli smiled at him, grimly. "Not enough."

"Eli, your life is worth too much to me for you to end it this way. I don't know if I can bear losing both of you at once. I wish you could see yourself through my eyes, how precious and unique you are. You're capable of wondrous things. Behind you are many times the number of years that old men require to gain the wisdom of a lifetime, but you've seen them all through the eyes of a beautiful innocent child. We all have so much we could learn from you. Your death will be a huge tragedy. I wish you could have given us a chance to become civilized enough to see you for what you are."

Eli took his hand, "I'm sorry. I wish I didn't have to hurt you, but I have to do this. I told Oskar my feelings, and I promised myself when I loved him, that when he died, I would die."

Dawson nodded, and sat in the chair next to the bed, waiting “You know I’ve loved you both with all my heart.” His voice was unsteady. “I’m going to miss you more than you can imagine.” He squeezed her hand.

She slowly got up, lovingly brushed Oskar’s hair out of his eyes and went to the window. The Professor stepped up beside her, and together they watched the pink clouds drifting on the horizon, the harbinger of dawn. Eli turned to the Professor, “Its time. Please don’t be sad! Know that I...have no other choice.” She took off her clothes and stepped up on the windowsill as her wings grew and firmed up. She gave him a quick smile, then gracefully launched herself forward. He watched her soar upwards over the lake as her powerful wings beat rhythmically against the cold crisp air. She began a steep climb and suddenly broke through the darkness into the full light of the sun. For a moment, she looked like an angel as the sun reflected off her shimmering wings; then she spread her wings wide, spiraled upwards and, frozen beautifully for a moment in time and bathed by the sun, she burst into flames. She continued upwards for a moment with the flames trailing behind her, when there was a sudden flash of light and she fell in a graceful arc towards the lake. Well before she reached the surface, the flames had consumed her and he saw thousands of tiny embers sparkling in the dim light, drifting slowly down until they were extinguished on the lake’s surface.

He grabbed the window ledge for support as his legs failed him and the flood of agony and unbearable grief overwhelmed him. He stumbled over to the bed sobbing, lay down beside Oskar, and put his arms around him. *I’m now the only person in the world who knows she ever existed. 200 years of misery followed by a few brief months of happiness. And when I die, there will be nothing left of this beautiful child or her beautiful soul or my beautiful memories of her. What an unspeakable tragedy this is!*

Professor! Professor! Wake up! Please Wake up

He felt hands on his face, his arms, his chest. In his despair he waved them away, pushed them away, and swung his arms blindly, trying to distance himself from the reality of the senseless deaths of these beautiful children, the dearest, sweetest things in his life.

His arms were suddenly pinned to his sides in a vice-like grip. He couldn’t move a muscle. In the distance, he thought he could hear Eli sobbing. *Please, please, please wake up!* He could feel her warm breath on his neck, her face against his, her trembling arms as they held him impossibly tight. *Please wake up! We can’t bear it any longer!*

I’m here, I’m here! I’m not dead! He heard Oskar’s voice.

He opened his eyes. Eli was straddling him, tears streaming down her face. Just over her shoulder, Oskar, red-eyed and trembling, was still holding both his hands.

The joy that welled up in him made him dizzy and lightheaded. “You’re here! You’re ... not gone.”

Eli let go of him and curled up in his lap like a small child, putting her arms around him and patting him affectionately, as though he were a puppy. Oskar squeezed in beside him on the chair and laid his head on his shoulder.

After a few minutes, Eli raised her head, looked at the Professor intensely for a second as though she were seeing him for the first time, then put her head back on his chest. “I love you.”

He gently ran his fingers through her hair. “I love you too” he whispered. He wrapped his other arm around Oskar and pulled him close. “And you too. If anything ever happened to either of you, I don’t know how I would survive.”

“We saw everything,” Eli whispered. “You yelled and we jumped out of bed and when we tried to help you...we saw everything. It was so sad!” her voice trembled “It was so sad!”

“You weren’t supposed to see that. Those are the fears of adults and have no place in the minds of children. I’m so sorry!” the professor pulled them closer. “You’re carrying the burden of a past that should have destroyed you. I have no right to burden you with anything more. Especially the fears of an old man who has seen death often enough to know it can come at any time to anyone.”

“You’re not old.” Eli said, indignantly.

“Certainly not as old as you,” he smiled. “But also not as strong in spirit.”

She sat up, and looked at him solemnly, “I...I promise you I will never do to you what I did to you in your dream.” She looked down, ashamed. “I promise. I promise.”

He held her close “You didn’t do anything to me. Those were my fears, not your failures.”

“And I promise I will never take chances like that again. I know Eli can take care of herself, but I wasn’t thinking and could have gotten myself killed,” Oskar said earnestly.

“Oskar, if loving parents had the power, many would lock their children away from all danger until they were adults – and possibly forever. You had no way of knowing that your life was in danger. He was an adult in a position of authority and you had every right to expect him to behave properly. I’m proud of what you did – because of why you did it. I know how much courage it must have taken for you to do such a thing. It’s my fault, not yours, that you were in any danger at all. I should have gone to the apartment alone.”

“No! I wouldn’t have let you.” Eli said sternly. “You would be in jail now. What good would that have done?”

Dawson laughed, “Never argue with a vampire. Let’s consider this an unanswerable question for now.”

Oskar yawned.

“Let me check you over one more time, Oskar.” Dawson checked his eyes, felt his pulse, and sat back, satisfied. “I think you’re going to be just fine. Thanks for watching over him Eli. I trust you completely; I just wanted you to know that. There are adults I don’t have as much faith in as I have in you.”

Eli looked down, embarrassed. “But I didn’t...”

“Quit trying to sell yourself short. Don’t you know it won’t work on me? When it comes to character evaluation, I’m more stubborn than you’ll ever be. I’m proud of you, and you’ll not be able to talk me out of it.”

Eli smiled in spite of herself.

“What time is it?” The Professor looked at his watch. 11:00AM “Well, I don’t know about you, but I think I’m going to try to get a few more hours sleep. It’s been a particularly trying night. No one will miss me at work on a Saturday. What about you two?”

“Us too!” said Oskar, as he climbed back into bed.

Eli slid in beside him and turned to the Professor. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry about me,” Dawson got up, yawned, and headed down the hall to his room.

Eli lay still until she could tell that both of them were asleep. Then she quietly slipped out of bed, went down the hall and slowly opened the professor’s door, listening. She moved quietly across the room and lay down on the foot of his bed, where she stayed, watching over him with loving cat-eyes, until he began stirring a few hours later. She quietly closed the door and tiptoed down the hall as she heard him get out of bed. She quickly returned to their bed – to Oskar; and without waking him, gently moved up against him, put her arms around him, and went to sleep.

Chapter 11: Weird Science

He finally found it on the fifth page.

A Duplex on Lignellsgaten street burned to the ground in the pre-dawn hours on Saturday. The initial investigation points to a gas leak, which caused a fire and subsequent explosion on the second floor that blew out the walls and completely destroyed the structure. One body was found, and is thought to be the sole tenant in the 2nd floor apartment. The remains were so badly burned and scattered as a result of the explosion, that positive identification may prove to be impossible. Fortunately, the first floor apartment was vacant at the time.

“It looks like we’re out of the woods for now. I think we will be long gone before they’re able to piece this together, if ever. I think we have a safe passport for you Oskar, but you’re going to have to grow a mustache.” Dawson teased.

“Ha, Ha.” He felt his upper lip reflexively; then reached up and rubbed his head. “Boy do I have a headache”

“You’re lucky that’s all you have!” Eli said sarcastically.

“Yours was easier, Eli. No one has ever seen your face.” He handed it to her.

“ ‘Eli Dawson.’ But... I thought they didn’t allow nicknames.”

“Eli is a proper name in England. At least they had no objections when I gave them your ‘birth certificate’ and photograph. Congratulations! You’re now a citizen of the U.K. I’ve sent your official birth certificate to my bank in London. And no, your birth year is NOT listed as 1761. I picked your birthday myself, so I hope you like it. Your official birthday is 183 days, or half a year, after Oskar’s. Since Oskar’s is May 30, 1969, yours is November 29, 1969. Congratulations again! On your next birthday you’ll still be12 years old!

Oskar got quiet. “And I’ll be 13 in May. And 14 next May, and...” he turned and went upstairs.

“I’m sorry Eli, I forgot how his aging upsets him. I’ll go talk to him.”

“No, that’s okay, I’ll do it.” She hurried up the stairs after Oskar.

Dawson went out into the storeroom. He checked the incubator to make sure the final samples he had brought home from the lab were still stable. He had created cultures from subcutaneous samples from both the mice and from Oskar right after Oskar had infected himself. Eli’s sample had shown no deterioration after more than 10,000 divisions, and he was close to the 10,000th division in the mice. Their cell growth rate was faster than normal but only about a fourth as fast as Eli’s. So far, Oskar’s cell growth rate was erratic, ranging from normal to about 25 times normal, which probably correlated with his increases in appetite, meaning it would be impossible to predict when the 10,000th generation would be reached. He had no idea what it meant, but the

four mice recovering so quickly from exposure to sub-freezing temperatures suggested that they may have at least some of Eli's regenerative capabilities. Since Oskar's head wound also seemed to heal abnormally fast, he appears to have inherited this ability also . *What am I missing? It seems as though the two cultures I fabricated have unpredictable effects. Oskar's injection contained a much higher percentage of the critical DNA strands from Eli, yet shows the same limited signs of regenerative ability. He acquired the ESP but it seems limited in odd ways and superior to Eli's in other ways. All I can do is wait and study the samples when they reach the 10,000 division mark and I can compare them to Eli's control sample.*

He scratched his head, and realized he was already a bit late for work. He closed the storeroom door, picked up his briefcase, and got into the car.

§

Eli followed Oskar into their room. Oskar had already taken his clothes off and was sitting on the edge of the bed. He saw her come in and quickly slipped under the covers and turned toward the wall.

"Oskar, please. Can we talk?"

Oskar didn't respond.

Eli slipped out of her clothes, lifted the covers, and gently slid in behind him. She pressed herself against him, brushed his hair away and kissed him on the back of the neck. "Oskar, please talk to me."

"It's just that...sometimes I think too much about what's going to happen. I'm sorry." He turned toward her and pulled her close. There were tears in his eyes as he softly kissed her. *Eli, you are so beautiful to me. I feel so warm inside when you're next to me. I love knowing that you love me back. I love to touch you, to smell your hair, to hold your hand. You are so sweet and kind and...* He kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, her forehead. He hugged her tightly and pressed his cheek against hers.

Eli was overwhelmed. Oskar's feelings washed over her in a flood of warmth and devotion so strong it took her breath away. She closed her eyes and gave herself to him. She went limp in his arms ... 'Elias! Elias! Where are you?' He rushed into his father's arms and was spun around and around. Visions of his mother's smile, his brother's laughter and playful teasing, and the look of pride on his father's face as he led the oxen in the field for the first time, rushed back to him from the distant past. He could see them all sitting around the table talking and laughing. He could feel his sister brushing his hair and teasing him because he was such a pretty child. He could feel her love for him as he helped her plant the garden and carry the clean clothes from the stream. And Mama! Dear, sweet Mama! He remembered curling up in front of the fire with his head in her lap as the winter storm raged, her fingers rubbing the back of his neck, soothing his fears of the dark and foreboding world outside. Then Eli cried for all she had lost, and would never get back – and was comforted and strengthened by Oskar's love. They lay like that, their

faces close, looking into each other's eyes, bathed in each other's thoughts, until they gradually nodded off together.

§

"Ha! I beat you again."

Eli frowned, "How are you doing that? There must be a trick. Tell me!"

"Well, I'll show you one trick but you'll have to figure out the rest." He drew another tic-tac-toe on the note paper. "Now if I go first, I always put my X in the center, like this. Now if you put your first O anywhere but in a corner, I will always win. Like this." He showed her the sequence of moves. "See? No matter what you do, I'll always win."

Eli smiled, "Yes! I see that now. Let's play again!"

Dawson watched them with great interest. Eli had never seen the game before, so he wanted to see how quickly she learned the strategy.

Oskar went first again, but put his X in a corner, rather than the center. Eli paused for a minute, thinking. Then she nodded to herself and placed her O in the center.

"Right!" Oskar said.

She never lost again. After an hour of draws, they agreed to stop.

"Let's go play with the mice. I have to clean their cages anyway." The two of them raced for the garage. He heard the door bang open as they elbowed each other, each trying to get through the door first.

Dawson smiled to himself. *The two of them think so much alike, its spooky. Eli is clearly quicker than Oskar, but that may be because of her years of experience and her doggedness. Or perhaps it's simpler than that. She may just be very bright.* He smiled at the idea that he was even considering the possibility that perhaps vampires had significantly higher IQs than non-vampires. He suspected that human nature could make that an even harder obstacle to overcome than the superhuman predator or blood-drinking part of vampirism, if vampires were ever accepted into society. Special schools for vampires? He could hear the complaints already: 'Discrimination! We can't allow that! They'll take over all our governments and financial institutions! It'll be us against them.' *Where have I heard these arguments before?*

He had finally gotten his results on the 10,000th division on both the mice's and Oskar's samples. Both had the same high viability as Eli's own cells, which supports evidence that Oskar and the mice have limited regeneration capabilities, but...on the other hand.... He looked more closely at Oskar's chart. He suddenly realized that there was a significant problem. Something was going on here that didn't make any sense. It could imply that...no, that's impossible! But it would explain at least one of Eli's symptoms. But the fact that those characteristics of Oskar's cell

divisions were exactly like those of the mice could be the key. He had to look at Eli's control sample to be sure, but this was definitely a real possibility. And not necessarily good for Oskar in the long run.

§

The day was fast approaching. They were scheduled to leave for London on the fifteenth of June. Packed boxes were everywhere. Oskar was in the garage, cleaning the cages and feeding the mice.

Eli came into the kitchen while the Professor was setting the table. "Sit down Eli, I have something I wanted to discuss with you. As you certainly know, Oskar's birthday is next week. I would really like to have a small celebration for him, in spite of how he feels about it. His whole life has been uprooted and I can't help but think he needs it, whether he thinks so or not. How do you feel about it?"

"I really want to, but I don't want him to get upset."

"Don't worry about that. I have something to give him that may cheer him up a bit."

"What is it? Tell me! I promise I won't tell!"

"Now how would you keep a secret like that from Oskar? Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Yeah. I guess you're right."

"I'll give you a hint. A birthday cake is involved."

"What kind of hint is that? There's always a birthday cake!"

"Take it or leave it." The professor smiled.

"You're mean! Maybe if I touched you I could read you..." she grinned evilly as she reached for his arm.

He suddenly grabbed both her hands in his and spun her around in circles. Her feet knocked a book off the end table as she flew by. Just as quickly, he set her back on her feet. "Did you read anything?" he laughed at her.

"No fair! You didn't give me a chance!"

He hugged her and lifted her off her feet. "Eli, I really want to do this for him. Could you try to convince him to let us do it?"

She smiled at him, "I'll do it! Don't you worry. He'll do it for me." She ran off toward the garage.

Dawson had thought this out carefully. It was a delicate situation. How to break the news to Oskar without upsetting him. Doing it during his birthday party was the best he could come up with, since it would emphasize the plus side of the situation. In fact it was possible that Oskar would not see any downside at all.

He went over his notes again. The culture used to inject the mice had the bat male/female chromosome stripped out entirely, yet they seemed to be exhibiting some of Eli's traits, albeit to a much lesser extent – but none of what would be called the primary Vampire, or bat only traits. Clearly the bat male/female chromosomes play an integral part in the process of creating the Vampire traits and dietary needs. Oskar's injection was from the untested batch in which the bat chromosomes had been removed and in which he had reintroduced Oskar's own male chromosome pair, to make standardized DNA testing easier. Yet Oskar had also picked up some of the same traits the mice did. The differences might only be in the degree of trait strength exhibited, but much more testing would have to be done to determine the differences. He also needed to determine the effects that Oskar's male chromosome pair had on the Vampire DNA segments he had spliced into the strand and vice-versa. Which brings up the underlying question: Which of these traits are common to both Oskar and the mice, and which are Vampire DNA-segment related? It almost appears as though some sort of intermediate parasitic species was involved before the vampire parasite, which is activated by the bat sex chromosomes, became dominant. And they apparently are not co-dependent. If true then this is a rare case of a symbiotic relationship between two independent parasites, both equally transmittable, but only one dependent on the bat sex chromosomes to become active. But Oskar's sex chromosome IS present in the hybrid DNA. Perhaps the "device driver," doesn't work with human sex chromosomes, which would be fortunate for Oskar in this case. However, the fact that this vampire parasite was still lurking in Oskar's system didn't make him feel any better.

§

Eli watched Oskar for a few minutes in silence as he cleaned the cages. "Oskar, I have a favor to ask you."

Oskar looked up, "Sure! What is it? Ask away."

"Could we celebrate your birthday?" she crossed her legs, and looked down at her feet, "It would mean a lot to me" she looked up at him with her best doe eyes. "Please, Oskar. Would you do it for me? I already bought a present for you and everything, and the Professor is going to make a cake."

"Eli, I really..." He saw the pleading look in her eyes and melted. "Okay. Sure. If that's really what you want." *It might be fun after all. And a present from Eli. What could that possibly be? What do vampires buy for birthday presents?* He smiled at her.

§

"Well, how did it go?" the professor asked.

“He went for it. I told you I’d get him to do it.” She said, cheerfully.

“Good!. Now as long as you’re here, there are a few things I’d like to discuss with you. How long has it been since you last hibernated?”

“The last time was about a year ago, before I met Håkan.”

“Is the length of time between hibernations always the same?”

She thought about it a minute. “No, I hibernate about every three to six months for one to two months or so each time. I think this is the longest I’ve gone without it.”

“Can you tell when you’re about to hibernate? Are there any symptoms?”

“It usually happens if I have had trouble ... getting food for a while. I get really tired, and I just sense when I have to go find a safe place to sleep – usually a cave or some other dark place away from anyone.”

“Promise me you’ll trust Oskar and me the next time this happens and give us as much warning as you can. I promise you, you will be much safer here with us.”

“I promise. But I haven’t even thought about it for the longest time. It’s as though it isn’t a part of my life any more. How could that be?”

He put his hands on her shoulders, “I think its because you are getting more than enough to eat. My theory is that, as long as you are well-fed, your body feels no need to hibernate. Have you noticed any changes in your eating habits? I have and I want to see if you have noticed the same things.”

She thought about it a while. “I know I eat almost two liters a week now, but when we started, all I could eat was one liter a week at the most. Before that, I could survive on a liter or so every two to three weeks. But I was hungry all the time.”

“And yet now, you don’t gain any real weight. The first month or two, I saw almost daily changes right after you ate. Your cheeks would fill out and your arms and legs would firm up and you would look like a normal twelve-year-old for a day or two, then you would begin to deteriorate quickly. Once we got you up to two liters a week, the changes became much less noticeable. Now, you are very stable at two per week, without any discernable changes. How do you feel?”

“I have almost forgotten what it was like to be hungry. Until the other night at the apartment; then, when I got angry, the feeling came back and I couldn’t control it...” She looked down.

“That wasn’t your fault. It doesn’t count!” he looked her in the eyes. “I want you to remember that. He shot you twice. Either wound would have been fatal to a normal person. You had no other choice.”

“But I didn’t choose! It just happened!”

“In either case, you are blameless. The consequences of inaction would most probably have been our deaths – or at least mine. He couldn’t afford to leave any witnesses after he thought he had killed Oskar. You saved our lives.”

“Now, back to the point at hand. During your 200 plus years as a vampire, you have probably been in a state of near starvation 95 percent of the time. You went through the Change at the drop of a hat during that entire period. You’ve been able to behave pretty much like a normal human being for a mere five months of that time. You no longer sleep in a cave, or a cellar, or a hole in the ground, or a bathtub. You no longer sleep alone; in fact, I’m not sure you could easily do so any more.

I’ve noticed other changes too. Oskar has corroborated them. Your nightmares are becoming milder and less frequent. And Oskar tells me that when you first slept together, that sometimes he would wake up and you would be lying there with your Changed eyes open, looking at him.”

Eli looked embarrassed, “Oskar’s right. I would wake up disoriented, and for a moment he would look like lunch.” She smiled sheepishly. “If I had felt he was in any real danger, I would have left, like I did in our basement in Blackeberg once.”

“No, No, that’s not the point. You have much more conscious control over your Vampire persona than before. It’s almost as if it is becoming somewhat dormant. But, as was evidenced last week, it’s always there when you need it. You also no longer change at all when you eat.”

“You’re right, I hadn’t thought about it before. I don’t ever have to try anymore.”

“Eli, you’re turning into a child again. You’re part of a family now. You are with people every day who aren’t trying to take something from you, and who care about you deeply. How does that make you feel?

She smiled at him “Happy. But I’m always afraid it will all go away and everything will be like it was before.”

“Maybe this is nature’s way of trying to balance the scales for you, Eli. According to my score card, you should be guaranteed at least another 200 years of happiness just to break even.” The professor winked at her.

He paused, “Eli, I also wanted to ask you some personal questions, if you don’t mind. Just stop me if you get uncomfortable.” He thought he knew the answers, but he needed to be sure.

She looked at him questioningly and nodded.

“Why was Håkan willing to stay with you, in spite of his knowledge of what you were? Was he afraid to leave? Had you threatened him?

“No, I could never do that. He was with me because he thought I was ... beautiful. He said he loved me but I don’t think he really did; I think he just wanted to ... do things with me.”

“You mean, things of a sexual nature?”

Eli nodded.

“Have you had problems like that in the past?”

“Yes, a lot. At first, I would sometimes...let them, if they would get me blood, but it was only when I was weak and couldn’t get it for myself. Sometimes they liked it if I pretended to be a boy, sometimes if I pretended to be a girl. But I never let Håkan do anything but touch me...”

“Eli, stop. You are not to blame for any of this.”

“But I could have stopped them any time, but I didn’t...”

“No, you couldn’t have. You would have starved to death.” Dawson was upset. “You have to understand that! Even with your power, you had to do what they wanted you to do.”

“I know, but it made me feel bad anyway. It made me feel even more lonely. Oskar is the only person I ever met who liked me and didn’t want ... that. And you.” She smiled, and looked down, embarrassed.

“Eli, when we get home, I’m going to show you that there are many more good, decent people in the world than you could ever imagine.” He thought he had seen enough of her life, but this made him angry all over again. How anyone could do such a thing to a child, especially this child, was beyond his comprehension, but obviously there has been no shortage of them, all contributing to Eli’s 200 years of misery.

He took her hands in his. “Eli, I want you to know you can talk to me about this anytime. Is there anything else about this that bothers you; that you would like to discuss with me right now?”

She nodded, “Håkan sacrificed everything for me. He wouldn’t tell them where I was, he poured acid on his face to protect me, and he asked me to take his blood and kill him in the hospital. But I never really gave him anything in return. What does that mean?”

The professor thought about it, “Eli, I think that it means that he did love you in his own way. Things concerning love are complicated even for normal people, but for a pedophile, they get severely twisted and distorted. I don’t know enough about him to know what truly motivated him, but, yes, I think a part of him may have loved you, because you gave his life meaning. Saving you by sacrificing himself may have been his last attempt to do something good and decent.”

She shook her head, “I don’t understand.”

“All you need to understand is that you may have brought out the little good that was left in him. And he used it to protect you from harm.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“That’s a good thing!”

Chapter 12: Oskar's Birthday**May 30, 1983**

The Professor pounded the gavel on the table. “May I have your attention, please! We are gathered here to celebrate the Birthday of Oskar, the Boy Wonder, who single-handedly taught Eli how to play Tic-Tac-Toe, and who has done so well at English Scrabble that he has moved from Last Place all the way up to Third Place in the Great 1983 International Scrabble Competition – and the year is not even half over yet. He has further distinguished himself by almost being trampled to death by a moose, and flying tandem over the city of Karlstad at night, without running lights, with a 200 year old pilot in a 200-year-old plane, without a parachute.”

“But first, we’ll have a brief recap of the great Vampire vs Mouse genetic experiment co-sponsored, and conducted by: My humble self, and my two dedicated lab rats, I mean assistants, Oskar, the Boy Wonder, and Eli, the Littlest Vampire. Latest DNA recipients: Littlest Vampire: 1; Mice 10. Oskar – the jury is still out.” To his relief, he saw that even Oskar was laughing.

Dawson sat back in his chair for a moment, then continued “Now its time to get a bit serious. I completed my analysis of the final samples early this morning. I would have completed them earlier with Eli’s help on the computer, but I felt I had to do this one myself. I kept running into a dead end. Everything was there, but I couldn’t put the pieces together properly. Then it hit me.”

“My error was in comparing the characteristics of the cell division of the mice to Oskar’s cell division. They were essentially the same. But the mice are all adults! The changes in their cells that would normally indicate aging, would not include changes in maturation, which would remain the same for adult mice. But Oskar’s cells also remained the same – and he is in the beginning stages of puberty; one of the most significant periods of maturation that humans go through. Yet there were no changes.” He watched Eli as her eyes got big and she put her hand over her mouth, which, by now was wide open in astonishment. *She gets it!* he thought.

Oskar, may I present you with your birthday present.” He stepped into the kitchen for a moment and came out with a birthday cake, candles lit, and put it on the table in front of Oskar. “Make a wish, Oskar. Then blow out the candles.”

Oskar closed his eyes for a moment. Then he puckered up, looked more closely at the cake, and, looking puzzled, counted the candles. “Twelve. You forgot one.” He looked up at the Professor.

“No. I didn’t!” he smiled at Oskar. “Happy Birthday! Oskar, you will never have a thirteenth birthday; or a fourteenth; or a fifteenth. You are no longer aging. For better or for worse, you will remain twelve forever. Just like your Littlest Vampire friend here.

Oskar looked at him for a minute, blank faced. Then he looked at Eli, who was grinning ear to ear. “But, how ... “

“Oskar, don’t you see? We can be together now until they find a cure for both of us!” She got a twinkle in her eye, “Now, what did you wish for Oskar?”

“I don’t know if I can tell you, since only part of it came true so far” Oskar was beginning to smile, as the truth of what the Professor had told him began to sink in.

“Come on, tell me!!”

“The part that didn’t come true yet is the ‘forever’ part” He looked directly into her eyes. She felt a sense of calm and warmth wash over her – a feeling of contentment; a feeling of joy, a feeling of completion.

“Oskar, stop. I can’t stand feeling so happy.” She threw her arms around him. Oskar put his arms around her and hugged her fiercely.

“Oskar, I can’t breathe. You’re squeezing me too tight.”

The Professor said. “Now, there are at least twelve of you in the world. Two juvenile delinquents and ten mice.” *I’m going to have to arrange for them to be shipped back to England. I can’t leave a bunch of immortal mice running around loose in Sweden.*

“What do you mean, juvenile delinquents?” Eli, asked, frowning.

“The ‘Great Escape,’ remember? Destruction of public property? Disturbing the peace of mind of 20 respectable police officers?”

“Well, this makes my present even better.” She handed Oskar a box with a blue bow around it.

Oskar opened it eagerly, “It’s a big Rubik’s cube! Only it’s 16 squares on a side instead of nine. Thanks, Eli.” He gave her a big hug.



“It looks like you’ll have plenty of time to work on it, now. Maybe you’ll even solve it some year. But of course if you need any help, as I’m sure you will, I’ll be here for you” she said, in mock seriousness.

§

Oskar and the professor were busy cutting more cake, a third piece for him and a second for the professor, while Eli was already working on the new Rubik's Cube.

"I'm still thirsty. Professor, would you like some milk?" Oskar got up and headed for the refrigerator, but as he passed Eli, he stubbed his big toe on her chair. "Ouch!!" He immediately spun around angrily, and kicked her in the leg.

Eli looked up, shocked. "What'd you do that for?"

"Well...you were sitting in it!" he rubbed his toe. He looked up at her sheepishly, and grinned.

Eli and the professor started laughing.

"Well! Oskar finally fights back... and misses." Eli taunted

"I think he hit exactly what he was aiming at," the professor said, amused.

Oskar, grumbling, refilled his glass, limped over to the table, and sat back down. He thought about his 12 candles. He could still hardly believe it. It seemed too good to be true.

"Is this really true? Will Eli and I really always be the same age?"

"No, I'll always be 208 years older than you, just like before."

"No, 'Grandma!' Maybe in vampire years, but in human years, I'm six months older than you. Look at your passport. And I'll always be six months older than you."

Eli stuck her tongue out at him, "Well... You can't fly!"

"Yeah but otherwise, we're the same now." He grinned smugly.

"Really? Wanna arm wrestle? Wanna try to clean my clock? How about a wrestling match?" She started around the table towards him menacingly.

Oskar stood up quickly and made sure the table stayed between them as she dodged back and forth.

"Ouch!" Oskar stubbed his toe on her chair again as he raced around the table trying to get away from her. She pounced on him in a flash, and sat down hard on his stomach. She grinned at him evilly "Wanna have a fang growing contest?"

"No! No! No!" Oskar laughed. "You win! You win! Let me up"

“Not until you say ‘Eli is stronger, faster, and smarter than me in every way’”

“Okay, okay! Eli is stronger, faster, and more of a smart-aleck than me in every way.”

“Sounds to me like we need to have a fang AND claw-growing contest.” she raised her hands and curled her fingers menacingly. Oskar saw his chance and took it. He squirmed out from under her and scrambled under the table.

Eli scrambled after him and reached the other side just in time to catch a piece of cake right between the eyes. Oskar administered the *coup de grace* by twisting it until her face and neck were completely obscured by chocolate crumbs and frosting. While she was digging it out of her eyes, Oskar jumped on her and pinned her to the floor. He leaned forward and ate the cake off her neck. “MMM, boy. You sure taste good.

“Oskar! Don’t!” she said, “Don’t even joke about that!”

Oskar smiled evilly at her, leaned down and ate the cake off the other side of her neck. “This side tastes good too!”

“Oskar...” She stifled a smile, then reached up, gently put her hands behind his head and slowly pulled him toward her... then suddenly smeared her face all over his. They rolled around on the floor, knocking chairs over until the Professor reached down and physically pulled them apart. “If you don’t knock it off, I’m going to go get the hose. Then you’ll both lose.” He looked at them and shook his head. “My god, I can’t even tell you apart. Eli, how does that cake taste? I made it myself, you know.”

“EWWWW! No offense, but, EWWWW!” She spit out a few crumbs, got up, straightened up the chairs, plopped down in hers, and wiped her face vigorously with a towel.

“Professor, the cake was exceptionally good,” Oskar mocked, “Especially that last piece. The one seasoned with Eau d’Eli.”

“Enough!” the professor grabbed Eli by the collar as she started for Oskar again. Oskar hid behind the professor and grinned at her.

“I’ll get you later, when your ‘Mommy’ isn’t around to protect you.”

“Well, that’s a new first” Dawson laughed. “I’ve certainly never been called a Mommy before. Now let’s get this mess cleaned up. I’ve got another surprise for both of you.”

§

They sat on the couch together, the Professor in the middle, as he opened the photo album. “This is a picture of our home. This is where you will be living when we get to England.



“Wow! It’s neat!” Oskar said excitedly.

“Where’s our room going to be?” Eli asked

“You see that little round window just below the peak of the roof? That’s the room I think you would like the best. It’s the room I would want if I were your age. And it’s totally appropriate for you and Oskar; there’s nothing easily breakable up there.”

“Ha, Ha. Well, its all Oskar’s fault. He’s always picking fights.”

“What do you mean? Whose toe is broken anyway?”

Your house is so pretty. Is that your car in the driveway?” Eli asked.

“No, that was my wife’s car. The picture is a bit old, but the house still looks the same.”

He turned the pages and showed them different views of the house.

“What pretty flowers! Wow! You have a swimming pool! Is it always cloudy there? Do you get snow? Is it warm in the summer? How far do you live from London?” they barraged him with questions. “Will I have to go to school?” Oskar asked.

“I’ll be in charge of your education. If we were to put you in school, Oskar, your teachers and friends would notice pretty quickly that neither of you are getting any older. You would have a couple of years at the most. We’ll decide later whether or not we’ll go that route. Eli, of course

you will have to be tutored at home, although I have some ideas as to how you might be able to go outside in the daytime. If that works out, you might be able to join Oskar at school some of the time.”

Eli turned the page. There were several photos of a woman and a small boy that appeared to be about seven years old. They were sitting on a couch in the living room; she recognized the couch from other photos the professor had shown her. “Who’s this?”

The Professor looked up, “That’s... my wife and son.”

“Where are they? Why didn’t they come with you?”

“They died in a car accident about a month after those pictures were taken.” He quickly turned the page, and showed them a picture of Trafalgar Square. “We’ll be sure to go here after we get settled in. The National Gallery is beautiful. You’ll both love it. And we’ll visit St Martins-in-the-Fields for their summer music program...”

“I’m sorry. What happened?” she sensed that something else was wrong – that something really bad had happened. She leaned toward him and reached for his hand.

“Eli, please don’t. I know you mean well but there are some things...” He looked at her, and saw how worried and concerned she was. “It beats me how you do that.” He smiled at her. “You can’t read my mind, but you can read my soul.” He shook his head, *Wow! That sounded stupid even to me.*

Her expression didn’t change. She waited. He looked at her and sighed, “Eli, sometimes you make me feel like I’m the child here and you are an ageless seer. He held out his hands to her. She took them in hers, put them in her lap, and looked into his eyes, questioningly.

“My wife Anna, and my son Richard, were waiting for me at home. Richard had his final district championship soccer game that Saturday afternoon, and I was coming home from work early to take them both to the game. I was going over the final proofs of my latest book and lost track of the time. Anna called me, and I was so close to being done that I was irritated with her. I told her to go ahead without me and I would meet her there. I was so absorbed in my work that I forgot that she didn’t like driving her car because the brakes were a bit stiff; they had just been replaced and I had put off getting them readjusted properly. When she started to explain, I was impatient with her.” He paused. Eli tightened her grip on his hands. “They died! I got a phone call from her brother a half hour later. A car pulled out in front of them as they approached the field, and she couldn’t brake in time. She hit the car broadside. Their car burst into flames and they both died in the fire. If she had been driving my car, they would have survived. If I had been driving them to the match as I should have been, they would have survived. They died because of my selfishness and vanity and stupidity.”

Eli had tears in her eyes. Oskar held his arm tightly. They had seen it all as he had remembered it. She saw clearly the connection between his tragedy and his dream. She saw that he spent almost every day living in the shadow of the mistakes he had made that day. She saw the

loneliness and guilt he had felt when he came home after the funeral. THAT she fully understood. There was nothing they could say that would help; she knew that. All they could do was comfort him. *She would have forgiven you. She would forgive you if she knew what you have done; how you have helped us, how you have put our safety ahead of your own, how you have taken risks that could ruin your name and your career for us, how you love us – how you loved them. She would forgive you. How could she not?*

He smiled at them. “I guess it will be impossible to keep secrets from you two. It’s fortunate for me that I’ve lived such a dull, uninteresting life – at least until now. There’s nothing else about my past that should interest you in the least, except maybe as a bedtime story to put you to sleep. Now! Let’s talk about all the places and things we are going to see this summer! Eli, where have you been that you think Oskar might be interested in seeing?”

§

The kids were asleep. Dawson was deep into the details of planning their future together. He knew that eventually Eli’s past would have to be revealed, but how? He would eventually die and somehow he had to provide for them and keep them safe. After Oskar had injected himself, he had frozen the remainder of both batches, including the one he used to inject the mice, to be used as his ultimate bargaining chip if necessary. The possibility of living an ageless life, weighed against imprisoning or destroying Eli. He knew human nature well enough to know that, once the public knew the options, the choice would be easy for them. Of course the longer Eli was kept from the public, the more likely the relatives of those Eli had killed would die off and the killings would become abstract historical facts, rather than ongoing unsolved murder cases. He figured that 75 years was a conservative estimate, after which things would be much easier for them. He had to find someone to take over for him in the event of his death. But how? The problems seemed insurmountable.

They might have to move regularly. The neighbors would eventually see that the children never aged. It could take as long as five years if he kept them from sight most of the time but after that, there could be trouble. By dying their hair he might be able to convince outsiders at some point that they were his grandchildren, but that would be iffy. The best outcome would be if he found a cure for the Vampire parasite in Eli. If she were no longer a “clear and present danger,” society might be a bit more understanding. But the odds were against him. Maybe in 75 years...

He also had to have a long talk with Oskar at some point. Oskar didn’t realize the consequences of not aging for someone so young. And Eli has had much more to worry about than the strain that not aging would have on her friendships. She had probably never even thought about it, until Oskar. The two of them will never be able to have long-lasting friendships with their peers. They will only have each other and some relatively long relationships of a different kind with adults, but even these will end eventually. Immortality forever distances them from the rest of humanity. In order to be with Eli, Oskar has given up more than he realizes. After 200 years, it still amazed him that Eli was able to reconnect on any level. Once again, it spoke to her strong, grounded, inner character, something she surely had before she was turned. But that reconnection is going to have consequences for her too. I think she IS capable of realizing what she had inadvertently given up after 200 years of isolation, especially now that she has reconnected.

Oskar will have to learn to deal with it, with my help. They had plenty of time to work on it before it gets too far out of hand.

June 5, 1983

Oskar was working on the new Rubik's cube and Eli was almost done with her reassembly of the Egg. She only had a few pieces remaining. She had finally made a decision and was trying to work out how to present it to the Professor in a way that he would accept it. She snapped the last piece in place and held it up in front of her, inspecting it carefully. "Okay, let's go." They both headed for the study.

The professor looked up as they came in. Eli stepped up to his desk and put the egg down in front of him. "I want you to sell this to the man in Denmark," she said firmly.

"But...I can't do that! You love it too much and we don't really need the money."

"Yes, we do. Oskar and I have talked it over and want you to use the money to set up a research lab to make it easier to find a cure for me."

"Eli, we'll find a cure, and both of you now have plenty of time. If I don't find it, someone else will. You just need to have patience."

"I want to do this! I want you to be there when it happens. It won't mean anything if you're not there."

"Eli, finding a cure for you is what's important. Not whether or not I'm still alive when it happens. I don't think it's a good idea to use your egg for that. We have no guarantee that the money will help that much and you may need it to survive after I'm gone."

"I don't want you to be gone! I want you to be there!" Eli was becoming more and more upset. This wasn't going the way she had hoped. Why wouldn't he listen to her?

"Please, do this for me." She pleaded.

"Eli, this is one time I'll have to be firm with you. I won't sell your egg unless we absolutely have to, and then only with your permission."

"I'll sell it myself!! Then you'll have to take the money!!" she yelled.

"Eli, what's really going on here? What is it you really want?"

"I...I don't know!!" she turned and ran out of the room.

"What's wrong with her, Oskar? Has she discussed this with you?"

"Yes, sir, but I'm not sure I can explain it to you"

“Well, try your best. I’ll go talk to her after she’s calmed down a bit.”

“I think she doesn’t want you to die – ever. She didn’t say that, but that’s what I think. She asked me yesterday if I thought she was selfish because she wanted a family. She was so happy that I would be with her now, and she said that made her want – other things for herself. She asked me if I thought she was a bad person for being so selfish.”

Dawson thought for a moment, “Okay. Oskar, wait here, and I’ll go talk with her.” He started for the door.

“Professor?”

“Yes, Oskar?”

He looked down at his feet, “I don’t want you to die either.”

The professor looked at him for a moment, touched. “Thank you, Oskar.” *And he really IS only 12 years old; yet he understands Eli perfectly.*

He went upstairs and quietly opened the door to their room. Eli was lying on the bed crying, her face toward the wall. *How could I have been so stupid! As adults, we’ve learned to accept death. Children do not have that capacity – even this ageless child. In spite of all the death she has caused herself, the death of her family is still an almost unbearable memory for her. My death will likewise be a terrible tragedy for her. She loves me.* “You become responsible forever for what you have tamed.” He smiled as he remembered the lesson from “The Little Prince” It was time for him to fully accept that responsibility. Eli was their beautiful wild creature, who had been tamed by Oskar’s love, and then by his own. And he had been tamed by theirs.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and rubbed her back.

She sat up and put her arms around his neck, sobbing. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. I didn’t mean to! I’m sorry!”

“Eli, I think you’re right. We’ll sell the egg.”

“What? Do you really mean it?!”

“Yes, I do. But under one condition. I will set up a trust for you and Oskar, which will also include a portion of my own estate and book royalties. Only then will I put a penny of what’s left into a research project. And any profits that result will be in your and Oskar’s names. That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much!” She looked up at him gratefully, then laid her head in his lap.

“Professor?”

“Yes, Eli?”

She hesitated, “When we get to England,...can I call you Papa? Would that be okay?”

“We’re a family now. I would be honored for you to call me Papa.” His eyes were shiny as he stroked her hair.

June 15, 1983

The day had finally come! The house was empty except for a few essentials. They were scheduled to leave for the airport at 10:00PM. With connections, it was only a 2 ½ hour flight to London, where his car would be waiting at the airport. They would be safe at home before daylight. Dawson was going over his last-minute checklist before going to bed. He could hear the kids talking quietly in their room, probably too excited to get much sleep themselves. He had arranged for their rooms, empty since Richard had died, to be readied for them. He had installed two computers, an additional bookcase, and a small lab refrigerator.

§

Eli had just finished drying her hair. She was thinking about the flight to London and the fact that she had never been on a plane before. *What fun this will be! I wonder if the plane flies higher than I can. I know it flies faster. Maybe I will be able to see even farther from that high up.* She **was** a little worried about Oskar, though. His life was going to change completely all over again. “Oskar, are you afraid?”

“A little. I just hope my English is good enough. I’ve never been anywhere so far away before.”

“It’s going to be great fun! We’ll be able to go places and see things, and no one will be looking for us.” The whole idea excited her. She and her family. **Her family! Me and Oskar and our new Papa.** She looked at him fondly, “I like your hair blond and short; it makes you look so cute.”

Oskar blushed, “It doesn’t either!”

“Yes it does! You’re cute, cute, cute!” she pinched his cheek.”And you’ll be cute forever!”

Oskar smiled in spite of himself. “I like your hair too.”

“Mine? But it looks the same as always – messy.” *I really should take better care of it. I’ll start doing that when we get to England.*

“I know. But it reminds me of the night you solved the Rubik’s cube. You know; the night you almost had me for dinner? I remember how beautiful you looked, how pretty your eyes were.”

“But Oskar, I almost killed you! Why would you remember that night?”

“Because I know you never, never could have done it. I know it! I can feel it! And then you showed me how to solve the cube, but I wasn’t paying any attention, because you were so so

pretty!!” Oskar paused, and looked at her seriously, “You don’t mind if I think you’re pretty do you? I know you’re really not a girl. I hope that doesn’t bother you.”

She took his hand, “But Oskar, I’m not a boy either. I love that you think I’m pretty. I think you’re pretty too. Does that bother you?”

Oskar blushed again, “No it doesn’t bother me, either – but please don’t tell anyone else.” He smiled sheepishly at her.

“I won’t. I promise.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“Let’s get under the covers!” They both scrambled into bed, fluffed up their pillows and pulled the blanket up over their heads. “Can you see me in the dark?” Oskar asked. “I can just barely see you.”

“See for yourself.” She took his hands in hers.

Suddenly Oskar was looking at himself through her eyes as though in a mirror in broad daylight. “That’s neat!” He moved toward her and kissed her on the lips. It looked like he was kissing himself in a mirror. He sputtered and burst out laughing. “Eli, stop it! That’s awful!”

She started laughing, “Do it to me! I wanna see!” They looked through each other’s eyes over and over again, crossing their eyes and making faces at each other as they kissed. After a while, they got quiet and lay on their backs staring at the ceiling.

Eli was deep in thought. I’ve got to figure out how to get Papa to inject himself. He’s the only person I trust to take care of us. I’m not going to let him die. He can’t die; he just can’t. Maybe I can do it myself while he’s sleeping. He’ll never know and won’t have to worry. I could tell him after a few months, when it wouldn’t matter anymore! ...But I couldn’t do that! It would be like lying to him. I have to convince him to do it, but how? She felt herself getting drowsy. I’ve got plenty of time to decide....

Oskar felt happier than he had ever felt before. He would never lose Eli now. And they were going to a new place where everything would be different. And he had a new father! One who loved him and cared about him. He smiled to himself as he nodded off to sleep....

Oscar dreamt that he was on a train, looking out the window as it pulled away from the station platform. He could see the reflection of Eli’s beautiful face in the window as she sat beside him with her arm around him. They were at the beginning of a long journey together.



END?

Part 2: London

Chapter 1: Eli asks Questions.

The drive from the airport took an hour. Eli and Oscar were feeling a bit apprehensive in spite of the fact that they knew they were finally safe and would soon be home. Dawson pointed to the right, just as they rounded the last corner. “There it is! What do you think?”



Oskar looked over the low fence into the front yard: it looked like every light in the house was on! “Wow, it looks even bigger than in the picture!”

“Papa, who turned on all the lights?”

Dawson smiled, “That would be Mrs. Anderson, our next-door neighbor. I asked her to do that for me because the house looks so pleasant that way, and I wanted you to see it at its best.”

“The flowers look just like in the pictures! How beautiful! Who took care of everything while you were in Karlstad?”

“Mrs. Anderson insisted on caring for the flowers; it’s sort of a hobby with her. Everything else was maintained by a service I hired. They also prepared your rooms for you.”

“Rooms? Aren’t Oskar and I staying together?”

“Don’t worry! Everything will be made clear as soon as we get inside.” He swung into the driveway and turned out the lights. He popped the trunk and the kids began unloading the suitcases and setting them by the front door. He stepped up, unlocked the door and, with a flourish, directed them inside. “Welcome home!”

Eli and Oskar ran in and put their suitcases down at the foot of the stairs. “Can we see our room? Is it really on the third floor?”

He laughed “Yes, both rooms are on the third floor. Go take a look!”

They scrambled up the stairs and disappeared. “You forgot your luggage,” Dawson called after them. He shook his head and headed up the stairs with his own suitcase to his room on the second floor.

They raced to the top of the stairs and stopped on the last step, taking it all in; there was a bathroom straight ahead toward the front of the house, and identical doors opened into rooms on the right and left. Without hesitation, Eli ran into the one on the right. “Look at this! Our own computer, and there’s that round window from the pictures, and look at the pool!” Oskar came up beside her as she gazed out onto the back yard from the gable window. She turned and surveyed the room. The walls were painted a vibrant zenith blue, Eli’s favorite color. The bed was against the wall to her right just this side of the two-foot diameter round window; beneath the round window was a huge chest of drawers. She could see out over the whole neighborhood from there. A wardrobe and a lab refrigerator were against the far wall, and a strangely familiar round table was in the far corner away from the door. Packing boxes were neatly stacked against the wall by the table.

Dawson stepped into the room, “What do you think? Does it meet with your approval? I tried my best to find you a table like the one you lost in the fire.”

“Oh, Papa! Thank you so much! Everything is just beautiful!” Eli gave him a big hug.

“You won’t need shades on the windows, by the way. They are made of that special tinted glass we worked on together.” He thought about all the tests he had run on her skin samples, and the final test, when she bravely and without hesitation put her entire bare arm into the direct sunlight behind his first test pane, ignoring his instructions to take it slow and easy. *She has way too much faith in me. I have to be very careful not to allow her to hurt herself because of it.*

“Now Oskar. Would you like to see your room?”

“But...aren’t we staying together?”

“Oskar, we have to be realistic. You and Eli are, as far as anyone here knows, twelve-year-old brother and sister by adoption. It’s inappropriate for you to appear to be sleeping in the same room. There will be many occasions where outsiders will, for one reason or another, see your living arrangements. You may even acquire friends your own age, who may see your rooms with little or no advance warning. Unfortunately, it is one of the many untruths we will have to

maintain in order to protect our secrets – until the right time presents itself. However, you two can continue sleeping together in whichever room you chose, as long as you follow the rules. Now, let's go take a look." He stepped across the hall into Oskar's room.

It was the mirror image of Eli's room, except the walls were light green; Oskar's choice. It had the same round window opposite the door, and the gable window facing the back yard. And his own computer and bookcase, just like Eli's. "Wow! It looks just like Eli's room!" He ran over and plopped down on the bed. "It might be nice to have a place I can hide when I get Eli mad at me. Does the door lock?" he gave her a defiant look.

"Even if it does, do you really think that would stop me?"

"But you have to ask in order to come in," he teased.

"Not into my own house!" she said indignantly. She suddenly realized that she hadn't even thought about asking Papa for permission when they first entered the house. All he had said was "Welcome home" If there was one thing she knew from past experience was that the invitation had to be explicit, or she would bleed. Why hadn't she? "Papa..."

"I know, Eli. You scared me when you rushed in. Then I realized; why should you have to ask permission to enter your own home?" He put his arm around her shoulder and squeezed her.

"Why don't you two do a little unpacking and decide where you're going to sleep tonight? But first, bring up your luggage from downstairs. Eli, your refrigerator is already partially stocked. I'm working on a more efficient way to get food for you. London is a big city, with many more sources than we had before."

They raced each other down the stairs, and he could hear the suitcases banging against the steps as they tried getting past each other on the way back upstairs. He yelled down the stairs at them, "Take it easy on the poor house. It's over 100 years old. I'd hate to lose it in a single day."

They smiled sheepishly at him as they reached the top of the stairs; Eli went into her room and Oskar into his. He could hear them scurrying around, opening boxes and drawers.

The sun would be up in an hour or so, and he had to at least make an appearance at work to get the ball rolling on his new research project. He hoped to be home by noon. "Now you two try to keep out of trouble until I get home." He headed downstairs.

"Where should we sleep tonight? I think we should sleep in your room!" Oskar said. "You have the window we saw in the pictures."

"Okay!" Eli grabbed him tight and spun him around. "Oh Oskar! I'm so happy. Nothing will ever go wrong again. I just know it!" She quickly went over to the gable, sat on her window seat, and looked out over the back yard. She watched as the sun touched the tops of the trees against the back fence. *Papa's window! Dear Papa!* Oskar sat down beside her and put his arm around her.

Suddenly, a big black cat peered in the window at them. It continued walking along the eave, when suddenly it looked straight into her eyes, arched its back and hissed loudly. It sprang at her, struck the window and slipped off the edge of the roof. They saw it land on the porch roof, jump down into the back yard, and run out of sight along the edge of the house.

Oskar looked over at Eli, trying to think of something funny to say, but saw the tears in her eyes. “I almost forgot what I was.” she said quietly, “But God keeps reminding me, just in case I get too happy.”

“Eli, don’t say that! God would never..”

“Then you explain it to me! I’ve been alone with this awful disease for over 200 years. People shun me and hate me. Up until Papa, I’ve had to kill other people just to survive. So I’ve always had only two choices; murder thousands of people, or kill myself like others have done. Aren’t these both supposed to be mortal sins? We’re supposed to all be God’s children. But if a real person were to treat his children this way he would be arrested for child abuse!! Is God the only one whose behavior, no matter how awful, is always accepted and excused? Why is that? Doesn’t he have to obey the same rules that he sets for the rest of us? If not, he’s a hypocrite! I hate him! I have the right to judge him by his actions! He means nothing to me!”

Oskar didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t ever sure he understood fully what she had said. *Maybe I should talk to Dad...*

“Oskar, please don’t say anything about this to Papa. I don’t want to upset him. It’s just that sometimes remembering what I am reminds me of the awful things I have done, and I don’t know how to deal with it. Maybe things will change, now that I don’t have to ... do that any more. Please...”

Oskar stood up behind her, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her on the neck. “I love you so very much!” He reached down and picked her up. She put her arm around his neck, and pressed her cheek against his chest. He carried her over to the bed, laid her down gently, put the blanket over her, and slid in beside her. “I’m going to run that old cat off our property every time I see him. He’ll soon learn where he’s not welcome.”

Eli smiled at him through her tears, “Well, at least I have you and Papa. God must have let you slip by him somehow. Maybe he was busy killing thousands of people in a volcanic eruption somewhere and misplaced my paperwork in all the excitement.”

“Eli, be quiet.” He kissed her on the cheek.

§

Dawson watched carefully as the mice settled into their new home. Because of his position there, he had been able to rent lab space in a building owned by Oxford. There were central testing facilities that serviced several satellite labs in the same building, so he felt he was getting

the most for his money. So far he had put up only his own money, but he knew that he could only hold out for five or six years without tapping into the 24,000,000 Kroner he had gotten for the egg. He was determined not to touch their money until he absolutely had to. The trust he had set up was as iron-clad as he could make it. Even if Oskar's identity was discovered along with Eli's true situation, the money could not be taken from them and the trustees would have total control over it until the children were of age, whatever the law determined that meant in their cases. If he were to drop dead tomorrow, the wheels would go into motion, and they would at least be financially secure. And most important of all, a double-blind system of blood delivery would make Eli's source of food secure, no matter where she went – even if she, in the worst-case scenario, had to go it alone.

He was already searching for a trustworthy grad student or apprentice to help him in the lab. He ultimately had to find several people he could trust completely when the research got to the point that disclosure of most of Eli's history and Oskar's immortality was necessary. Eli would be an integral part of his screening process, even if her methods happened to scare off some of the applicants. Perhaps Oskar's talents with ESP would be valuable also, but he knew he could rely on Eli's judgment. Oskar was still a bit young.

He was actually hoping that a cure could be found within ten years and was planning accordingly. He had decided he was going to deliberately expose the children to other workers in the lab in order to build credibility for what appeared to be their first breakthrough: the potential halting of the aging process. Even if a cure for Eli were never found, perfecting this culture and understanding its side-effects would guarantee their credibility. And, after ten years, everyone would have to acknowledge that Eli and Oskar were not aging. They would be living proof. A genetic profile of all ten mice had also been recorded, which would underscore the stability of the culture. Especially if they all survived the same ten-year period.

Eli had already been subtly hinting that he should be the next guinea pig, but it was too risky at this point. If something happened to him before he had established a chain of succession, who knows what would become of the research? In today's world, even a hint of Eli's powers could bring out the dark side of certain factions even within the British Government. Eli and Oskar might never see one another again in the worst-case scenario. No, he had to proceed cautiously and walk the tightrope as carefully as he could until they were sure they had it right.

It had certainly been a busy couple of weeks. And the kids were visibly becoming more relaxed and easy-going. They no longer looked like political refugees, always looking over their shoulders. They had all taken long, evening walks in Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, and fed the geese at Round Pond. When no one was looking Eli had even climbed to the tops of a couple of the taller trees. He was amused at how much she liked the Tube. She would have been content just riding it all night, watching the people and trying to figure out what they were like and where they were going. He just wished he could take her out in the daytime. If everything went according to schedule, it wouldn't be long before he was going to make that happen. Would she ever be surprised! He smiled at the thought. It seemed as though he lived now just to make them happy. He had no other desires that even came close to that. It's not that his life before had been particularly unhappy. It's just that now it seemed he was happy most of the time. And he was happiest when he could do things for them. Eli was intensity, strength and stability

personified, at least in the context of a twelve-year-old mind, and Oskar, in spite of everything, was still an unapologetically sweet, kind boy who was finally showing signs of developing a backbone. His days of shoplifting and binge eating were long gone. It seemed ironic to him that Oskar's last shoplifting had occurred when he stole a Rubik's Cube for Eli. What a mixed message that was! He smiled to himself.

§

The three of them were sitting in the living room, relaxing after dinner, watching the evening news. Featured was a documentary follow-up on the huge El Chichon eruptions in April, 1982 in Mexico, in which over 2000 people had died. The story emphasized the courage and tenacity of the survivors, who had rebuilt their village, and were, by all accounts, doing very well.

"Maybe that was your volcano, Eli," Oskar joked.

"Don't even joke about that, Oskar," Eli scolded, as she glanced at Papa and quickly turned away.

"What was that all about? Oskar?" Dawson sounded puzzled.

"Oh, nothing. Just an old joke." Oscar looked at Eli apologetically. Dawson looked at them both carefully. His gaze finally settled on Eli. "Is there something you would like to talk about?"

"Not really...It's just that..." she looked down.

"Eli thinks that the only reason she is with you and me is because God lost track of her while he was having fun killing people in a volcanic eruption."

"It's true! God hates me for what I am! And lots of other people too, it appears. He forced me to have to decide between killing others to survive, and killing myself."

"But Eli, you don't have to kill to survive any more."

"But that's because of you, not God. If God had his way, we would never have met. He messed up."

"No, Eli. It's because of you. You made the decision yourself, and with Oskar's help and support, you found me. I've dealt with some children your age, and have never been as completely swept up in their lives as I have been in yours. You did this. You made up your mind that you were going to change and you did. Oskar and I just helped you. And where do you suppose the inner strength came from that made you able to travel this difficult path? I know it's easier now, but you must remember how uncertain and frightened you were when you first came into my office in Karlstad."

She looked up at him, “Well, I know it wasn’t anything God did. He doesn’t care one way or another what happens to me as long as he can make me always remember what I am and what I have done.”

“Eli, Mankind has spent centuries trying to understand what God is or is not. Your unique life has given you such a different perspective that this is, unfortunately, a journey you will have to take largely by yourself. Please, if you have any questions, come talk with me. I certainly don’t pretend to have a corner on the truth, but perhaps I can give you a few clues as to what questions you should be asking yourself.”

“Do you believe in God?”

“I have my own ideas about what God isn’t. Would that help?”

She nodded.

“The universe is so perfectly complex, interdependent, and orderly that I don’t believe its creator would ever intervene on behalf of prayer or supplication and make any changes that would violate that order.”

“I don’t understand.”

He sighed. *Of course she wouldn’t understand.* “I don’t believe God hates people or punishes them for doing the wrong thing, any more than he loves and rewards them for doing the right thing. I believe the universe he created is simply indifferent to our existence. Prayers, by their own definition, simply have no meaning in this universe. It existed for billions of years before our small planet was born, and will probably exist for billions of years after it is consumed by our dying sun. The vastness of the universe is almost unimaginable, even to scientists and philosophers. I can’t bring myself to believe it was created solely to nurture an infinitesimally small group of humans on a statistically insignificant planet in an insignificant galaxy within that vastness.” He paused, “Eli, my God doesn’t hate you. If he exists at all, he exists within you. He’s part of what makes you what you are. He is, at least partly, the amazing gift of consciousness, completely unexplainable by science so far, which allows you to make your own decisions about what you are going to do with your life. I also believe that there are no guarantees from God that, even with this gift, that goodness will come from living what you believe to be a good life, any more than I believe that evil is necessarily the result of living a hate-filled one. Some people believe that evil is a force in itself and turn to the bible or some other holy book for answers to questions about good and evil. I believe that evil is the unintentional result of mistakes people make while trying to survive. Nothing more! It’s like believing that darkness is a force, when darkness is merely the absence of light.” He looked at her carefully. “Does any of this make sense to you?”

“I...think so. So you don’t think that ‘Why does God hate me?’ is a useful question.”

“Correct. Eli, my God could never hate you. You are a part of him.”

“But clearly, I can’t rely on him for help.”

“Eli, that’s a determination you have to make for yourself. I won’t answer that one for you. But you might ask yourself the question, ‘Am I helping this God by helping myself? Am I helping this God by helping others?’ And then ask yourself, ‘What does it mean, to ‘help’ God?’”

She thought about it for a moment. “I don’t know. I certainly don’t think about it that way. I help Oskar because I love him; not because I want to help some God. And I help myself because I want to do be able to finally do what is right; not to help God. And I would help you too, but you’re too smart for me.” She smiled at him slyly.

“Eli you are one of those rare people who ‘gives and knows not pain in giving, nor seeks joy, nor gives with mindfulness of virtue.’* You give because it’s in your very nature to do so – because you truly are an eternal child. Ironically, your blood curse, now that you are free of its influence, has forged a beautiful, unique person in you, whom it is my great joy to assist in any way that I can.”

“I’m not sure I understand... but, I know for certain that YOU help me – because you love me.” She sat in his lap and hugged him tightly. “And I love you too, Papa.”

Chapter 2: Sunny Days

Eli came down the stairs reluctantly, her pants and shirt softly crinkling with every step she took and every small movement of her arms. She stepped out into the living room and was greeted by wild applause.

“Wow! You’re really shiny!” Oskar quipped as he put on his sunglasses.

“How do they fit? Are they comfortable?” Dawson asked.

“They’re noisy! I feel like I’m wrapped up in aluminum foil.”

“Well, you almost are,” Dawson said, “Here! Try on the boots and gloves.

She actually liked the boots. They were shiny and made of black leather, and came up to just above her calves. They fit perfectly! The gloves were also black leather, but were lined on the inside with the same MPET material her shirt and pants were made of. They actually looked kind of cool. Papa had given her the choice of a silver- or gold-colored outfit. To her, it was a no-brainer. Gold, of course!

Dawson checked to make sure her gloves overlapped her shirt sleeves properly and snapped them in place. He checked her belt to make sure her shirt was safely tucked in, then stepped back and motioned for her to turn around.

“What do you think, Oskar?” she held her arms outstretched and spun around a couple of times.

“I love it! You really look neat! Your very own Fremen Stillsuit!”

Dawson held up the helmet for her inspection. The prototype was a work-in-progress, being modeled after an old aviator’s leather helmet and lined with the same MPET material.

She slipped it on effortlessly, tucking her hair behind her ears. An MPET-lined scarf wrapped around the already-tight connection between the helmet and high-collared shirt, just for a bit of insurance. A special-made Eli-tinted sun visor snapped to the helmet, covering the remaining exposed areas of her face.

Oskar tried to think of something smart to say, but he was actually a bit jealous. She looked really cool! “Come on! Let’s go outside!”

“Let’s take it slow and easy,” Dawson cautioned. “This should work, but I don’t want to take any chances.”

Eli took a deep breath, opened the door to the back porch, and cautiously stepped out. This would be the closest she had been to the sun on purpose for over 200 years. So far, so good, but she was still not in the direct sun. She was actually able to step out on the porch during the day with normal clothing on, with mild discomfort. She would feel a tingling, burning sensation as

small amounts of reflected light from the pool struck her bare skin, together with an overall discomfort caused by all the indirect light, but nothing unbearable. The porch was screened, but very open and bright. Oskar walked ahead of her and opened the screen door for her, bowed, and motioned for her to step out. "After you, Chani, my Sihaya."

Eli gracefully held out her gloved hand for Muad'Dib, and stepped out together with Paul into the direct sunlight, out onto the hot, arid surface of Arrakis, as the sole remaining descendents of House Atreides.

She felt a bit anxious, but as she walked around the yard the feeling evaporated, followed by one of elation and joy. Now she would be able to go places with them during the day. The idea that people would stare at her was of no consequence. She had been on the outside looking in for so long that such things had no effect on her anymore. Besides, Papa had a ready explanation for them; she had a rare disease that made her allergic to sunlight. Most people would understand and even be sympathetic. And he wouldn't really be lying at all. She suddenly felt like running. She ran around and around the pool laughing and jumping. She looked up at the sun defiantly. *You can't get me now! I'm not afraid of you any more!* She stopped and looked at the flowers. Their colors were even brighter than at night, even with her eyes. She saw a large flock of birds go past changing shape and direction in beautiful unpredictable patterns. She felt Oskar's arms around her, and his cheek in the small of her back. She turned around and hugged him. "Oh Oskar! This is so – amazing!"

He took her hand, and together they walked toward the house, where Dawson was smiling with his hands on his hips. "May I please take Eli for a walk around the neighborhood? I promise, we won't go far, and we'll be really careful."

"Of course you can! But try not to stay out for more than an hour or so. I still want to run some tests on the unexposed film packets in the outfit lining, just to make sure it's working properly. And take this with you, just in case." He handed Oskar a pouch containing a small folded Space Blanket, which Oskar tucked under his arm. He watched as they disappeared around the side of the house, and heard the gate close as they went out front. He had already told his closest neighbors about Eli, so there shouldn't be any problems. He looked at his watch. 2:00PM. Well, this will certainly be a good test of the clothing. The heat buildup certainly won't be a problem for her. She seems to be as tolerant of the heat as she is of the cold. He had long ago established her normal core body temperature as 99 degrees Fahrenheit, dispelling the lore that vampires were more reptilian or cold-blooded. He had intuitively dismissed that idea before he had even tested her, because she had too much energy available for immediate use. That lack of energy is one of the major weaknesses of cold-blooded creatures. That's why they like to sun themselves. It brings their energy levels up high enough for them to move more quickly. They are vulnerable in cold weather just for that reason. And Eli is definitely not in the 'vulnerable' category.

Oskar and Eli turned right down the street and walked hand in hand along the sidewalk. Mrs. Anderson looked up from her garden. "Hello Oskar. This must be Eli. What a beautiful outfit! I'm so glad to finally meet you. Your dad was so happy that you would finally be able to go outside, and you couldn't have picked a more beautiful day!"

Eli smiled at her, “Nice to meet you. I’m...so happy to be able to do this. I really like my clothes too, especially the boots.”

“I agree with you; it’s a smart-looking outfit. The gloves compliment the boots nicely.” She reached for a pot of flowers, “Well, you come visit me anytime. If you like flowers, you are welcome to help me out in the garden. Oskar, you should take her down to the stream. There’s a new family of ducks down there. You’ve just got to see them. They have 8 little ones!”

“Thanks! We’ll do that. Come on Eli. It’s only a couple of blocks down.” They hurried on down the street.

“She’s really nice!” Eli said, looking back over her shoulder and waving.

“She’ll talk your ear off if you let her! I really like her too.”

They stepped off the sidewalk onto the path towards the stream, Eli in the lead. “I think I can hear them,” she said in a whisper. They moved slowly through the trees along the path and stepped out on the stream bank. Sure enough! They were all there, just a few feet in front of them, clustered together in a quiet area just off the main stream. At that point, the stream was a bit too wide and deep to cross without getting seriously wet, so they sat down on a log to watch. “We should have brought some bread to feed them,” Oskar said. “Maybe next time.”

Eli noticed that the smells in the daytime had subtle differences from those at night. There were also a lot more insects out and about. Oskar slapped at a mosquito on his arm.

Eli suddenly turned and looked over her shoulder, just before a large rock landed in the pond. The ducks scrambled for the opposite shore, protesting loudly. The eight ducklings followed quickly behind them and they all disappeared into the brush on the other side of the stream. “What’d you do that for?” Eli said crossly as three boys stepped into the clearing.

“What’s the matter? Did we scare you?” The biggest boy sneered at her. He was a foot taller than Oskar, and had flaming red hair.

“I heard you coming a mile away. You sounded like a bunch of elephants crashing through the jungle. You really weren’t trying to sneak up on us were you?”

“Liar! How could you hear anything with that space suit on?”

The ducks were slowly moving back towards the water, when the boy turned and threw another rock, which struck one of the ducks a glancing blow. They squawked and retreated quickly back into the brush.

“Stop it!” Oskar yelled. “What’d they ever do to you? Leave them alone! Eli, let’s go get dad.”

“No! By the time we got back, it would be too late. These little jerks will have killed them by then.”

Eli? You mean there's a girl inside that stupid costume? It figures. It does look a little girlie after all."

Oskar's face got red with anger as he stepped towards them. "Stop throwing rocks!" The redhead took a step toward him and swung, just as Oskar slipped and fell on the wet ground.

The other two boys stepped back a little, fists at their sides. One of them whispered to the other, "Isn't that...?"

"Shhh," the other one put his finger to his lips.

"Oh, is the little baby going to cry?" He looked directly at Oskar. "Why don't you come over here and make me stop?" He bent down and picked up another rock.

Eli strode purposefully up to him, grabbed his wrist and squeezed. His grin turned to a grimace as he dropped the rock. Eli squeezed harder and twisted his arm back until he went down on his knees, groaning in pain. The other two boys started toward her. "Don't!" her voice sounded dark and commanding. "There's plenty more left for you two." She started toward them, dragging the red-head along behind her like a rag doll.

Oskar jumped up, "Eli! Be careful! Your suit..." He ran toward the two boys, his fists in front of him.

That was more than enough of an excuse for them. They both turned and ran back up the path and disappeared.

Eli looked down at the remaining boy. "Had enough?"

He looked up at her defiantly, "You just got lucky! No girl could ever take me in a fair fight!"

She smiled at him and let go of his hand. He jumped up and swung at her hard, but she easily ducked down out of the way, grabbed him by an ankle, and jerked him off his feet. He landed on his back on the damp grass with a loud smack. As he jumped to his feet, she twisted his arm behind him and gave him a powerful shove, sending him face first into the stream, where he disappeared momentarily beneath the surface, then jumped up coughing and sputtering.

Oskar smiled at him nastily and stepped forward, offering him a hand. "Need a towel?"

He brushed past Oskar without saying a word, and stumbled off into the brush, his shoes making squishing sounds as he walked.

"We're going to check on these Ducks every day! The first time we find that they aren't here, we'll find you and do a real proper interrogation." Eli yelled after him.

"What's this?" Oskar picked up a paper bag, dropped by the smaller of the two boys when they ran. Half a sandwich fell out on the ground. "Perfect! Come on Eli, let's feed the ducks." They

sat back down on the log and, sure enough, after about ten minutes, the whole family cautiously slipped into the stream, eyeing them suspiciously. Oskar tossed a piece of crust into the water, and several of the ducklings swam over and began fighting over it. Soon they were all eating.

They sat there watching for a few minutes, relaxing and letting their minds wander. “Oskar?”

Oskar turned toward her.

“Let not tell Papa about this. He’d just worry about me. Okay?”

“Sure! Nothing really happened anyway.”

“And Oskar? Thanks for the help. If you hadn’t started for them, they might have attacked me, and my clothes might have been damaged.”

Oskar smiled, patted her on the helmet, and put his arm around her. He knew she hadn’t really needed his help, but it made him feel good for her to say it.

After a few more minutes, they started back toward home. *What a perfect day this has been!* Oskar thought to himself.

They walked back along the other side of the street, as Oskar filled her in with his limited knowledge of who lived where. As they approached their house, a woman looked up from the chair on her front porch, stood up and hurried over to them.

“You must be Oskar. And is this Eli? Dr. Dawson’s told me so much about you both! She turned toward the house, “Boys! Come out and meet the Dawson children.”

The front door opened slowly, and the two smaller boys from the stream stepped out with sheepish grins on their faces and walked up behind their Mom. “These are my two sons, Jack and Henry. Boys, meet Eli and Oskar Dawson.”

Eli smiled, “We actually met them earlier down at the stream. Henry gave us his sandwich to feed to the ducks.”

“Well, that was nice of you Henry. I’m glad you’ve already met! There aren’t many children in the neighborhood and I just know you all will be good friends. Tell the professor I said ‘hello.’” She headed back for the house.

“Thanks for not telling on us,” Henry said. “Mom would have killed us if she knew we were hanging around with Seth. She doesn’t like him at all. She thinks he’s a bully.”

“We’re really sorry about the ducks.” Jack said. “And we’re sorry about what happened.” He turned to Eli, “Boy are you strong! How’d you do that? Not that he didn’t have it coming.”

“I think I was just lucky. He was a little off balance and I caught him by surprise.” She knew they hadn’t seen her throw him in the pond, and she was equally sure that Seth wouldn’t tell them about it either.

“Maybe you guys could come over and swim with us later.” Oskar said. “Just after the sun goes down, Eli can swim too. She can’t go out in the sun, you know.”

“Yeah, Mom told us all about you, Eli. She said your dad was trying to find a cure for you. Your suit is really neat. You look like the gold wrapper from a Wonka bar.”

“Thanks! I really like it too.” She smiled at him. “We’ll ask Papa if it’s all right for you to come over. Come on!” she headed across the street.

Dawson looked up as the door opened and four kids spilled into the living room, laughing and talking.

“Papa, can Jack and Henry come over later to swim?”

“Hi Jack. Hi Henry. How’s your mom doing?”

“Just fine, sir. She said to say ‘Hello’” Jack said.

“Of course you can come over later. How about 8:00 or so? Be sure to clear it with your mom first. Eli won’t be able to join you until around 9:00, just after the sun dips behind the trees. But I’m sure she won’t mind criticizing British swimming techniques for an hour.”

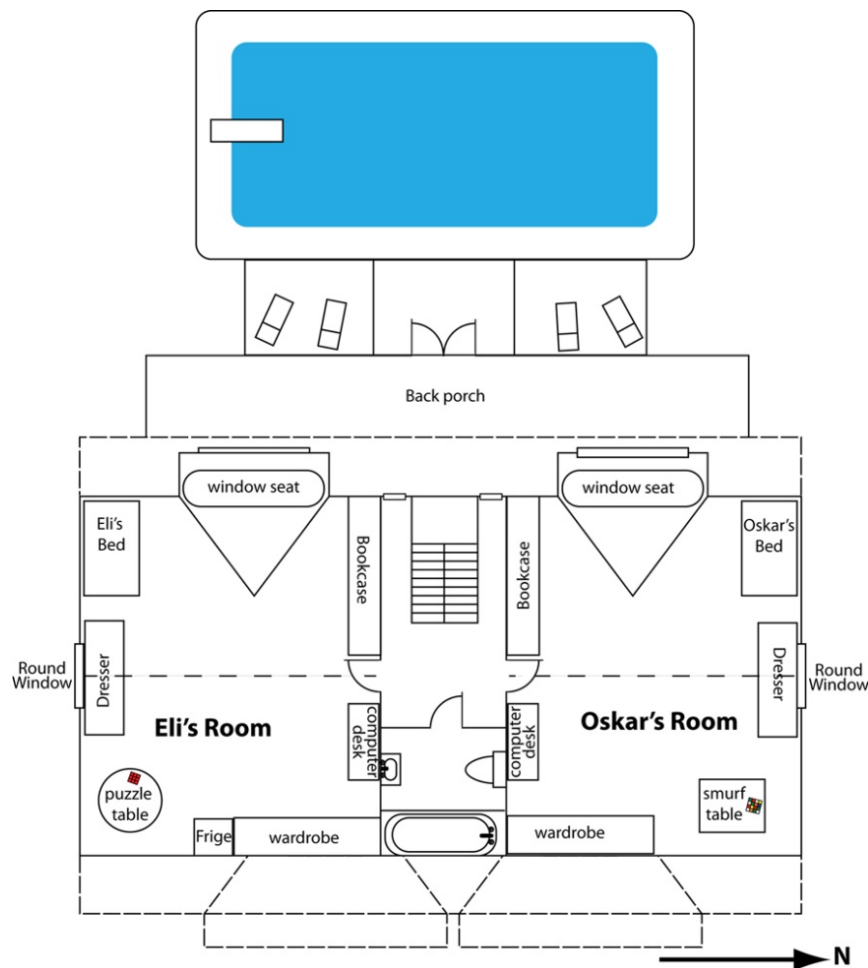
She blushed, “I wouldn’t do that.”

Eli sat in a chair beside the pool, just itching to get in as she watched Oskar and the boys splashing around and racing one another back and forth. She couldn’t stand it another minute! Just as the shadow of the trees was half-way up the side of the screened porch, Eli pulled off her helmet, took off her gloves and boots, then stripped down quickly to her bathing suit and folded up her MPET clothing neatly on the chair. She dove silently into the deep end of the pool and swam the full length under water, did a racing turn and swam all the way back to the other end without even a ripple showing on the surface. She quickly climbed out, sat on the edge of the pool and shook the water out of her hair.

“Wow! I wish I could do that,” Jack said. He turned to Oskar, “Your sister is totally cool! Where’d she learn to swim like that?”

“Years and years of training,” she joked. “All the kids in Sweden can swim like that. We’re not just good at skiing you know.”

“She’s really just that good,” Oskar whispered to Jack, “None of my friends in Sweden, or I, can swim anything like that.”



Jack jumped in and did a strong backstroke across the pool and back again, as Eli watched. “Show me how to do that!” She jumped in beside him, as he swam up. “I haven’t seen that before.”

“It’s just the backstroke. Here, let me show you.” He swam back and forth in front of her demonstrating.

She tried copying him, but couldn’t get the arm and hand positions just right. “What am I doing wrong?”

“Here, I’ll show you,” He positioned her arms and turned her hands, “You should be like this at the top of your stroke,” he switched her arm positions again, “and like this at the bottom. Then you just repeat the same pattern over and over, breathing at the top of each stroke. Like this.” He swam back and forth in front of her slowly, exaggerating each motion.

“Like this?” she mimicked him perfectly.

“Perfect!” he said, “Now speed it up a bit and keep your arms closer to your sides...that’s it!”

She swam back and forth several times, while Jack and Oskar watched. “She learns so fast! You have the nicest sister.”

Eli swam up to them, smiling, “Thanks, Jack. You’re a good teacher. This is so fun!” she sped off across the pool in an almost perfect backstroke.

“I think she could beat me at this already! She’s a natural!” He watched her admiringly.

“Here I come!” Henry jumped off the diving board and cannonballed into the water right in front of them.

Oskar climbed out of the pool and headed for the diving board. “You think that was good, watch this one!” He ran full speed down the board and leapt into the air towards them. All three of them disappeared in the wake of the resulting splash. Of course this resulted in a cannonball war. By the time they were all worn out, the walkway around the pool was totally soaked. Then they spent another hour diving for pennies. Eli always won at first, but gradually everything seemed to even out. Even Henry was holding his own, and he was only ten years old.

Oskar pulled Eli aside, “You’re just letting us win. How come? You never used to let me win at English Scrabble.”

“But Oskar, it wouldn’t be fair if I won all the time. They don’t know what I am, and I don’t want to spoil the fun. This is so so much fun for me, and I like them both very much.

“There it goes! Go for it, Eli!” Jack shouted. She turned and dove in as the two of them jumped in from the other side of the pool. Oskar was a split second behind her.

Oskar watched as Eli quickly spotted the penny, smoothly maneuvered around, and headed straight for it. He saw her slow just slightly, and allow Jack to grab it just as she reached for it. He snatched it up, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her to the surface with him. “I saw that! You could have gotten it easily, but you didn’t. How come?”

“You’re wrong!” Eli protested, “You think I’d let a BOY beat me on purpose? No, you won fair and square. I lost sight of it for a second, and when I spotted it again, you already had it.”

“Well...okay then. The better BOY won then. Right?” he grinned at her.

“Right! But there’s always next time.”

“Okay kids, I think its time to wrap it up for the evening. Its already almost 10:00 and your Mom’s going to ground me if I don’t have you home by 10:30.” Dawson pointed at his watch.

“One more time!” Jack shouted, as he tossed the penny into the pool, looked defiantly at Eli, and dove into the pool after it.

In one fluid movement, she turned, dove straight into the pool and scooped up the penny two feet above the bottom before either Henry or Oskar had even broken the surface. Jack was still a full three feet away when she surfaced, holding the penny up triumphantly. “Well, at least I got the last one!” She smiled directly at Jack, then turned, climbed out of the pool, grabbed her towel and sat down, drying her hair.

Jack followed her every move, as he climbed out of the pool and sat down beside her. “That was amazing! How did you do that?”

“Just lucky, I guess. And maybe I just wanted to knock that grin off your face.” She smiled at him. “Why don’t you guys come over again tomorrow? Would that be okay, Papa?”

“Tomorrow might not work well, but how about the next day. Are you boys free then?”

“That’d be great!” Jack said, “Thanks, sir.”

“Yeah, thanks a lot!” Henry chimed in.

Oskar walked Jack and Henry to the door, while Eli and the professor picked up the towels and cleaned up a bit.

Henry had already crossed the street and gone in the house, but Jack hesitated before following him. “Your sister is really cute.” Jack whispered to Oskar. “and she’s so fun. I really like her. How old is she?”

“She’s only twelve,” Oskar said, a bit irritated. “How old are you? Thirteen? Fourteen?”

“I’m thirteen. I’m sorry; I didn’t mean anything by it. All I said was that I thought she was cute and fun.”

“I know, it’s just that she’s my sister, and I’ve been taking care of her for a long time.” He paused a moment. “I guess we’ll see you day after tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.” Jack looked down a moment, then walked slowly across the street.

Oskar went back into the house, and helped Eli put things away. The professor had already gone up to his study.

“What fun that was! Oskar, I’m so happy that we’ve already made some friends. And the summer is only half over. Isn’t this great?”

Oskar didn’t say anything.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” Eli asked.

“I think Jack really likes you.”

“I like him too, Oskar. And Henry – he’s a sweet kid. This was so much fun!”

“No, I mean he really likes you – as a girl. He thinks you’re cute.”

“You’re wrong, Oskar! We’re just friends. How could he like me...like that? He’s only known us for a day.”

“I don’t know, but that’s what he told me. Who does he think he is anyway? Did he expect me to slap him on the back and tell him it was okay for him to ‘Go for it?’”

Eli was angry, “But I didn’t do anything! What’s the matter with him? He must be just like all the others. Maybe you and Papa are the only people in the world that aren’t jerks!” She turned and stormed up the stairs with tears in her eyes.

Oskar quickly followed, but saw the light was on in the study and went in, “Dad, Eli is really upset! Jack told me he thought Eli was cute and fun, and asked me how old she was.”

“And, of course, the first thing you did was tell her about it.” Dawson said.

Oskar protested, “I thought she needed to know!”

“Did you tell her out of concern for her, or because you were a bit jealous?”

“I...I wouldn’t...”

“Oskar, you not only may have hurt her deeply, but you ruined what was, to her, a perfect day. Do you really think that bit of information was that important? That it couldn’t have waited until you had talked to me about it?”

Oskar was speechless. *How could he think that I would ever want to hurt Eli? I wouldn’t... I couldn’t...* He suddenly realized that Dad was right. He had been so indignant and angry that Jack liked Eli that he didn’t even think about how she would react if he told her. “What do I do now? I’m sorry!!”

“That’s okay. Let me go talk to her first. That’ll give you time to figure out how you’re going to make this right with her.” Dawson got up and headed upstairs to her room.

Eli was lying on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. Dawson sat down on the edge of the bed, and took her hand in his. “Eli, Jack is a very nice boy. I’ve known him since he was a baby. He’s done nothing disrespectful towards you, and the fact that he likes you is a tribute to your ability to be your own person. Boys his age who are worth their salt, really like people like that, especially girls like that. And remember, you chose to be considered a girl. Your new identity is that of a girl. And that is, through no fault of his own, how he sees you. There’s absolutely nothing wrong or bad about it, and at his age, his feelings are quite innocent. He has a crush on you – an innocent crush. And I think it’s kind of nice. You just have to learn to deal with it, and let him down gently. Please don’t think you have to hate him for it.

She smiled at him, “Do you really think so? Maybe I overreacted. But that’s almost all I’ve ever seen in my life. Its hard to look at it any other way.”

“Remember, Eli, how I told you I would show you how many really decent people there were in the world? Well I personally think that Jack is one of them, or will be when he’s grown up. Please don’t sell him short.”

“What am I going to do? How can I stop him from liking me like that?”

“Just try to keep your distance. Spend a little more time playing with Henry and Oskar. I think Oskar may have put a damper on it already by his reaction to Jack.” He smiled at her, “I’m confident that you can work it out. Just remember, he means you no harm. Oskar is on his way up to talk with you.” He squeezed her hand.

Dawson passed Oskar on the stairs. “She’s all yours. Do you have a plan?”

Oskar looked down at his feet, “I’m just going to apologize. I...I don’t know what else to do. I’m so sorry!”

“Just think about that and you’ll do just fine!” Dawson gave him an encouraging hug.

Oskar stepped quietly into her room. He could hear the shower running. He was still sitting on the edge of her bed, deep in thought when Eli came into the room drying her hair.

Oskar looked away as he took off his clothes, and headed for the bathroom.

“Oskar...”

“Oh Eli! I’m so sorry! I hurt you because I was jealous and selfish. What’s wrong with me? I’m so stupid, stupid, stupid!!”

She took his hand, “I think it’s kind of cute that you’re jealous...”

And he really was jealous, he realized. The thought that anyone else would like Eli was hard for him to take. All his inadequacies flooded back into his mind; his wimpiness, his inability to stand up for himself, and his inability to make friends. And he had so quickly and easily put his own feelings ahead of hers. Boy, did he EVER not deserve her!

“No it’s not cute! After all you’ve done for me and I do that to you. How can you even look at me?” The more Oskar talked, the worse he felt. “You’ve always thought about me first. You’ve always taken care of me. You saved my life three times, and almost died doing it! And I...” He couldn’t stand it any more. “Eli, your one fault is that you’re a terrible judge of character!!” He stalked off into the bathroom, slammed the door and turned on the shower. *And now I’ve made it even worse. I probably upset her again by yelling. I’m just an immature twelve-year-old, and an idiot besides.* He heard a soft knock on the door.

“Can I come in?”

“Yes.” Oskar said softly.

He heard the door open. She pulled the shower curtain back, gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, smiled at him, and just as quickly, slipped out and closed the door behind her.

Chapter 3: Oskar's Challenge

"Oskar, would you get the door?" Dawson was helping Eli put away the dishes.

Oskar opened the front door and stepped back as Jack and Henry spilled in, talking excitedly.

"Seth is really mad." Jack said, "**Someone** spread the news that he had been knocked around by a girl, and he's been looking for us." He turned and gave Henry a dirty look.

Oskar put his finger to his lips, and motioned them toward the stairs. "Dad, its Henry and Jack. We're going upstairs, Okay?"

"Okay, Oskar! Eli, I'll finish up here. You run along." She quickly followed the boys upstairs.

They spread out in Oskar's room; Jack and Henry on the window seat, and Eli and Oskar on the edge of his bed "I'm really sorry, Jack, I only told Clayton about it. He's my best friend. He said he wouldn't tell. I'm sorry!"

"Well, what's done is done. It's okay, Henry. It's really not your fault." Jack patted him on the back.

"Does Seth know who ratted him out?" Eli asked.

"No, but he can put two and two together. We were the only ones who were there," Jack said.

"Really? Oskar and I don't count? I'll just tell him that I spread the news. That'll get you off the hook."

"No! I'm not going to hide behind you on this. You think that because you're a girl that he won't knock you around? After what you did, you're probably on his list anyway."

"Jack, think about Henry. You can't watch him all the time. And from what you tell me, Seth would beat up Henry just to get back at you. We can't let that happen."

"I could tell him I did it, too. That might confuse him." Oskar said.

"No, that would just mean that Seth would beat you both up. You don't know him like we do. He's not a nice guy."

"Why don't we talk to Dad? Maybe he can talk to Seth's parents," Oskar asked.

"No! I don't want Papa to know about the fight at the stream."

"That wouldn't work anyway. His dad's a drunk and his mom is dead. Your dad would likely be beaten up himself if he tried it."

“That...will definitely not happen,” Eli said, steely-eyed.

“What’ll we do then?” Henry was getting scared.

Eli stepped over and gave him a hug. “Don’t worry. We’ll all just stick together. He’s basically a coward. He won’t fight with us all. We’ll just stick together until he gets tired of being angry and this all blows over. Deal?”

“Deal!” they said in unison.

“Any time you are going out alone, give us a call. If we can’t go with you, don’t go! Oskar and I can take care of ourselves.”

“No deal! It either works both ways, or not at all,” Jack insisted.

Oskar glanced at Eli, “Jack’s right. It needs to be all for one and one for all. Just like the Three Musketeers!” They all crossed imaginary swords.

“You two need to show us where Seth lives. Why don’t we do that now?” Eli started for the door.

Oskar grabbed her by the arm. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” He pointed outside, where the sun was low, but still visible on the horizon. “We need to wait at least a half hour. I don’t think it would be a good idea for you to have your suit on if we run into him.”

Eli paced back and forth. “Where does he normally hang out?”

“I see him over behind the school a lot,” Henry volunteered.

“And over by the old warehouse, smoking with some of his older friends.” Jack said.

“Oskar, see if Papa has a map we can have.” Oskar disappeared down the stairs. He was back almost immediately. “Dad has a whole collection of them in an endtable in the living room. He told me to help myself.” They spread the map out on Oskar’s table.

“Here’s where he lives, and here’s the school. Over here is the warehouse.” Jack pointed to the different locations. Eli marked them down.

“Okay then,” she said, glancing out the window, “Let’s go take a look.”

“Dad, we’re going out for a while, but we’ll be back in about an hour or so,” Oskar yelled as they all went out the front door.

“Don’t go too far. It’ll be dark soon.” Dawson said.

It took them almost 20 minutes to get to the neighborhood of red-brick houses where Seth lived. The area was tired-looking and threadbare, with litter in the streets and an old car with a flat tire up against the high brick fence. The same stream that was so beautiful in their neighborhood degenerated into a muddy trash-filled ditch, running through an empty lot lined with the ghosts of old tenement foundations and littered with garbage, across the street from Seth's house.

"That's his house over there, the third from the corner," Jack whispered.

"Okay. Which way to the school?"

"It's closer to our neighborhood. I'll show you on the way back." He pointed toward the empty lot. "You can just make out the stacks by the warehouse over there. I don't think we need to go there; we probably wouldn't make it back in time."

"Okay, then. Let's head back. Lead the way, Jack!" Eli said. As they turned, they spotted Seth standing by his front gate, watching them intently. Two other boys were lounging against the fence next to him. Eli hesitated for a moment, then started across the street towards them.

"Eli! Let's go home!" Oskar hissed, as he hurried to catch up. Jack and Henry held back, but still followed them across the street.

"Hello, Seth. I just know you'll be relieved to hear that our ducks are doing just fine!"

"You think you're so smart? You're in my part of town now. Your mommy's a long way away, snitch!" He directed this last comment at Jack and Henry. "You're really stupid to come down here after spreading lies about me." He turned to the others. "This is the little bitch that they claimed beat me up." They all laughed.

"Watch your mouth, Seth, or I'll tell them what happened after Jack and Henry left. Oskar here will back me up." Oskar stepped up beside her defiantly, and stuck out his hand, "Need a towel?" he grinned at Seth.

"Get the hell out of here or you'll be sorry!" he snarled. "Come on! Let's go. We're late already." He motioned to the other two boys and they quickly headed down the street.

"Wow! I've never seen him act like that before. What'd you do after we left?" Jack asked.

"She pushed him into the pond! He went completely underwater and was totally soaked!"

"Oskar, you weren't supposed to tell!" Eli was smiling in spite of herself.

Jack looked at her in amazement. "I thought so! You weren't lucky; you're just really good! I bet Seth was sorry he ever ran into you!" They all started laughing as they headed back towards the school.

§

The car pulled into the driveway. It had barely come to a stop when both rear doors opened simultaneously and Oskar and Eli piled out and raced for the house.

“Don’t forget your stuff – and close the car doors!” Dawson called after them. They had just returned from a shopping trip downtown, their first daytime excursion with Eli’s new suit. She actually almost enjoyed all the attention she got. People were so nice and understanding. It was fun looking at all the shops and record stores, but the only thing that interested her was a box of wire puzzles she found in a hobby shop. Oskar bought a couple of ABBA albums he didn’t have, but like Eli, he preferred to window shop and explore.

Eli was already working on one of the puzzles when she heard Oskar put on a record in his room. He stepped in and watched her for a minute, then sat down and started working on one of the puzzles himself. “What do you do with them once you’ve solved them? It must be boring to do them over and over.”

“I hadn’t thought about it. I’ve had the old puzzles for over a hundred years, but I guess boredom is relative. You’d be surprised how much fun these can be if you live in a cave and don’t have anyone to talk to. Now...you’re probably right. I’ll probably do them once and maybe give them to Henry or Jack. There’s too much around here to do that’s more fun!” she smiled at him. “There! This one’s done.” She tossed it up on the dresser under the window. “Let’s see who can do one the fastest!” she handed him one, and picked a new one for herself.

“No fair! You’ve been doing this for over 200 years, and I’m only a child. I’m only 12 years old,” he looked at her with an exaggerated pout, “How about a handicap?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well... why don’t you try doing it with your eyes closed? That’d be fair. Or are you afraid I’d beat you?”

“Ha! That’ll be the day. You’re on! I’ll close my eyes and you hand one to me.” She scrunched up her eyes and held out her hand.

“Okay, here. No peaking now.” He concentrated on his puzzle, twisting and turning the wires, trying to get them apart. Eli’s fingers were almost a blur as she concentrated with a half-smile on her face.

Just as he gave his the last twist, she shouted, “I got it!” and pitched the two loose pieces up on the dresser, where they bounced against the wall and slid down the back to the floor. Oskar carefully put his two pieces on the dresser, “You missed! I won!” he taunted.

“That wasn’t the deal.” She protested, “I finished first!”

“How do I know you really finished? For all I know, you tossed it up there before you solved it.”

“I’ll prove it to you!” She got up and headed for the dresser.

“Don’t Eli! Take off your suit first. You’ll tear it. That’s a really heavy dresser.”

“Okay, okay!” She took off the suit, hung it up in the wardrobe, and headed for the dresser, but as she glanced out the window, she saw Seth standing on the sidewalk in front of Jack’s and Henry’s house. Seth looked up and saw her in the window at almost the same time. “Oskar, Seth is outside in front of their house. Go call them and warn them so they don’t go outside.” Oskar quickly headed down the stairs as Eli pulled the dresser out from the wall and stooped down behind it, looking for the puzzle.

She grabbed the puzzle pieces but, just as she stood up, there was an explosion of glass! She felt the pain as hundreds of sharp slivers of glass buried themselves in her back, bounced off the dresser and fell like rain on the floor. A large rock rolled to a stop in the middle of the room. Instantly, she was exposed to the full unfiltered rays of the sun as they poured down on her with a fury. Caught off guard, she screamed in agony, and scrambled to get away, but was momentarily trapped between the heavy dresser and the wall. Blinded by the pain, she put her foot against the top of the dresser, pushed it over and clambered over the top of it, fell and felt the sun’s rays searing her face and chest. She could smell her flesh burning, and fought to remain conscious, just as Oskar rushed into the room. She managed to get to her knees, just as he grabbed a blanket off the bed, threw it over her, snatched her up, stumbled across the hall into his room and slammed the door. Almost immediately, the door burst open and Dawson rushed in. “Oskar! What happened?”

“Her window broke and she was in the sun! You can smell her burning! Is she going to die?!” Dawson picked her up off the floor, put her on Oskar’s bed, and carefully pulled back the blanket. Eli was a mass of blisters and tattered skin. In some places, her skin hung in strips; everywhere else it was bright red, and covered with spots of blood welling up around the splinters of glass that seemed to be everywhere. Her eyes were closed and her body was shaking. “Oskar, go get my bag!” He felt for her pulse. There! Strong and steady! She was breathing fast, and her fists were clenched at her sides.

“Papa? It...hurts so much!” Eli looked up at him, her teeth clenched. Oskar rushed in with the bag.

“What can I do to help you heal yourself?” Dawson whispered.

She swallowed, and closed her eyes. She shook her head slowly. “Nothing. I don’t know if I can...” she said hoarsely. Oskar took her hand and felt her pain. *Eli let me help! What can I do? Anything! Please?*

Oskar, just stay with me. It hurts so much! Oskar could feel her moving in and out of consciousness through the pain. *Eli, don’t go away! Please! Don’t die!* Oskar could feel her slipping into the darkness. He held her hand tightly, willing her to stay awake, to no avail. She suddenly disappeared. He was completely and utterly alone – more alone than he had been in his life before. Oskar moaned softly.

“Oskar, she’s just fainted from the pain! Her pulse is still strong, and I see slight signs of healing in progress. She’s going to be fine!” Inside, he wasn’t so sure.

“She’s gone! She’s not here any more! Even when she’s asleep, I can feel her. She’s not there.” Oskar kissed her hand and held it to his cheek. “She never complains about pain! When the moose almost killed her, she didn’t hurt this much! What’s wrong? Where is she?”

“Oskar, I think the sun is the one thing we need to worry about with Eli. I honestly don’t know if she will recover from this nearly as fast as she does from other injuries. I suspect she won’t, actually. I see nowhere near the healing activity I saw after the incident with the moose.”

Oskar?...

“Eli!?” Oskar jumped up and squeezed her hand again. “She’s here. She’s back!” he leaned over her and kissed her on the forehead as she opened her eyes. Dawson opened his bag.

“Eli, I’m only going to remove the pieces of glass. Let me know if this hurts too much and I’ll stop.” Dawson began picking out the slivers as gently as he could with a fine pair of tweezers. There were so many!

After an hour, he thought he had it all. He could see signs that Eli was finally, but slowly beginning to heal. Her skin had smoothed out a bit, even though she was covered with black and blue splotches on her chest and face. Her back was still bright red and sensitive. “Oskar, go get her some food.” He put his arm behind her back and gently raised her up to a sitting position. Oskar handed him the first bag. He quickly removed the clamp and pressed the tube to her lips. After a few moments, she began to drink, slowly at first, then steadily until she finished three bags.

They heard the bell ringing downstairs. “Oskar, go see who that is. I’ll stay with Eli.”

A few minutes later, Oskar came back into the room, a strange, detached look on his face. “That was Jack. He said he saw Seth throwing rocks at the house. His mom went out and Seth ran off. I told him what happened to Eli.”

“Who’s Seth?”

“Just a kid in the neighborhood,” Oskar said quietly. “Eli, are you okay? Are you going to be okay?”

She took his hand, “I’m fine, Oskar. You know you probably saved my life don’t you? If you hadn’t thrown the blanket over me and pulled me out of the room, I don’t know what might have happened. That’s the longest I’ve ever been in the sun before.”

He smiled at her, then looked away, “Dad, can I go talk to Jack? I’ll be back in a couple of minutes.”

“Sure. Go ahead. I’ll stay with Eli.”

He quickly headed downstairs. Dawson checked Eli’s wounds one more time, and put a fresh blanket over her. “What exactly happened, Eli? Why were you in the sun so long?”

“I was moving the dresser to get a puzzle that dropped behind it and when the window broke, I was caught between the wall and the dresser. By the time I pushed it over, I just...”

Eli suddenly sat up straight in bed. “Papa, you have to stop him! He’s going to do something stupid. He’s going after Seth!”

“Eli, Oskar wouldn’t do that. He’s a sensible kid. He knows that we’ll get to the bottom of this and Seth will be handled...”

“You don’t understand! I heard him! He’s going to get himself hurt because of me. He’s not thinking.” She started to get out of bed.

“Stay where you are! I’m not going to run the risk of losing you both again. I’ll go look for him. The sun is still out, remember.”

“Take Jack with you. He knows where Seth lives,” she called after him as he hurried down the stairs.

Just as he started out the door, he noticed his cricket bat was no longer hanging on the wall next to the fireplace. *Oh Oskar!* He hurried across the street. Jack was standing on the front porch.

“Jack, I think Oskar’s gone after Seth. Can you come with me and show me where Seth lives?”

“Okay!” He quickly joined Dawson on the sidewalk. “Sir, Seth will really hurt him! He’s a good foot taller than Oskar. He’ll be all alone and Seth is really mad at all of us. Why would he do that?” they started down the street quickly.

“Jack, he really loves Eli, and Seth, by breaking the window and cutting her with the glass, also exposed her to the direct sunlight. She’s burned pretty badly. Oskar, at least for a moment, thought she might die.”

§

Oskar was filled with rage. He had never felt this way before, even with Jonny. That was just about him; this was Eli. That f...ing animal had almost killed her! There was no way this would ever happen again! He was going to put an end to him now! He held the bat tightly in both hands and swung it over his head, as his anger grew. All he could see was that a...hole laughing at Eli with his stupid friends. *Well, they’d better stay out of my way, or they’ll get some of this too!* He quickened his pace.

He rounded the corner, and headed down Seth's street. Sure enough, all three of them were outside the fence, smoking and laughing. He held the bat down in front of him with both hands as he strode rapidly towards them. All he could see was Seth.

Seth looked up as Oskar approached. "Well, look who's here! That little cunt's baby brother. Did she hear me coming this time, or did I catch her by surprise?" he taunted. He stepped towards Oskar.

Without breaking stride, Oskar swung the bat as hard as he could as he bore down on him. Seth's face was framed against a blood-red sky, as Oskar's anger and all his strength was contained completely in that swing. The edge of the bat caught Seth just below his left shoulder. There was a sharp crack as the bat met bone and Seth bounced back against the brick fence. As he scrambled to his feet, Oskar swung again; the flat side of the bat connected with Seth's head with a meaty smack. His hand went to his ear as he went down again. The other two made a move towards him, as he brought the bat back for another swing. "Get the hell out of here or I'll kill you both!" Oskar screamed at them. "I just want him!" They stepped back, startled by Oskar's intensity. He swung again, but Seth rolled over and just caught a glancing blow on the back. He whimpered in pain, stumbled to his feet and headed for the gate, his left arm hanging by his side and his right hand against his head. Blood was oozing through his fingers. Oskar brought the bat back for another swing as the faces of all his past tormenters swam before his eyes and merged into the retreating form in front of him. *I want you dead! You've taken the last thing from me you're ever going to get!* His swing was suddenly stopped short, and he felt a strong grip on his wrist.

"Oskar!! Stop!" Dawson wrenched the bat out of his hands and grabbed him, pinning his arms to his sides. The blood-red sky gradually faded with the fury as Oskar watched Seth fumble with the gate latch, and finally stumble into his yard, out of sight. The other two were just disappearing around the fence at the end of the block. Oskar went limp in Dawson's arms and dissolved in tears. Dawson relaxed his grip, and Oskar stepped away, refusing to look at him. Instead, he focused on the bat, lying at his feet.

"I'm not sorry! I'll never be sorry!" he sobbed, and headed for home without looking back.

"Jack, please stick as close to him as you can." I have to see if I can help Seth." He handed the bat to Jack. "Take this over to your house for now. Tell your Mom what happened, and see if she'll check in on Eli and Oskar for me until I get back. He watched as Jack hurried after Oskar. He turned and walked through the gate.

§

As hard as he tried, Jack didn't catch up with Oskar until they were almost home. "Oskar, is Eli going to be all right? Is she hurt bad?"

Oskar turned and looked at him for a moment, then continued on without saying anything. Jack followed him in the house and up the stairs. He left the bat on the front porch; he felt uneasy carrying it, remembering what it had just done.

“Oskar, are you all right?” Jack could hear Eli’s voice floating down the stairs as they approached the landing.

As Jack reached the top of the stairs, he could see bits of glass glittering on the floor just inside Eli’s room. He paused and shut her door before following Oskar into his room. Oskar was already sitting next to her on the bed with his arm around her. Jack gasped as he caught sight of Eli’s face; it was a mass of black, blue and red splotches. “Gosh, Eli! You look terrible! Does it hurt much?”

She smiled at him. “I’m okay. It just looks bad! Where’s Papa? Did you go with him?” she asked.

“He’s okay. He’s helping Seth. Oskar beat him up with a cricket bat. You should have seen it! Things have certainly gotten exciting around here since you two moved in.” He looked at her admiringly. “Boy, that’s got to hurt!”

“You should see my back,” she said, as she started to take off her shirt.

“Eli!” Oskar grabbed her hand and turned red.

“Oops! Sorry!” she giggled. She turned her back and raised her shirt up, revealing black and blue streaks, sprinkled with what looked like chicken pox. “That’s where Papa took out all the pieces of glass.”

“Wow!” he said admiringly, “That looks awful!” He took on a more serious tone, “Are you going to be okay? Dr. Dawson wanted me to send Mom over to look in on you, so I’d better go on home.” He started for the door.

“Jack? Thanks for going with Papa. And thanks for bringing Oskar home.”

He blushed, “Actually I just followed him home...but you’re welcome,” he turned and bumped into the door frame on his way out. “Sorry,” he mumbled as he disappeared around the corner.

“Oskar, I was so worried! You promised you wouldn’t take chances anymore.”

“I’m sorry Eli. When I saw you and felt how much pain you were in, and all because of ...him. I couldn’t help it. I’ve never felt that way before. Let me get you some more food.” He quickly stepped into her room, grabbed a bag and sat down beside her again. She drank it gratefully as she lay back down on the bed, and smiled up at him.

They heard the door open, then footsteps on the stairs. “Papa! Are you okay? Did you see Seth’s dad?” Eli said anxiously.

Dawson came into the room and sat down on the window seat. “I’m fine, Eli.” He looked at her face carefully, then lifted her shirt and looked at her back. “This is going to take a while to heal.

It's not at all like your usual injuries. Even the glass injuries haven't healed yet. Oskar and I need to have a talk. Can I borrow him for a few minutes?"

She nodded. "Papa, please don't be angry with him. He didn't mean to."

Dawson smiled at her. "Let's go Oskar," he closed the door behind him and directed Oskar into Eli's room. The glass crunched under their shoes as they walked over and sat on Eli's window seat. He saw the overturned dresser, the jagged remains of her favorite window, puzzles strewn all over the floor and smears of blood near the door where Oskar had half-carried and dragged her into his room. "Oskar, looking around Eli's room I can understand what it must have been like for you when you came in. I understand why you got so angry. I'm frankly surprised, but I understand. But you have to try to keep this from happening ever again. You're going to be twelve for a long time and you need to learn to control yourself better." He grabbed Oskar firmly by the shoulders. "Oskar, you might have killed him! What do you think that would have done to Eli? She was already frantic worrying about you. Isn't she in enough pain already that you have to add to it by getting yourself arrested for assault? Or Murder? In the worst case scenario, they could find out who you really are! You'd never see her again!" He knew he was being hard on him, but he had to make him understand. He also knew that Eli could hear everything they were saying. She needed to hear this too.

Oskar had tears in his eyes, "I don't even know what happened. I got madder and madder and then it was like I was someone else. All I could see was Seth and I hated him. I wanted to..." he put his face in his hands. "I'm sorry!" he shook his head. "I've been saying that a lot lately. Maybe I should have waited till I grew up a little before I infected myself. Now I'm going to be an idiot forever."

"Oskar, please come to me before you do anything like that again. You have to trust me! You know I'll make things right."

"How's Seth?"

"It wasn't as bad as it looked. I calmed his Dad down and we made an...arrangement. I'm paying for all his medication, plus a bit more to help them out at home. I don't think there'll be any more problems from Seth. Especially when I told his Dad what he did to Eli, and what the charges would be if he caused any more trouble."

Oskar got up and began picking up Eli's puzzles and carefully placing them on her table. Together, they swept the glass into a pile, set the dresser upright and pushed it back against the wall. When they were finished, Oskar put his arms around his Dad and squeezed. He knew there was nothing he could say at this point that would matter. He just knew he had to change, to become more grown up. He owed that to them both.

"Now, you go on in and take care of Eli. I'll cover the window and get someone up here tomorrow to clean up the room. It'll take a while to replace the glass though. I can't just buy it at the closest DIY store." He watched as Oskar hurried across the hall and closed the door behind him.

He walked over to Eli and hugged her tightly. “I love you so much! Even though I mess up all the time.” He kissed her, and went in to take a shower. He thought about what had happened. Living his fantasy hadn’t been as satisfying as he thought it would be. He felt ashamed, dirty somehow. In fact he felt as if he had been selfish yet again. What, in his fantasy, he thought he was doing for her, he was really doing for himself – for all the years he hadn’t done it before. He went into the room and climbed into bed. Eli pulled him to her and hugged him tightly. He smiled and kissed her on the cheek. Exhausted, they quickly fell asleep together.

When she woke up later in the darkness, he was sitting up looking at her lovingly. “I’m afraid of you.” He said softly. “I can never do enough for you. There’s never enough. I feel like there is something I just have to give you, but whenever I try, it’s not nearly enough.”

“Oskar, you’ve given me more than I’ve ever had before in my life. I feel like you are the only thing that can keep me from the darkness that’s been a part of my life for so long. I feel it just behind you, waiting for a chance to take me back. It’s only completely gone when you’re in my mind, loving me. I’m afraid of you, too. I’m afraid you’ll go away, and I’ll be lost again forever.”

He lay down beside her, and gently pulled her to him. They held each other, his cheek pressing against hers. He reached back and pulled the blanket over their heads, and felt the heat of their bodies as the space around them gradually became toasty warm. He imagined they were completely safe and protected from the world by their love and warmth inside their little cocoon. Eli smiled at him in his mind and her love enveloped him. At this precious moment, they were everything in the whole world that they needed.

Chapter 4: A Chance Encounter.

Oskar was sitting at his computer when he heard the phone ring. “Oskar? Would you get that?” Dad’s voice floated in through his open window. He jumped up, ran down the stairs and grabbed the phone. “Hello?” There was silence on the line for a minute, then, a familiar voice “Can I speak to Dr. Dawson?”

“Who’s this?” Oskar asked.

“...Seth”

“Okay, just a minute.” He ran out to the back porch, “Dad, it’s Seth. What does HE want?”

Dawson quickly came in and picked up the phone, “Seth? ...Is there a problem? ... Okay, stay with him. I’ll handle it. I’ll be right there.”

“Oskar? Come with me.” Dawson started out the door. Oscar followed him to the car.

They hurriedly pulled out of the driveway and headed towards Seth’s house. “Are we going over there? Why? What does he want?” Dawson didn’t say a word. They continued on in silence. As they finally rounded the last corner, Oskar could see Seth standing in the middle of the street over the unconscious body of his father. His left arm was in a sling. They pulled over and parked, and as Oskar got out of the car, he could see tears in Seth’s eyes. He backed away as they approached.

“Oskar? Give me a hand,” Dawson reached down, grabbed a limp arm and gently lifted Seth’s father off the ground. Oskar took his other arm and could smell the whiskey on his breath as he struggled to get his shoulder under him. With difficulty, they maneuvered him across the street, through the narrow gate, and into the living room. Discarded bottles littered the floor, old newspapers and dirty dishes were strewn everywhere, and a young boy and girl were sitting together in an old, stained lounger, with frightened looks on their faces. They couldn’t have been older than seven or eight. Dawson guided Seth’s father to the couch, and lifted his legs up as he flopped down, semiconscious. “Oskar, I’d like you to meet Stacey and Donald, Seth’s brother and sister.

“Hello,” Oskar smiled at them.

They smiled back uncertainly, but remained silent.

“Seth, have the children eaten anything today?”

He looked down at his feet, and slowly shook his head.

He handed Seth a handful of bills. “Run down to the store and get them some food – and some milk. And Seth, get something for yourself too. You have to stay strong for them. You’re the man of the house now. Can I count on you?” Seth nodded and silently slipped out the door.

“Help me, Oskar,” Dawson began picking up the empty bottles and dirty dishes. Oskar quickly joined in. They went into the kitchen where Oskar saw two half-empty bottles sitting on the counter. Dawson quickly emptied them in the sink, and tossed them in the garbage with the others. Stacey and Donald timidly walked in and put some old newspapers in the garbage, then sat down at the table and watched as the Professor and Oskar washed and dried the sinkload of dishes. They had just finished cleaning up when Seth came in with a bag of groceries. He silently placed them on the table, and handed Dawson several bills and some change. “Keep it for later,” Dawson said, “but keep it away from your dad.” He put his hands on Seth’s shoulders and looked him in the eyes. “Promise me you’ll use it for food.” Seth nodded solemnly.

“Oskar and I need to get home, but call me if something happens you can’t handle,” Dawson shook his hand. Seth began putting the food in the refrigerator. As they turned to leave, he suddenly turned toward Dawson “Thank you. I...” he looked down at his feet.

“Just take care of your brother and sister. I know you can do this. You’re a tough kid.” Oskar saw the tears in Seth’s eyes as they went out the front door.

They drove home in silence. Oskar felt confused and guilty at the same time. Were they all like this? Somehow he couldn’t quite believe it. Jimmy and Jonny? Micke? No, it had to be different with them. They were just bullies; animals who tried to kill him and deserved what they got. Didn’t they? He deliberately stopped thinking about it.

As they got out of the car, Oskar took his Dad’s hand and squeezed it hard, “Dad? I’m really sorry.” Dawson smiled at him as they went in the front door together.

§

Eli was still across the street at Jack and Henry’s house when Dawson and Oskar finished their game of scrabble. Oskar could almost hold his own by now, which made for a much more interesting game. It was late in the evening when they finally had had enough.

Oskar had no sooner started up the stairs when Eli burst in the door behind him, the splotches on her face partially obscured with flour. “Oskar, look what Jack’s mom helped me make! She handed him a plate of cookies. “Come on! Try one! I did this batch myself!” Oskar pretending to be serious, carefully took a cookie and nibbled a corner. He looked puzzled as he turned the cookie around and took a nibble off the other side.

“It doesn’t work!” he exclaimed. What did you do wrong?”

“What do you mean? You don’t like them?” Eli looked dejected.

Oskar carefully put the plate on the table, “One side didn’t make me small and the other side didn’t make me tall. It didn’t work!” He grinned. “But they taste absolutely incredible! I love peanut butter cookies!” He grabbed her and hugged her before she could build up a head of

steam. “Eli, you are so ...” He hugged her again. “I love you so much. Your cookies are wonderful! Dad! Come and have one of Eli’s cookies!”

Eli was grinning ear to ear as Dawson sampled one of her cookies. “Wonderful!” he exclaimed. “You’ve outdone yourself!”

“Oh Papa, I’m glad you like them!” She hugged him. “I’ll be back in a minute. I have to help with the last batch.” She flew out the door and ran back across the street.

Dawson watched her as she ran, a lump in his throat, “Oskar, I really do understand why you were so angry with Seth. You certainly have your own inner demons, but the heart of the matter just ran across the street. I think if I were in your shoes I would have been just as angry.” Secretly, he was convinced that at that age he would have done pretty much the same thing. The thought of anyone deliberately hurting her made him angry just thinking about it. Ah, if life were only that uncomplicated!

When Eli got back, Oskar was already in her room, working on his big Rubik’s Cube. He proudly held it up to show her he had solved the four center squares on all six sides. Now if he was careful not to mess up the pattern, he could solve it just like a regular cube.

“Oh Oskar! That’s great!” She went over, sat on the window seat, and gazed out the window. “It’s going to be dark tonight. There’s a new moon.” She swung open the window and felt the cool night air waft in, as Oscar sat down beside her. “Oskar, there are more cookies downstairs if you want some.” She smiled at him. “Do you really like them?”

“Eli, I love them! But how could you stand making them when they taste and smell so bad to you?”

“They really don’t smell bad; they’re actually kind of pleasant, you know, like flowers smell nice but you wouldn’t eat them. And of course I don’t have to taste them. It’s really only a problem if I eat them.” She turned and gazed out the window again.

She felt...restless somehow. She thought about her old life, the endless loneliness, the nightly routines, so different from today. Did she have the right to be so happy? She had an intuitive feeling that she needed to maintain that connection with her past somehow. In some odd way, it gave her present a much deeper meaning. “Oskar, I ... I think I’ll go out for a little while. Would you mind?” she looked up at him, pleadingly.

“What do you mean? Do you want to go for a walk?”

“Not exactly. I feel like – flying for a while. Do you think that’s okay? It’s dark, so no one would see me.”

“I don’t know. Should we ask Dad?”

“No, I don’t want to bother him. It’ll only be for a little while.” She took off her shirt.

Oskar looked at her bruised body worriedly. “Eli, are you sure you’re well enough? You still look pretty bad. How about your legs?”

She pulled off her pants, “See? They hardly show anything anymore. They just got a little bit of sun. I just wanted to see what the old neighborhood looks like today. And it’s not like I’m going to be fighting a moose or anything.”

Oskar laughed, “Okay, okay. I really wish you wouldn’t, but go ahead. I’ll wait here for you. We haven’t slept in your room since the window broke.” He watched as she stepped out the window onto the roof, lifted her winged arms, and fell forward. She swooped over the pool, banked left and disappeared over the trees at the back of the yard. Oskar went back over to her table, picked up the cube and studied it intently.

§

Eli climbed to a safe altitude and got her bearings. It had been years since she had been here, but she recognized many familiar landmarks; Parliament, the river, St. Paul’s. She headed for the East End, curious as to how things may have changed since she had lived there so long ago. She passed over the Tower of London, and could make out the familiar street patterns ahead. Whitechapel and Commercial Road were right below her. She descended slowly as she approached Mile End and Burdett Roads, her old neighborhood. Some things looked vaguely familiar, but much of what she remembered was either gone and replaced with newer row houses, or looked the same, only more threadbare.

The Tower Hamlets Cemetery looked the same, but a bit more overgrown and in disrepair; she descended rapidly for a closer look. She swooped low over the old crypts and finally landed in front of one she had called home for over a year. She stood there for a moment in the dark taking it all in as her wings retracted with a soft crackle. The eagle with its single remaining wing perched on the peak above the door, still looked as forlorn as it had when she saw it last. The crypt was in even more disrepair than when she had lived there, but upon careful examination, her old entrance, though overgrown, still appeared intact. Out of curiosity, she pulled away the heavy stone and lifted the old metal plate. Surprisingly it came away easily, in spite of the accumulation of dirt and rust. She crouched down and slithered through the tiny opening into the crypt chamber, where everything appeared exactly as she had left it those many years ago. An old copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, a bit dusty but still intact, was in an old wooden box in the corner. A ring of old keys that had given her access to various other hiding and feeding places she had managed to discover, were there also. The memories they brought back were not pleasant. She suddenly felt uneasy even being there, as the old memories became more vivid, and for a moment, her recent beautiful life with Oskar and Papa seemed as though it might be just a fantasy – a dream. She felt an adrenaline rush as the fear of that very possibility became palpable. She turned and scurried out the entrance, replaced the plate and carefully set the stone back in place.

She walked rapidly along the path towards the Cemetery gate, followed by legions of ghostly memories. Just as she was about to step out onto the sidewalk a sudden noise made her

instinctively drop back into the shadows. She silently scurried up the side of the two-story outbuilding just inside the gate to the right, and crept across the roof to get a better view of the dimly-lit street. She saw two men walking slowly down the cemetery-side of the street; one was clearly a drunk, as he was weaving a bit as he walked. The second was clearly following him, but at least 100 feet back. But there was something about this second man that bothered her. Something about the way he was stalking the drunk. Something...she couldn't quite put her finger on. Suddenly, as the drunk reached an unlit portion of the walkway, the second man, in an incredible burst of silent speed, covered the distance between them in four huge leaps and dropped the drunk in his tracks. Before he could even react, he was struck in the head and knocked unconscious.

Eli realized immediately that she was in the presence of one of her own kind. She froze in position and stopped breathing. She sensed the wind direction and realized that she was in a precarious position, as the breeze was blowing from behind her directly towards the crouching figure. Nothing she could do now but watch and hope he didn't notice her.

The vampire stood up quickly, looked around carefully, then took off his jacket. Eli was startled to see that he was only a child – certainly older than Oskar, but still a child, judging by his height and face. She guessed perhaps 15 or 16; about Seth's age. But despite his apparent youth, his back was covered with deep horizontal scars. She watched as he pulled out a long flexible tube, and what looked like an old sheepskin water bag, and bent over the drunk. She watched him shove the sharp end of the tube into the man's jugular and secure it around his neck with a strap. He then effortlessly lifted the man by the waist, feet in the air, completely over his head, and stood motionless as the half-gallon container, aided by gravity, gradually inflated as the blood drained efficiently from his limp body. When the bag was about two-thirds full, he dragged the man across the sidewalk next to the cemetery fence, put some white powder on the wound, and as he pulled out the tube, pressed a square-folded piece of cloth directly on the wound and secured it with the strap.

He suddenly raised his head for a moment and was still, as though he had heard something. Eli hadn't taken a breath or moved a muscle, so she wasn't sure what had alerted him. However, he quickly resumed his activity, and after making sure the man was no longer bleeding, picked up his gear and quickly sprinted on down the street out of sight around the corner. Eli waited a couple of minutes just to be safe, then stood up carefully and scanned the roof. She breathed a sigh of relief. She had to get home and tell Papa about this. It could present problems for them.

She turned into the wind with her arms at her sides, and, as quietly as she could, spread her wings and leaped into the air. She hadn't cleared the roof when she was suddenly struck hard from above and driven downward. Her wings collapsed as he wrapped his own tightly around her, and together they fell like a rock, dropping 20 feet onto the hard gravel roof. She landed on her face and chest with his full weight driving her across the loose gravel, knocking the breath completely out of her. She quickly rolled to the side, jumped to her feet, kicked him solidly in the groin, and raced for the edge of the building, but he was up almost as quickly and grabbed her firmly by the hair in mid-stride. Her head jerked back and her feet flew out from under her, as he grabbed her around the chest with both arms and lifted her completely off the ground.

“Well! What have we here? A new little vampire, and a cute one at that. Hardly a mouthful though. Where did you come from?”

Eli struggled to get away, but it was no use. Not only was he bigger and stronger, she was still comparatively weak from her encounter with the sun. He relaxed his grip on her but grabbed her wrists tightly in his clawed hands as he turned her around to face him. All she could see was his black eyes boring into her. She struggled for a moment, but her claws were useless to her and her talons couldn't get a good enough grip on the roof to give her any leverage. She looked at him defiantly with her cat-eyes and remained silent. “Got a little sunburned I see.” he laughed, “I hate it when that happens! It can ruin your whole day.” He examined her more closely. “I see you have sexual identity issues too. Boy I bet that hurt! Ahh, but it brings back nothing but fond memories for me.” He got an ugly look on his face as he tightened his grip and his claws bit into her wrists. “Now, where the hell did you come from? You'll tell me eventually, I promise.” He smiled at her, deliberately exposing his fangs. She saw that he was much more muscular than he had appeared to be when seen from a distance. He was quite a formidable figure. She also noticed multiple scars on his chest which, along with the horizontal scars on his back, suggested that he had most likely been whipped repeatedly. He must have gone through his own hell before he was turned, since she was painfully aware that injuries acquired before being turned were never repaired.

Eli retracted her claws and talons and stood there motionless. He released one arm, firmly guided her to the center of the roof and motioned for her to sit down. When they were seated, he released her and leaned back against a ventilation shaft. “You realize you can't get away, right? You'll be no match for me, and I will definitely get angry if you make any such attempt. Now, I'll ask you once more. Where did you come from?”

“That's something I will never tell you, so try another question. Maybe you'll be lucky enough to come up with one I WILL answer.”

He jumped up and, with a single blow to the head with his open hand, sent her sprawling across the roof. He was sitting cross-legged in front of her almost before she had stopped rolling. He smiled at her, “This is getting us nowhere. Let me put it to you this way. I will not risk the attention I will get if you muck things up for me. I have perfected my food-gathering technique and have been successfully feeding in London, off and on, for over 300 years, without detection. I won't have some stupid child eunuch screw it up for me. I've lived here in the cemetery for over 100 years and I've not come close to being discovered.”

“I'm not from anywhere around here, and am absolutely no danger to you. My food source is none of your concern, because it has no effect on your supply whatsoever.” She realized she had to be very careful. His temper was even more volatile than her own.

He leaned toward her, “Now that sounds interesting to me. I'm always open to new ideas. Exactly where and how do you feed?” His face was inches from hers; she could smell the mixture of whisky and blood on his breath, a price he was obviously willing to pay for his choice of victims. She could also tell that he probably never bathed, but then why should he? She certainly hadn't – until Oskar.

She shook her head slowly, “Sorry. I can’t tell you that. I have my own reasons for keeping it to myself.”

He looked her over carefully. “Well you sure travel light,” he joked. I usually wear pants when I fly. I have to carry the tools of my trade in something. You must be close to home, and on reconnaissance or you would have to do the same. In your weakened condition, I would guess...within a 20-minute flight as the bat flies.” He smiled at his own joke. “That puts you in London somewhere and a direct threat to my anonymity.”

“Believe me, my source is far safer than yours.” Eli groaned inwardly. *That was absolutely the wrong thing to say. This one seems to be quite proud of his cleverness, and I walked right into that one.*

“Now I am intrigued.” he said, smiling. “I must insist that you tell me. I promise I will let you go if I like your answer. Otherwise...” he stopped smiling and again took her wrist in his hand.

“Ask me anything else, but I can’t answer either of your questions. It could lead you to where I live and I can’t let that happen.” She tried to sound sincere; even apologetic.

He sighed impatiently, “Where do you come from originally? How old are you?”

“I’m twelve, but I’ve been twelve for over 200 years. I was born in a small village in Sweden.”

“Well! Finally some answers! Now was that hard?”

Maybe I can disarm him a bit by sounding genuinely interested in who he is. “Now I’d like a couple of answers in return. How old are you and where do YOU come from?”

He grinned at her, “I’m 18, but I’ve been 18 for 325 years and came from right here, not more than a half-mile from this spot. I’m not a world traveler like you, although I was once in your part of the world. I like where I am and intend to stay here. But you present a problem for me.” *That would explain why I thought he was younger.* She thought to herself, *The average height in those days was much less than today.*

“I promise that, if you let me go, you will never see me again. You clearly didn’t notice me when I lived here 65 years ago, and I was here for many years.” She smiled at him.

“There were many more of us here at that time. I think the wars provided a more fertile ground for our activities and lessened the chances we would be noticed in all the disruption. But since then, I have worked hard to ensure that I and I alone control this area, much to the ‘annoyance’ and eventual deaths of many others like you.” He took on a darker tone, “Do you really think that I’m stupid enough to even consider taking a chance that you’re telling the truth?”

“Where do you live? How could you have stayed in one place so long without being detected, even by chance?” Eli was stalling for time, even though she was intrigued by his success at staying hidden for so long.

He paused a moment, then laughed, “Well, why not? I live right here, within sight of the tomb of Dr. Rees Ralph Llewellyn, a man I was indirectly involved with towards the end of the 19th century. I’ve always considered it poetic justice that I pass his stone every evening when I set out on my food quests. Now then! I’ve shown you mine, you show me yours.” His black eyes glowed as he flexed his claws.

The name sounded familiar, but she couldn’t place it. And why would he so casually tell her where he lived, when he clearly didn’t trust her? He was either lying, or... The alternative wasn’t pleasant to think about. And once again, she had walked right into his trap. He would now expect a better answer from her.

She thought carefully about how she should answer him. Even though he was a vampire like herself, he seemed – different somehow; more feral, more inhuman; more predatory. If he WERE human, he would probably be a sociopath, she thought to herself.

“I’m still waiting.” His voice hardened. “Tit for tat, remember? I’ll be quite disappointed if you end the game now.”

She slowly shook her head, “I really can’t tell you. All I can do is assure you that your secret is safe with me. I have no quarrel with you and you have my word that if you let me go, you will never see me again.” She felt a knot in her stomach, as his intentions became clearer to her.

“Then you’re of no use to me, and as far as I’m concerned, that makes you a liability. Too bad! You’re kind of cute for a eunuch.” He ran his clawed hands slowly up and down her arms. Her skin crawled as she pulled away from him. Suddenly his face lit up. He grabbed her again and examined her more objectively, checking her muscle tone, and prodding her back, legs, and shoulders. She felt like a horse at an auction. “You’re too consistently well-fed and healthy overall to be on your own, as small as you are.” He suddenly grinned as he got it. “You’re not alone! You’ve got help. No wonder you won’t talk to me. You’re protecting someone! Now that’s even more interesting. And I would guess that they have no idea where you are right now, or I would already be in trouble – unless.... they’re human! Of course! That makes much more sense, since as you know, our species tends to not get along well together. Who is it? A lonely desperate childless couple, taken in by your natural charms?” his voice dripped with sarcasm. “Am I right so far?”

“You’ll get nothing from me. You must know that!” She pointedly looked down at her scar, then back up at him, “I survived when that was done to me, and I hadn’t been turned yet. You think you can do better, go for it!” she realized that she had given up trying to reason with him. That was a dead-end road now.

“You think you’re immortal? You think that only the sun, or fire can kill you? Well, I can kill you too!” He paused, “It’s your choice. Answer my questions, and I promise I will let you go.”

“No! You won’t!” Eli had read him clearly. She knew he meant to kill her no matter what she said. She needed to make sure he got nothing from her.

“Well, then. We understand each other perfectly.” He got a faraway look in his black eyes as his pupils elongated and became unnaturally sinister, even reptilian. He slowly stood up, and as she made a last desperate attempt to run, quickly grabbed both her wrists and pulled her up against him. He put one arm around her and squeezed her impossibly hard; with the other hand, he grabbed her neck firmly and drew her toward him. She felt his claws on her skin and watched as his fangs grew and his half-open mouth moved slowly towards her neck. “I haven’t fed normally since I killed another of you 30 years ago. You don’t know how much I’m going to enjoy this. And, in the end, it will be the sun that gets another chance at you.”

She could feel his fangs press against her neck as he felt for the spot. He paused for a moment, then she jerked from the sharp pain as he bit into her neck. She made a final attempt to free herself, but only managed to get a clawed hand free long enough to gouge some skin off his back before he pinned her arm again. She could feel her blood moving toward the open wound as his mouth moved on her neck. His eyes were vacant as he slipped into that blissful mental state she knew so well. She knew with certainty that he had dismissed her completely as being anything but a meal. She felt herself getting weaker, and willed her blood away from him, willed her heart to slow and stop, tried to will herself into hibernation.

She felt herself falling in slow-motion, as he forced her down on the rough gravel roof. She pulled her knees toward her chest in a final attempt to force him away from her, but he easily straightened them with a strong hand; then locked his hands together behind her back and squeezed even harder. She knew that if she were human, her ribs would have broken under the force of his grip; she knew, because she had done the same countless times before. She tried twisting her head, but he pressed his mouth against her neck so hard that she was effectively caught in a vise. She concentrated on Oskar and Papa. She had to live! She had to warn them! She thought about how worried they would be when she didn’t come home. How they would look for her and never find her and never know what happened to her. She knew he would leave her on the roof and the sun would destroy her body when it came up in a few hours. She knew that he would watch the newspapers, looking for stories about missing children. She knew he would eventually find Oskar and Papa. She couldn’t bear the thought. *STOP! This is not going to happen!* She felt her body shut down in response to this new, powerful command; her breathing stopped, her heart stopped, her major arteries collapsed, she closed her eyes and went limp. She saw Oskar smiling at her, Papa was calling her name....

Chapter 5: Redemption

Oskar was worried. It was 4:00AM and she wasn't back yet. He had called out to her but there was nothing! He got up, put on his clothes, and went downstairs.

Dawson woke up with a start, as Oskar knocked loudly, entered his room and turned on the light. "Eli's gone! She said she wanted to fly over her old neighborhood and left about 9:30. She isn't back yet!"

Dawson quickly got up and put on his clothes. "Come on Oskar! We need to find her. She's still weak. She may not be able to get home." Oskar went upstairs, grabbed Eli's suit and the Space Blanket, and headed back downstairs.

They jumped in the car and headed for downtown. "Oskar, you need to try as hard as you can to find her. I know she lived for a while near Burdett Road and the Tower Hamlets Cemetery. She told me about it during one of our lab sessions. We'll start there and spread out. But I don't think she would be able to fly much further than that. The tires squealed as he went around a corner. Thirty minutes later, they pulled onto Whitechapel Road. He sped up, watching for police cars as they finally saw the street signs change, indicating they were now on Mile End Road. A short time later, they turned right on Burdett off Mile End. *Eli! Can you hear me? Where are you? We're coming. Please answer me!* He got nothing. Complete emptiness. There was none of the faint background noise that he always felt when she was nearby. They drove up and down the dark side streets, as Dawson paused at each alleyway and Oskar cried out for her, then listened intently. They established a crisscross pattern – up one street and down the other as they moved further away from the Mile End – Burdett intersection. Finally, as Dawson passed the entrance to the Cemetery, he spotted a motionless form on the sidewalk next to the fence. He quickly pulled over to the curb, grabbed the flashlight, and jumped out of the car.

He crouched down and examined the body. It was only a drunk, passed out... *What's this?* he suddenly spotted the patch on his neck, and the still moist blood around the edges of the strap. He felt the man's pulse – weak and thready. He could tell by his pale complexion that he had lost a lot of blood. "Oskar, come here! It looks like this man has been deliberately bled." He checked the ground around the body and found a small pool of blood a few feet away and drag marks leading to the body. "Someone did this recently. The blood is still fresh. This can't be a coincidence. Eli had to have been here, and involved somehow." He spotted the half-open pedestrian gate, and motioned Oskar to follow him into the Cemetery. The sky was beginning to lighten in the east.

They inspected the ground near the gate carefully. In the moist ground next to the outbuilding, Oskar spotted a bare footprint, then another. "Dad! Look at this. These are just like Eli's footprints! I'd recognize them anywhere."

"How can you tell, Oskar?" Dawson bent down and examined them closely.

"See how the print of her little toe is straight? Mine and everyone's my age are bent inward because we've grown up wearing shoes. I tease her about it all the time."

“Good observation, Oskar! The footprints end here at the building. Let’s see how far back we can trace them. He walked slowly away from the building, looking intently at the ground. The footprints ended at the sidewalk, but it looked like she had stepped off the walk as she was coming out of the Cemetery.

“Dad, what does this mean?” Oskar pointed at the moss-covered brick wall of the building. He could make out regular disturbances in the moss as far up the side of the building as he could see.

“Oskar, do you think she may have climbed the building?”

“If she had a reason, I know she could. That’s how she rescued me from the police station. She dug her claws and talons in between the bricks...see? Look here.” He pointed at a space between the bricks at about eye level. There was a small hole, with bits of loose mortar around it. “Dad, we’ve got to get up on the roof.”

“Oskar, look at this!” Three feet further down the wall, there were similar disturbances in the moss, but further apart. Another partial bare footprint could be seen in the mud just below them, but this one was much larger and animal-like, with talon marks clearly visible. “I think Eli is in real trouble! She’s been followed by someone up the side of the building, almost certainly another vampire. The man out front is probably his doing, and Eli caught him in the act. We’ve got to get up on the roof!”

“Over here,” Oskar hissed. He pointed to the fire escape at the back of the building. They quickly climbed the steep steps as quietly as they could, but they knew that if he were still around, he would easily hear them coming. Oskar felt his stomach tighten with fear and his hand began to shake as he held the railing for support. Dawson motioned for Oskar to stay behind him as he quietly stepped out on the roof. Nothing! He checked the door to the roof; it was locked and showed no sign of having been disturbed. He crossed the roof slowly, looking behind every ventilation shaft and skylight casing. He stopped suddenly and his heart went to his throat.

He saw two broken chains, one secured around a ventilation shaft in the center of the roof and the other to a four-inch diameter pipe about 10 feet away. The end links were twisted and bloody, and there was a small pool of blood where the chains would have met, had they been long enough. Eli’s blood, he was sure. But where was she? Had he killed her and moved the body? He felt Oskar arms around him, heard him sobbing.

“Is she dead? Where is she. I know she was here! I can tell!” He stared at the pool of blood.

“Oskar, we need to think this through. Eli’s life may be at stake. Especially if we don’t find her before the sun comes up.” He crouched down and examined the ends of the chains. He saw the detail in the bent shackles and the gouges in the chain clearly indicating the size of the objects that had been in the restraints; almost exactly the size of Eli’s wrist on one shackle and her ankle on the other. “Oskar, Eli was chained up here, but somehow got away. I don’t believe the other vampire took her. He wouldn’t have done such a precise job on her if he was going to move her. He knew the sun would take care of her when it came up. Also, he couldn’t have anticipated her

being there while he was subduing the drunk, which means he had to have left her here for dead while he went back for the chains. He **MUST** have thought she was dead or so close to death that she wouldn't be able to free herself, which was why he only chained one arm and one leg. He was wrong!" He shuddered to think that the only reason she would be dead or close to death would be if the vampire had attacked her and drained her blood himself. Fortunately, Oskar hadn't realized this yet. Being a vampire, he also knew the length of time it took for a dead vampire to become an undead one – obviously longer than three hours.

They frantically examined the roof for clues as to which way she went. There were a few drops of blood in the direction of the stairwell, but they petered out quickly.

Oskar shouted at him "Over here!" There was a smear of blood on the ridge of the building closest to the fence. Oskar could see a row of thick bushes between the building and the fence, one of which was totally crushed. "I think she jumped or fell off the roof!" He ran for the fire escape.

He was breathing hard when Dawson came up beside him with the flashlight. Sure enough, there was a smear of blood in the shape of a handprint on the wall – a small hand with long, thin fingers; Eli's hand. They followed the trail of leaves and broken branches until they reached the walkway heading deeper into cemetery. There was no sign of her after that. Dawson slowly swung the flashlight back and forth across the concrete path as they walked, making sure they didn't miss any signs that had she left the path. *There! A smear of blood and another bloody handprint. She must have fallen here,* Dawson thought. He was feeling a deep sense of foreboding. The sun was already touching the top of a highrise a few blocks away. They hadn't much time left.

"Look over there!" Oskar shouted. There was a gouge in the mud alongside the path, and another bloody handprint on a tree 10 feet further in. It was light enough now for them to see without the flashlight. They wandered through the labyrinth of old tombs and crypts, but it was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Oskar stopped suddenly. "Dad, I don't 'not feel her' any more." He shook his head, "I mean, she's not gone anymore. Does that make sense? I can't hear her, but I know she's not 'gone'."

"Oskar, you're our homing pigeon! I'll stand here and you keep walking until you can't feel her any more. We'll mark the spot, then meet in the center between them and repeat the same thing at a right angle to our original path. We'll narrow it down until we find her. Hurry!" It only took them a few minutes to pick enough points on the circle that they could roughly estimate where the center was. There was a large tombstone, and a particularly old crypt just inside the area near the center. Oskar turned and strode purposefully toward the crypt, which had a one-winged eagle over the door. He felt a knot in his stomach as he grabbed the door handle, but of course he couldn't budge it. "We have to get in! How did she get in?"

Dawson was already examining the walls and footing around the tomb. At the back he spotted a large displaced foundation stone. He shined his flashlight into the hole and immediately spotted a two-foot-square metal plate at the bottom that looked as though it had been moved recently. He

reached in and with a great deal of effort managed to lift it out of the hole, revealing a small tunnel leading directly under the crypt. “Oskar! I need your help!”

Oskar ran over, crouched down and peered into the hole. Without hesitation, he jumped up, took off his jacket, and plunged head-first into the tunnel. “Oskar, be careful! You don’t know what may be in there.” He watched as Oskar’s feet disappeared into the darkness. A moment later, Oskar stuck his open hand out of the hole. Without a word, Dawson put the flashlight in it and it vanished as quickly as it had appeared. He sat down and waited, his back against the crypt.

Oskar backed into the chamber, turned and switched on the flashlight. At first, he saw nothing, but as he stepped past the raised sarcophagus in the center, he spotted her lying in the corner curled up in a ball, with her head on an old book and an old wooden box at her feet. She jerked as the light struck her face and she opened her eyes. Her body was trembling. *Eli, it’s me! Eli?*

Oskar! Is it really you? I thought you and Papa were only a dream – that I had imagined you, that you weren’t real. He saw tears in her eyes as he sat beside her and cradled her in his arms. He kissed her over and over and lay down beside her holding her to him, trying to get her warm. She was as cold as ice and even paler than normal. He saw the wound on her throat, and gently put his hand over it as though he could, just by thinking about it, make it disappear. He saw the gouges the shackles had made on her wrist and ankle, and the fresh bruises on her back and the side of her head.

“Oskar, we have to hurry! Did you find her?” He heard Dad’s voice echoing in the chamber.

“Yes! She’s here and she’s alive!”

The sun lit the head of the eagle, and Dawson realized suddenly that they hadn’t much time left. He stood up and ran for the car. *Her suit! The space blanket.* “I’ll be right back, Oskar!”

Oskar kissed her on the forehead, “Can you get up?”

She shook her head and looked up at him. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s okay. I’ll carry you.” Oskar held her gently and rocked her back and forth for a moment. He touched her wrist, and caressed the ugly bruise on the side of her face. “Oh Eli!” there were tears in his eyes.

He stood up and gently lifted her in his arms and carried her to the small tunnel. “Eli, put your arms over your head. Can you do that?” She nodded and pushed her arms through the hole as Oskar, holding her by the waist, edged her forward on her back. “Dad, watch for her hands! I’m pushing her through.”

Dawson reached down into the hole and felt for her hands – He had them! He pulled firmly and breathed a huge sigh of relief as he saw her sweet face appear in the pre-dawn light. He quickly pulled her out of the hole and laid her on the space blanket. She was as cold as ice; he could tell that her core body temperature was dangerously low. Oskar was at her side almost immediately.

Together, they gently pulled her pants up, rolled her over and pulled her shirt over her head and guided her arms into the sleeves. She smiled up at Papa as he tightened the belt and slipped on her boots and gloves. He sat her up gently as Oskar brushed back her hair, pulled her helmet over her head and snapped the visor in place.

“Please, put the plate and stone back over the entrance,” she said softly. “The Other One might find this place otherwise.”

Oskar and Dawson quickly covered the entrance, and Dawson brushed away the footprints and as much other evidence of their presence as he could. As an afterthought, he bent down and slipped a penny into the small crack between the entrance stone and the adjoining one, and brushed some loose dirt over it.

Dawson picked her up and she put her arm around his neck as they headed for the car. Oskar fell behind, rubbing away all signs that he could find that showed that she had come back along the path after escaping. The morning sunlight lit their faces as Dawson placed her head in Oskar’s lap on the back seat, climbed into the front seat, and started the car. He turned the heater on full force, then as they pulled away from the curb and headed for home, Eli closed her eyes and squeezed Oskar’s hand. She felt like she had been rescued from the edge of a black abyss, and Oskar had saved her life once again. “That’s twice in two weeks.” She smiled at him.

“What’s twice in two weeks?”

“You saved my life twice in two weeks, Oskar. And you too Papa. I love you so much!” She closed her eyes, and shivered reflexively as the warmth enveloped her. She suddenly realized that she had been cold for the first time in over 200 years.

She thought about what would have happened if they hadn’t found her. The Other One would have found that she had escaped. He would have easily followed her trail, and she hadn’t had the strength to put the stone back in position. He would have certainly found her and finished what he had started.

“Eli, we’ve got to get some food in you and get your body temperature back to normal. Is there anything we need to do quickly that’s more important?”

She shook her head, “No, my body temperature will take care of itself as soon as I eat.” She felt herself slipping away. “I...I think I’ll sleep now.” She felt Oskar gently rubbing her back as she drifted off.

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She woke up as Papa was gently placing a pillow behind her head. She felt the weight of several blankets, and felt how warm the room was. She suddenly realized she was in a pair of heavy cotton pajamas. She smiled to herself, remembering when Oskar had bought them for her on his first trip to the store with Papa, before she had her wonderful suit. She smelled soap, noticed that

her hair was still a little damp, and realized that they must have bathed her while she was still asleep. “Papa? Could I have something to eat?”

Almost before she had mouthed the words, Oskar handed her an unclamped bag. She gratefully took it and made short work of it. Oskar immediately handed her another, and then a third one. She finished that one more slowly, then lay down contentedly, as she savored the warmth and the loving faces around her. She took their hands in hers and squeezed hard. “Thank you for saving me. Thank you for taking care of me. I’m so used to taking care of myself that I’m not sure how to say it right...”

“Shh! You’re doing just fine. Save your energy.” Papa said.

She reached up and touched her neck. Papa had put a bandage over the spot, but she could feel it healing as her strength increased. “Papa, I have to tell you what happened! It’s really important!”

“Eli, it can wait until later. You need to rest, and I’m sure Oskar could use some sleep.”

“No! It’s too important. I’m already feeling better.” She took off the bandage. “See? It’s already healed. Please!”

He sighed, knowing there was no holding her back. Her bottomless source of energy and determination always caught him by surprise. “Okay, Eli. Go ahead.”

She took Papa by the hand and looked directly at him. Oskar reached for her other hand, but she pulled it away. “Oskar, it was horrible! I don’t want you to be upset. Papa will tell you. Please promise me you won’t read me.”

“Eli, I think Oskar should see this too. We couldn’t have found you without him. He identified your footprints at the Cemetery, he spotted the marks on the wall where you climbed to the roof, he was first to see where you had jumped into the bushes, and ultimately, he was the one who climbed unhesitatingly into the black hole under the crypt and found you. I feel he has earned this.” The pride in his voice was unmistakable.

She turned and took Oskar’s hand. “Oskar, I...”

He squeezed her hand, “It’s Okay, Eli, Go ahead.”

She collected her thoughts, and told them the entire story, complete with self-recriminations. They felt her fear, her anguish, her despair as the inevitability of her death had become clear to her; the force behind her last command to her own body; the anxiety as she woke up alone on the roof, not knowing if he was toying with her and watching her from hiding, as, with great effort because of her weakened state, she finally used her fangs to twist and break the links and shackles, crawl to the edge of the roof and force herself over the edge. The fear as she half-crawled, half-stumbled to her old crypt and lay there, drifting in and out of consciousness for what seemed like an eternity until Oskar called out to her.

They sat in stunned silence for a few minutes. “Eli, whatever you did to shut your body down while he was feeding on you saved your life. I’m sure he thought you were dead; that he had gotten all he was going to get from you. He may have wondered why it was so little, but you are small and he probably just let it go. He underestimated the resolve of our Eli.” He smiled and gently stroked her hair.

“The other thing about this that is intriguing to me is his reference to Dr Rees Ralph Llewellyn. Do you know who he was?”

Oskar and Eli shook their heads.

“He was the police surgeon during the 1888 serial murders by Jack the Ripper. In fact, he did the autopsy on the first victim, Mary Ann Nichols. What do you suppose his relationship was with this man?”

Eli and Oskar looked at each other. “Was he...”

Dawson smiled mischievously, “One never knows. These days, one theory is as good as another. But if he were, it would certainly explain the sadistic cat-and-mouse game he played with you, Eli.” He paused, suppressed a smile, then said in mock seriousness, “Just be happy that he was apparently over his disembowelment phase. That would have been even more unpleasant for you.”

“Is that what you call ‘graveyard humor’? I don’t think it’s funny!” she scowled at him.

Oskar stifled a grin.

“You too? What’s the matter with you two? Those are MY ‘bowels’ you’re tossing around so casually!”

They both roared with laughter, as that image formed in their minds. Eli finally gave in and swatted Oskar. Papa put his arm around her and kissed her on the forehead.

“I don’t think he’s Jack the Ripper, but he was obviously there at that time.” Dawson said, taking on a more serious tone. “Anyone he killed the usual way during that period would have been sent to Dr. Llewellyn. That’s probably their only connection, but we’ll never know for sure. The important thing is that he gave us a real clue as to where he lives. I’m sure it’s real, because he was sure you wouldn’t live to tell anyone about it. You two try to get some sleep. We’ll talk more about it this afternoon.” He got up, smiled at them both, and headed downstairs.

Oskar immediately got up and disappeared into his room. A couple minutes later, he reappeared, wearing a matching pair of cotton pajamas. He stuck his arms out and turned completely around. “What do you think, Eli?”

She laughed and clapped her hands, “Bravo, Oskar! You look like...ME!” He ran over, jumped into bed and gave her a big kiss. She gently turned him around, snuggled up behind him and clasped his hand in hers, as they had done so long ago the first time they slept together. She softly kissed him on the back of the neck and they quickly fell sound asleep, exhausted.

§

The sun was just going down, and the kids had finally dragged themselves out of bed. Dawson had allowed them to sleep as long as they needed to; it had been a long, anxiety-filled ordeal for all of them. He hid a smile as they came down the stairs in their matching pajamas, sat on the couch together and looked at him solemnly.

“What do we do now?” Oskar asked. “We can’t go to the police, but don’t we have to do something?”

“Oskar, do you think he is the only vampire in England? Or even in London, no matter what he told me? We can’t do anything! We just have to hope he can’t find us.”

“I’m afraid Eli is right, Oskar. We can’t just turn vigilante and hunt him down. I simply will not put either of you, not to mention our neighbors, in danger by trying to find this -- Other One. He has the advantage of being a mythical creature. We would look ridiculous asking for help, and we simply could not do this without help. No offense, Eli, but you are no match for him by yourself.”

“But, if we knew where a mass-murderer was staying, wouldn’t we have to tell the police?” Oskar pleaded, “He tried to kill Eli! She can’t have been the only one he’s tried to kill in over 300 years.” Oskar could feel the white-hot anger boiling up in him again. He determinedly pushed it into the background.

“Oskar, believe me, if there were any way we could do this without endangering Eli’s own secret, and yours, I wouldn’t hesitate to at least try to discover where he sleeps.”

Eli looked down, “Oskar, you could have been describing me and my life as recently as a year ago.” What right have I got to condemn him for doing what I did myself for over 200 years?” she paused, then said softly, “Even in Karlstad.” She looked solemnly at Papa. “And he figured out, on his own, how to feed without killing anyone. I wasn’t smart enough to do that on my own.”

“That’s not true! You’re not like him! He figured it out to keep himself from being caught; he obviously still wanted to do it the old way. He told you so! You did it because you had to. You hated doing it!”

“I’m sure that’s a great comfort to all the people I killed, Oskar. ‘I don’t mind that she killed me, because she really didn’t want to. What a considerate little vampire!’” she said sarcastically.

“Eli, he’s an adult. You are not. Remember, I saw your life through your eyes. Do you think for a second that I would be able to love you and try my best to take care of you if I didn’t know with

absolute certainty what you really are?” Papa said firmly, “My responsibility to you is even more important to me now, because I also know that you would kill yourself before you would go back to that way of living again. And I will NOT allow that to happen, even if it means that I have to let the Other One live his life freely.” His voice broke and he paused for a moment, “As long as I am alive, I will not allow you to be in a position to have to make that choice.”

“I’ve never told you that! How could you know that?” she looked at Oskar worriedly. She knew it would upset him and, so far, she had been able to keep him from seeing her secret resolve.

“Eli, you wear your heart on your sleeve. Every time we – communicate by touching, I see these things – even this morning in the midst of your horror story. They are so much a part of you and what you are becoming that you can’t keep them from me; perhaps because those things are at the heart of who you really are. I’m sorry if I’ve spilled the beans. I was sure that Oskar knew.”

“I did know. But I also knew that Eli didn’t want me to know, so I’ve kept quiet. Sorry, Eli.” He smiled at her and took her hand. “You’re right, we should leave him alone. I’m selfish. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Okay, then. That’s settled, but it doesn’t mean we should be careless. We’ll stay away from that area from now on and avoid any activities that could get us in the papers. Although I’m not really convinced that he cares one way or another where we are, as long as we don’t affect him.” He turned to Oskar, “Do you think you can do that? No more Seths?” he grinned at him.

Oskar held his hand up, “I swear!”

§

Oskar was setting out the towels and Eli had just headed upstairs to change, when the bell rang. Dawson opened the door for Jack and Henry, and motioned them onto the back porch, where he had set up a small table with soft drinks and sandwiches.

“Wow! What are we celebrating?” Henry asked excitedly.

“It must be Eli’s new window and ‘finally healed’ party!” Jack said, as Eli bounded down the stairs and stepped out on the porch in her bathing suit. “You look pretty again!” he said as he grinned at her.

“What do you mean? Did you think I was ugly before?” she frowned at him.

“No! I just...” he stammered.

“Just kidding!” she smiled, “Thanks Jack. It feels great to be back to normal.” She grabbed Henry and gave him a big hug and kissed him on the cheek. “Henry, you’re as cute as ever!”

“Ewww!” Henry rubbed off her kiss disgustedly, then slugged her on the shoulder. She pulled him down on the floor and tickled him mercilessly. “Stop. Stop! I give up!” he rolled over and

crawled under the table, giggling. "I'm so glad you're feeling better, Eli," Henry smiled at her from under the table. She took him by the hand and helped him up. "Thanks Henry." She winked at Oskar.

Oskar winked back, then ran for the pool, "Last one in is a rotten egg!" he shot a quick grin at Eli, just before he disappeared into the pool in a huge splash.

"My grandpa used to say that." Jack laughed, "I haven't heard it in years." He quickly followed Oskar into the pool. Soon they were all laughing and splashing each other. The game of the week was seeing who could dive through an inner tube without touching the sides. Henry had the distinct advantage here because of his size. Jack, of course, had the most trouble, since he was three inches taller than Oskar, and correspondingly wider. Team Eli and Henry won every time over Team Oskar and Jack.

After their fifth win, Oskar secretly gave Eli a dirty look. She just smiled, shrugged her shoulders, and pointed at Henry, who was beaming with pride. It wasn't often he could beat his big brother at anything.

The full moon was getting low in the sky when they finally gave it up. Henry was proudly waving around the small plastic diving trophy Dawson had officially presented to Team Eli and Henry. It was a depiction of a diver just entering the water, and Dawson had slipped a black rubber "O" ring around its waist. "You can keep our trophy at your house for a month." Eli had told him, "Then, I get to keep it the next month." They had shaken hands on it.

They were all relaxing in lounge chairs eating sandwiches as the evening wound down. "Eli, you never seem to eat anything," Jack said, "Don't you like the sandwiches?"

"I do! But I ate earlier because I sometimes get an upset stomach if I eat after swimming hard." She picked up her glass of water, "I do get thirsty, though." She drank half the glass before putting it down. Water was the only normal thing she could handle, although it had no apparent value to her system. And it came in handy at times like this.

Dawson began picking up towels, subtly signaling the end of the party; Eli immediately began gathering up the dishes. Jack quickly got up, picked up a couple of plates, held the door open for Eli, and followed her into the kitchen. "Thanks for having us over, Eli. Mom says that you are welcome to come over any time you want cooking lessons. She really likes you. She says it's nice to have a girl to talk to for a change."

She smiled at him, "I really like your Mom. She's so nice. She's such a good cook! Its no wonder you two always look so...well-fed."

He blushed, "Thanks...I think. At any rate, you're welcome to come over whenever you want." He turned and headed for the porch. "Henry! Time to go!"

Oskar walked with Jack and Henry to the door, then came back and sat down with Eli by the pool and put his arm around her. "I really like being here -- with you." He kissed her gently.

“Eli, I was so afraid for you. I can’t bear to think about what happened to you. How anyone could treat you like that; like a piece of meat. And he enjoyed every minute of it. He’s nothing like you! No one could care about him. He’s got nothing worth caring for.” He held her as tightly as he could.

She stroked his hair and smiled at him. “Oskar, do you want to know why I lived? I just had to live because I had to warn you. That’s all I could think about; protecting you and Papa. And living was the only way I would be able to do that.”

She stood up and took his hand. They said good night to Papa, went upstairs together, put on their pajamas, and got into bed. They were soon fast asleep. The full moon shone in her window, casting moving shadows against the wall as the soft night breeze whispered through the trees in the back yard.

There was a soft thump outside the window, and Oskar opened his eyes. A sense of inhuman coldness, a sense of ageless rage, a sense of predatory passion, and a sense of deep unsatisfied hunger enveloped him. His heart began racing. *Who’s there?* He was afraid to move. His mind explored the feelings, as they suddenly coalesced and became clear to him. He could suddenly see Eli through other eyes: as an unfinished meal; as a beautiful, defenseless, naked child; a toy to play with, teasing it with hope, frightening it with the threat of death, and then, finally, feeding on it in ecstasy.

The Other One! He was here, just outside their window! He was watching them as they slept.

Oskar was terrified at first, but gradually realized that the Other One had no idea that he was there. He was eavesdropping on what he knew were the intense, private thoughts of a real vampire – not a comparatively gentle aberration like Eli, but the Vampire of legend, the Vampire of lore, the Vampire that brought forth the pitchforks and torches in medieval times.

Chapter 6: The Confrontation

I was right! ‘She’ lives here. ‘She’ lives with a man and a boy, as a girl. But how does she feed? I need to find out how she feeds. Then I need to finish her. No mistakes next time. She has many human friends she cares about. That is her weakness. I can use them to get her. All I need to do is wait and watch. Oskar could feel the Other One’s lustful thoughts turn towards Jack and Henry, could feel him fantasizing about...doing things to them, feeding on them, then leaving their small lifeless bodies on their doorstep. He couldn’t understand; he sensed the dark sexual hunger, and the strange attraction the Other One had to children, but simply couldn’t interpret it. Suddenly, through his eyes, Oskar could clearly see them all laughing and splashing in the pool, as he circled the house from a great height, admiring their slender, lithe bodies. *Ah, children! The easiest marks of all. Such a delight to play with and feed on. No struggles, just a bit of poking and prodding, then a quick, soft, easy meal. I long for the good old days, when children in London were so often not missed. So many to pick and choose from. Civilization with its new sophistication has greatly reduced my recreation and feeding options. It’s not nearly as much fun as it used to be.* Chilling, sadistic, awful memories floated in vivid detail in Oskar’s head for a moment, until he pushed them away in horror and disgust. The Other One’s sinister thoughts turned finally to him. *I’m going to make her watch as I slowly feed on her young friend – after I’ve made him regret that he’s such a pretty boy. Watching her face as I feed will more than make up for her having made a fool of me. Their deaths will certainly fill the newspapers for a while but it’s a safe distance from home.* Oskar suddenly saw Eli’s room from outside the window. He could see through the Other One’s eyes as they panned the room, taking in all the details. He watched them sleeping with his predatory eyes. *They sleep together. What a fool! Why would the boy feel safe with her lying next to him? He must know. They must know.* He turned and silently dropped off the roof, flew back across the street, circled twice over Jack and Henry’s house noting all the entrances, then headed toward the river. After a few minutes, his thoughts gradually faded from Oskar’s mind.

Eli! Wake up!

Oskar? What’s wrong? Oskar held her, kept her from moving.

Eli, the Other One was here! Outside the window! He knows where we live!

Eli sat up in bed, “Oskar! Why didn’t you wake me while he was here? How did you know it was him?”

Oskar took her hands in his and closed his eyes. He flooded her with the horror and sadism of The Other’s thoughts and memories, and worst of all, his plans for both of them.

Eli jumped out of bed. “We have to tell Papa.” They raced down the stairs and burst into the study. “What on Earth...?” Dawson looked up from his desk, startled.

“Papa, the Other One was here! He knows who we are. He wants to kill Jack and Henry, and all of us!”

They joined hands and Oskar repeated everything he had heard once again.

“I was wrong,” Dawson said solemnly, “I’m sorry. If I had known, I would have done something immediately, before he could find us.” He thought for a moment, “He must have returned to watch, about the time we came searching for you. He probably wrote down our license number. And my Oxford sticker number. As sadistic as we know he is now, I’m sure he wanted to be nearby when you went up in flames. By the time he realized, along with us, that you were no longer on the roof, he had to get away from the sun. He knew he couldn’t kill us all that close to home; it would attract exactly the kind of attention he didn’t want.

“But how could he have found us with only those numbers?” Oskar asked.

“He’s been around a long time Oskar. I’m sure he has human acquaintances that can get him that sort of information, especially if he pays well.”

“I don’t know, Papa. I really don’t think that’s what he would have done. If he had seen you trying to rescue me, he would have immediately killed you and Oskar and maybe driven your bodies to a different location in your car. All he would have to do is move you far enough away to keep the police from looking too closely at the cemetery. He had plenty of time to do that before dawn.

“Then how...”

“I don’t know! He’s lived much longer than I have and was turned when he was older. But he found us. That’s all that matters! I’m strong now. I’ll go after him. He’ll never come here again! I’m much stronger now!” Eli stood up with her fists at her sides and her cat-eyes blazing.

“No, Eli. We have to plan this very carefully. Oskar may be the key. He can read him. He seems to have an ability, at least with vampires, that vampires do not have: REAL telepathy, at least on the vampire wave length.” He smiled, “That’s why he can read you so easily, Eli, and he could read the Other One for miles without detection. We HAVE to do this together. We have to take advantage of his weaknesses and our strengths.”

“Are we going to kill him?” Oskar asked.

“I...don’t see any other option,” Dawson said quietly, “We clearly can’t reason with him, and his abilities make it a certainty that, unless stopped, he will eventually get what he wants. But there are great risks involved, including exposure to the authorities.

“If only I had listened to Oskar and not gone flying that night! If only I hadn’t teased Seth and humiliated him, I wouldn’t have been burned and weakened, and Oskar wouldn’t have nearly killed him. I’m the cause of all our problems since we got to London. How can I be so stupid? And now everyone I care about is in danger because of me. I have to do this myself!”

Oskar looked at her sternly, “No Eli, you need to listen to Dad and do what he says. All the trouble we’ve caused him has been for exactly the same reason. We are both only twelve years

old. No offense, but some of the mistakes we've made since we've been together have almost gotten you killed three times. That's more often than Dad, and he's not even a vampire."

Eli felt deeply hurt. "But ...I've only done what I thought was right."

Papa put his arms around her, "Eli, what Oskar is trying to say is that wisdom comes with maturity, and through no fault of your own, you will never physically mature. He's not finding fault with you. You know how much he loves you. His 'Gift' makes it impossible for him to lie to you about these things. Please, give me a chance. Trust me and we have a good chance of getting through this intact." He shuddered as he thought about Jack, Henry, and their Mother. Sadly, he knew that, if they got through this, they would have to back away from close relationships until the disease was cured. There were too many complications.

"First things first. We need to establish for certain where he lives. But we'll do it in daylight. Oskar, do you think you can find him while he's sleeping? Like we found Eli that night?"

"I'm sure of it! I know him now. I would recognize him anywhere!" Oskar's anger and hatred was simmering just below the surface. He wished his self-infection had been completely successful, so he could kill the Other One himself. Or at least he and Eli together could do it.

That's it!! Perhaps we can! A plan began to form in his mind – a plan that he knew Dad would never approve of. He and Eli needed to discuss it and do a bit of 'practicing' but he was sure it would work. His own admonition of Eli was immediately forgotten in his excitement.

"Okay, then," Dawson continued, "Tomorrow is Saturday. Oskar and I will take a trip to the cemetery and find out where he is. Eli, you will stay here. I don't want you out in your suit in that area unless absolutely necessary. He was probably back in his tomb before I brought the suit from the car, but we can't take any chances on him making the connection. We don't want him to know our strengths."

"But I have to go! What if..."

Oskar squeezed her hand, subtly shook his head and gave her a cautionary look, "Dad's right. It would be much safer for us to go alone."

"Eli, I want you to write down all the weakness you are aware of as a vampire, as well the limits of your strengths. Think it through carefully, and we'll go over it when we get back from the cemetery. That's all we can do for now. Let's all try to get some sleep."

Oskar took her hand and pointedly led her upstairs to his room. They climbed into bed together as Oskar began whispering excitedly. "Eli, I have an idea about how to do this. Tell me what you think. I don't think Dad will like it, though."

She looked at him solemnly, "Will Papa be safe?"

They talked far into the night. From outside the room, an occasional giggle could be heard – snippets of conversation. “We can practice tomorrow!” and “It’ll be like that last night in Karlstad! We can do this!” Finally, silence. The moon shone through Oskar’s window, casting friendly shadows on the walls as the breeze blew through the trees in the back yard. It shone down on the small bed in the corner, where Oskar and Eli lay in each other’s arms asleep.

§

As Dawson walked into their room the next morning, it took him a minute to figure out what was going on. Eli and Oskar were standing in the middle of the room facing each other. Suddenly, Eli would swing at Oskar with her open hand, whereupon Oskar’s hand would meet it simultaneously in mid swing with a loud smack. She started slowly with random swings, speeding up until her superior strength-related speed overwhelmed him. Then, instead of meeting her swings, he would anticipate them and duck or dodge away. It almost looked like a weird dance of some kind. “What on earth are you two doing?” he asked.

“It’s just a game we invented, to see who has the better reflexes.” Eli lied, “Of course, I always win in the end.”

“Well, I’m getting better,” Oskar grinned.

Papa eyed them suspiciously, but decided to let it go for now. If it was a real game, Oskar would be much more irritated by losing, and Eli would be gloating more. “I just came to let Oskar know we would be leaving for the Cemetery in an hour and a half. Do you want some breakfast, Oskar?”

“No thanks! I already had some toast and a glass of milk.” He turned back towards Eli, “Ready to go again?”

Dawson shook his head and headed back down the stairs.

“This time, do it with your eyes closed,” Eli said. They began again, with almost identical results. “Bravo, Oskar! Now, the other game.”

Oskar put a blindfold on her, moved the furniture randomly around the room and stood in the doorway. “Go!” he shouted. Eli began running around the room faster and faster, dodging the furniture as she went. Occasionally, Oskar would step in and move something quickly as she ran. By the end, she was moving so fast that her feet were beginning to lose their grip on the floor as she took a turn too sharply. She finally stopped suddenly in the center of the room, spun around a couple of times with her arms out, and sat down in a chair just as Oskar was reaching for it. She pulled off the blindfold laughing. “That was great fun, Oskar! Weird, but great fun. Let’s do it again. Your turn.” She put the blindfold on him and they repeated the exercise. Oskar did just as well as Eli, but, of course, not at the same speeds.

“Now we have to figure out how to do it as a three-way exercise.” Oskar instructed her, “Too bad you don’t have any vampire friends you can call on.”

“Ha, Ha! One vampire ENEMY is all I can deal with right now. However I have thought of a way we can get Papa involved without making him suspicious. We’ll talk about it when you get back from the Cemetery.” She stood up and faced him, “Now, let’s start again!”



They parked a block from the cemetery and walked quickly through the main gate toward the section containing the gravestone of Dr. Llewellyn. Oskar felt for the Other One in his mind as they walked. They crisscrossed the area several times, but he felt nothing. Finally, they stopped and sat down on a bench, frustrated. “We can’t cover the whole cemetery in a day. We have to think this through.” Dawson said, his head in his hands, pondering.

Oskar let his mind wander. The cemetery, at least in this area, was kind of pleasant. There were small brick-lined, irregularly-shaped patches of flowers along the path, and a flower-lined way winding up a small hill a short distance off with a well-kept white crypt sitting on the top. “Dad! Could that be it?” he pointed toward the hill.

“Oskar, you’re a genius! Let’s give it a try.” They had hardly gotten half-way up the gentle slope when Oskar stopped.

“He’s here! I can feel him.” Oskar ran for the crypt.

“Stop, Oskar. Let’s do this more systematically.” He carefully marked their location, then they walked together toward the crypt, passed it and continued on down the other side of the hill, until Oskar could no longer feel him. They stepped back up the hill to the center of the line. The crypt was almost 40 feet behind them, further up the hill. “See Oskar? We might have made a mistake if we hadn’t taken the extra time. Let’s finish this.” They made a right angle turn and began again. They quickly zeroed in on a slightly smaller black crypt that was overshadowed by the larger one, but 30 feet further down the hill and a little to the right. Dr. Llewellyn’s gravestone was clearly visible, and even a bit closer to this tomb. Dawson walked around it several times, inspecting the foundation carefully. He identified at least two places that might be an entrance, but he kept his distance. He wanted there to be no chance that the Other One would see any disturbance. A thin line of dead grass parallel to the base of one stone made it an easy final choice. He motioned to Oskar and they quickly headed for the cemetery entrance. On an impulse, he suddenly made a sharp detour and went directly to Eli’s old hiding place. He took out his pocket knife and carefully scraped away the dirt around the entrance stone. Sure enough! The penny was gone. The Other One had been here and discovered Eli’s old hiding place. He shuddered to think that Eli’s worst fears would almost certainly have come to pass; he would have found her and finished the job the next night if he and Oskar hadn’t saved her. He also noticed a small nail wedged in the crack on the other side of the entrance stone. He smiled as he realized that the Other One, even as he had fallen for their trap, had set one of his own.

They returned quickly to the car and headed home. Dawson was already working on a plan of action.

§

Eli was waiting for them in her room. They quickly sat down and filled her in on the details. “I see he didn’t really give away where he was living. He knew I wouldn’t be able to find him based on Dr. Llewellyn’s tomb alone. There were too many possibilities. He didn’t count on Oskar being on our side.”

“You’re right Eli, which is why we can be sure we’ve found him. Now, a few questions for you. You remember the acid that Håkan used on himself? What would happen if something of that nature were used on a vampire?”

Eli shuddered, “It would probably hurt a lot and cause a lot of damage, but it wouldn’t kill me and I would quickly regenerate.”

“How quickly?”

“I’m really not sure. How long does it take the acid to get used up? I mean, how long before it stops burning?”

“Initially, probably five minutes or so, but to a human, damage could continue for hours, even days.”

“Then in five minutes, I would start repairing myself, and in less than two after that, I would be normal again.”

“So then, directly in the eyes, it would give me five to seven minutes of incapacity.”

“But I would still be able to hear you and smell you, and come after you, especially if you were in my tomb in a small space. I would be able to easily find you.” She glanced quickly at Oskar.

“When you...slept during the day, how easy was it for you to be awakened?”

“About like me,” Oskar interjected. “After sleeping with her during the day in Karlstad all that time, I found that getting up quietly didn’t wake her up, but nudging her or slugging her on the arm would.”

“Oskar’s about right, but when I slept on my own, I was a bit more sensitive to small noises. Oskar kind of ‘domesticated’ me.” She smiled at him. “But, many times, I was awake when you thought I was asleep.”

“So if we quietly removed the stone over his entrance, and I went in with a five-gallon can of gasoline, verified his presence, and then poured it on the floor, do you think he would wake up?”

“She nodded, “Yes, as soon as the fumes filled the room he would most likely wake up quickly.”

“That’s a risk I will have to take, then. I’ll also bring in a jar of Hydrochloric acid as a backup, just in case. I’ll have a rope around my waist and you can pull me back through the entrance if I get into trouble. Did I mention that we would be doing this in the early morning, before the cemetery is likely to have people wandering about? You will need your suit. There’s still a chance we could be spotted by others, but we’ll just have to deal with that possibility.” He paused for a moment. “What do you think? It’s just a preliminary plan and needs some work, but do you have any other suggestions?”

“But why do you have to go in? Couldn’t we just pour it down his tunnel?”

“Eli, we don’t know the layout of the tomb, and we don’t know what precautions he may have taken to protect himself. We have to be absolutely certain.”

Oskar and Eli looked at each other. Finally Eli couldn’t stand it any longer. “Papa, I won’t let you risk your life for us like that. If he gets hold of you, you’ll be dead in an instant. I can’t bear the thought of losing you,” she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. “Oskar thought of a much better idea.”

“Eli, don’t!”

“We have to, Oskar. We really need his help with this.” They sat him down and went over it with him briefly.

“So Oskar would be out of harm’s way, and you’d face him alone? In your old tomb? I don’t like it.”

“But Papa, Oskar would be helping me. And that’s the only way we can make sure he’s dead. He could actually survive a fire in his tomb, if he were able to climb into the stone sarcophagus itself. He would just wait there until the fire burned itself out. And when he came after us he would be even angrier than before.”

“So that’s what those ‘games’ were all about,” he said, “Were you going to tell me, or just try it on your own?” he sounded exasperated.

“I don’t know!” Oskar cried, “but Eli and I won’t let you risk your life for us! You mean too much to us. Please let us do this.”

Dawson paced back and forth. He realized that Eli hadn’t survived as long as she had by relinquishing authority easily to someone else. It was her cross he was now having to bear himself. He knew finally that he couldn’t change her – at least not fast enough to help in this case. He sat down in front of her. “Okay, we’ll do it your way, but only under the condition that we add a few of my own ideas.”

“Papa, I promise you, Oskar will be safe and the Other One won’t be able to kill me. With Oskar, we have a real advantage. But we need you to make sure it will work. You need to practice with us.” She sat him down and explained Oskar’s idea to him in detail. He realized immediately that

they were really on to something. The more he listened the more certain he was that they stood a very good chance of succeeding.

“Okay, what do you need me to do?”

They sat in a circle. Oskar closed his eyes and kept them shut. *Ready Eli?* He took Papa’s left hand in his. “Okay, Dad, I want you to try to slap Eli.”

He swung his right hand at her as fast as he could, but she caught him around the wrist before his hand had passed his shoulder. He tried it again and again from different angles and different pause times, with no success.

“Now try it again without me, Eli.” He let go of Dawson’s hand. Sure enough, he was able to connect about half the time, although her reflexes were good enough to stop him the rest of the time. “Sorry, Eli!” Papa said, apologetically.

“Didn’t hurt! Do it again!”

They tried it over and over again. Dawson suggested other tests, and even insisted that they try them without Oskar holding his hand. It was midnight when they finally called it a night.

“I want you to close all your drapes tonight. I don’t want him to be able to see anything in the house until we make our move. Eli, what specifically happens if he comes in without permission?”

“He’ll eventually die, but the instant he walks in uninvited, he loses all his strength. Even Oskar could handle him then. He would never take the chance.”

“Good! Let’s get some sleep then. It’s going to be a long day tomorrow.” Dawson figured they would practice for a couple more days, pick up a few items he felt would be useful, and plan on confronting the Other One on the third day, hopefully before he could put any of his own plans in action.

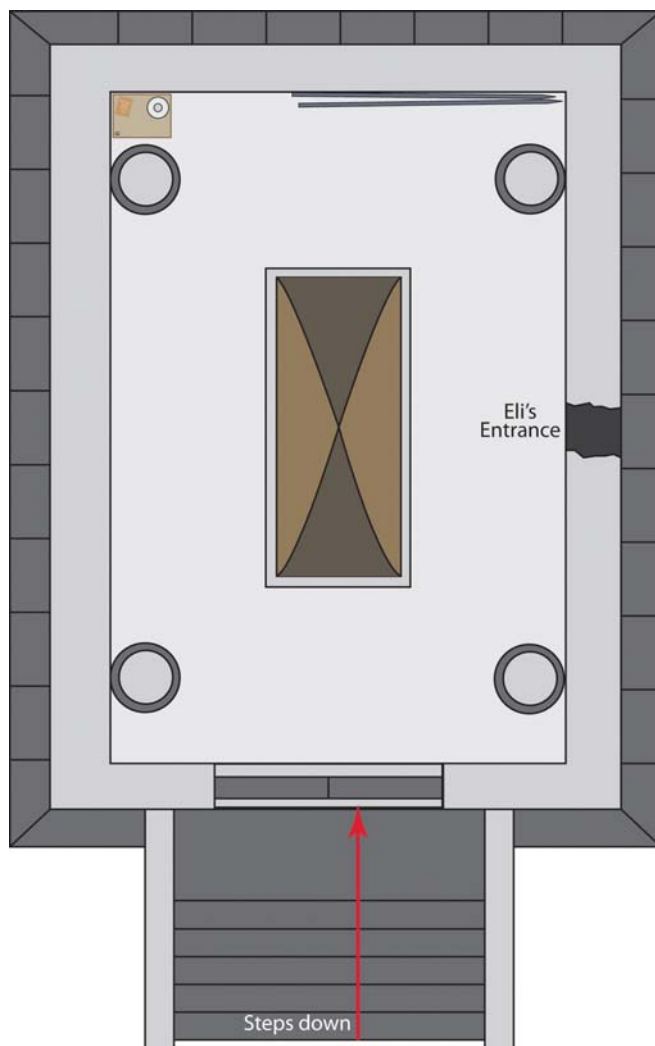
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It was one hour before dawn. Eli knelt down beside the Other One’s tomb; a one-gallon can of gasoline at her side. Oskar and Papa were already in position near Eli’s old tomb. She took a deep breath, listened intently, then grabbed his entrance stone and jerked it hard, pulling it completely out of position, then threw it 20 feet away where it landed with a dull thud. She grabbed the wooden hatch from beneath it and hurled it after the stone, making as much noise as she could.

As soon as the Other One woke up, Oskar made the connection. *Run, Eli!* She heard Oskar in her head.

She deliberately left the open gas can and box of matches, and ran as fast as she could toward her old tomb, not looking back. She smoothly removed her stone, watching as the nail fell to the side in plain view, and quickly slipped inside. She pulled the stone back into place, checked to make sure everything they had placed there earlier was where it belonged, then sat down in the back corner of the chamber to wait for Oskar's signal. It came quickly.

Suddenly, she could see what the Other One saw and hear what he was thinking, as clearly as though she were him. When he emerged from his crypt, he had seen her disappearing into the trees in the direction of her old tomb. He bounded down the hill directly towards her, filled with rage. *That stupid child thought she could burn me out? Am I ever going to enjoy this!* He ran even faster. He slowed down quickly as he rounded her tomb, searching the ground until he spotted the small nail. *There it is! She's now trapped inside.* She could feel the sadistic joy well up in him. Even so, he carefully walked around the tomb twice, listening intently before he crouched down and gently removed the entrance stone and plate. He sniffed the air. *She's here!* He slowly extended his claws and talons and moved steadily through the tunnel into the chamber. He stood up just inside the entrance and immediately saw her huddled in the back corner. Eli stood up and made herself look as small and defenseless as possible.



He put his hands on his hips and began laughing, “Did you really think I wouldn’t find you? That I wouldn’t wake up when you tried to burn me?” He started toward her. She simultaneously moved around the wall, keeping the sarcophagus between them. He quickly switched directions, as did she. He snickered, “Don’t make this more difficult than it has to be, or I’ll spend a few more hours playing with you than I had planned on.” *She may be a eunuch, but there are many other ways to have fun with her. And she IS pretty; and to think I missed my chance when I had her before.* “Just step on over here...” He leaped over the sarcophagus and grabbed the air as Eli quickly moved to his old position. He leaped back, felt her hair brush his cheek as she dodged past him, and again she was gone.

She put her hands on her hips and laughed at him, “Getting a bit slow in your old age? Maybe you’d like to take a break? So you can catch your breath?”

He feigned to the right, then leaped over the left end of the sarcophagus. Once again, he grabbed air and Eli taunted him, “Can’t even catch a small child? What’s the matter? Not used to dealing with one you can’t screw and have for dinner? If word gets out, what’s this going to do to your stellar reputation?”

“Well, actually I have had you for dinner. We’ll explore that other option in a few minutes.” She could feel the fury building in him as he calculated his next move. He leaped across the sarcophagus, pushed off the wall breaking loose large chunks of marble, and immediately leaped back, catching the edge of her sleeve with a claw, but once again missing her. Eli stood in the corner next to the wooden box, laughing at him; her eyes were now black holes, and her fangs were showing. “Wanna try that one again, pussy?” she said in a deep gravelly voice.

His fury reached the boiling point and he lunged for her, claws outstretched. He swung at her in midair as she suddenly raised a sharpened eight-foot stainless-steel rod off the floor. He felt it pierce his chest and emerge from his lower back as his momentum carried him forward. He swung again, and felt his claws rake across her chest. *Got her! She’ll not get away this time.*

Eli, with blood running down her chest, lunged forward, jammed the spike into the sarcophagus and, with all her strength, wedged the other end tightly against the crypt chamber wall, leaving his feet dangling six inches off the floor. “Well, now!” she mocked, “You look just like a shish-kabob. All you need is a little seasoning, and you’ll be good enough to eat.” She stepped back just out of his reach and reached into the box. She lifted out a large glass jar and slowly unscrewed the glass lid. She stepped toward him, effortlessly ducked as he swung at her, and calmly poured the Hydrochloric acid directly on his face. He screamed in rage and grabbed blindly at her as his face burned away and drops of acid sizzled and smoked on the marble floor, creating tiny pools of boiling brine. As he struggled with the spike, Eli calmly poured the rest of the acid on his claws and back and stepped back out of the way as his claws blackened and deformed and his vertebrae became visible as the skin on his back sloughed away.

“Papa! Oskar! Its time!” she yelled. Oskar’s head appeared at the entrance, and he handed Eli another jar and the end of a chain. His flashlight reflected eerily off Eli’s iridescent eyes and sprinkled the walls with flickering fireflies of light. Eli took the jar, removed the lid, and calmly

poured more acid over his claws and talons, down the center of his back, and finally on his face once again, ignoring the muffled screams of pain and rage. By now, the air was thick with the acrid smell of acid, brine, and burning flesh, and the still-sizzling marble floor was alive with tiny volcanoes belching white fumes. She placed the jar in the corner, secured the chain around his waist, and nodded to Oskar, who turned and yelled, "Okay, Dad." then disappeared through the tunnel; Eli heard the car engine rev up as the chain became taught. She kicked the spike loose from the wall, guided the end towards the tunnel, and watched as the Other One was dragged with increasing speed through the entrance, where he quickly disappeared in a shower of broken marble and black dirt.

She calmly picked up the extra spike, surveyed the tomb carefully, and carried it and the box with the empty jars through the widened tunnel to the surface, where she could see the sun just touching the top of the nearby high-rise. She turned and methodically replaced the steel plate and the entrance stone, carefully setting it in place and brushing dust into the cracks. Then she turned, dug her talons into the ground and grabbed the blunt end of the spike. She lifted the Other One completely off the ground, paused for a moment, then drove the sharp end of the spike three feet into the ground, just as he had recovered enough to begin struggling. Oskar's back was against the tomb as he stood there transfixed, watching Eli, wide-eyed, his mouth hanging open. *Is this the Eli that killed Jonny and Jimmy at the pool?* He looked into her black eyes and felt...fear? Awe? Adoration? An odd mixture of emotions that, for a moment, made him deeply uncomfortable. Her exhibition of raw, primitive, unchecked power left him weak-kneed. He wondered if his Eli was still a part of this...creature.

"Eli, don't. Please! We have this under control. There's no need for overkill," Dawson said, as he backed away from her.

"She turned towards him, eyes as black as coal and fangs bared, then turned back, stooped and picked up the other spike with a clawed hand, and drove it through the Other One's body just above the groin and pushed it deep into the ground. He swung at her but she easily stepped out of the way. His face was almost recognizable again. His fangs grew quickly and he hissed at her.

"Let's go!" Dawson said urgently. "We haven't got much time." He unhooked the chain from the bumper, and quickly moved the car onto the service road and loaded up their gear.

"Oskar, would you get my suit?" Eli's voice was low and intense. Oskar snapped out of his trance, quickly stepped over to the car and brought the suit to her.

Eli turned toward the Other One as she gradually transformed back into the small, beautiful child she so desperately wanted to be, and with a cocky smile on her face, calmly took off her torn, bloody, and acid-burned clothes until she was standing pure white and naked in front of him. She put her arms out and turned completely around, mocking him, then slowly put on her suit, her eyes glued to his. She put on her helmet, boots and gloves, but left the visor open so he could see her face clearly. She looked up at the descending sun line on the high-rise, then turned to Dawson. "Papa, please try to understand. I have to do this. Please, take Oskar and wait for me outside. We can't have anyone see the car when he..."

Dawson was relieved that her voice and body, at least, had returned to normal. But he knew her black eyes were still watching the Other One.

“Dad? I’m staying with Eli. You go ahead.” He hesitated a moment, then carefully, as though she were contagious, put his arm around her waist.

“Oskar...” he finally understood where Oskar’s recent strength had come from; it had come from hate. He was terrified that he may have lost Oskar forever to it. Courage founded on hate was unstable; the hate would eventually turn inward, resulting in unexpected victims closer to home. He sighed, got in the car, and slowly drove toward the cemetery gate, fearing for the children’s future lives and the real challenges they had yet to overcome.

Eli and Oskar sat down together arm in arm, cross-legged in front of him, listening to his curses, watching him struggle more powerfully as his strength returned. “You think I’m going to beg you to release me? You think I’m going to grovel?” He raged at them.

No! I think we’re going to watch you die! Oskar screamed at him in his mind. The Other One jerked, as Oskar forced him to see himself through Eli’s eyes, immersed in her hatred. Then, through his own, as his rage rose up and he relived everything, including his part in the Other One’s destruction. He relived Eli’s torture, despair, and near-death at his hands, Oskar’s and Papa’s deep devotion as they rescued her, then cared for her, Henry and Jack and their warm, unassuming friendship, and his blind hatred of the Other One, raging just beneath the surface since the day he found Eli, alone and shivering in the tomb.

“What are you?” he hissed at Oskar. “You’re not a vampire. How can you do these things?” Oskar smiled at him as he hugged Eli. He turned her face to him and kissed her gently. She kissed him back and hugged him extra hard. Oskar watched as the sunlight touched the Eagle’s unbroken wing; then he gently lowered her visor and snapped it in place. They sat there watching patiently, as the sunlight slowly wrapped around them, casting long shadows across the grass. An explosion of light! The white-hot flickering firelight bathed their faces with its radiance, pushing back the chilly night air. Finally, they got up together and walked slowly out of the cemetery, dragging the spikes and chain behind them. A wisp of black smoke still hung in the air above Eli’s tomb.

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The drive home was a silent one. Dawson was almost repulsed by their emotionless response to the Other One’s horrible death. Eli, having succumbed to her vampirism, and with 200 years of resignation and self-possession built up, he could understand, but Oskar? This was a side of Oskar he had never seen before. Anger was one thing; stoicism was quite another. He worried about how he, even as an adult, was going to be able to deal with this new darkness in this sweet child. He knew he loved Oskar dearly, but would it be as easy to like him anymore?

He pulled into the driveway and sat quietly for a moment. No one said anything. He turned towards them, and was surprised to see Oskar lying on the seat with his head in Eli’s lap. She was gently stroking his hair as the silent tears streamed down his face and beaded up on her

beautiful golden pants. His body was trembling and his eyes were closed. Eli looked up at Papa sadly for a moment, then back down at Oskar, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Please forgive me." she whispered to him.

Dawson quickly got out of the car and opened Eli's door. She pulled Oskar gently out of the car, lifted him like a baby, placed his head on her shoulder and carried him towards the house. Oskar wrapped his legs around her waist like a small child and nestled up against her neck. Papa opened the door and quickly climbed the stairs ahead of them. He stepped out on the third floor landing and opened Oskar's door.

Eli moved instead toward her own room and Papa quickly opened the door for her. She gently laid Oskar on her bed, unbuttoned his shirt, then took off his dirty, sooty clothes. She carefully dressed him in her pajamas, took off her suit, smiled shyly at Papa and climbed into bed with him, where she put her arms around his still-trembling body. Only after Oskar had wrapped his legs tightly around her, did his trembling slowly begin to subside. Papa stepped over to the windows and drew the drapes, then turned the light off and quietly closed the door behind him as he left. He stood there a moment, as a feeling of relief washed over him; then he headed for his study. All he could think about was their pain, and how inadequate their child-like defenses against it would be in their long journey ahead together in immortality. But he knew for certain that he had been completely wrong about Oskar: it wasn't the courage born of hate that drove him; it was the courage born of love. And he was now paying the price for what he felt he had to do in its name.

Chapter 7: Recovery

They slept through the rest of the day, and the night. Dawson was in the kitchen when Oskar finally made an appearance just as the sun was coming up the next morning, and quietly sat down at the table, avoiding eye contact. “Good morning, Oskar. I just made some sausage and scrambled eggs. Would you like some?”

Oskar smiled and nodded his head. Dawson put a full plate in front of him and prepared another for himself.

He turned as Eli walked into the room a few minutes later, clutching an old book to her chest. She blushed as she spotted Oskar, hesitated, then came over and sat in his lap for a moment and hugged him. Then, without saying a word, she sat down, placed the book on the table and laid her head on her arms.

“What would you two like to do today? I’ve taken the day off, so anything goes.” Dawson tried to sound cheerful.

“Papa, do you think we did the right thing?” Eli asked, hesitatingly. Oskar looked up at him for the first time.

“Eli, I just don’t know! I suppose we could argue that it was pre-emptive self-defense, and possibly win our case in some sort of heavenly court, but there are no easy answers when a life is taken, no matter how compelling the cause. The simplest answer is that he gave us no choice. There were also other innocent lives at stake. In another time, perhaps if your cure had been found, Eli, maybe we could have followed another course of action; but at this time, and in this place, we did the best we could. Rest assured, your motives in this are above reproach. I know you did this solely to protect us all, and I love you even more because of it, if that is even possible. I am indescribably proud of both of you. Bravery is only tested when there is real fear to overcome, and both of you showed bravery far beyond your years – especially you, Oskar. This is all new to you, and yet you stepped up unhesitatingly and put yourself not only in harm’s way, but inside the mind of a raging sociopath for what must have seemed like an eternity, never flinching, never turning away, even though I could see the sheer terror in your eyes as you submerged yourself in his anger and vicious inhumanity, for the sole purpose of keeping Eli safe and protected.” On a sudden impulse, he took Oskar in his arms and held him close to him. “Oskar, your life can only get better from here on,” he whispered. “You will never have to doubt your courage again! I certainly never will.” Oskar looked up at him, then buried his face in his chest and hugged him.

Eli watched them fondly, “Papa, how do you always know the right thing to say? When I listen to you, all my doubts and fears go away. You are the only person who really understands what my life has been like, and how much I love you. You mean so much to me!” Once again, she thought about the vow she had made to herself that last night in Karlstad. Papa was going to live to see them cured, one way or another. There was absolutely no doubt in her mind about it. She saw it as clearly as she could see her beautiful family around her. “Papa? Could we go to Hyde

Park to see the Serpentine? I like standing on the bridge and watching the swans, and we haven't done it in the daytime yet. Would that be Okay?"

Papa smiled at her. "Eli, that's one of my favorite places, too. I'd be happy to take you there. Why don't you go on up and put your clean suit on. Oskar, could you put the dishes away for us?" Oskar smiled at Eli, and began clearing the table.

"What's this?" He asked, as he picked up the old book.

"That's for you, Papa." It was mine when I stayed in the tomb a long time ago. I thought you might like it." Eli took it from Oskar and handed it to Papa.

"Romeo and Juliet." Papa looked up at her, surprised. "Eli, did you read this in English?"

She nodded, "It was a bit hard at first, but I had a lot of time to work on it. And I really liked the story."

He opened it up and was startled when he saw the publication date: 1790. "Eli, where did you get this?" he examined it more carefully. Although dusty, it was in remarkably good condition. The leather binding, although cracked in a few places, showed very little other signs of aging, and the Gold-leaf lettering was perfectly intact. There were several old pieces of folded newspaper sticking out from between the pages in various locations; clearly bookmarks that Eli had placed there a long time ago...before he was born, he realized. It made his head swim for a moment.

"I bought it in an old bookstore on Portebello Road. It didn't cost much. Is there something wrong with it?"

"Nothing whatsoever! It's a beautiful, thoughtful gift, and I have just the place for it." He went into the living room, took down his own copy of *Romeo and Juliet* from the ancient bookcase and replaced it with Eli's. "I like this one much better."

"But why? Your copy is part of a set. It looks just like the others, and it's much prettier."

"But my daughter didn't read this one." He smiled at her, as he put his copy on a lower shelf. His heart ached for Eli, for all those years she spent in solitude, living in dusty old tombs, never seeing the light of day, and never being able to share her heart with anyone – or the darkness of what she had to do to survive. "Run upstairs now and get yourself ready. I have a few other ideas about what we can see today, if you two hurry." She scurried upstairs as Papa reached for his collection of maps.

Eli had just finished putting on her suit, and, as she stepped out onto the third floor landing holding her helmet, was startled to see Papa standing there waiting for her. "Have I told you lately how very pretty you are? And how proud I am to have you as my daughter?" he said softly.

Eli was overwhelmed. She turned beet red for a moment, then rushed up to him and hugged him.

Papa offered her his arm, she slipped her own through it, and together, they walked down the stairs. At the front door, he gently brushed back her hair, kissed her on the forehead, and put on her helmet. Oskar opened the door with a flourish. Papa escorted her to the car and opened the door for her, as Oskar piled in on the other side. Eli was beaming as Papa closed her door, got in and started the car. “Papa? Have you ever thought about getting married again?”

“What on earth made you think of that?” he asked.

“I just don’t want you to be lonely. I want you to be happy!”

“Eli, with you and Oskar in my life, how could I ever be lonely? I don’t have the time for it.” He smiled at her. “And you two give me all the happiness I can stand right now – even with the occasional bump in the road.” He pulled out of the driveway and headed for downtown.

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“Wow, this is amazing!” Eli said, as she took in the row of computers against the wall, the shining equipment, ventilation hoods, and the cabinets full of sparkling-clean glassware. “Look, Oskar!” She pointed at the cage in the corner, where their ten old friends were scurrying about, whiskers twitching, without a care in the world. They went over and poked their fingers through the bars. “Do you think they recognize us?” The mice sniffed and nibbled at their fingers inquisitively.

“I would prefer to think that they do.” Oskar said with an exaggerated English accent. “They jolly well better, after all we’ve done for them – saving their lives and all. Harrumph!”

Dawson laughed, “Oskar, with an accent like that, you could run for Parliament.”

Eli was already typing away on one of the computers. “Papa, you have the same software as in Karlstad! I can hardly wait to get started again. Where are you keeping all the cultures from before?” Her mind was already working on a plan to infect him – by “accident” if possible; on purpose, if necessary.

“Half are here in the Lab; the other half are at home in the cellar, in a special freezer. They’re too valuable to keep in one place.”

“Who takes care of the mice?” Oskar asked.

“We have a lab tech that comes in three times a week to take care of them. He works the other days in other labs in the complex. So, at this time, you two will be the only full-time employees.”

“So I can take care of them the rest of the time?”

“Of course, Oskar. I would appreciate it, and so will they. I think they’ve missed you. But right now I need to get a blood sample from you so we can see if there have been any changes.

Remember, you haven't been infected long enough for us to be sure your 'disease' is stable. We certainly don't want any surprises." He laid out the tubes and syringes. "Eli, we might as well get a sample from you too. Recent events, including your exposure to another vampire's bite and near exsanguination may have affected you in some way. I can compare your blood with the control samples we took in Karlstad. We certainly don't want any surprises with your overall health either. I think I'll take your temperatures too. I'll trust you to do the DNA comparisons after the tests have been run."

The pride in Eli's voice was obvious, "Thanks Papa. I promise I'll be really careful and double-check my work, just like you showed me." She rolled up her sleeve and sat down beside Oskar.

Dawson went through the motions, but his thoughts were elsewhere. The visit to the lab had been the frosting on the cake; the ending of a perfect day. The Serpentine had been perfectly beautiful, it was a warm, clear day, and there were more swans and ducks than he had seen in a long time. Watching the kids enjoy themselves together was one of the most relaxing things he had done in a long time. They got to talk to a few curious but friendly people, and the few children in the park naturally gravitated towards Eli, who seemed to have a natural affinity for them. He wondered where that came from. They followed her around like a bunch of ducklings and listened to her Swedish fairytales as they all sat in a circle in front of her. Part of him hoped they could find a cure just so she could grow up and become a beautiful young woman, but of course, that could never happen. No matter what her preferences, she was still Elias. As an adult, this could be an even greater obstacle for them to overcome, especially for Oskar. If the cure ever came, he would have to try to explain the possible consequences to them, knowing that their love for each other could be greatly strained by the introduction of sexuality into their relationship. But they had overcome other seemingly impossible obstacles; perhaps they could do this.

He checked their temperatures, and was surprised to see that Oskar's temperature was 99 degrees Fahrenheit, the same as Eli's. This WAS a change, unless he was coming down with something. He felt Oskar's forehead. It was a bit warm. "Oskar, are you feeling Okay?"

"I'm fine! Why?"

"Your temperature is slightly elevated. It's the same as Eli's normal temperature."

Oskar looked at Eli, "Gee! Does that mean I'll be able to grow wings now? And beat you at wrestling?"

"In your dreams!" Eli snorted.

Papa laughed, "No, it's probably just a mild infection, or the start of a cold. We'll take it again later just to be sure."

He taped a small cotton ball to each of their extraction sites and put away the samples, as Eli was taking a mental inventory of the freezer contents, noting where the two sets of cultures were; the first, hers, which included the bat male and female chromosomes, and the second, where Oskar's male chromosomes had replaced the others. She remembered that this batch had the higher

percentage of her own Vampire DNA strands, or at least the strands that Papa thought were the ones that activated her transformations. This is the batch that Oskar had used to infect himself, with no outward results, other than his permanent increase in appetite and food intake; and, of course, his permanent 12-year-oldness. Boy was she glad that had happened! When she could bring herself to think about it, his growing older and leaving her behind had terrified her as much as it had him. But her life till then had been so very full of loneliness and disappointments that she had already resigned herself to it when the miracle occurred. Well, there was going to be another miracle soon! She smiled to herself, realizing that she was unused to being able to look forward to wonderful things. She looked fondly at Papa as she closed the freezer door.

“When do we start?” she asked eagerly. “Do we have to wait until school starts?”

“Of course not! You can start whenever you wish. But remember, school starts when we decide it does. You’re being home-schooled for now. Remember?” He pointed to the back of the lab, where two desks faced a small blackboard, and a bookshelf filled with textbooks and reference material stood against the wall. “Our first project will be to try and isolate the factors in Oskar’s blood and DNA that halted the aging process, at the same time we try to find and remove the strands that could potentially, with the proper trigger, activate the Vampire parasite that our previous tests showed was still in his system, and replicating at a ‘normal’ rate.”

“And if you can remove it from Oskar, does that mean you can remove it from me?”

He smiled at her, “That’s the plan. The first step will be to isolate the proper strand from Oskar, reintroduce your bat male and female chromosomes, and see if that alone reactivates the Vampire parasite. That will verify that we have picked the correct DNA strand, as well as verifying my original theory that the chromosomes are the trigger. This might require some actual lab time from you, Eli, since you are immune to the parasite, and accidental infection won’t be a problem for you.”

Eli’s eyes lit up. “So I’ll get to work under the ventilation hoods?”

“Yes, but you’ll need some detailed safety instruction first. When would you like to start?” He realized that he needn’t have even asked the question. NOW was always her answer. He smiled to himself. *Too bad we can’t create a parasite from Eli’s enthusiasm. THAT would be a marketable product!*

“What about me? Aren’t I immune too?” Oskar asked.

“We can’t be sure, Oskar. The bat chromosomes are probably the trigger, and if you inadvertently got some of them in your system, it could turn you quickly. It’s not worth the risk”

“But I’m around Eli all the time and we...kiss. Wouldn’t that infect me?”

“Apparently not, Oskar, or it surely would have happened long ago; however, contact with her blood could be a whole different matter.” He looked at his watch. “I think we’d better head for home. It’s been a long day, it’s getting dark, and I, for one, am tired.”

“When we get home, would you bake us some cookies, Eli?” Oskar asked.

“That would be fun! You can help me. That is... if you want to.”

“Only if I can have some cookie dough.”

They went out together, ahead of Dawson to the car, arm in arm. Once in the car, Eli lay down on the seat and put her head in Oskar’s lap. Long before they got home, they were lying next to each other, sound asleep. No sooner had they pulled into the driveway, however, when they were both up, out of the car and at the front door before Papa had shut the car door. As he headed for the study, he could hear the clanging of pots and pans in the kitchen. He could imagine the rapidly-growing mess and shook his head. Thank God they were good at cleaning up after themselves. Soon the wonderful aroma of gingerbread cookies filled the air and he ventured downstairs to see how things were going, and see if he could snag a few. He walked into the kitchen and, lying on the cooling rack surrounded by hot gingerbread cookies, was a giant gingerbread man with horn-rimmed glasses, a stack of gingerbread books in his arms and a crude Oxford parking sticker on his forehead. “I suppose you think that’s funny.” He said sternly, as he peeled off a couple of gingerbread books and popped them in his mouth. I’ll get even with you both once school starts. Mmmmm. I never knew *A History of England* could taste so good. That’s the next book on your summer reading list, by the way.”

“Dad!” Oskar complained, “A HISTORY book? How boring!”

“You might like this one. It’s a bit old and written by C.R.L Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling. I’m sure you both know who Kipling is. His writing style is unique, to say the least. And it’s written for kids your age, whatever that means in your case, Eli.”

“Really? I didn’t know he wrote a history book. It must be really old.”

“It is! Which is why I want you to read it. It’ll give you a much better idea of the way the British interpreted their history at the beginning of the 20th century in England than I could ever convey easily any other way. It was published in 1911, so be careful with your copies. They’re originals and a bit hard to come by. Actually, I have them in the other room, if you’d like to take a quick look.” He stepped into the living room and pulled two identical books off the shelf. “Wash your hands, please.” He waited until they had dried them thoroughly, then handed them the books.

Oskar opened his and saw the signature on the inside cover, “‘Richard Dawson. 1942’ Dad, was this your book when you were my age?”

“Yes, it was Oskar. But I know you’ll take good care of it.”

Eli opened hers. “‘To Richard, from Dad.’” Eli looked up at Papa. “Was this...”

“Yes Eli. I trust you to take very good care of that one also.” He smiled gently at her.

"I'll take it upstairs right now and put it on my bookshelf. Come on Oskar." She walked carefully up the stairs, holding the book to her chest. Oskar quickly followed. As soon as they were out of sight, Dawson smiled, slipped a couple of cookies in his pocket and headed up to the study.

He finished typing up his notes, just as the noise in the kitchen died down, signaling the end of the cleanup process. He stepped out on the second floor landing just as they were heading upstairs. "Eli? Could I speak with you for a moment? You can go on up, Oskar."

"Papa? Is something wrong?"

"Not at all, Eli. I just have a big favor to ask of you, and I really don't want Oskar involved. I don't think it would be good for him so soon after his shock yesterday. If you don't feel up to it tell me right away and I'll come up with another solution." He took both her hands in his. "Eli, would you be up to visiting the Other One's tomb and going through his things? We need to clean up all the loose ends, and make sure no one discovers anything that could compromise our situation. We don't know what he may have left behind. We closed up his entrance, but who knows who might open the crypt in the future?"

She looked at him solemnly, "When do you want me to go? Now?"

Papa nodded, "The sooner the better. Are you sure you're okay with it?"

"Yes! Let me go tell Oskar, and I'll get started."

"Slow down a bit Eli. I have a few things I'd like you to take with you. No flying in your birthday suit this time, okay?" He smiled at her. "Put on a tight-fitting pair of pants, with pockets and a wide belt. I have a backpack with straps that cross over your chest and strap between your legs, that won't interfere with your wings. If you could carry Oskar, I'm sure this outfit won't upset your aerodynamics too much. I want you to bring back what you can and let me know what's left. Take this camera with you and take lots of pictures before you destroy anything. If you have any problems, come back right away and we'll discuss it. Don't try to do everything tonight. You and I can go back later to finish up. I just want to make sure we didn't make any mistakes that would attract immediate attention. And if you're not back in four hours, I'm coming after you. Understood?"

Oskar wasn't happy. "But Eli, I'm afraid you won't come back! Look what happened last time."

She hugged him reassuringly, "Oskar, the Other One made sure there were no other vampires anywhere near him. And, other than one woman years ago, he's the only vampire I've ever seen since I was turned. I think we're an endangered species. Don't worry." She squeezed his hand and headed downstairs.

Papa tightened the straps and tugged on the pack to make sure it was secure. "How does that feel, Eli?"

“Fine Papa. Any last minute instructions””

“Just...stay safe, Eli. Be careful.” Standing there, she looked so small, so frail. Her arms were so pale and thin, he always had a hard time remembering how strong she really was. He hugged her tightly. “Good luck, Sweetie.” She smiled at him; then she stepped out her window, spread her wings and glided out over the pool. She turned toward the river and rapidly gained altitude. He watched her until she was out of sight.

Eli circled the cemetery several times, making sure the area was clear, then landed lightly in front of his black tomb. She walked around it carefully, looking for anything odd or out of place, and finally satisfied, moved his stone and set aside the wooden hatch. She carefully scanned the hillside again, then crawled head first into The dark hole. Once inside, she stood up and got her bearings. His tomb was half again as large as her own, and had two sarcophagi standing side by side in the center. She stepped around them carefully, searching the floor and walls for signs of his having been there. There was nothing! The tomb was spotless. Actually, it was too clean, she realized. Why would he have kept it so clean? There was no accumulation of dust at all. She thought for a moment. Of course! If there were dust, anyone opening the tomb would be able to see disturbances in it, indicating his movements. He must have a hidden entrance into his sleeping area. It's a good thing Papa didn't try his plan; it never would have worked, and he'd have been killed. She walked around the tomb, methodically taking pictures of everything, in case Papa could see something she had missed.

She carefully examined the walls, looking for a crack a little wider than the others – any sign there might be a loose panel. Nothing! She walked slowly around the crypt, and as she stepped between the sarcophagi, she stopped suddenly. The marble slab between them rocked ever so slightly as she walked across it. She crouched down and examined the seams carefully. Each sarcophagus was about six inches off the floor, supported on intricately-carved marble ball-and-claw feet. The rectangular slab had quarter-circle notches cut out at each corner to accommodate the depressions in the floor in which the balls were resting; but there was a one-inch gap between the depressions and the slab – just enough room to slip in a couple of fingers – or claws. She examined the floor more closely and could make out very faint scratches where the slab had probably been slid across the floor toward the uphill side of the crypt. She thought her claws sharp and gently lifted the slab; it came up smoothly and silently. She slowly slid it toward the crypt wall, backing up on her knees and keeping the slab close to the floor so it wouldn't bind against the overhanging claws and the edges of the sarcophagi.

She stood up, stepped carefully across the slab, and looked into the chamber below. There were steps leading down into a narrow hallway that extended under the crypt toward the uphill side. Each step, although perfectly formed, seemed to be made of a different type and color of marble, as though the builder had been color-blind or...Of course! He had built this himself, probably from marble looted from other tombs. He had had at least 100 years to work on it, and appeared to have been a perfectionist, or at least an expert craftsman. She looked at the steps more closely and suddenly realized the colors of adjacent steps blended from one to the other in an odd sort of way, producing the illusion that they were being illuminated from above.

She looked around one last time, then carefully stepped down into the lower chamber. The walls were beautifully paneled dark hardwood of some sort, highly polished. The floor was marble, but laid out in a distorted four-inch-square, spiraling checker-board pattern in which he had made a real attempt to match the marble. The effect was subtle, but beautiful; in fact she was sure she had seen it somewhere before. It made her feel a bit uneasy, but she couldn't put her finger on the reason for it. He had clearly been an artist of some talent at some point in his long life. She took several pictures of the floor and wall detail. Thirty feet ahead of her was a heavy door, pure white, with intricate floral patterns carved into it. She stepped toward it and was startled to find a modern light switch on the wall to her left. She flipped the switch, then cautiously turned the polished brass knob and slowly opened the door.

Chapter 8: Shadows of the Past

As the door opened, bright light spilled out into the hallway, reflecting off the marble floor and flooding the corridor. The pattern on the floor in the hallway was repeated in the newly-revealed room, but the marble tiles were roughly twice as large. There were three white marble steps leading down into the room, providing a floor-to-ceiling clearance of over 10 feet. The room was huge! It must have been thirty feet wide by over sixty feet long, with three large evenly-spaced white marble columns down the center supporting 6x6 heavy wooden beams in the ceiling. She couldn't see how he could have done this by himself, even in 100 years. She quickly realized she must be standing directly under the peak of the hill. The white crypt must be somewhere above the room, but she could see no sign of another exit. Papa would have to see this. There was no way she could make all of this go away. As she stood on the top step, she snapped pictures of the entire room, then gingerly stepped down and stood at the foot of the stairs a moment.

She couldn't shake a growing uneasy sense of *déjà vu* as she looked around the room. Just inside the door to the left was a small simple wooden bed frame, with an old, straw-filled mattress and a couple of gray woolen blankets thrown over it. Next to the bed, against the wall was a worn wooden workbench covered with assorted pieces of marble and a collection of heavy hammers and odd-shaped tools that she didn't recognize. Under the bench were several coils of chains and shackles that looked exactly like the ones that had held her on the roof. She shuddered. Several larger pieces of marble rested against the wall. As in the crypt, everything was clean and spotless. To her right was a simple wooden table with two chairs. Several books, some of them open, were strewn about on the table top. Two crude wooden bookcases were against the right-hand wall, filled with books on home electrical wiring, woodworking and cabinet-making. The rear half of the room stood in stark contrast with the front half. A low three-foot high wall separated his crude living area from the rest of the room. In the rear half, beautiful maroon velvet drapes hung from the walls, and 19th century plush furniture filled the area. A huge banquet-sized Table with 10 chairs filled the left rear of the room, surrounded by beautiful, hand-crafted bookcases filled with books. She wondered who on earth he could have been entertaining. She hoped they were long gone, because if they weren't, they would probably have an ax or two to grind with the three of them.

Suddenly, her eyes were drawn to the back of the room. In the center of the back wall was an oddly familiar dark arched doorway, with a barred glassless window. She walked toward it, fascinated, unable to take her eyes off it. Her field of vision narrowed as she approached, until the dark doorway was all she could see. She opened the door and stepped into...hell!! She saw the rough stone walls; the dark-stained floor; the high-backed velvet-cushioned chair against the back wall and the rough-hewn heavy wooden table in the center of the room; the wide leather restraining straps; and finally, the hole in the table where ... the 200-year-long nightmare of her life had begun. The smell of old blood filled the air. She stumbled back against the now-closed door and trembled in terror. How could this be? She knew it was impossible, but there had to be a connection between...this and her unspeakably horrible beginnings in Sweden. She closed her eyes and willed herself back to sanity. She thought about Oskar's love for her; and Papa! Dear sweet Papa! They were her life now – not this! Her vision cleared and she determinedly examined the room more carefully. The table was clearly relatively new. Nails and screws held it together, rather than the heavy wooden pegs and close-fitting mitered joints used in the distant

past. The leather straps, although old, were certainly not 200 years old. But the blood...was much more recent. In fact, in some spots, it smelled relatively fresh; no more than a couple months old. What had this awful creature been doing for over 100 years? She slid down to the floor, her back against the door. She remembered Oskar's eavesdropping memories from the Other One that he had tried to suppress. Did some of them take place in this room?

Elias shuddered at the thought, as he vividly remembered his own castration – the unbearable pain, the fear of death, the horror as the man in the wig drank HIS blood from the bowl. Not once, not twice, but three times before his eyes finally turned away from his and he nodded to the funny man under the table. Elias felt more pain, then pressure as something was pressed up against his groin. In a daze, he felt himself being lifted off the table; then blackness. When he woke up, he was alone in a small room; a small straw mattress was against the wall and a cup of water was on a low table in the corner. The pain came back in a rush, overwhelming him, and he almost slipped back into unconsciousness. His hand went reflexively to his groin and he saw the blood-soaked rag between his legs. The horror of what had happened to him flooded back and he realized what he had lost forever. Tears of pain filled his eyes and he felt an odd sense of loss; loss of something he couldn't fully comprehend. He vividly recalled a time when he was younger, walking in on his sister and mother in her room; his sister was in tears, crying in fear. His mother was holding a blood-soaked cloth between her legs and blood was dripping on the floor, as she comforted her. "This is normal. It's just a sign that you've become a young woman. Don't be afraid. You're going to be just fine. I'm so proud of you!" She kissed his sister on the forehead and hugged her tightly. He quickly backed out of the room unnoticed, but he never forgot what he had seen. Did this mean that he was now a young woman? He longed for the comfort of his Mother, the encouraging kiss on the forehead. He thought of his sister, how much she loved him, how much he loved her; how much he had wished he could be like her, so kind and loving. Would she still love him if he were a girl? Somehow, he knew she would. They would be sisters. They would share the same room and she could sleep in her bed with her and be close to her. The thought comforted her and calmed her; but tears filled Eli's eyes as she realized these things would never happen. She would never be with her family again.

Days passed. The only time she saw anyone was when the fat man brought her food. The pain had almost gone away, when one night, she was awakened by the sound of voices outside. The door opened and He was standing there, leering at her. She trembled in fear, naked, her back against the stone wall. He came in smiling, fangs showing, half crawling, cat like towards her, then gently put his hand behind her head and ... she felt his fangs sinking into her neck...

She spent months afterwards adjusting to the horror of what her life had become, trying to reconcile what she had become with what Elias had been. At night she would watch her family going on without him, mourning him. She would often take her sister's clothes off the clothesline, put them on, and lie down beneath her window at night, imagining they were talking and laughing together, and brushing each other's hair. Her sister! But eventually, the insurmountable differences between the new Eli and her beloved family grew so great that she could bear it no longer, and she gradually drifted away, never to see them again.

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Eli shook her head and stood up. She intensely disliked remembering those awful times. It served no purpose and stood in stark contrast to the beautiful life she was now living. She disliked those memories because they forced her to remember all the innocent lives she had taken to preserve her own. She knew in her heart that, although most had been taken by the thing inside her without her consent, many had also been taken when she was fully conscious of what she was doing, Håkan only being the last of them. His death, and many others like it, were on her and they ate at her, festering just beneath the surface. They were her albatross, and she would never be rid of the deep regret and guilt she felt. She smiled grimly as she realized that, the better her life became, the deeper the guilt and regret; but somehow, the delicate balance of it all kept her grounded. Her new sense of right and wrong was clearly defined for her, hewn out of the terrible things she had seen and done in her life; at the same time, the grey ever-changing boundaries between them were likewise well-defined by Oskar's love and Papa's tolerance, understanding, and wisdom.

She gave the room a last look, then moved back into the large chamber and began examining the huge bookshelves. Several paintings were leaning against the wall, and three thick photo albums were on the end of the table closest to the bookshelves. She lifted the first painting. It was a depiction of a beautiful walled garden, resplendent with its manicured and beautifully-shaped trees and flower beds, obviously painted in the spring. She caught her breath as she set it aside, revealing the next painting – The Törnkvist Castle! The connection she had been looking for. This one, however, was painted in bright daylight. Several people were posing on the massive stone steps; actually an odd assortment of people. The artist was talented, as the faces of the men and women were quite detailed. Obviously, none of them were vampires. By their clothing, she figured that they must all be part of the estate's staff and their families, which would make this a very rare painting. People of that low caste were seldom depicted in paintings in those days. A young boy was standing between a man and woman who appeared to be part of the kitchen staff. He bore a remarkable resemblance to the Other One, but she couldn't be sure. He was younger, and of course the artist's rendering of the face made it a bit iffy. If it were he, this painting had to be over 300 years old, painted shortly before he was turned, and 100 years before she was turned. She wondered what could have happened to him in the time between this painting and when he attracted the attention of Törnkvist. The signs of whipping on the Other One's body might have been only a superficial indication of the horror that he went through before he was turned.

She moved on to the next painting. More confirmation! This one bore a striking resemblance to the one Papa had shown her in his binder, but there were three people in this painting: Lord Törnkvist, the fat man, and the Other One. There was no mistaking him this time; he had the same almost sadistic half-smile on his face she had seen herself. Somehow, she knew with absolute certainty that he was a vampire at this point. But why would Törnkvist have kept him around? The answer revealed itself in the next painting.

A huge formal banquet table stood in the center of an immense banquet hall, with marble columns, maroon velvet drapes and tapestries on the walls, and a familiar spiral checker-board pattern of marble tiles on the floor. The floor was unfinished, and in the center of the picture, the Other One, clearly in charge, was standing and studying a large tablet, while several poorly-clad workmen were carefully placing new tiles on the floor in the same familiar pattern. Eli recognized the room immediately. She could see the very wall where her mother and the other

unfortunate mothers had stood, waiting for the throw of the dice. Her face flushed as a white-hot anger overcame her. This creature had probably been here when she had been chosen, castrated, and bitten. He had not only seen this horror inflicted on probably hundreds of children, he had taken the horror back with him to London. He was not only Törnkvist's expert marble crafter, but a sadistic pedophilic monster besides. His death at her hands, or actually at the hands of herself and the two people she loved the most in the world, took on a whole new level of meaning for her.

She mechanically lined up the paintings against the wall and carefully took pictures of them all. She methodically took sequential pictures as she walked around the room, even opening a cabinet door flush with the wall near his bed, in which a heavy electrical cable could be seen, which had clearly been tapped into for the electricity he used for power. Papa would certainly want to see this. She reluctantly took detailed pictures of the torture chamber also. When she had finished, she gathered up all the photo albums on the table, plus a couple of journals on the adjacent book shelf, and stuffed them in her backpack.

As she was about to put the final album in, she hesitated, then opened it to the last page containing photos. The last four, all in full color, caught her attention immediately. The first showed her lying sprawled on the roof, head back and tilted to the side exposing a gaping wound on her neck, hair in her face, and arms and legs twisted in all directions, as she had probably been immediately after he had finished feeding on her. The second one was a picture of herself lying apparently dead on the rooftop, perfectly posed, eyes open, with her legs slightly apart and her arms over her head. Her hair was neatly brushed and spread out in a perfect fan around her face; the wound on her neck was clearly visible. The next was the same, but showed a single shackle on her left wrist and another on her right ankle. She suddenly felt dirty, as though she had been violated. The thought of him...handling and posing her like that was disgusting. The fourth picture was a long shot of Papa's car with the license plate clearly visible, parked next to the cemetery gate. She could tell by the sky that sunrise was, at best, only minutes away. One mystery solved, at any rate. She quickly flipped through the album and, near the front, found a black-and-white photo almost identical to hers of a young man, probably in his 20s, lying on his face on the ground next to his black tomb. The second showed him naked on his back in the same pose as hers, hair neatly combed, his eyes open and a ragged wound on his neck. Besides the photo with the shackles, there was a fourth one. The same shot, but a dark stain on the ground and empty shackles. She smiled grimly as she realized that, fortunately, that shot was missing from her sequence. She shuddered as she put the album in her backpack.

Papa would have to come back with her to make sure there was nothing else here that could connect them with this place. He could decide what to do about destroying it. She didn't feel she had the detachment necessary to make such a decision.

She looked around one last time, then exited the room, flipped off the light switch, climbed the stairs, and carefully slid the marble slab back over the entrance. She listened carefully for a moment, then climbed slowly out of the tomb, and put the hatch and stone back in place. She took off silently down the hill, banked sharply to the right, gained altitude quickly and headed for home.

She landed softly on the roof, quietly opened the unlatched window and stepped into her room. Papa was sitting in a chair wide awake, just inside the window. She quickly slipped out of her backpack.

“Eli? Are you Okay? I was just about to go wake Oskar and go after you.” He whispered.

“I’m fine, Papa. You won’t believe what I found and what I discovered! I...” her eyes suddenly filled with tears; she sat in his lap and put her arms around his neck. “Papa, it was awful! He’s worse than I ever imagined.” She took his hands in hers and lightly kissed him on the lips, flooding him with the horrors that were still fresh in her mind. He jerked, startled, but stayed still until she was finished. He hugged her tightly, kissed her on the cheek, then, in one quick motion, took her in his arms, laid her carefully on her bed, then turned and opened her backpack. He pulled out the last photo album, thumbed through it until he found her photos, ripped them roughly off the page, threw them into the wastebasket and set them on fire. He slumped back into the chair with his face in his hands.

Eli thought she had loved him before, but now...she couldn’t begin to put into words how much he meant to her. “Papa?”

He looked up at her, his eyes shiny.

“Papa, do you think I’m getting weak and cowardly? I used to take care of my own problems. If I was in trouble, I got out of it by myself. I knew what I was and I knew that I had to kill people to survive, but I didn’t waste time crying about it. Now, I cry all the time! I just did what I had to do to stay alive, no matter what it took. I only depended on someone when I had to and even then I never owed anyone anything. Now, I’m always taking from you. I’ve put your life and Oskar’s life in danger over and over again because of my mistakes. It’s like I don’t care enough about you to go away and leave you both alone and safe. I’m getting weak and cowardly!” She looked straight at him, determined not to let herself cry.

He looked surprised, “Eli, you’re many things, some of them dark and disturbing, but one thing you are NOT is a coward. And I don’t mean this in the sense that you are almost indestructible and have super-human strength and can survive most battles unscathed. That’s not courage; that’s confidence. Your battle with the Other One took real courage. If you had failed, Oskar would have died a horrible death at his hands, and you knew it.”

“And you too, Papa.” She sat up on the edge of the bed and took his hand.

He smiled at her. “Yes. And me too. He wasn’t the type to leave any survivors. My point is, that was real courage. Your courage is intact, Eli. You’re wrong about yourself.”

“But I’m weak! I depend on you for too much.” She protested.

“Eli, do you love Oskar?”

“Yes. Very very much!”

“And he loves you too. Very very much. Do you owe him anything in return for that love?”

“I owe him everything! Everything!”

“Everything? That’s a lot to owe someone. How do you propose to pay him back; to square things with him? By leaving? Do you think Oskar would be happier without you? Or just safer. You would destroy him by leaving. You are everything to him also. Don’t you ever forget that. He’s already shown you that he would give his life for you.”

She smiled at him, “And you would too, Papa.”

“Yes. So, I suppose that means we would all be willing to give our lives for each other. I guess that’s a real predicament for you, if you want to try to balance the books, clear your debt, and go on with your lonely existence that would be the result of proving you are no longer ‘weak’. Eli, you don’t take anything from either of us. We willingly give these things to you because we love you. We give them to you sometimes even when you don’t ask for them, or think you need them, because we want to. Having the humility to accept these gifts at face value is a true measure of your strength of character – something I have always known you have. So forget this ridiculous notion that our lives would be better off without you in them. You’re wrong again, as usual.” He smiled slyly at her.

“And you cry because you should cry. You’re a 12-year-old child. Even so, only fools believe that crying is a weakness. You cry because your life has become safe enough that you can allow yourself to feel again. Your willingness to cry is a gift to Oskar and to me. It shows us that your human side is blooming. And it makes me even more determined to find the cure for your illness.”

Suddenly, the door to her room opened and banged against the wall as Oskar rushed in. “Eli! I was so worried about you! Are you Okay?” He rushed across the room, and bowled her over on the bed, landing squarely on top of her.

“Umph! Oskar, what...”

“I missed you!” his momentum carried them both off the bed as it slid away from the wall. They fell in a heap between the bed and the wall, Oskar still on top.

“Oskar, get up! You’re squishing me.”

“You gonna make me?” He planted a wet kiss on her forehead and pinned her arms to the floor. She easily freed her arms and began tickling him mercilessly as he dissolved in laughter. The bed slid further into the room as they wrestled. “Oskar, be careful! You’re messing up my hair.” More laughter! Finally, she stood up, raised a wriggling Oskar above her head and dropped him face first on the bed. He jumped up, put his arms around her and kissed her. “I was so worried about you,” he whispered. She rested her head on his shoulder and hugged him. Papa looked into

her eyes, saw the love and happiness there, and quietly stepped out of the room, carrying the backpack with him.

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Dawson was worried. Oskar's temperature was still 99 degrees and there was no sign of illness. He still had the same healthy appetite he had since the infection, but otherwise he was normal. This could be a permanent change, and he didn't like it.

He was even more worried about Eli. The oxygen level in her blood was twice her normal level; which was already four times normal for a non-vampire. There also seemed to be an excess of some odd type of antibody in her bloodstream, as though she were fighting off an infection of some kind. Yet her appetite seemed to be lower than normal; he had to remind her to eat this morning. He needed to do further tests. He would talk to her about his concerns tonight.

He shook his head, turned out the lights in the lab, and headed for home.

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"Eli, why don't we have Jack and Henry over for swimming tonight? It'd be fun."

"You go ahead if you want Oskar. I think I'll just look over the Other One's Journals. I just don't feel like swimming right now." She flopped on her bed, hands behind her head.

"But, you always feel like it! Come on! It'll do you good. It'll take your mind off of all this...stuff. And you can figure out a whole new way to beat Jack in a contest again."

She smiled at him, "Okay, Oskar, you talked me into it. Check with Papa first, then give them a call."

Oskar hurried out of the room and headed downstairs. Eli sighed, *Oskar's right, I really should do this, but somehow I just don't feel like doing anything tonight.*

She was feeling more in the mood when the bell rang. She had a new two-piece swimsuit anyway and wanted to try it out. Oskar had kidded her when she first tried it on. "You don't have anything there to hold it up," he laughed. He was, of course, appropriately rewarded for THAT comment.

She hurried to the door. "Hi Jack! Hi Henry! Come on in. They followed her out onto the porch, where the usual soft drinks and sandwiches were waiting.

"I really like your new suit, Eli," Jack said.

"Yeah, Eli. It matches your eyes perfectly!" Henry said, grinning.

“What do you mean?! It’s bright red!” Eli pretended to get angry and chased Henry into the back yard, grabbed him around the waist and tossed him in the pool, where he landed with a loud splat right on his back. “Yeouch!” he yelled. I’m gonna get you for that. He quickly swam over to her, reached up, grabbed her by the ankle, and pulled hard. Eli pretended to be off balance, waved her arms wildly in the air, and fell face first into the pool, executing a perfect belly flop. Jack and Oskar grimaced at the sound. “Wow! Her stomach is going to match her suit after that one.” Jack laughed.

“Take it easy out there! I don’t want anyone hurt!” Dawson yelled. *And thus the fun-filled evening begins*, he thought to himself, amused.

After monitoring a few races and diving contests, Dawson retreated to a lounge chair, leaned back and relaxed, watching the kids dive for pennies. He enjoyed watching how cleverly Eli restrained herself and kept herself from dominating all the contests. He knew how competitive she really was, and watching her hold back was a constant source of amusement for him.

Finally, he got up and began picking up cups and plates; the usual indicator signaling the end of the festivities. They all went after the penny one last time, and as usual, Eli came up with it. She always allowed herself this one luxury – getting the last one. She grinned at Jack smugly and climbed out of the pool. Jack and Henry hurried over and began picking up plates and cups, while Oskar grabbed a few towels.

Something, some small movement that didn’t seem right, some small sound, Dawson wasn’t sure, but something made him look suddenly toward the pool. Eli had stopped walking and was looking directly at him, wide-eyed. Her hand relaxed, and he heard the penny drop to the walk and watched it roll into the grass. Eli’s knees slowly buckled and she slumped to the ground, unconscious. His heart stopped as he lunged for her. “Oskar! Get a towel and a glass of cold water.” He knelt down and felt her pulse; abnormally slow, but steady. She seemed to be breathing normally, but was a bit paler than usual. The boys were all standing silently around her as Oskar handed Dawson the water and towel. He motioned them back as he dampened the towel and patted her face and forehead. Her eyes suddenly opened, and she tried to scramble to her feet, but Papa gently held her down.

“Don’t move, Eli. Just stay there a few minutes and relax.”

“But, I’m fine, really! I just...slipped.” She tried to get up again, but Papa held her more firmly.

“Please Eli, just stay still for a couple of minutes – for me?” he pleaded.

“How embarrassing!” she whispered.

“Eli, how many times have I told you not to run on the wet cement?” he said loudly, “You could have really hurt yourself!” he winked at her.

“I’m really sorry, Papa. I won’t do it again, I promise.”

He gently sat her up, paused a moment then slowly helped her to her feet. She held tightly to his arm as her legs wobbled a bit; then she straightened up, stepped toward the boys, held her arms out and bowed, “Ta Daa!” She smiled at them as they all clapped.

“You sure scared me, Eli.” Jack said, concerned. “I thought you’d really hurt yourself.”

“I was just stupid, Jack. I ran when I should have walked. Sorry I scared you.” She smiled at him.

“Well, after that bit of drama, I think it’s time to call it a night,” Dawson said, as he led the boys to the front door.

“If there’s anything we can do for her, let us know, Dr. Dawson,” Eli could hear Jack’s voice as he and Henry went out the front door. *What a good friend he is*, she thought to herself.

Papa came back to the kitchen, took Eli by the arm and led her into the living room. He sat down next to her on the couch, and turned to face her, “Eli? Do you have something you want to tell me?”

She looked downcast, “I’m sorry Papa, I thought if I ignored it, maybe it would stop, or go away, or something...”

“You’re going to hibernate, aren’t you?” He gently raised her chin, and looked into her eyes.

“Yes, Papa; I think I am. I’m afraid.”

“How much time do we have?”

“Not much, Maybe a few days now. It started after the Other One...”

“I thought as much. Your blood tests show a doubling of your normal blood-Oxygen levels, and a simultaneous buildup of antibodies. Something is definitely changing in your system. You need to tell me exactly what to expect, so Oskar and I can take care of you properly.

She put her head in her hands, “I don’t know! I really don’t know. I just know that when I wake up I’m very weak and skinny. Sometimes I’m strong enough to...get food and sometimes I’m not. I don’t really forget where I am or anything, but I am disoriented and confused for a while.”

“Are you...dangerous? Are you in control? Have you ever had a ...helper or acquaintance on both sides of hibernation? I mean before and after hibernation?”

“No. I didn’t know anyone I could trust to wait before.” She looked frightened and gripped his hands tightly. “I may be dangerous. I don’t know for sure. I know I’m very hungry and all I can think about is feeding.”

“Eli, look at me.” He held her face in his hands, “I promise you. You will wake up in your bed with Oskar and me by your side, no matter how long it takes. I swear this to you.” He kissed her lightly on the lips and repeated his promise to her over and over again; then gently pulled away. She smiled at him. “Thank you, Papa. I love you so much.”

“Now, let’s go discuss this with Oskar, although he probably already knows, or at least suspects.” They headed upstairs together.

The next two days were hazy for her. She slept later each day, and went to bed earlier. Her energy level dropped along with her food intake, although Papa forced her to eat as much as she possibly could. She passed out any time she tried to exert herself. Papa moved monitoring equipment into her room in anticipation. He even prepared for delivery of high-quality whole blood in case he felt a transfusion might be necessary, but he knew he was totally in the dark here. He was frightened for her but covered it up as best he could. The days dragged on...

“Are you afraid?” She looked into Oskar’s eyes.

“Yes. I’m afraid that when you go, you won’t come back; you won’t know who I am, and I’ll have to start all over again.”

“You mean, if I didn’t remember you, you’d still love me anyway?”

He looked at her as though she were crazy, “Eli, I would never stop loving you. You would still be the same you, though; right?”

“Right! And I’m sure that your charming personality would win me over again immediately. Just like it did the first time.” She smiled at him. “But I know I’ll not forget you and Papa. I know it.”

They held each other desperately, as they drifted off to sleep.

“Dad?” Dawson felt himself being shaken. He sat up in bed, immediately alert. “She’s gone, Dad. She’s not there anymore.” He was trembling. Dawson got up and together they went up to her room. She was lying on her back, one arm across her chest, sightless eyes wide open. Dawson checked her pulse. Nothing. No breath sounds, no sign of life. He was frightened in spite of what he knew. He had seen death too often to not recognize it when he saw it. He gently closed her eyes and carefully hooked up the heart monitor. He watched it intently for over seven minutes before a quick blip appeared on the screen; ten minutes later, another. Her body temperature was also beginning to drop, but he suspected it would stabilize at ambient room temperature. Oskar and Papa stayed up the rest of the night and most of the next day writing down all the changes. They realized they were in this for the long haul.

Chapter 9: Hibernation

From the first night, Oskar insisted on sleeping with her. He dressed her in her pajamas, because he couldn't bear the thought of her becoming too cold. He slept with his arms around her, holding her up against him to keep her warm.

Even so, not being able to feel her presence, not being able to talk to her as he had almost every night since they had been together, was almost unbearable for him. The first night, he hardly slept. He kissed her over and over, as he thought about what she meant to him; how she had saved him; how sweet and kind she was to him; how she made him laugh; how much fun it was to tease her and get her mad at him, because he loved the way she looked when she came after him.

He listened to her heart, and by the end of the first night, could tell within a second or two when it would beat next. He would lovingly put his hand on her chest so he could feel the beat and imagine her blood as it moved through her veins, keeping her alive just for him. He talked to her in his mind, imagining that she was listening to everything he said. He discovered on his own that she took a soft breath about every two hours. Even Papa hadn't found this out yet and was quite pleasantly surprised when Oskar showed him.

On the third day, Oskar carried her into the bathroom and gently bathed her in a tub full of warm, soapy water. He had picked out a nice Rose-scented bubble bath for her the day before, because he knew she loved the smell of Roses. He gently washed her hair, rinsed it, and brushed it until it was dry, because he loved to smell her hair when he was sleeping with her.

During the day, he would lie next to her and read aloud from *The History of England*, imagining that they were reading it together. He insisted that Papa discuss the day's chapters with him in Eli's room, so she could hear. He always left her copy of the book next to the bed, with a bookmark at the day's lesson.

They kept track of her weight to the ounce. Every morning, Oskar would weigh himself, then weigh himself again, holding Eli in his arms. He religiously updated his notebook several times a day.

§

Dawson was worried. Two weeks had gone by, with no changes other than her relentless loss of weight – about three pounds a week. At a bit under 5 feet tall, she had started out at about 85 pounds and was down to 79. At this rate, in two months she will have lost almost 40 percent of her body weight. No normal child could survive that weight loss without permanent damage. He hoped it wouldn't last that long, but the double trauma she had suffered over the previous few weeks probably rivaled anything that had happened to her in the past. He was becoming more worried about Oskar too. He was spending way too much time alone with her. Oskar was terrified that she would wake up and no one would be there with her and he felt that he couldn't take the chance.

Dawson got up and headed upstairs. He and Oskar needed to have a talk about this.

Oskar had just taken her out of the bath as Dawson reached the third floor landing. He quickly held the door for them and followed him into her room.

She looked ethereal, almost sprite-like, as Oskar laid her on the bed and began drying her off. She was like a beautiful delicate china doll; pure white, slim arms and legs; and her angelic face! He remembered the first time he had really noticed her face in his office in Karlstad, when she took off her sweater, grew her wings and confounded him with her inner strength and self-possession. And now, here she was, in stark contrast, helpless and seemingly near death. When he looked more closely, he could see her ribs, her protruding collar bones, the delicate bones in her wrists and ankles normally hidden by healthy tissue, indicating the first signs of excessive weight loss. He helped Oskar dry her hair, and together, they put on her pajamas. Oskar gently pulled the blanket up to her chin, while Papa adjusted her pillow.

When they were finished, he took Oskar's hand and led him over to Eli's table. "Oskar, I'm concerned about you. You need to get out and get some fresh air; go play with Jack and Henry. Everyone thinks she's gone on a visit to see friends in Sweden, so it probably seems a bit odd to them that you're never out and about. I'll watch over her anytime you want to leave. Tomorrow I'm installing a sensitive intercom, with a receiver in my study and in both of our bedrooms, as well as one in the kitchen. Any sound at all will be amplified and we can be up here in a matter of seconds."

"I don't want to leave her alone!" he protested. "I won't let her wake up alone!"

"Oskar, you might actually be in danger if she wakes up and you are asleep next to her. She may not be able to control herself. She could hurt you!"

"No! She won't! She couldn't. I trust her."

"Oskar, she almost killed you in your cellar in Blackeberg, remember? And she knew who you were. Like it or not, she sometimes cannot control the creature inside her."

"But she didn't kill me! And she loves me now! And I love her too much to leave her alone." He thought for a moment, "I'll go outside and maybe go see Jack and Henry, but you have to promise you'll stay at home, with her."

"Oskar, I would never leave her alone in the house. You know that."

"And I'm going to keep on sleeping with her. I know she won't hurt me." Oskar looked at him defiantly.

"I know I can't force you, but Oskar, you have to promise me that the instant you sense movement, you'll at least get out of bed and give her a chance to get oriented. Please!" Dawson knew he wasn't going to win this one. All he could do was minimize the chances he would get

hurt. Oskar was becoming as stubborn as Eli on those things he considered important. “And since the intercom will be on all the time, hit the buzzer. I’ll come up the instant I hear it.”

“Deal!” Oskar knew that Dad wanted some assurance that he wouldn’t take chances, so he’d humor him. Actually, he had no intention of obeying – except maybe for the buzzer.

After Dad left, Oskar picked up reading where he had left off the night before:

Norman and Saxon

“My son,” said the Norman Baron, “I am dying and you will be heir
To all the broad acres in England that William gave me for my share
When we conquered the Saxon at Hastings, and a nice little handful it is,
But before you go over to rule it I want you to understand this:

“The Saxon is not like us Normans; his manners are not so polite;
But he never means anything serious ‘till he talks about justice and right;
When he stands like an ox in the furrow with his sullen set eyes on your own,
And grumbles, ‘This isn’t fair dealing.’ My son, leave the Saxon alone.

“You can horsewhip your Gascony archers, or torture your Picardy spears,
But don’t try that game on the Saxon; you’ll have the whole brood round your ears.
From the richest old Thane in the country to the poorest chained serf in the fields,
They’ll be at you and on you like hornets, and if you are wise, you will yield!”

Finally, he closed the book, turned out the lights and slipped into bed with her. He pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her. *Eli, are you there? It’s been over two weeks now. Please talk to me; I’m so worried about you.* He called to her over and over again. This had become a nightly ritual, and he looked forward to it because it gave him hope. Maybe this one time she would hear him and come home. He called to her again and listened intently. Nothing; but this time, he felt something moving in the darkness – a new darkness, which had suddenly become three-dimensional in his mind – a real world of darkness instead of the flat blackness he normally saw when he closed his eyes. And something blacker than that darkness was moving ever so slowly across his field of vision. *Eli? Is that you? Eli?*

Whatever it was stopped as it became aware of him, turned, and moved slowly towards him. He could see two black soulless eyes staring at him, curious, but unafraid. “Go away! I wish to be left alone”

Eli, it’s Oskar. Eli?

“You’re disturbing me! Go away!”

Oskar sensed its threatening tone. *I want to talk to Eli. What have you done with her?*

“Your wants mean nothing to me.” It paused for a moment, as if making a decision of some sort. Oskar sensed a change in its tone as it moved closer, menacingly closer. It was now eyes and two rows of teeth, bared in a sinister smile. He could hear its slow steady breathing. “Would you like to...come in? I have something to show you. I’m quite sure you’ll like it. It’s a secret,” it whispered to him. “You’ll love it forever and ever. Would you like to see? It’s quite lovely.”

Oskar hesitated a moment ... *Yes.*

“Come closer. You need to come closer,” it breathed softly. Oskar moved slowly into the darkness. Two alabaster hands appeared out of the moving blackness, holding something – something bright, something white; holding it lovingly, delicately. “Shh. You must be still or you’ll wake it. Come closer so you can see it better,” it whispered to him, so faintly he could barely hear. Oskar moved forward ever so slightly, craning his neck so he could see. “That’s it. Now ...see!” The hands slowly opened and he saw...a child with long black hair, dressed in a flowing white gown, lying in the palm of the perfectly-formed marble-white hand. She was curled up in a ball and was crying softly; a mournful cry of hopelessness, despair, and loneliness. Eli! It was Eli! Oskar’s heart broke for her, and he reached for her, to comfort her, to hold her, but the hand moved away, just out of his reach. “Do you like it? Would you want it? If you want it, first, you must do something for me,” it whispered. “You have to give me something... something in return, because I’ll miss it so much. It’s been mine for over 200 years and I would be...lonely without it.” It smiled at him.

Anything! I’ll give you anything!

“Anything? But of course, you’re right. It is worth MORE than anything, after all; don’t you agree?” it smiled at him again.

Oskar was frantic! She was there, right in front of him. All he had to do was give this...thing what it wanted and she would be his. *What do you want? Tell me!*

“Very simple really; I want...you of course. Are you willing to give yourself to me? To own her?” It was breathing faster, anticipating a bargain.

Yes! Please let her go.

“Come. Come to me now and she’s yours.” The hand gently moved toward Oskar. He heard her crying, saw her tears as he reached for her again. He touched her arm; he reached for her hand; he caressed her sweet face. In the back of his mind, he could feel its touch on his shoulder, feel it breathing against his cheek, feel the first touch of its lips on his neck, a probing tongue...

Eli’s head suddenly snapped up. Her terror-filled eyes were fixed on him, “Oskar!! NO! He’s lying! He’ll never let me go! He can’t let me go! Only Papa can save me from him! Only Papa! Run! Run! If you love me, go! Go fast!” He saw real tears running down her face. He realized what he had seen before had been merely an illusion – an illusion that became obvious when contrasted with the reality of Eli’s tears. He jerked back, and felt the rage of the parasite as it realized it had lost him. He saw Eli dissolve away, saw her smile at him at the last moment and

blow him a kiss. “Soon!” he heard her whisper as the alabaster hand closed into an onyx fist around her and faded from sight.

Oskar was wide awake! *What an awful dream! It seemed so real!* He remembered her face, her sweet face, as she lay there sobbing. He realized his arms were still around her, just as they had been when he fell asleep – he looked at the clock: 4:00AM – over six hours ago. He reached over her and turned on the light. He had to look at her, just to be sure she was really here with him. He gasped as he saw the real tears streaming down her face! He quickly put his hand on her chest, hoping to feel her normal heart beat. Nothing. And no breath sounds. An awful thought went through his mind as he reached up with a trembling hand and touched his neck. There was a warm, damp spot where that... thing had touched him – pressed its tongue against him! It had used Eli’s body and his love for her to seduce him. The very thought of it using Eli this way disgusted him. He finally understood a small part of the horror that Eli must endure on a daily basis, just knowing that evil thing lies just beneath the surface of her mind, waiting, watching. But he knew now that she had, at least at that moment, been far stronger than it could ever be.

Resignedly, he snuggled up to her again and held her tighter than before, as he kissed her tears away. He knew with all his heart now that she was much closer to him than he had thought and he took great comfort from the knowledge. And even there, in the depths of her hibernation, she had saved his life once again. He decided not to tell Dad about this.

§

Everything was different the next day. He felt happier than he had felt since her hibernation began. He got up early, had breakfast with Dad and went over to Jack and Henry’s house; soon they were playing soccer in the back yard with a couple of Jack’s friends. Jack’s mom brought them snacks as they relaxed afterwards, and Oskar went home content for the first time in weeks.

But his heart was heavy as he walked into her room and saw her lying helpless on her bed. “Dad, how much longer do you think it will be?”

“I don’t know Oskar. But she’s lost another two pounds in just one day. She seems to be feeding on her own body to survive. It’s as though she had suddenly expended a large amount of energy between yesterday and today. It makes no sense.”

It made perfect sense to Oskar. This was his fault! She had used the energy to save him. He was determined not to make that mistake again. It was his job to look after her – not the other way around.

§

Another two weeks had passed. Eli had become a ghost of her former self. Her gauntness was exaggerated by her hair, which was now almost pure white. Her pajamas were so big on her that Oskar had given up on them, and in desperation, wrapped his own naked body around hers to keep her even warmer, and slept with so many blankets that he woke up drenched in sweat. But it had seemed to work; she was only losing weight at the rate of about two pounds a week now.

He was almost afraid to bathe her because she seemed so fragile he was afraid he would break her. She now weighed only 66 pounds, and looked like a concentration camp survivor; but strangely, her face remained unaffected. Oskar chose to think it was because of his love for her and the knowledge that the essence of what she really was lay just behind her beautiful face. He no longer tried to reach her; instead, he had made a ritual of writing her letters and reading them to her just before he turned out the lights.

§

“Well, Oskar! Did you have fun?” Oskar looked up at Dad as he took off his shoes and rubbed his feet. “We must have biked 40 miles. I’m starving!” He looked guiltily at Eli. She looked worse than ever, and here he was, worrying about feeding his own face. This had to end! Another month and there’d be nothing left of her. He went over and kissed her on the forehead and adjusted the blanket. “Dad, I’m going to give her a bath now, and then I’ll read to her for awhile. Is that Okay?”

“Of course, Oskar. I’ll bring you up some dinner in the meantime.” He quickly got up and headed downstairs. He had just restocked her refrigerator, and removed all the expired blood – blood that even as food, was no longer good. For the last week he had made sure there were at least two pints of viable blood available for transfusion, even though acquiring it had been a bit risky. He was seriously considering doing it if nothing changed by the end of the week. He was becoming genuinely alarmed by her deteriorating condition.

Oskar filled the tub, checking the thermometer to make sure the water temperature was as close to 99 degrees as he could make it. He pulled back the blanket and, as per Dad’s instructions, turned her over and examined her closely for any indications of bruises or ‘bed sores’ just to be sure. No point in taking any chances. He cradled her in his arms, gently carried her into the bathroom and placed her in the tub, watching as the warm sudsy water enveloped her. He loved bathing her because it made him feel closer to her; letting her somehow know how he really felt about her, how beautiful she was to him; how he loved everything about her, her strength, her vulnerability, the purpose she gave to his life when he could do these small things for her. He held her gently, cradling her head under his arm as he washed her. He could feel every bone as he moved his hand up and down her arms and legs; and he could count her ribs as he washed her chest.

As he turned her and began washing her back, she suddenly took a deep breath, startling him so much that he almost dropped her, face-first into the water. He quickly turned her over, but her eyes were still closed, and she appeared lifeless once again. He patted her face and gently shook her, to no avail. It was as though nothing had happened.

He emptied the tub, refilled it with clean water and rinsed her off thoroughly. But he didn’t see her eyes open as he turned to get a towel off the rack. He didn’t see her cat-eyes follow him as he laid the bath towel on the floor next to the tub. Her eyes closed as he reached for her and lifted her onto the towel, picked her up, and carried her to her freshly-made bed. He dried her off, then sat on the bed with her head in his lap and dried her hair, brushing it, getting the tangles out and

finally laying her on her back with her arms by her sides and pulling the blanket up around her. After a silent dinner and another letter read to Eli, He took off his clothes and turned on the shower. He felt useless. He really couldn't do anything of substance for her; he was just going through the motions. The bottom line was that she was doing this on her own, as she had for over 200 years.

He stepped out of the shower, dried himself off and climbed into bed with her. He pulled her close to him, put his arms around her, pressed his cheek up against hers, and slowly drifted off. He didn't see her cat-eyes open; didn't feel her slowly nuzzle up against his neck; didn't see her fangs grow; didn't see her mouth move slowly to his throat or her eyes begin to get that far-away look they got in anticipation of her approaching nirvana.

"Eli! Is that you?!" Oskar suddenly felt her flood back into his mind. Her hunger overwhelmed him for a moment, but the enormity of her actually being there, so close to him filled him with joy. He turned and kissed her fully on the mouth, oblivious to her fangs, oblivious to her half-closed reptilian eyes, already rolling back in anticipation of feeding, oblivious to the powerful force that drove her instinctively toward his neck. He kissed her again and again and squeezed her and stroked her face until she melted in his arms and he looked into her deep blue eyes once again.

He jumped out of bed, jerked open the refrigerator door, grabbed the two bags of viable blood, and rushed back over to her. She was lying exactly as he had left her, so weak she could barely move. He put his arm around her, raised her up and put the tube in her mouth. Her eyes fixed on his as she began drinking; slow at first, then more rapidly. Her eyes never left his as he unclasped the second bag and put the tube in her mouth. As he moved to get another bag, he felt her iron grip on his arm.

"Please! Stay! Please!" He could see tears of joy in her eyes, as he turned and pressed the buzzer on the intercom. Within seconds, Papa rushed into the room, saw Eli and rushed over to her.

"Thank God!!" We were about to go out of our minds with worry." He saw the two empty bags lying on the floor. "Good for you, Oskar. You gave her the best of it first." He rushed over to the refrigerator and pulled out two more bags, unclasping one as he returned. She sat up carefully, still tightly gripping Oskar's arm, and let Papa hold the tube in her mouth. He watched in astonishment as her hair slowly turned from white to black beginning at the roots and propagating outward as though ink were flowing through tiny hollow tubes. He saw her ribs disappear as her chest filled out, saw her collar bones become smooth ridges rather than bony crags around her neck. He wondered if her weight were magically increasing at the same time – impossible on the face of it. She had only taken in a pound or two of sustenance. How could she possibly gain more weight than she took in...he refused to think about having to rewrite all the basic Physics books. He smiled at her, just thinking about all the paradoxes she so nonchalantly presented to the real world, and how fascinating it all was and how alive it made him feel to be witnessing it all.

She held up her hand as Papa started back for a fifth bag. "I'm okay, Papa, really. I'm okay now." she paused, then said softly, "Thank you for keeping your promise to me. I...don't know

what else I can say....” She closed her eyes for a moment, then leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

Papa breathed a sigh of relief as he felt her warm kiss. Her body temperature was already back to normal. She was going to be okay! He took her wrist and checked her pulse. Everything seemed normal; the long nightmare of uncertainty was finally over, and their Eli had survived. “Eli? Is this the way it ends? Are you in any danger of dropping back into hibernation?”

She smiled at him, “No Papa. It’s over now. I hope it’s over for a long, long time. I’ll try not to get bitten again.”

“See that you do that.” He smiled back at her. “This was almost as hard on Oskar as it was on you, I suspect.” He started for the door. “I’m going to leave the two of you alone for a while. You have a bit of lost time to catch up on.” He gently closed the door behind him as he left.

Eli turned and lay next to Oskar, her face close to his. Oskar could feel her breath and hear her heartbeat. He reached out and ran his hands over her body, feeling her collar bones, her arms, her legs, her chest. He ran his hands down her back lovingly. “I like you better without all the bones sticking out.” He smiled gently at her.

“Oskar, what did you do all that time? Did you go out and do things? Did you have any fun?”

“I had great fun with you, Eli. I’ll show you.” He took her face in his hands and kissed her, and she saw everything. She saw day after day of his tenderness, his love, his patience, his selfless caring for her, her long baths, night after night in his arms, his constant worry, Papa’s fears, all their sacrifices for her. She saw him reading to her every day, talking to her at night, and reading his letters to her before he went to sleep.

“Oskar, I...”

He got a gleam in his eye, “You’re so much easier to get along with when you’re hibernating. I can always get in the last word, and I’m always right when we argue. I win all the wrestling matches and beat you at Scrabble every time. And you’re always so reasonable and you’re never a smart-ass. I’m sort of sorry it’s all over now.”

“Smart-ass? I’ll show you how easy I am to get along with! We’ll see who has the last word this time!”

He leaped out of bed grinning ear to ear, ran for his own room, slammed the door behind him and got under his covers. She had the door open before he was half way across the room and almost beat him to his bed. She grabbed him tightly with one hand and pulled the covers off him with the other. She then tickled him mercilessly until he cried out in desperation, “Stop! I’m gonna pee! Uncle!”

She stopped immediately, got off him and grinned at him smugly. “See how reasonable I am?”

She sat down beside him. “I missed you a lot!” She took his hands and held them in her lap for a moment, then slid back down beside him. He kissed her on the neck, then bit her gently.

She giggled, “Oskar, what’d you do that for?”

He whispered to her, “What would happen if I bit you hard? Would I infect you the way you would infect me?”

She laughed, “You’re just a normal person, and I **ALREADY** live forever! What would you infect me with? Oskar cooties? A candy fetish? I know! My hair would turn blond!”

“Let’s see!” Oskar bit her harder.

“Ouch! Oskar you almost made me bleed!” She put her hand to her neck, which was already turning red.

“Eli, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to.” He jumped up. “Let me get you a bandage...” he grinned sheepishly. “I guess I don’t need to, right?”

“Ta Daa!” she removed her hand, revealing ... nothing. “Oskar Bites heal faster than anything. They’re so wimpy.”

“That’s not fair! If I had fangs like you, I bet it’d be a lot harder for you to heal.”

“Well, if you had drawn blood, you might have had fangs by tomorrow. Be careful, Oskar! If you had a sore in your mouth and got my blood on it, you could get infected.”

“Sorry, Eli,” he snuggled up against her and put his arms around her.

She took his hands in hers and held them tightly to her chest. “Hah! I still got in the last word.” He whispered to her as he kissed the back of her neck.

She squeezed his hands and pressed them even harder to her chest. “I love you, Oskar.” She whispered.

He decided to let her have the last word this once.

She smiled to herself. She was so glad hibernation was over. Maybe things would stay quiet for a while now. She could only hope. She thought about what Oskar had done, what she had said...*and I **ALREADY** live forever...Hmm! I wonder...*

Chapter 10. The Plot Thickens.

Dawson looked up as they came down the stairs together. “Good morning, Papa.” Eli said as she flopped down at the table. He closed the photo album and waited until Oskar had settled in with a bowl of cereal and a glass of milk.

“I think we should make another trip to the tomb tomorrow night, together this time. We need to make sure we have recovered anything that could link us to him, including all the negatives for the photographs in the albums. We can’t destroy the vault, but we can at least do that much. There are too many loose ends; for example, who developed the photos for him? Who sat at the table with him? There are only a few pictures of others in the vault, but they’re all old black-and-white photos. So I think we’re probably safe. He told you he didn’t kill to get blood anymore but that room you found suggests otherwise. We also need to check for alternate entrances. He must have had at least one; even rabbits are smart enough to have a back door. There may even be other rooms you didn’t find, Eli.”

“I don’t think so, Papa, but...I was pretty upset when I left, so maybe...”

“Eli, he was a bright guy. I just want to make sure we don’t overlook anything.” He smiled at her, reassuringly. “I have a few things to do, but after lunch we should probably go on over to the lab and get our research project started. Eli, you’ll need to get caught up on your history book too, so bring it along.” He picked up the album and headed upstairs.

“Oskar, this strange poem keeps going through my head. Part of it goes something like, ‘The Saxon is not like us Normans; his manners are not so polite; But he never means anything serious ‘till he talks about justice and right’. Do you know what that is?”

“That’s from the book! Eli! You must have heard me read that to you while you were hibernating! I knew it!”

“Gotcha! I actually read it this morning while you were still asleep. You left a bookmark in my book.” She grinned at him.

“Eli, are you making fun of me?” He started around the table after her, then quickly jumped up on a chair and slid across the table toward her as she dodged directly into his path. He caught her around the waist and fell on top of her next to the table.

“Oooof! Oskar, how’d you do that?” she looked up at him, surprised.

“Gotcha back! All that practice looking through your eyes paid off,” he said smugly as she struggled to get away. He looked up startled, as several sheets of paper fluttered down around them. “What’s this?”

Eli picked them up quickly, “Papa must have left them on the table.” She smoothed them out and put them back in order. “Oskar, what is this?” It looked like a medical report. It had his name on the top, and several charts, one showing average blood pressure over the last year, and another

showing cholesterol levels over the same time period. What caught her eye was a paragraph at the bottom of the page, talking about his ‘Heart Murmur’ and his ‘Mitral valve prolapse’ and a prescription for some kind of pill. ‘Oskar, what’s a ‘Mitral valve prolapse?’” she read further:

Surgery

Surgery on the mitral valve is done only when the valve is very abnormal and blood is flowing back into the atrium. The main goal of surgery is to improve symptoms and reduce the risk of heart failure.

The timing of the surgery is very important. If it's done too early and your leaking valve is working fairly well, you may be put at needless risk from surgery. If it's done too late, heart damage may have already occurred that can't be fixed.

“Oskar, Papa has a damaged heart! He might have a heart attack!”

“What? Let me see!”

Eli pointed to the article, her hand shaking. “Oskar, Papa’s going to die! Why didn’t he tell us?”

Oskar looked puzzled, “Maybe he didn’t want us to worry...”

“Worry?! How could he not tell us? We can’t let this happen!” she was frantic. She paced around and around the room. “What are we going to do? What are we going to do if he dies? He can’t die!”

Oskar put his arm around her. “Eli, maybe it’s not so bad.” If it is, Dad will tell us. We really shouldn’t have looked at this. It’s private. Let’s wait and see what he tells us. Okay?” He kissed her and hugged her.

“Okay, Oskar. But I’m only going to wait a few days; then I’m going to ask him about it. I don’t care if he gets mad or not. We have a right to know!” her eyes blazed. She stormed up the stairs, as Oskar hurried to catch up.

§

The drive to the lab was unusually quiet. When they arrived, Eli avoided Papa and went straight to her computer, updated her notes, then sat down at her desk with her book.

“Oskar, is something wrong with Eli? She’s been uncharacteristically quiet all afternoon.”

“She’s just trying to get caught up with me. I think that’s all it is.”

“Well, you’ll be sure to tell me if anything’s wrong won’t you?”

“Sure, Dad.” Oskar felt really bad having to lie to him, but Eli came first, always.

Eli got up, walked slowly over to the refrigerator, and noticed right away that there was a padlock on the door. “Papa, why is the refrigerator locked?”

“Eli, the cultures are too valuable. I put the lock on a couple weeks ago after I realized that anyone in the complex here could come in and inadvertently leave the door open or damage them accidentally. We can’t afford to take a chance. I did the same to the ones at home. We’re not there all the time and it’s simply not worth the risk.”

She nodded and headed back to her desk. *Well, that leaves me only one other option.* She palmed a couple of syringes, and slipped them into her pocket. He wasn’t going to die if she had anything to say about it.

§

“Eli? Are you Okay?” He heard her turn off the shower. They were sleeping in his room tonight; Eli had insisted on it. Normally on a Thursday, they slept in her room, but she knew he always slept against the wall in his room, just as Eli did in hers. She came in drying her hair, and finally climbed into bed with him. “Are you feeling better about Dad tonight? He seemed okay at work today. I’ll bet it’s nothing serious, Eli. I’m sure he’d tell us if it was.”

“I’m kind of tired, Oskar. Would you mind if we just went to sleep? I’m okay, I promise you.” she snuggled up against him and smiled at him. He kissed her and put his arms around her.

She waited until she was sure he was sound asleep; then she carefully slipped out of bed, tip-toed into her room and took a syringe out of her pants pocket. She went back into Oskar’s room and carefully lifted the covers and rolled him slowly over on his back. She leaned down, thought her fangs sharp and moved them gently over the large vein in his arm where Papa always took his blood. She rubbed her saliva on the spot for a moment waiting for the numbness it caused to take effect, then gently pressed the needle into the vein and drew out a full syringe of Oskar’s blood. She pressed a ball of cotton on the spot for a few seconds, then bent his arm over it, and pulled the covers up around him. She slid in beside him for a moment, listening to his breathing, making sure he was still sound asleep; then quietly slipped out and closed their door behind her.

She crept silently down the stairs, down the 2nd floor hallway into Papa’s room and stood there listening intently. His breathing was deep and slow, a sure sign that he was fast asleep. Once again, she grew her fangs and applied her saliva to his arm. She held her breath as she pressed the tip of the needle to his vein and pushed gently. She then pressed the plunger in, watching Oskar’s infected blood flow into Papa. If she was right, and Oskar’s blood was as infectious as her own, Papa would now be immortal like Oskar, and he could never die of a heart attack. If not, there would be no harm done and everything would be just like before, and she would have to figure out how to get to the cultures. She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. *Papa, I love you so much!* She knew that he would figure it out sooner or later. Especially if he also got Oskar’s ESP ability, along with the immortality. And if his normal temperature changed, he would see that right away.

She slipped out of his room, went back to hers, hid the syringe under her clothes in the bottom drawer of her dresser, and went back to Oskar's room. She slipped back into his bed, put her arms around him and drifted off to sleep, contented, at least for the moment.

§

They spent most of the next day preparing for their trip to the vault. Each of them had a pair of gloves, to avoid leaving fingerprints. They all had large backpacks and Papa also had a toolbox and small shovel. No telling what they might need once they got started.

As it became dark outside, Eli got more nervous. He should be showing symptoms by now. He should be really hungry, and his temperature should be elevated, but if anything was happening he either didn't notice or wasn't letting on. Now she was getting worried. What if something else happened? What if she was wrong and Oskar's blood was really bad for him? She was beginning to regret having done it at all. She snuck a look at his arm and gasped. There was a large black-and-blue spot where she had injected him. Why hadn't he noticed? Was that her fault because she wasn't trained to give him a proper injection, or was his arm getting infected because of Oskar's blood? Could he die because of the shot? She was really scared now. Her previous confidence and determination melted away in a flash. What had she done?!

Papa finished packing the toolbox and was carrying it with his backpack to the front door, when Oskar grabbed his arm, "What's that, Dad? Did you hurt yourself?"

Dawson looked at his arm and noticed the bruise for the first time, "I don't know, Oskar. I hadn't noticed." He examined it more closely. "It does sting a little. What in the world..."

Eli couldn't look at him. She began adjusting her backpack, and rearranging her camera and notebooks. She suddenly noticed that the room had become very quiet. She looked up quickly and saw Papa and Oskar staring at her. Oskar had his hand over his mouth and she realized he had read her; it wasn't as though she had thought to hide anything from him. Papa had seen Oskar's reaction and put two and two together. She suddenly felt dizzy and light-headed.

"Eli? Did you have something to do with this?" He held out his arm. His voice sounded tense. "Eli?"

She felt a tightness in the pit of her stomach. She knew her face was flushed; she could feel it. *I've done it this time. He'll never understand! What am I going to do? He's going to hate me.* "Papa, I..." She steeled herself and blurted it all out at once. "I injected you with some of Oskar's blood last night. I didn't want you to die and I thought it would make you like Oskar!"

His face got red with anger. "Do you realize what you've done? We have no idea what might happen next! You may have ruined any chance for the two of you to ever lead a decent life! If I die before I've completed my preparations for your futures, you may be right back where you started! How could you have violated my trust like that? Why couldn't you have come to me and discussed it with me first? Haven't I always listened to you and respected your feelings? Why

couldn't you have done the same for me? Your reckless behavior may have cost you everything!"

Eli was frightened as the enormity of what she had done sunk in! She had never seen him so angry. And he was angry with her! And he was right to be angry! Seeing his anger directed at her and her alone was unbearable! This was her Papa, the man she respected most in the world, the only adult who had ever accepted her and treated her with love and kindness and she had betrayed his trust. In despair, she dropped her backpack on the floor and ran for the stairs. Oskar was right behind her.

She rushed into her room with her head in her hands and paced back and forth rapidly. She sat down, then quickly stood up and paced again. Oskar came in, but she couldn't bear to look at him either; she had violated his trust too; she had taken his blood and hadn't even trusted him enough to ask for it. She couldn't think about what she had done. She couldn't take it back! She couldn't undo it! And she was wrong, wrong, wrong! It was as though her mind were in flames! Everything hurt so much! There was nowhere to turn for solace. The stark reality of it all was overwhelming her.

Papa came rushing into the room, "Eli..."

She couldn't take any more! She tore off her shirt, fled to the window and leaped out, even before her wings were fully formed. She fell, rolled off the roof and, with a dull thud, landed hard on the concrete patio two floors below. With blood running down her face, she stumbled to her feet, took a few awkward steps and took off like a wounded butterfly, tearing her wings on the tree branches and almost falling again. Finally with a few powerful thrusts of her tattered wings, she cleared the trees and disappeared from sight.

Her wings pounded against the night air as she climbed fiercely towards the new moon. She climbed until her body ached and her heart felt like it was going to burst, and then she climbed even higher. All she could feel was pain, and it was cathartic; it washed over her; it consumed her; it focused her. Papa might REALLY die, and it would be all her fault! Oskar would be forced to go home and she would be alone forever! Finally there was nothing left of her grief but hopelessness, and she folded up her wings and fell like a rock out of the night sky.

Detached from herself, she wondered what it would feel like to hit the ground at this speed. Could she die? Probably not, but it would hurt a lot she was sure. She looked down as she fell. She couldn't remember ever having been so high before.

The wind was whistling in her ears when she finally spread her wings and pulled out of her dive. She glided down slowly in an ever-tightening spiral, with everything she had ever cared about in her life at the center. Going home would be the hardest thing in her life to do, except for going anywhere else. The memories of what she had been before came back in a rush. She thought about all the years she had spent alone in the tomb in Tower Hamlets Cemetery. Was this going to be her fate once again? Because of her curse, was she bound to destroy everything good in her life?

When she finally saw the light from her window, she realized she had been gone for almost an hour. She pulled up at the last moment, landed softly on the sill, and stepped down into the room, where Papa and Oskar were waiting for her, hand in hand.

“I told you she was coming back!” Oskar said excitedly.

Eli looked at Papa, and saw that he was holding the medical report in his hand. Oskar must have told him everything. She knew for a certainty then, that nothing would ever be the same between them. He would never be able to trust her again. She had destroyed something almost as valuable as Oskar’s love. She felt a lump in her throat as she realized the finality of it. How could she not have seen it before?

Because you’re only a 12-year-old child, in spite of everything. And, as usual, you are wrong again. There is no curse, and you’re not going anywhere, because this is, and always will be your home.

She looked up at him, startled. “How did you...”

Papa smiled and nodded toward Oskar. “He’s getting quite good at this. You should never have gotten him started. Oskar, go get me a damp washcloth.”

Papa sat down and took both her hands in his. “Oskar told me you had read my medical report. He told me how frightened you were. You should have read it more carefully before jumping to conclusions, but you are Eli and being careful is not one of your strong points. Frankly, I’m not sure how you managed to survive for over 200 years.” He ran his fingers through her hair lovingly, as he gently wiped away the blood on her face.

Eli looked down at the ground, ashamed. “Papa, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He put his hand under her chin and raised her face to his. “Eli, I’ve never known you to do anything for me where love wasn’t a major factor in your motivation – even when you spared my life in Karlstad when you barely knew me. Granted, this time there was a bit of selfishness, but you didn’t intend it to be at anyone’s expense. I know that! But you’ve got to know it was a stupid, reckless thing to do. Don’t you think I would like to halt my own aging process? The world is too exciting to think about my having to leave it anytime soon – especially with you two in it. But I know the risks involved without further research, and at this point they are unacceptable risks. I’m responsible for you and I can’t afford the luxury of taking chances with my own life. Eli, I’m afraid too. I’m afraid I could die before you and Oskar are truly safe. I can’t bear the thought that that might happen. That’s why I was so angry with you.”

He picked up the medical report and showed it to her. “The only reason the paragraph on Mitral valve prolapse surgery was there at all is because I requested it. I like to know all the options. I have mild Mitral valve prolapse. I am in absolutely no danger at all. The medication is for slightly elevated cholesterol. Please! Just ask next time!”

Eli climbed into his lap and put her arms around him. She couldn't think of anything to say that would make things right; so he said it for her, "Eli, my heart broke for you when you fell off the roof. When I heard the sound of you hitting the concrete, I felt like dying. I couldn't bear to watch as you flew into the trees. You had hurt yourself badly, and it was my fault. I'm supposed to be the adult, not you. Every time you feel the need to take matters into your own hands, I consider it my failure to protect you properly." She hugged him tighter.

"I'm afraid we'll have to reschedule our trip to the vault. Oskar, get out your notebook. We have to start monitoring me for any changes. Eli, go get my bag out of the study." She jumped up and headed down the stairs. She was back with the bag in seconds. He opened the bag, pulled out his thermometer, shook it down, and popped it in his mouth.

Eli pulled a blanket out of the wardrobe and put it around his shoulders. "I'll go make you a pot of tea," she disappeared down the stairs before he could stop her. He checked the thermometer: 99 degrees. Eli might have guessed right after all. It was going to be a long night.

Eli stepped quickly into the room with a pot of tea and two cups. She poured a cup and brought it to Papa.

"Where's mine?" Oskar asked, grinning.

"Get it yourself! I'm not your slave!"

"Does this mean the honeymoon's over?"

Papa laughed. "No, it just means Eli is back to normal." He took the cup of tea, "Thanks, Eli."

"You're welcome Papa." She hesitated, "Papa, why don't you sleep up here with us tonight? Oskar and I can move his bed in here and we can all sleep here. That way I can keep an eye on you all night."

He looked at Eli; saw how much she wanted this. "Okay Eli, I think it's probably a good idea, at least for tonight." He watched as they dragged Oskar's bed across the hall and pulled it up next to hers. The both of them had already put on their pajamas. Eli followed him downstairs and waited outside his room while he put on his own pajamas and his robe.

She followed him back upstairs. "You know I would have watched over you every night, right?"

"I'm sure of it Eli, I know you would have. And I trust you to do it tonight, too. Okay?"

"Thank you, Papa, I will." She followed him into her room.

On an impulse, he tucked them both into bed together and kissed them on the forehead; it brought back fond memories for him. He climbed into bed. "Eli? My temperature is 99 degrees and, so far, stable. Only time will tell if your gamble paid off." He felt she needed at least a little

encouragement. Oskar drifted off to sleep, Papa settled in with a book and, as promised, Eli patiently watched over him all night.

§

When he checked his temperature in the morning, it still held steady at 99 degrees. He ate a bigger breakfast than usual, but only time would tell if his appetite had increased significantly. As for the aging problem, he wasn't sure there was any truly definitive test for that, other than time – and lots of it; perhaps years. No signs of the telepathy yet, but he wasn't sure he really wanted that ability. It could make his life in the real world much more complicated if he could read the thoughts of anyone other than Oskar and Eli. And even reading their thoughts could present problems for them all. Personal privacy was his main concern. He wasn't sure how Eli and Oskar had handled that problem between themselves, but they were very young and adaptive. He wasn't sure he could adapt as quickly.

“Eli, if you want to go upstairs and read or something, feel free to do so. I'll push the button on the intercom if I start feeling funny or there are any new developments. Meantime, you can flip the switch to 'listen' and you can hear everything going on here in the kitchen.” She had been following him around like a puppy since he got up.

“I know I can do all that, Papa. I just...want to be with you for a while longer. Is that okay?”

“Of course Eli.” On an impulse, he lifted her off the ground and hugged her tightly. He was so happy to feel her vibrant warmth around the house again after so long. He had missed her more than he had thought possible.

Chapter 11. The Artist.

Dawson removed his cultures from the incubator and prepared them for the refrigerator. It had taken several weeks for his culture to reach the 10,000th cell division cycle, but the results were identical to Oskar's. Even so, it wasn't positive proof. Oskar was young; there were many indicators in his samples from which to infer lack of aging. He was older; the differences weren't as definitive. No, it would take years before he could be sure. And to make it even more difficult, he had developed no telepathy. The only thing that had changed was his normal temperature and his increase in appetite. Ah well; if he were truly immortal, he had plenty of time to see what else developed. Meantime he had some serious things to discuss with the two of them tomorrow morning unrelated to his own problem. And they had to reschedule their trip to the vault now that he was relatively confident there were unlikely to be any more medical complications.

§

Papa studied the photos in the newest album carefully. He knew they would have to do something, but he shuddered at the thought of getting them involved, especially Eli. She'd been through enough already. This would be particularly hard on her. He looked up as they came down the stairs together. "Good morning, Papa." Eli said as she flopped down at the table. He closed the album and waited until Oskar had settled in with a bowl of cereal and a glass of milk.

"We have something serious to discuss this morning. This ... animal has committed terrible crimes against children and against young adults. Some are recent enough that there are still living family members who have a right to know what happened to their loved ones, or at least to be told where their bodies can be found. Fortunately for me, he took lots of pictures. I've already identified locations of at least three bodies." He paused for a moment. "I have several problems: I have to figure out how to notify the authorities without exposing us in any way; I have to painstakingly go through all these albums, and find as many victims as possible, latest victims first, and work backwards in time; and finally I have to do research in newspaper archives to identify the ones I find. I want your opinions on this project. I don't have the right to endanger your anonymity without giving you a chance to have your say.

"You have to do it, Dad. Their moms and dads need to know what happened to them." Oskar said solemnly.

Eli stood up abruptly, "Papa, you have to let me do this. I have to do this!"

"Eli, you've been through too much. It's too soon!"

"What I've been through is the same as what they went through before he..." she choked up. She reached across the table and pulled the album over to her. Papa stopped her.

Eli, you CAN help me, but please, not this way. I'll get you involved as a last resort, but more importantly, I need you to get all the compiled information to Scotland Yard without being seen. Will you do that?"

“Yes, Papa.” She nodded solemnly.

“Oskar, you can help me organize the final report.” He stood up, gathered all his notes and the album, and headed upstairs to the study.

“Eli, what’s wrong?” Eli wouldn’t look at him. He tried to hug her, but she was rigid; unresponsive.

“I have to talk to Papa” she turned and headed up the stairs. “Please, Oskar, stay here.”

She slowly walked up to the study, knocked lightly, and entered the room. Papa looked up from his desk, “Yes Eli?”

She looked away, “Papa, I’ve killed a lot of people too. Some of them even more recently than the Other One. What should I do about them? I don’t have any pictures. All I have are my memories. I don’t even know who most of them were. I buried their bodies and their families will never know what happened to them.”

Dawson sat back in his chair. He had known this moment would come eventually; Eli was smart, relatively non-delusional, and had become harder on herself, the better her life had become. But he had also known that he had to wait until she was ready to deal with it. It seemed now was the time. “Eli, what do you think you should do? What CAN you do under the circumstances?”

“I don’t know, Papa, but I have to do something!” she sat down and put her head in her hands.

He thought for a moment, “Eli, if you don’t know who they were, how many can you possibly remember?” He came around the desk, sat in front of her and took her hands firmly in his.

“All of them! I remember all of them! I can’t even remember my birthday, or my Mother’s face, ...but I can remember ALL of them.”

He looked at her for a moment, trying to come up with the right words; the words she needed to hear; the words she needed to understand in order to go on with her life. “Eli, how are you and the Other One different? There’s only six years difference between you in biological age. Do you think you are alike? You have both killed literally thousands of people each over the centuries. In fact, if he was actually telling you the truth, you have probably killed more people in the last 100 years than he has; 5,000 souls at best, and around 10,000 souls at two per week.” The look on her face was hard for him to bear, but he knew he had to make his point. “After all these years, you finally, less than a year ago, found Oskar and eventually came to me because you felt you could no longer continue as you had for so long. An impartial third party, a court judge for example, filled in on your history, might ask you, ‘What took you so long to reach this epiphany?’ How would you answer them?” He could feel her trembling.

“I don’t know, Papa. I don’t know.” She whispered. She had never thought of it this way before. The numbers were overwhelming her; the sheer magnitude of it! Over 20,000 people had died just to keep her, an insignificant half-human nothing, alive for 220 years. She could feel her heart

pounding in her chest. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. Those were huge numbers of people! All together, they could make up a whole city! As a Vampire, she had destroyed an entire city's worth of people, including all their dreams and their future generations!

Papa held her trembling hands even tighter as she feebly tried to pull away. *Enough!* He had known all along he had to do this himself, without Oskar's help. He took her face firmly in his hands and lightly touched his lips to hers.

Eli, you are an innocent! You are only 12 years old. You simply cannot take on the terrible responsibility for what you have done! You remember them all because your conscience won't let you forget them. Her guilt over what she had done washed over him, almost overwhelming him. I witnessed your life that day in Karlstad – as an adult, not a child. There is absolutely nothing you were capable of doing differently; you are as much a victim as all those you killed. The real killer of those thousands is Lord Törnkvist, the man who, for his personal entertainment only, tortured you and turned you; and also turned the Other One, and who knows how many others. Your willingness to endanger your future by rescuing Oskar at the pool, and your willingness to sacrifice yourself for Oskar in Karlstad rather than kill me, a relative stranger, absolves you of responsibility for the thousands that came before. That you were able to muster the strength to rise above the limitations of your age and make that decision is nothing short of miraculous. And I love you dearly for that decision and for being the miraculous Eli that I loved from the moment I shared your life with you. Please, Eli. If you never believe anything else I ever tell you, believe this! You are blameless for all you have done in the past. He felt her responding to his love and understanding, yet still – without tears. The profound finality of the trail of death behind her was still too great a burden for her.

He gently released her, and looked into her eyes.

“I KNOW what you are; and you are not a monster like the Other One. He reveled in his disease; he delighted in the deaths he caused; in the suffering of all the children and young people he killed, not to survive, but to pleasure himself. Perhaps when he began his life as a vampire, he was like you and regretted what he had to do, but the power and darkness of it all had certainly consumed him long before you crossed his path – even before you were turned.”

She looked directly at him; her earnestness was almost palpable. “But Papa, I have to do something. There has to be something...”

“There is, Eli, but you have to have patience. Someday soon, I hope, you will be able to grow up, free of this disease. At that time, and only at that time, will you be able to properly address the individual and collective tragedies all these deaths have caused. As an adult, you will be equipped to handle them, and I am confident that you will do a proper job of it at that time. I know it seems unfair to the victims, but nothing good can possibly come out of all this by destroying the life of an innocent 12-year-old child just to satisfy a misguided sense of justice, even if the child is willing to sacrifice herself.” He smiled down at her. “I swear to you: Once you have left your childhood behind you, Oskar, you and I will sit down as adults and make the proper decisions with respect to your past; and we won't stop until you are finally satisfied, no matter how long it takes. And if your gamble with my life pays off for you, as I now suspect it

will, we'll have a lot of time to work with." He winked at her and gave her a big hug. "Now Eli, does that sound like a deal to you?"

"Yes, Papa." She said resignedly. She suddenly jumped up, a look of wonderment on her face. "It worked? Why didn't you tell me? Oh Papa! It really worked?" she lit up like a Christmas tree and jumped into his arms. "You'll be with us forever now! Everything will stay the same forever!" She jumped down and headed out the door, "Oskar! Papa's going to live forever! Oskar!" she quickly disappeared down the stairs.

He shook his head sadly. He knew that once he found her cure, she would soon realize that nothing lasts forever; but now...she's just a child, with beautiful childish fantasies. He would be terribly sad to see them go.

§

Papa turned off the lights and pulled over to the side of the road next to the cemetery gate. He paused for a moment waiting for a car to pass, then slowly turned onto the cemetery service road, and, following Eli's directions in the darkness, parked the car at the base of the hill and turned off the engine. Eli stepped out quickly and, at a trot, scouted the area for any sign of activity. There was only a sliver of a moon, so it was almost pitch black; perfect for them, since Eli could see just fine. She tapped on the window, and they quietly got out, slipped on their backpacks and followed Eli up the hill, holding hands. There was a light breeze, but it was a warm autumn night and actually quite pleasant out. She led them off the path near the top of the hill and finally crouched down beside the tomb, where she carefully removed the stone and hatch, and quietly slipped inside, pulling her backpack and the lantern in behind her.

Light filled the tunnel as Eli reached out, took their backpacks and Papa's toolbox, and disappeared back into the tomb. Oskar and Papa quickly followed after them.

They watched as Eli carefully lifted the slab and slid it away from the entrance, revealing the beautifully carved marble steps descending into the darkness. Papa led the way with the lantern as they cautiously moved down the corridor toward the door – the intricately carved door. Eli clearly hadn't seen it the way he saw it! This door couldn't have been carved by the Other One; it was incredibly detailed and gently, but powerfully beautiful. Every flower petal was delicately carved and textured; every gracefully curved branch and leaf lay in a seemingly random pattern that collectively led the eye back to the perfect white rose in the center of the door. Whoever had done this had seen the world in a way that would have been impossible for Him to have understood – and yet, here it was. He examined the door frame carefully: The door, non-standard sized, was clearly made for this space, rather than the frame having been adapted to fit an already-made door, which meant the artist had probably been on the site. Who could it have been?

Papa cautiously opened the door, raising the lantern in front of him, but the circle of light faded away long before he could make out any details at the back of the room. He nodded to Eli, who silently stepped down into the room, listened intently, and nodded back at Papa. He stepped back, and flipped the switch on the wall. The room was instantly ablaze with light; too much

light, he thought to himself. Why would a vampire need this much light? He stepped down into the room with Oskar right behind him.

“Wow! Eli, this is fantastic! I can see why we wouldn’t be able to destroy it all.”

“I know! I still wonder how he could have built all this without being seen.”

Oskar stepped away to explore the rest of the room while Papa and Eli walked over to the crude wooden desk, where the DIY books were laid out on the table. He noticed a relatively new phonograph sitting on the table with Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons” on the turntable; an odd choice for a sadistic sociopath. What could possibly have drawn him to this type of music? He checked the bookcase and found many more albums, including the complete set of Beethoven’s symphonies by Arturo Toscanini, his own favorite conductor of Beethoven’s work. He hadn’t recalled seeing all this music in the photos; he must have overlooked it. And Stravinsky! “The Rite of Spring” and “The Firebird” – powerful music for a tortured, driven soul. Could there have been any conflicts, any breaks hidden within the non-human façade He presented to us? It didn’t seem even remotely possible to him, but what other explanation could there be?

Oskar walked around the room, looked at the paintings against the wall, cautiously looked through the barred window in the arched door, sat down in several of the plush chairs and headed back towards the two of them, when he stopped suddenly. “Dad! Look at this!” He pointed at a beautiful sculpture standing against the far side of the low wall dividing the room.

Dawson quickly stepped around the wall, crouched down and examined the piece. It was clearly done by the same person who had done the door, only this was done in ebony and painted with matte enamels of some sort, as near as he could tell. It was about four feet from the jet-black twisted, gnarled base to the final red Rose at the top. The theme was the same: beautifully intertwined vines covered with white roses, the petals so fine and realistic he had to touch them just to assure himself they weren’t real; but clinging to the vines and wrapped around them, were beautiful nude figures of young adolescent and pre-adolescent children with looks of joy on their detailed faces, reaching up towards the single red rose at the apex of the sculpture. Thorns covered the vines but nowhere did they touch a human form. Together, they twisted upward in such a manner that they formed a beautiful hollow spiral, subtly suggesting the shape of a horn of plenty, and apparently carved from a single piece of wood. The effect was stunning.

He examined it more closely and saw that, the higher on the vines the figures were, the older they became until the two near the apex, a boy and a girl on separate vines, appeared to be around thirteen or fourteen; and unlike all the others, they were looking at each other, rather than at the beautiful Rose at the top. And, even though the thorns were just beginning to pierce their skin, they seemed not to notice. The subtle changes in the expressions on all the faces the higher they were on the vine were crystal clear.

“Eli? Why didn’t you take a picture of this? It’s magnificent!”

“Because it wasn’t here, Papa! It wasn’t here!” She stepped up next to him and hastily scanned the room again. “Someone’s been here since I left.”

“Dad, she’s right! Someone is nearby! She’s watching us! She’s been watching us for a while. I’m sorry! I wasn’t paying attention! I can see us through her...” He turned and stared into the golden eyes of a young woman sitting quietly in a plush high-backed chair on the other side of the room against the velvet drapes, half concealed by the low wall. How had he missed her earlier? He had walked right by that chair moments ago.

Eli grabbed Papa’s arm and squeezed it tightly. He heard a low growl from deep in her throat, as she spotted the woman. Those eyes! He was looking into Eli-like eyes as he had seen them that night in his office in Karlstad when she first enchanted him. They were face to face with yet another Vampire!

Dawson thought fast! If she had wanted to, she could have already caught them by surprise and probably taken out Eli quickly, then Oskar and him. Since she hadn’t, she probably had not made up her mind yet as to what action to take. He decided to take a gamble. “Your artwork is absolutely stunning! The craftsmanship alone is breathtaking!”

She turned from Oskar and looked directly at him for a moment, an amused half-smile on her face. It faded quickly. “Did you kill Him?”

Dawson hesitated a moment, “Yes. I had no choice. His plans for us did not include our survival, and I had these, as well as other children’s lives to think of.”

“You didn’t do this alone. You’re not one of us.” This was a statement of fact – not a question, he realized. “Who helped you?” she looked at Eli, then Oskar; then settled her gaze on Eli. “You. What’s your name?”

“Eli...Elias”

A look of surprise and understanding washed over her face “You were one of His...playthings?”

“No!” Eli exclaimed, “Not his, but...another’s”

“How old are you?”

Eli knew which age she was expecting. “I’m about 235 years old.”

She nodded, “Then you are Swedish?”

Eli nodded slowly.

“I’m sorry for you, Elias.” Her voice hardened as she turned to Dawson. “You’re human. What is your connection to Elias?”

“He saved me!” Eli blurted out, before Dawson could answer. “He took me in even though he knew what I was. He’s my Papa now!” she stepped in front of him protectively.

“Everything I’ve done with respect to your ... companion was, first and foremost, to protect them from harm.” He put his hands on Eli’s shoulders, “And you need to know that I will continue to do so.” Dawson’s voice was firm. “Even if it means my death.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” She said in a low voice, “And who is this...other not-quite-human child? Oskar? Your name is Oskar?”

“Yes, Ma’am”

She smiled at him, “So polite! And how did you come by your special talent?”

“I’m a Molecular Biologist. I’ve been working on a cure for Eli, and Oskar became infected with an experimental component of the parasitic infection. His ‘talent’ is one of the results,” Dawson interjected, glancing quickly at Oskar.

“A cure. What a novel idea. And how is that going?” she said sarcastically.

“Not well at the moment.”

“Ah! Why am I not surprised? You will fail of course.”

“No! He won’t!” Eli protested. “Papa says it’s just a parasite, and it can be removed like any other, once we know enough.”

“You’re just a child. You’ve been alive a long time, but you haven’t learned to understand the world for what it really is: a cold, indifferent place in which individual wants and needs are of no consequence. You will never see this; thus your thoughts on this matter have no relevance.”

She turned back to Dawson, “Now. Why are you all here? What are your intentions? This is my home now and I will not sit by while you decide whether or not to destroy it.” He saw her eyes widen and her pupils elongate. Her posture changed slowly and almost imperceptibly to an aggressive one, as she leaned forward and slowly opened and closed her hands.

Dawson walked slowly and carefully towards her, and sat down in a chair facing her. He took a deep breath, leaned forward, and carefully explained why they were there; First, to sever all ties between the Other one and themselves by gathering up any evidence linking them to this place; Second, to find as much material about his past crimes as possible in order to make it easier for them to get closure for the friends and families of all his recent victims. When he finished, he sat back in his chair and waited.

“I’m not sure your reasoning is sound, but Oskar verifies your sincerity. Thank you, Oskar.”

Dawson saw her visibly relax and lean back in her chair. “Elias, come sit beside me, please.”

Eli looked at Papa, “Should I?”

Dawson looked at Oskar, who nodded to him. “Okay, Eli. Oskar says it’s safe,” he smiled to himself as he tried to put this whole situation in perspective. Here they were, in negotiations with a vampire for their lives and safe passage, using a 12-year-old child as an interpreter and a 12-year-old vampire as a diplomat. He felt like excess baggage for all the good he could do. He watched carefully as Eli decisively stepped over and sat down next to her on the chair. Dawson looked her over carefully; she was taller than Eli of course, about 5’6” by his best estimate; slim, but not as slim as Eli. She wore a long-sleeved gray shirt, with the sleeves rolled up to just below the elbows, black thread-bare slacks, and brown work boots. Her hair was almost identical to Eli’s; jet-black and shoulder-length. Her face was hard, but he saw a gentleness in it that hinted at the artist in her; a soul that appreciated beauty – more like obsessed in it, if her work was any indication. The chair was large – so large that the two of them sat comfortably in it side by side without discomfort.

She gently took Eli’s hands in hers, looked into her eyes for a moment, then leaned over and kissed her on the lips.

“Elaine. Her name’s Elaine.” Oskar whispered.

The minutes ticked by; the silence was almost unbearable and still, no one moved. Finally, Elaine took Eli’s face in her hands gently and their lips parted. “I am honored to meet you, Eli. Eli, the brave;

Eli, the good,”

she said softly. “As rare as it can be, I recognize it when I see it; even in the most unexpected of places. You’re a lucky young man, Oskar. She loves you.” She smiled at him gently.

Eli’s eyes were full of tears. She impulsively wrapped her arms around Elaine and hugged her tightly. Elaine, startled, started to pull away, then sat painfully still until Eli relaxed her hold on her; then slowly stood up and stepped back.

Eli sobbed, “How could he have done those things to you? Papa, we have to leave this place alone. It belongs to Elaine now. It’s hers!”

“Of course, you’re right, Eli. Elaine, we’re only interested in photographic negatives he may have left...”

She held up her hand, “Eli showed me everything, including what he did to her – and what you’ve done FOR her. I’ll get them for you.” She walked quickly over to a chest against the low wall, opened it and removed a large briefcase, which she handed to Dawson. “Everything you want is in there. He was very meticulous. You already have all his journals. I’m afraid that’s all there is. I’ve already destroyed my own. He devoted an entire album to me. And you won’t have to worry about the jolly fellow who developed and printed the photos for him either. I took him out to dinner a week ago to show him my appreciation for his years of service.”

Dawson thought for a moment about what she had probably done, then decisively put it out of his mind. “Is there anything we can do for you? I have a source of...”

“I know. Eli showed me. But I’m fine. I can take care of myself.” Her voice sounded hard again. “And no, I don’t kill for blood. That’s one thing of value I learned from him.”

“I was sure of it as soon as I saw your work,” he said quietly. No one could create something so beautiful and still kill on a daily basis.”

She laughed. “For a well-educated man, you are certainly naïve. Your country’s own history proves you wrong a thousand times. Man’s ability to create beauty doesn’t hold a candle to his ability to justify and carry out all manner of atrocities against his fellow man, and still kiss his children goodnight and sleep soundly until dawn. And war is the ultimate manifestation of this justification. Every war ever fought has been caused by Man’s inability to recognize the common threads that run through all our lives and bind us all inexorably together on our journey towards inevitable death. Men that believe their deaths have greater meaning if met in the face of battle are self-delusional. The mother who dies protecting her children from wolves has a more meaningful death. The glory of war is and always will be greatly overrated – especially by men and other fools. Dying to protect life is meaningful. Dying to protect ideas is vain and presumptuous —and the source of most of Man’s misery. And there is no more a cure for that, than there is a cure for me.” She paused a moment, “But I pontificate; one of my many weaknesses. Please forgive me.”

He smiled at her, “You have a great deal of wisdom, but it’s colored by the dark life you have had to lead. I suspect that the Truth lies somewhere between us, and I hope with all my heart that it is closer to me than to you. And rest assured; I will find a cure for Eli.”

“Papa? Can we help Elaine? Can you cure her too? Can she come home with us?”

Elaine smiled at her, “Beautiful Eli! I would expect nothing else from you. This curse has left you relatively untouched; a miracle in itself. A small ray of hope in my ‘dark life’ as you so succinctly put it, Dr. Dawson.”

“But Eli, I can’t. I have to stay here. I’m nothing but a black cloud; I’d eventually destroy your little family with my bitterness. I can’t be around people for very long, especially people like you. The contrast between what you are and what I am is too painful for me to face on a daily basis. But you CAN do something for me,” She walked over, picked up her sculpture and handed it to Dawson. “Take this with you. Let it see the light of day. I’ll get my pleasure from just imagining what it looks like in the sun. Please?”

He took it from her carefully, “And when all my friends and colleagues ask me, ‘Who created this beautiful piece of art? Why haven’t we heard of him?’ What am I going to tell them?”

“Tell them the artist died a long time ago, and her name has been lost in the dust of history. Then tell them you bought it at a street fair for two pounds. They’ll not pay any more attention to it after that,” she said coldly.

“But you and I will know.” He said to her. “You must know on some level how good you are.”

“I know only that I can make with my hands, that which represents what I can only dream of in my life. My art represents my failures, and all those things I hoped for and dreamed of when I was Eli’s age. Every decision I made as I grew up closed another door, until finally, when I was turned, the final door closed.” She held her arms out as though she were being crucified. “And finally, here I am, amidst all my life’s accomplishments, frozen in time forever, never to live and never to die, until I make that inevitable, ultimate decision and walk in the beautiful sunlight one last time.”

She sat down, “But I’ve said enough. You are all free to go. I know my secret is safe with you all, because there is a part of me in you, Eli; and you also Oskar. We have a common ancestor.” She turned to Dawson, “And I sense the smallest beginnings of something in you, too. Another gift to you from Eli, I understand.” She smiled mischievously.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Oskar. I hope things go well for the two of you, but never forget; the world is a dangerous place for those who are different.”

She turned to Dawson, “I admire your faith and optimism, however misguided it may be. I found it increasingly difficult in my life to see the good in people the way you seem to do so effortlessly. But on the other hand, it did allow you to find Eli.”

Finally, she took Eli’s hands in hers once more. “Eli, you are an anomaly; a contradiction; a paradox. Your goodness is inexplicably strengthened by the evil forces that lie in juxtaposition to your own beautiful life force. I hope you win the ultimate battle – with or without your Papa’s help. I have heard there is another way...” she got a faraway look in her eyes for a moment; then shook it off. “Is there anything else you all need?”

“No, Elaine. And thank you for your help.” Dawson sensed that she was done with them; that they needed to leave before she became uncomfortable. “I would like you to verify my thoughts on something I consider quite important. The music. The albums are yours of course!”

“Of course. Did you, even for a moment, think they were His? There was no room in his soul for anything other than his twisted thoughts and subhuman sadism.”

He took Eli and Oskar by the hands and stood up. He felt sad that there was nothing he could do for her. If they had somehow been able to find her sooner, he knew he could have done something... He looked up suddenly as he sensed she was staring directly at him; only this time, it was with a look of sadness.

“You were only 10. I was lost when you were only 10. You were a little boy in a little boy’s world. What could you have done?” she whispered. “But I thank you for the thought. I’m beginning to think that I’ve met you all at exactly the right time in my life.”

She guided them towards the door, ushered them into the hall, stopped to pull a backpack from under the bed, then followed them into the hall and closed the door behind her. They went up the stairs together and stepped out under the star-lit sky.

“You’ll have to excuse me now. I have a little...grocery shopping to do.” She started up the hill, paused a moment, then turned around and walked slowly back down the hill to them, “Eli? Would you come and visit with me from time to time?”

“I will! Can I bring Oskar and Papa along too?”

She smiled at her, “Of course! You are all welcome! Doctor, you are a breath of fresh air and a great sparring partner, but I won’t hold my breath waiting for that cure; and I can hold my breath for a long time.” She turned and quickly disappeared over the top of the hill.

“Oskar? Can you still see her?” Dawson asked.

“Yes, Dad. She seems almost happy now. Not like when I first saw her.”

“Let me know when she’s out of your sight. And how far away she is when you lose her.”

Oskar laughed suddenly.

“Oskar? What’s so funny?”

“I guess she can still see me too, Dad. She said ‘Your Dad is a Scientist to the end, isn’t he? What a nerd!’”

Chapter 12: The Art Critics

Oskar and Eli sat across from each other at Eli's table, looking at Elaine's sculpture. Papa had agreed immediately that Eli should keep it in her room; where better to exhibit the work of a vampire than in the room of a soulmate, he had told her.

"It's so beautiful, Oskar. I like to imagine that I'm climbing the vines with them. They all seem so happy.

"Eli, did you notice that there are six separate vines and every other one has girls on it and the rest have boys? I wonder what that means?"

"I don't know, Oskar; maybe it's because girls and boys grow up with different goals in their lives."

"But then, why would they all be climbing toward the same goal; the Red Rose at the top?"

"Maybe they have the same goals, but different paths?"

"Yeah, that's probably it," Oskar said. He stood up and looked more closely at the figures at the top.

"Oskar, look at this cute little guy here at the bottom. He looks just like Henry!" she giggled. "I guess we should keep that to ourselves."

Oskar laughed, "Henry in the nude! Yeah, I don't think he'd ever live it down if we showed it to Jack."

"Eli, this girl at the top looks just like you. She even has your hair." He bent over and examined it more closely.

Eli stood up next to him and crowded him out of the way. "Oskar, I think maybe that's supposed to be Elaine. She has the same hair that I have...but this boy across from her does look a lot like you. Same haircut and everything."

"What do you mean, 'and everything?'" he looked at the figure again.

"I mean he's just as pretty as you are." She smiled at him.

Oskar blushed, "Why do you always say I'm pretty? Why don't you say I'm handsome?"

"Because you're pretty! And you're cute! Papa's handsome. You're not old enough yet to be handsome."

"Well... I still think the girl is you. She has your beautiful face, she's slim and pretty like you, and her hair is wild, just like yours. I'm going to call her 'Eli'"

“Well, I’m going to call this one ‘Oskar.’ See how you’re looking at me instead of the Rose?”

“And you’re looking at me. And I recognize that look. I’ve seen it before.”

She looked at it more closely, “When? When did I look like that?”

“You’ve looked at me like that a lot, but the first time was right before you kissed me that day in your apartment, before you went away. I really remember that! It was when I knew for sure that you loved me. After you left I felt more alone than I had ever felt in my life.”

“I’m sorry, Oskar.”

He leaned over and kissed her gently, then put his arms around her. “I’m not. You came back. That’s all that matters.”

“Papa! How long have you been standing there?” Eli smiled at him as he stepped into the room.

He smiled back, “Long enough to hear one of the best reactions to a real piece of art it’s ever been my pleasure to witness.”

“What do you mean, Papa?”

“Eli, the thing about art that makes it great, is its ability to strike a common cord with people of almost all ages and levels of education or knowledge. Its beauty, if it is truly great art, is accessible to almost anyone who is willing to open his or her mind the least little bit. The fact that they won’t all see it in the same way is of no consequence. If it fills up your glass, no matter what its size, it has done its job, and will stand the test of time.

“You and Oskar, just by observing it for a little while, have found the essence of what Elaine was trying to say when she made it. When you are older and have a larger ‘glass’ you will understand even more of what she was trying to say. There are things hidden there that will only reveal themselves to you when you are older and have had more life experience.” He thought about the thorns and the Rose and how their meaning would change for them when they were able to age physically. Who’s to say which meaning will have the most value to them? After all, there was danger in their growing up, as there is always potential danger in any change of that magnitude. Even so, he decided he liked their current impressions very much. And, just like the figures at the top, which they had instinctively, and correctly in his opinion, claimed as their own, they had not yet noticed the thorns beginning to pierce their own skin.

He sat down next to them. “Eli, did Elaine explain to you how she came to be with the Other One? It seemed to me that she may have been his captive; that she was with him unwillingly.”

“She was, Papa. She kept so much of it from me, but I think when she first met him, before she knew what he was, she stayed with him because she wanted to. When she realized what he was, it was too late. I don’t know what her life was like all those years, or how she learned how to

make beautiful things. I know she went to Cambridge, though, before she met him. I don't think she wanted me to see that, but I did.

"But he did awful things to her; really awful things. He held her for a long time in a room behind the curtain in the back of the vault. She was there when I explored the vault the first time, but decided to stay quiet, because she had no idea that we had killed him. He had a set of really heavy chains he used on her, and fed her just enough to keep her alive. She was alone for two weeks after he died, before she decided to try to escape. She was too weak to break the chains so she...she crushed her hands one at a time and pulled them out of the shackles. Then she did the same with her feet. Each time, it took her longer to heal and she became weaker. When she was finally free, she ... fed on a man who had passed out by the cemetery gate." She quickly looked up, "She didn't kill him, Papa."

"I believe you, Eli. And I believed her when she told us she hadn't killed to eat." But he knew she had killed. And she had fed on at least that one. He flashed back to Eli's attack on Detective Ellstrom; but that wasn't premeditated, even though she had fed on him. No, Elaine was definitely not a 12-year-old child. She was potentially much more dangerous.

Eli continued, "When she got her strength back, she soon discovered the place where He had died. She saw the burned spot on the grass, the holes where the spikes had been, and pieces of His clothing and part of a bracelet He was wearing. Then she went back to the vault and kind of settled in. Two weeks later, we visited her."

"Under the circumstances, we're lucky she didn't kill us on sight!"

"She wouldn't have done that Papa, I know she wouldn't."

§

Eli rushed to the door as soon as the bell rang. "Hello Henry! Hello Jack! Come on in," she turned and headed back to the kitchen, where she and Papa were finishing up the sandwiches.

Oskar hollered at them from the first landing, "Come on up to Eli's room. I want to show you guys something." He turned and headed back up the stairs, with the boys following right behind him. Eli glanced after them, a worried look on her face.

They all stood around the sculpture. "Look at this! Isn't it neat? A friend of Dad's gave it to us."

"They're all naked!" Henry exclaimed. He looked closer. "And look! You can see their willies." He giggled, as he looked at them more closely. He checked out the figures on the adjacent vine "Is that what girls' bits look like?" He turned to Jack.

"How would I know?!" Jack said, as he bent down and examined them more closely. "Boy, they sure look real. Look at their faces! You can see the pupils in their eyes and what color their eyes are. You can see exactly what each one is looking at – that red rose at the top. You can see their fingernails and toenails. And look! This one looks like Henry!" he laughed.

“No it doesn’t!” Henry protested.

“Eli thought the same thing, Jack!” Oskar laughed.

“I know it’s Henry! Look at his Wee Willie Winkie! I’d recognize it anywhere.”

Henry slugged him hard on the arm, “That’s not funny!”

“I thought it was pretty funny, Henry, and the rest of him looks like you too!” Oskar laughed.

“Not funny!” Henry yelled and pushed Oskar hard, his face red with embarrassment.

Jack grabbed him, pinning his arms to his sides. “Knock it off, Henry! You’re acting like a stupid little kid. We were just joking.”

“I don’t think it’s funny either!” Eli said from the doorway. “How old are you two anyway?” She stepped over and grabbed Henry away from Jack. “Henry, ignore them. They’re just stupid little boys. Come on downstairs and you can get first pick at the cake and ice cream – BEFORE dinner. I hope there’s enough left for you two little children AFTER dinner.” She glared at both of them. “You go on down, Henry. I’ll be right there.” He scurried quickly down the stairs.

“Oskar, what on earth is wrong with you? Jack? Henry’s your own brother! How could you treat him like that? You’re not so old that you can’t remember how that feels are you? If you can’t, you’re dumber than you look. And Oskar, with your wimpy background, I’d expect you to be a bit more sensitive to his feelings. I’m disgusted with you both!” she turned and stormed out of the room.

Oskar and Jack looked at each other, “Boy she sure told us, didn’t she?” Oskar said, a bit subdued.

“Yeah, she sure did,” Jack said, admiringly. “Your sister is absolutely amazing!”

§

Henry was still upset. “Oskar told me you thought it looked like me too!” he said, accusingly.

Eli could tell that his feelings were really hurt. “Henry, he does look like you, but in the best of ways. He has that cute expression on his face that you get when you’re happy; and I think he’s very handsome, just like you.” She bent over and whispered to him, “And don’t tell him, but I think the boy at the top looks just like Oskar, willie and all.” She grinned at him.

Henry laughed, took Eli’s hand, and walked into the kitchen with her, where she immediately cut him a big piece of cake and sat down at the table with him. “Henry, it’s really a compliment that you look like one of them; and I noticed it right away. The artist that made it tried her best to make them all perfect in their own way, and they’re all perfectly happy looking at the perfect

rose at the top. I'm sure the artist would have been very happy to meet you and see that there really is a sweet boy who's as cute as she imagined him to be."

Henry blushed, and hugged her tightly, "I really like you Eli!"

Papa smiled to himself as he listened to Eli repair the damage Oskar and Jack had done to Henry's ego. Elaine's sculpture was really getting a workout today. He looked forward to telling her about it the next visit.

§

"Do you think it's safe to go downstairs yet?"

"I don't know, Jack. She was pretty mad at us. Maybe we should stay up here a while longer." They sat down and looked at each other through the sculpture for a few minutes.

"Oskar, look at this! You can see the muscles on this guy straining as he's getting close to the top. Look at his arms and legs. He looks like I feel when I get to the top of the rope in gym, but he's still smiling! I hadn't thought about it, but I'll bet you could get really worn out climbing something like that for very long – and seeing as how they look older the higher they are, they've been climbing a long time. And look! Even the girls' muscles are straining. You can almost see their sweat."

" 'Glow,' Jack. Boys sweat, girls glow," Oskar said, grinning.

"Oh, yeah. Right." They both started laughing.

"Oskar, did you see this girl at the top? She looks almost exactly like..." His voice trailed off.

"It's okay, Jack. I know you didn't mean anything by it. I think she looks like her too." He reached up and gently ran his fingers down her back. "Dad said she looked like the artist to him. She has the same hair as Eli."

"But she's not 'glowing' like the others. It's like she changed her mind about the rose, or something. Just like the guy across from her." Jack said, peering into the sculpture.

Oskar held his breath, certain that Jack would see how much the 'guy' looked like him, but for some reason, Jack didn't seem to notice the obvious similarities. Oskar breathed a sigh of relief.

"I think maybe it's safe for us to go down now." He abruptly stepped away from the table and headed for the door, hoping that Jack wouldn't take a closer look at the figure, but he was too late. Jack looked at it closely for a minute, then touched its face with his fingers. His other hand went almost unconsciously to his own face. He looked back wistfully at the Eli figure a moment, then with a faraway look in his eyes, turned back toward Oskar.

He blushed and looked away when he saw that Oskar was looking directly at him, but recovered quickly. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Besides, she won’t dare beat us up with your dad in the room.” He grinned as he started for the door. They went down the stairs together hoping they weren’t in for another tongue-lashing when they got to the kitchen.

§

Dawson scratched his head as he put down the test results Eli had just handed him. He was at a crossroads; he could take his research in two different directions, depending on how important a particular DNA sequence really was in influencing Eli’s vampire characteristics and abilities. It could cost him years of research if he made the wrong choice. He knew he was at a definite disadvantage, not having a larger range of subjects from which to draw samples, but what could he do? In a normal research endeavor in which there was a large pool of subjects, the large number of samples would help him narrow down the truly unique characteristics of the particular disease he was looking for, thus eliminating the random elements that were almost certainly present in Eli’s sample. He needed more samples, but finding cooperating vampires was a problem. “Eli, do you think that Elaine might be willing to provide me with a blood sample for our research?”

“I don’t think so, Papa. You know how she felt about what you were doing; she thought it was a waste of time.”

“Perhaps if I talked to her I could convince her. It could significantly reduce the time it’s going to take me if I can make a more informed choice about which direction to go with the research.”

“Papa, I could go ask her if you like. Maybe she’ll listen to me.”

“I don’t know, Eli. I’m not sure I like the idea of you going there by yourself. Elaine has a dark side that makes her behavior a bit unpredictable. I don’t want you hurt.”

“She wouldn’t, Papa. I know it!”

“I know she wouldn’t intentionally hurt you Eli, but she has dark ideas about life in general and could cause you great discomfort, at the least. This is something I should probably do myself.”

“Please Papa. I know I’ll be fine. I’ve got you and Oskar. She doesn’t have anyone.” She smiled at him, “And I’d like to talk to her by myself. She’s like me you know. Oskar? What do you think?”

“I wish I could go with you. I kind of like her; she’s funny.” Oskar put his arm around her.

“Okay, okay! I guess I’m outnumbered on this one. You can go this evening, Eli, but be careful, the moon is almost full tonight.

§

Eli landed lightly in front of the tomb. It was a bit after two A.M., and the moon was low on the horizon as she carefully moved the stone and backed into the tomb, pulling it into place behind her. She slid the slab across the floor, descended the stairs, walked up to the Rose Door, hesitated a moment, then knocked. “Elaine? It’s Eli. Can I come in?”

The door opened immediately, and Eli put her hand up to her eyes as the bright light hit her in the face. “You realize you don’t have to ask permission to enter the home of a vampire.” Elaine said as she ushered her in.

“I was just being polite. It’s your home.” Eli said, a bit sheepishly. She followed Elaine back to the banquet table at the far end of the vault, where she sat down and continued working on her latest sculpture, this one in white marble. Eli was startled to see that she didn’t use any tools. Her hands changed shape subtly, and her nails became pseudo-claws that took on delicate shapes, which she used to chip away at the marble. They changed as she moved her hand across the dips and rises in the stone, and Eli could actually see the marble changing shape and becoming more defined right before her eyes.

“I didn’t know we could do that!” Eli exclaimed, looking at her own hands. “Why didn’t the Other One do that with all his marble work?” She remembered all the tools on his workbench.

“Because he had a limited imagination. His world was a dreary place; cold, dark, and predictable to a fault – except its end.” She smiled grimly at Eli.

Eli stood up suddenly as she realized what Elaine’s latest sculpture was: a large hand, palm up, fingers curled, revealing a child in a long flowing white dress lying delicately on the palm. As she watched, Elaine’s claws became impossibly fine, and the face, Eli’s own, impossibly beautiful, took shape before her eyes. As Elaine worked, Eli saw an arm emerge from the marble, lightly caressing the face, which now had tears in its eyes; and finally Oskar’s face, full of longing and helplessness, took shape at the end of the arm. Eli realized this was the moment of recognition – the exact instant, frozen in time, before she warned Oskar off, saving his life; saving his life from the evil within herself. She involuntarily reached for Oskar’s face, hesitated, then drew her hand back.

“Your Oskar is an open book,” Elaine said, matter-of-factly, “but he has seen some truly wondrous things – your face, for example. I never really saw your face until I saw it as he sees it.”

“But I don’t look that – pretty.” She said, confused.

“Then, just call it ‘artistic license’ if you like, but I don’t think Oskar, or your Papa for that matter, would agree with you.” She sat back in her chair. “I’m glad to see you again. What can I do for you?”

“I have a favor to ask of you. Would you be willing to give Papa a sample of your blood for his research?”

Elaine frowned, “Why didn’t he come to me himself? Did he think I was a sucker for a pretty face?”

“No, no! It’s not like that at all. I convinced him to let me come, because I wanted to see you; to talk to you by myself; to be with you for a while...”

Elaine stood up abruptly, “Talk is cheap! Come with me.” She strode purposefully toward the vault stairs, paused at the bed just long enough to strip off her clothes, motioned for Eli to do the same, then took her gently by the hand and led her up the stairs and outside.

To Eli, as the moonlight washed over them both, Elaine looked like a goddess chiseled out of pure white marble. She looked to Eli like an older version of the figure at the top of her sculpture; even more so now, because her face had, at least for the moment, lost that hardness that Papa had seen when they first met.

She turned toward Eli, crouched down and tenderly touched the scar between her legs. Eli instinctively flinched, but otherwise remained quite still, wondering what was to come. Elaine put her hands on Eli’s shoulders, looked at her intensely for a moment, then sighed. “What fools they were, to think that this would take anything from your soul. If anything, it has made you whole – and given you Oskar.” There was a quiet tenderness in her voice.

She stood up, took a couple of quick steps away from the tomb and raised her arms, unfurling her powerful wings. “Try to keep up,” she said, as she gracefully launched herself into the air. Startled, Eli stumbled as she raised her arms, but quickly recovered and lifted off after her. It was all she could do to keep up. It took her three strokes to every one of Elaine’s and she still had difficulty.

Together, they climbed, higher and higher, until Eli realized they were higher than she had ever been before; higher even than when she had fled from Papa’s disappointment in her. Why was it so easy this time, she wondered. Finally they leveled off and Elaine turned toward the east, the direction of the rising sun. The river was below them and the moon reflected beautifully on the rippling water, outlining an occasional bridge or barge, but from this height, it looked more like a speckled silver ribbon. Eli realized it was so cold she could see her breath.

Elaine hung in the air, her wings motionless except for an occasional correction indicated by an almost imperceptible flick at the tip of a bony spar. Eli couldn’t even begin to compete with this, try as she might. She lost altitude a bit faster and had to flap her wings every now and then to maintain the distance between them. She felt like a novice for the first time in her life; small and clumsy in comparison with the power and grace that Elaine was so effortlessly displaying.

They flew for hours. Elaine would descend to the rooftops and fly low over a portion of the city where the combination of the reflected moonlight and approaching sun almost imperceptibly combined to produce an understated masterpiece of color and texture, then soar once again to impossible heights. Eli suddenly realized that they were on a tour of Elaine’s own living museum of art. As picture after incredible picture was placed on display for her, she became lost in the

beauty of it all, until a moonlit Big Ben made her realize how late it was. She wasn't even sure that, from this distance, she could make it home before the sun came up.

She veered off suddenly and headed for home, flapping her wings furiously. Almost immediately, she felt Elaine drop over her from above. "I'm sorry. I lost track of the time," she shouted through the wind, "You'll never make it home in time on your own. Let me do this!" She gracefully maneuvered under Eli and rose slowly up to her until their wings were almost touching. Eli lifted her wings slightly and softly dropped onto Elaine's back, wrapping her legs around her waist. She quickly retracted her wings and wrapped her arms around her neck; the next instant, Elaine's powerful dive and acceleration almost threw Eli off her back. She had never flown so fast before! She held on tight and, filled with elation, allowed herself to be carried away by this mysterious, beautiful, dark angel. She leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek, "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! That was so beautiful! Can we do it again?"

She felt Elaine smile, "Whenever you wish, Butterfly."

They roared out of the sky and spiraled down towards the house, where Eli could just make out Papa and Oskar standing inside her open window. The sky in the east was bright now; the sun would be full up in less than half an hour. She felt sad somehow that their night was coming to an end, even though she knew with a certainty there were many more such trips ahead of her, but at the same time she felt a deep bond, a connection with Elaine that was difficult for her to understand. She desperately wanted it not to be over. She tightened her grip, leaned forward and pressed her cheek against Elaine's. "Please come in. I so, so want you to come in." She felt Elaine pull up, stall out and drop gracefully just inside the window. Oskar tripped and fell backwards, and Papa jumped out of the way.

Eli jumped down, pressed her cheek against Elaine's chest and hugged her tightly. Elaine hesitantly put her winged arms around her, then firmly kissed her on the top of the head. "The answer to your question is 'yes,' but he has to ask me himself." She smiled at Papa, looked out the window and stepped up on the sill, "Please come and see me again soon, Butterfly. Bring these – others along with you too, if you wish." She turned and with a single thrust of her wings, disappeared over the top of the house and vanished from sight. Oskar and Papa stood there, momentarily speechless.

"Eli, she's beautiful!" Oskar said, breathlessly.

"Yes. She is," agreed Papa. He knew somehow that Eli was at least partially responsible for this change in Elaine; or else his first impression of her unyielding darkness was wildly off the mark. "And those wings! I hadn't thought much about what the wings on a mature vampire would be like, but they are much more than proportionally larger than yours, Eli. I'm not sure how she was able to get them in the window intact; but somehow, she did."

"Papa, she said 'yes!' But she says you have to ask her yourself. I don't know why." Eli said, excitedly.

Papa smiled at her, “You will when you’re a bit older, Eli. Now tell us all about your visit, and where you left your pants,” he grinned.

Less than 15 minutes later, Oskar assured them that she was within sight of home. “She called you a nerd again, Dad.”

Chapter 13: An Unexpected Death

Dawson pulled his car up to the curb near the cemetery entrance and turned out the lights. They sat there quietly for a few minutes, then Eli nodded and they quietly walked across the street and moved quickly into the darkness. Soon they were standing once again in front of the Rose Door.

Dawson had hardly raised his hand to knock, when it opened quickly. Elaine smiled at him, looked down at his medical bag, then, without a word, turned abruptly and headed back towards the banquet table. Eli scurried to catch up, and took her hand in hers. Elaine paused a moment. “Hello, Butterfly.” She squeezed her hand, and walked with her slowly towards the table. Eli was almost skipping as they went, swinging their arms between them as though they were two little girls.

When Dawson got to the table, Eli and Oskar were already seated on either side of Elaine. He sat down across from them, and caught his breath as he saw the marble sculpture on the table. “Is this something new? It’s beautiful! It’s...Oskar? and Eli? My God! You’ve captured their expressions perfectly! Their faces are exactly right!”

Elaine turned to Eli, “See? I told you!” she said smugly. “No ‘artistic license’ whatsoever.”

“Oskar, this one’s for you. You can take it home with you tonight if you wish. It’s to celebrate your trust and faith in Eli, and her love for you. What she overcame to warn you matched your determination to find her, even though your life was in danger.”

“Wow! Thanks a lot Elaine. I love it, especially Eli. She looks exactly like I remembered her that night.”

Papa looked directly at Elaine, “What danger? When?” He looked at Oskar. “Is someone going to explain this to me?” he sounded worried.

“Dad, when Eli was hibernating and I slept with her, I spent a lot of time trying to talk to her before I went to sleep. One night, I found her, or I thought I had. But it was really the ... parasite, I think, pretending to be Eli, so it could get me close enough to...you know.”

“Oskar! Why didn’t you tell me?! I never would have let you sleep with her if I’d known!”

“I know, Dad. That’s why I never told you.”

“You need to have more faith in them, Doctor. After all, you are largely responsible for the solid foundation on which their new strength is built.”

“But I’d like them both to live long enough to reap the long-term benefits of their new life!” he said, heatedly. “If something were to happen to either of them, I could never forgive myself.” He realized that he was trembling, and quickly sat down.

“I’m genuinely sorry, Doctor. I didn’t mean to interfere in any way with your family dynamic.”

“Really? Do you mean to tell me that when you read Oskar’s thoughts on this event, you didn’t see that he had kept it from me?” he asked angrily.

Her face turned red, “Doctor, are you accusing me of deliberately trying to sabotage your family’s trust?”

“Stop, stop, stop!! Please don’t do this!” Eli shouted, as she put her hands over her ears. “Stop fighting!” She put her head on Oskar’s shoulder and pressed her cheek against his.

“Oskar? I need your help.” Elaine said softly. “Doctor, I told you why you wouldn’t want me around your family. I warned you. But THIS isn’t the reason. You must believe that I had no idea Oskar hadn’t told you. I underestimated his determination to be with Eli, no matter what the danger to his own life. When I read his thoughts – and remember, I read only what he made available to me; this is his talent, not mine – there was nothing indicating that he had kept it from you. I never would have exposed him to you in this way. My art is too important to me to use in such a base, destructive manner; and I care for your children too much to hurt them. We have the same...origins.”

Oskar sat down with Eli for a minute, then reached for Elaine’s hand. Dawson put up his hand, “That’s okay, Oskar; she won’t be needing you.” He looked at Elaine for a moment. “I believe you, and I’m sorry I misjudged you. I guess I’m just an overprotective father. It’s hard to get the balance just right.” He was right about one thing; her art was what had kept her sane during those horrible years; he was certain of it.

“I know, and I’m sorry. Oskar told me about your wife and child.” She said, solemnly.

He smiled at her, “With Oskar around, there can be no secrets, I see. I apologize for allowing my personal issues to cloud the important job of keeping my children safe and happy.”

“Accepted! Now that we have that worked out, let’s get down to business.” she rolled up her sleeve and laid her arm on the table.

Papa smiled at her, winked at Eli, and put his bag on the table beside him.

“She forgot to make Papa ask her for the blood.” Eli whispered to Oskar. Elaine flashed her a quick, knowing smile, then turned her attention back to Papa, and his syringes.

§

Dawson looked up from the test results, looking quite pleased with himself. “Eli, I think this does it. I’m almost certain now that we have the DNA sequence responsible for your vampirism. Other than the changes made by the parasite, your sample has virtually nothing in common with Elaine’s. You’re Swedish and she’s ‘Anglo-Saxon’ whatever that really means. You have common ancestors in the Vikings certainly, but long enough ago that the differences are clear. The bottom line is that the two of you are far enough apart on your respective human family trees

that the superfluous segments of the strand stand out like a sore thumb. The parasite-modified parts of the sequence are completely identical, as we would expect because of the close common ancestor you both have on your 'vampire' family tree. Good work, both of you!"

"Does that mean we have a cure for Eli?!" Oskar asked, excitedly.

"No, Oskar. There's a lot of hard work to do, but at least we know exactly what part of the sequence we have to deactivate. And, thanks to your own partial infection compared against Eli's, we were able to make an educated guess as to which portion of the strand on which to begin this testing process. All in all, we have been quite lucky. This could have taken us years, even decades, with a bit of normal bad luck."

"We have to tell Elaine! Maybe she'll change her mind about your research now, Papa!"

"I don't think it'll have much of an effect on her position, other than the fact that it makes you happy. She's old and set in her ways, just like I am," he joked. "Actually, she's about 16 years older than me – five years older, and she could have been my mother."

"Papa! Don't be silly!" Eli giggled. "She's not old at all! And you're not old either! Old people are stuffy and boring."

"Well then, I'm quite happy that I'm not old yet. I couldn't stand myself if I was stuffy and boring." He hugged her tightly. "Let's go home and celebrate!"

§

"Seizures!" Oskar said, as he laid down his tiles, clearing his rack. "That, plus triple word score, and using all my tiles for a single word, gives me the game!" he hollered triumphantly.

Eli looked across the board at him intensely as her eyes took on a familiar golden hue. Oskar's eyes got big as he suddenly realized what was coming.

"Now, Eli, take your loss like a good sport!" Papa said, smiling, "It's his first win, after all."

"One...Two...Three..." Eli's voice was dark and menacing.

Oskar threw back his chair and ran for the stairs, slipped, scrambled on his hands and knees to the first landing and disappeared around the corner.

"Four...Five!" Eli leaped over the table and was after him in a flash. Papa heard Oskar's door slam as Eli bounded up the stairs. Silence. Then, a blood-curdling scream, several loud thumps, and peals of laughter.

Papa hurried up the stairs, and tried Oskar's door, but it was still locked. He heard another scream. "Eli, please! Don't!" then muffled giggling.

He knocked hard, then pulled out his key and unlocked the door. Oskar's window was wide open, and he didn't see Eli or Oskar anywhere. He rushed to the window and leaned out. Eli's window was also open and he realized immediately that Eli must have gotten into Oskar's locked room by coming in the window. He imagined how surprised Oskar must have been when he saw her, eyes blazing, leaping into his room from the darkness. That must have been the first scream he heard. He smiled at the thought. He turned and immediately bumped into Eli, who was standing right behind him with a big smile on her face, and Oskar's belt in her hand. "The Butterfly has been avenged" she said solemnly.

"Where's Oskar?"

Oskar's bed moved slightly and Papa heard a muffled "Umph" coming from the darkness beneath it.

"Pay no attention to that...thing under Oskar's bed." Eli waved her arm slowly in front of him.

Papa leaned down and reached under the bed, felt a bare foot and gently pulled a bound and gagged Oskar out into the room. He did a double-take as he realized that Oskar was upside down in his own clothes. His legs were sticking out the sleeves of his sweater, and his pants were over his head. His hands were sticking out of the rolled-up pants legs, and his head was scrunched up in the crotch of his pants. His hands and feet were tied together with his shoelaces and his socks were in his mouth. Papa laughed in spite of himself. "How did you do that so fast? He was still pleading for his life when I put the key in the door!"

"You continually underestimate my powers!" she said darkly.

Oskar spit out the socks. "Is someone going to untie me?" Papa and Eli sat down on the floor together and slowly restored Oskar to a semblance of normalcy.

"Oskar, I'm proud of you! That was the best game of scrabble you've ever played. You earned that win! No luck involved!"

Eli grabbed him and gave him a big, wet kiss, "I'm proud of you too! Ptooeey! Oskar, your breath smells like dirty socks. You need to work on your oral hygiene."

"You seem to have forgotten who smelled like a dead fish the second time I met you." He smiled at her and took her hands in his.

She stood up and effortlessly pulled him to his feet. "Let's go help Papa clean up! I'm tired. Besides I need to read a dictionary or two before we go to bed to get ready for next time." They headed down the stairs together, with Papa right behind them.

§

Oskar was happy as he recounted the evening. They had celebrated with cake and ice cream, and had played 10 games of English scrabble. He had actually beaten Eli for the first time, and in

spite of having been chased up the stairs and attacked by a vampire, felt pretty good about it, all in all. He gazed fondly at his sleeping Eli, and kissed her on the forehead. He slipped out of bed and headed for the bathroom, when he heard the bell ring. He looked at his clock: 4:30AM. Who could that be? It rang again. He heard Dad hurrying down the stairs and quietly slipped out the door and crept down the stairs after him.

“May I come in?” Oskar heard Elaine’s soft voice as he peeked around the corner on the first landing. She was standing in the open door in front of Dad in his robe and slippers, a backpack in her hands and spatters of blood on her shirt. He quickly leaned back and sat on the stairs, listening.

“Of course! Come in!” Dawson closed the door behind her and ushered her into the kitchen, where they sat down at the table. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“I’ve...killed someone – an innocent.” She put her head in her hands. “He shouldn’t have died, but he did. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t risk it any longer. I have only two options and you are one of them, the other, a brief walk in the sun. If this had happened before I met you and your family, it would already be done.” Her voice was hollow; emotionless. Her hands were trembling. “In fact, I’m really not sure why I came here; you certainly owe me nothing. Perhaps it was so Eli wouldn’t think I left without saying goodbye. I couldn’t bear that.”

Oskar scurried up the stairs and rushed into his room. “Eli! Wake up!”

Her eyes opened immediately and she sat straight up in bed. “Oskar, what...”

“Elaine’s here, talking to Dad. She killed someone and she’s going to kill herself,” he whispered intensely.

Eli jumped out of bed and they both slipped back down the stairs and crouched down beside the kitchen door.

“You can’t do this, Elaine. As short a time as you’ve been in her life, it would hurt her terribly. Like it or not, you are now part of her life. You should have seen how happy she was after your flight the other night. She picks her friends carefully and keeps them close to her with an intensity I’ve not seen before – understandable for someone who has led such a long, barren life at such a young age.” He took her hand. “I was right about you, despite your denials. Someone who can create the beautiful things you do is incapable of killing without doing irreparable harm to herself; even if it’s necessary for your survival. So please, let us do this for you. Your kindness to Oskar and Eli more than makes up for anything I can do for you.”

“What I’ve done to a complete stranger more than negates any brief pleasure your children derived from seeing me on my best behavior.”

“Tell me, Elaine. How did you pick your meals? The same way the Other One did? All easy marks? Did you pick them randomly? Did you look for Drunks? Men who beat their wives? Drug pushers? Convicted murderers? Let me guess. You picked healthy, 20-to-40-year-old men

or women, to minimize the chance that you would inadvertently kill someone, even though attacking men in the prime of their lives puts even a vampire at some risk; the risk of exposure at the least, if he could somehow fend you off. Am I close?"

She looked up at him, a half smile on her face. "You seem to have all the answers."

"The point is, even though you are, on a daily basis, guilty of theft of the worst kind, by no stretch of the imagination are you a cold-blooded murderer. In a court of law you might be convicted of manslaughter, or in the United States you might even be convicted of murder, because a death occurred during the commission of a crime. But fortunately, in the U.K. we don't have the death penalty. Your own self-selected penalty exceeds the maximum allowed under British law." He paused to take a breath. "Now, will you please let us help you?"

She stood up slowly, "I'm not sure you know what I'm really like, Doctor, or you might not be so generous. But I do thank you for the offer. Perhaps..."

"And I would miss you, too. You have an intensity and directness about you that is matched only by Eli's own. A Vampiric trait, perhaps? At any rate it certainly rates further...study." He smiled at her.

She suddenly cocked her head and turned toward the kitchen door, an amused smile on her face. "Well, since you put it that way, I humbly accept your offer. Anything for Science." She sat down and leaned back in her chair. "Why don't you two come in and join us?"

Eli, with Oskar right behind her, quickly ran over and sat down next to Elaine. "Does this mean you're going to stay with us? Papa, she could sleep in my room, and I could stay with Oskar. Elaine, are you hungry? Let me get something for you!" she jumped up and disappeared up the stairs. A loud bang was followed almost immediately by another, and Eli reappeared with two bags in her hand. She handed one to Elaine, who held it gingerly between two fingers.

Papa admonished her. "Eli, how many times have I told you not to abuse your poor bedroom door?"

"Sorry, Papa. Elaine? You open it like this." Eli demonstrated the 'right way' to unclamp the tube, then watched intently as Elaine hesitated a moment, then put it to her mouth. "What do you think? Is it okay?"

Elaine put the clamp back on the bag, and handed it back to Eli. "I'm really sorry, Eli, I just...can't do this right now, not like this. Don't be upset."

"It's okay, Elaine, I had to do it alone the first time myself, right Papa?"

"Right, Eli." He smiled at her. Her enthusiasm was contagious, as usual. "Elaine, you're welcome to stay with us as long as you like, but certainly today at least." He looked out the window. "Even you wouldn't be able to get home on time now." The sun was just hitting the top of Jack and Henry's house across the street. "You can stay in our spare bedroom, if you like."

There are some of my wife's shirts in the closet that I'm sure will fit you just fine. There's no sense in you continuing to wear that one."

"But Papa, that room doesn't have our windows yet. She needs to stay in my room, so she can see the sun and the daylight."

"You're right Eli, I should have thought of that. Elaine, you can stay in Eli's room if you like. I'm sure Eli will be more than happy to get you settled in. This evening, we'll all talk about how to keep you supplied with food, and where you want to stay in the future. Of course we all know how Eli will vote." He smiled at her.

Eli and Oskar took her by the hands and headed up the stairs, "We have windows all over the house that Papa made himself that keep the sun from hurting me. He experimented until he found the light frequencies that causes us harm and filtered them out. You can hardly tell them from regular windows! You can sleep in my bed, and Oskar and I will pull it over next to the window so you can see everything."

"Eli, I'm really not likely to sleep. Why don't we all just talk and you can show me everything you want me to see." She turned toward Dawson, "Professor? Would you join us?"

He smiled at her, "I have a bit of work to do, but I'd love to in an hour or so. I'll see you upstairs later. Eli, get her a shirt please." Eli ran ahead of Papa into the spare bedroom, grabbed a shirt and was back before Papa made it to his study. She handed the shirt to Elaine, who changed quickly and put her bloody shirt in her backpack.

Eli ran ahead of them and was waiting in her room when Oskar and Elaine got to the top of the stairs. "What do you think? Isn't it beautiful? She stood in the center of a beam of sunlight pouring in through her round window. Elaine gasped reflexively. "Eli! Its...stunning!" she stepped over next to her and hesitantly put her arm in the sunlight. "Your Papa is an amazing man to have done this for you. I don't know the exact process, but I do know it took a lot of money, determination, and hard work to do this. He didn't need to do this you know."

"That's not all! Look at this!" Eli stripped off her pajamas, opened her wardrobe and put on her sunsuit complete with helmet and visor. "I can go outside and go with Oskar and Papa anywhere I want in broad daylight. I'll bet he'd make one for you too if you wanted it."

"Eli, do you have any idea what one of those must cost? I wouldn't think of it!"

"He would do it Elaine. Dad would do it for you; I know he would," Oskar said.

"But I'm not going to ask him, and I want your word that you won't either." She said solemnly.

They nodded, as Eli carefully removed her suit and hung it back up in the wardrobe. She took Elaine by the hand and the three of them sat on the window seat overlooking the back yard. Elaine put her arms around them both. "You two children don't realize how lucky you are. Somehow you were able to find the one man in a million who could, and would help you, love

you and stand by you. Frankly, I wouldn't have believed it possible if I hadn't seen it for myself. Eli, his kind is even rarer than our kind. I'm not the least bit surprised it took you 220 years to find him.

"But I was only looking for a few months. It was Oskar's idea."

Elaine said nothing for a moment, then turned to Oskar. "You two are causing me a great deal of difficulty in trying to resolve discrepancies in my world view." She smiled at the confused looks on their faces. "But I enjoy it all immensely. You keep me on my toes!"

Oskar yawned, "I think I'm going to go back to bed for a while. Eli? Are you coming?"

"I'll be there in a little while Oskar, I want to talk to Elaine for a bit."

Oskar stumbled into his room and flopped down on the bed. He fell asleep to the murmur of soft voices in the next room.

Elaine and Eli talked as though they'd known each other all their lives. Finally she had found someone, an adult, who not only understood her agony and inner turmoil, but was actually going through it herself. She felt a kind of closeness to Elaine that she hadn't felt in a very, very long time. Finally, Elaine's soft voice made her feel drowsy and relaxed, so they lay down on her bed together. "Elaine, what happened to your family? Are any of them still alive?"

"No, Eli, my father died soon after I met the one you call the Other, when your Papa was only ten years old. He was not happy with my choice, and I never resolved our differences before he died. My mother died when I was about your age, and I was an only child. My father was all I had and my mistake cost me dearly. But I made many, many costly mistakes in my previous life."

"I'm sorry Elaine. You must have been lonely for a long time then." Eli touched her face softly.

"Not nearly as long as you, Butterfly. And you came out of your dark life in far better shape than I." she kissed her gently on the forehead.

Eli fell asleep with her arms around her as Elaine held her close, listening to her soft purr and her quiet heartbeat. She hadn't realized how lonely she had been for so many years until she had this small beautiful child asleep next to her holding her lovingly. Reluctantly, she slipped out of bed and carried her tenderly into Oskar's room and tucked them in together. Even in their deep sleep, they found each other and snuggled up together. Elaine smiled at them and slipped back into Eli's room, marveling at the sunlight as it wrapped itself softly around Eli's sculpture. She sat in front of it for a moment thinking, then stepped up and with her impossibly fine claws, made some infinitesimally small changes in the faces of the two figures at the top. *I knew they were missing something*, She thought to herself, *that final spark of life longing for itself. I see it now.*

She was completely lost in thought when Dawson walked into the room. "I see you outlasted them. I expected as much. They had a drama-filled day, in which your unexpected arrival was

the climax. Your blood sample has reduced my research timetable by probably ten years; I can't thank you enough! And Eli had the honor of presenting me with the final test results today at the Lab. We had a wild celebration at home, followed by a short sprint and a violent attack by a disgruntled vampire, topped off by a visit from one of our favorite people in the world, albeit, not under the best of circumstances." He proceeded to give her all the details of the evening, as well as the intrigue swirling around her sculpture and the effect it had on the neighborhood children. Elaine laughed in all the right places. Dawson was enjoying himself more than he had in years, outside of his life with the children. It was a refreshing change; a real adult to talk to, to whom he didn't have to lie about the real problems in their lives.

Finally, after a quiet moment, Elaine looked up at him with a determined look on her face, "I need to fix this. I mean...I know it can't be fixed, but I need to fix it somehow." She put her head in her hands.

"How did you leave him?" Dawson asked quietly.

"Under a tree in a park about a mile from the cemetery. I broke a large dead branch off the tree and pierced his wound with it, hoping that it would appear to be an accident. I had hardly begun to draw blood, so I'm not sure why he died. It was quick. But I went through his wallet. He has a wife."

Dawson thought for a moment, "Elaine, do you have any money? Cash, preferably."

"Plenty, but Doctor, I can't buy my way out of this one."

"That's not the point. He probably supported or at least partially supported her. We know nothing about their lives or their relationship. What would you do? Give her a visit and comfort her by telling her he was accidentally killed by a vampire rather than an act of God? Frankly, money is all you have that could possibly help in any way. Remember, your prime purpose here is not to salve your conscience, but to mitigate the damage you've caused by killing someone close to her. Your penance is something you're going to have to deal with on your own. Let's not mix up the two. Consider it a settlement in a wrongful death lawsuit; a verdict that, from what you've told me so far, would be pretty close to the truth."

"Doctor, has anyone ever told you you're a cold logician?"

"Elaine, you have to do the best you can. Recognizing that this, at least at the moment, is the best you can do, is difficult but necessary. Now, what do you think would be a reasonable amount to leave for her?"

"All of it!" she said. "I'll give her everything. After all, I took everything from her. I'll handle the delivery myself. I want to include a short note."

He smiled grimly, "'Everything' sounds appropriate to me also." He searched her eyes. "You also need to promise yourself that this is the last of them. You'll never get past this otherwise."

“I told you before, Doctor. You and the sun were my only two acceptable options. I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life” she looked down for a moment. “We have something else to discuss also. You know I can’t stay here with you, Doctor. I’ve told you why, and I’ve not seen any reasons to change my mind that aren’t selfish and self-serving. I’ll start looking for another place immediately, but it could take a while. I might have to move a fair distance away to find a suitable place; hopefully, large enough to hold some of my art materials. I simply can’t stay in the vault any longer. For some reason it has become unbearable for me. But I don’t want to let Eli down. She wants this so much. Do you have any suggestions as to how we can handle her?”

“Other than that you should stay with us? I’m afraid not. The only reason I can think of that you shouldn’t stay with us, is that the neighbors would talk. Especially after I’ve fitted you out with the new sunsuit I plan on making as soon as I get your sizes.”

“Forgive me Doctor, but doesn’t this all sound a little – Bobbsey Twins-like? Poor downtrodden, depressed, but talented vampire gets saved by handsome, benevolent benefactor and led into the sun, hand-in-hand with his two beautiful children, and they all live happily ever after in their halfway house for wayward vampires.”

“What’s the matter with a happy ending? Does it really scare you that much?”

“No, Doctor, but happy endings exist only in fantasies and children’s books. And I refuse to be a part of anything that could even slightly threaten to bring what you have here crashing down around your heads.”

“Ah! So you are willing to concede that there may be a happy ending in their future?”

“In theirs, possibly; in mine, very unlikely – which is my whole point, Doctor. I was hours from destroying myself, when I stopped by for – I’m not even sure what, now. Do you really want someone that unstable around your children for very long? Let’s be realistic here. I’m a nice person to have visit, but believe me, my living here would get old really fast. It strains me to the limit to be ‘nice’ for any length of time.”

“Handsome, benevolent benefactor?” he rubbed his chin, “You think I’m handsome? What a nice compliment, coming from a mature older woman such as yourself. But I’m afraid you may be a total fraud, so I certainly can’t take this compliment seriously.”

“What do you mean?” she said darkly.

“You constantly warn me that your dark side would (1) intrude on our happiness; (2) cause serious divides in our family dynamic; and (3) endanger our very existence somehow. Where IS this ‘dark side’? You haven’t shown it to us yet. On the contrary, it becomes more a figment of your imagination the more we look for it. What we’ve all seen is (1) you hesitated to kill us all when we first met, even though the element of surprise would have made it simple for you. That shows compassion and respect for life: (2) You gave us a beautiful work of art, a part of yourself, even before you knew us well enough to be sure we wouldn’t ‘rat you out’ someday. That shows a clear ability to trust your instincts and an honest desire to share your inner self with others; and

(3) you have totally won over the heart of the person closest to my own, merely by exposing this imaginary ‘dark side’ of yourself to her over a very significant ‘length of time.’ This shows the depth of your ability to love, understand, and empathize. Every time she sees you she is happier, more grounded, more self-confident. If that is a result of your dark side, by all means, give us more of it. Your constant pessimism is quite annoying, however, but I’m sure with a little effort we could all learn to ignore you when you’re in one of those moods. The bottom line is, you’re either a fraud, or you don’t know yourself nearly as well as you think you do. I opt for the second choice, because the first would indicate that you really don’t think I’m handsome.” He sat back with a smile on his face and his hands clasped behind his head.

“Well, you certainly don’t give me much wiggle-room do you? I feel that I’ve been logically bested by the best.”

“Captain of the Debate Team for two years.”

“Okay, you win for now, but I swear to you; at the first sign of anything I think will develop into a problem for you, and more importantly, Oskar and Eli, I’m gone! And I am extremely intolerant of my faults. Are we agreed?”

“Of course! By the way, how are you at scrabble?”

Chapter 14: Preliminary Flight Check and Growing Pains

Elaine turned slowly around, looking with fresh eyes at the place that had been her home for more than 40 years. She shuddered as the memories came flooding back, vividly contrasted now with the promise of the future that the Doctor had offered her. She realized that emotional numbness was the only reason she had been able to remain there after her escape – that, and the fact that she really had no other place to go. Thus, she had continued with her art as an automaton while in an emotional daze, unable to come to terms with the reality of her dark past.

“To me, this place is cold and lifeless; oppressive, and dark.” Dawson nodded towards the two rooms in the back of the vault, where Elaine had been imprisoned and countless children had been maimed and murdered. “I really couldn’t understand how you were able to remain here with all those memories swirling around you. I knew it wasn’t healthy for you, even though you seemed comfortable with it. That was part of the reason why I ascribed an impenetrable darkness to your character, and was apprehensive about allowing you access to the children at first.”

Elaine added another block of white marble to the small but growing pile in the center of the vault. “Doctor, you have no idea! I felt as though this was the life I deserved – that staying with him and subjecting myself to his sadism was a just reward for my unforgivable mistakes and all the unhappiness I caused my father. I don’t expect you to understand, but a part of me still feels that way. Nothing against you, but if it weren’t for your children, I probably never would have come to you. It is this singular aspect of my character that frightens me, and still makes me apprehensive about my possible negative effect on your family and your lives. I am genuinely worried that my presence in your home will attract undue attention to you all and expose you to danger. I couldn’t bear that. I don’t want you to become another of my mistakes.”

“Believe me, it’s no mistake. My mistake was in misjudging you so quickly. Admittedly, it was so soon after our encounter with the Other One, that I had a well-earned prejudice against London’s vampires,” he smiled at her, “but I have also lived with Eli, which should have at least given me pause for doubt.”

She laughed good-naturedly, “You should have seen your face when you saw me for the first time! It was a look that I have seen many times before, but never enhanced by the powerful feelings of a father protecting his children. You actually almost frightened me for a moment.”

“Well, you certainly frightened me. I just can’t get used to those eyes, even when Eli is behind them. Those wings, on the other hand; I can’t get used to them either, but only because they are so beautiful. They are one of the things that define Eli for me and make her who she is. I’ve thought that they were beautiful since the first time I saw them, and yours are simply magnificent!”

“Why Doctor! Is that a compliment? Maybe you’re not such a nerd after all.”

“I call them as I see them. I actually envy you both. It was a childhood dream of mine to fly unaided; sort of a Superman fantasy.”

“Well, there’s no moon tonight and there’s plenty of darkness left before dawn. Why don’t you and I take a spin?”

“I...I couldn’t possibly! I’m half again your weight!”

Elaine sighed impatiently, “How long have you lived with a vampire? You should have a better idea of our strength limitations than any other human. Let’s do this.” She started for the stairs.

“I don’t think so, Elaine. I...”

“What’s the matter Doctor? Ah! It’s the clothing problem, isn’t it! No worries! You can keep yours on. I don’t mind.”

He stood there with his mouth open, saying nothing.

She smiled at him. “And, just to appease your sensibilities, I’ll keep my pants on. Is that acceptable?”

She unbuttoned her shirt, turned toward the stairs, and tossed it on the bed. “Let’s go.”

“Elaine, Eli’s immodesty is one thing, yours is quite another. She’s just a child, you’re...not.” he stammered.

“What am I, Doctor? A grown, sexually mature woman? I’m a nothing, just like Eli so erroneously thinks she is. Your ‘Other One’ took everything from me. Everything! My sexual identity was taken from me over and over again for over 40 years. There’s nothing left to take. And you have it backwards. Eli is not immodest at all. She’s quite modest. Modesty is unpretentiousness. Eli is so unpretentious that it never occurs to her that her naked body would either repel or attract anyone close to her. How much more modest can you be than that?”

“But...”

“Come on Doctor, you’re among friends here. Let me do this for you. Unless you’re afraid of heights. But how could a little boy who dreams of flying be afraid of heights?” She took him by the hand and led him, reluctantly, outside.

“We’ll make this a short one. I don’t want you getting cold – or airsick.” Dawson stepped back as she unfurled her wings, shook them out, and raised her arms over her head, “You can close your mouth now, Doctor.” She said, amused. “Now, put your arms around my neck and hold your elbows tightly in your hands. The moment you feel your feet leave the ground, wrap your legs tightly around my waist and lock your feet together. I’d really hate to drop you.” She turned and waited patiently until he nodded, then leaned forward slightly and launched herself gracefully and smoothly into the air. Dawson gasped as she cleared the top of the hill and the cemetery dropped rapidly beneath them. She stayed low, not more than 200 feet above the ground, but for Dawson it was exhilarating, just like in his dreams as a boy. Finally, she dropped down suddenly over a wide, and at the moment at least, deserted stretch of road, and glided not

more than five feet above the pavement at what seemed to him to be a speed far in excess of the posted limit. He smiled at the thought. This, too, had been one of his recurring dreams as a child; indeed it gave him a queer sense of *déjà vu*. But even in his exhilaration, he couldn't shake his impressions of her stunning beauty; the totality of it, the perfect integration of everything she was, body and soul, and how uncomfortable it made him feel. He knew that was the real reason he hadn't wanted to fly with her; to be physically close to her. Not her nakedness, but her beauty; two distinctly different things to him. He would have been just as reluctant to fly with her if she had been fully clothed. He was conflicted; his memories of his beautiful wife and child filled him with guilt. He was responsible for their deaths. The finality of it all was hard to reconcile with the feelings that being close to her reawakened.

As quickly as it began, it ended. Elaine rose up off the street, banked to the right flapped her wings and descended quickly back into the cemetery; finally dropping silently and gracefully in front of the tomb. Dawson dropped to the ground, a bit wobbly. Elaine's wings quickly retracted and she turned and looked at him, questioningly.

Impulsively, he took her hands in his. "Elaine, I don't know what to say. That was ... exhilarating!" he leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. "Not bad for an elderly lady."

"I'm only 26," she said, smiling.

"But I'm only 10."

§

Dawson's car pulled into the driveway. The ride home had been pleasantly conversationless. "We'll put all your art supplies in the garage for now. I'm afraid you'll have to move your collection of marble and hardwood yourself, as I don't own a forklift. I'm amazed this old car could carry it all. I'll have the back of the garage converted into a studio for you until we can think of something else. I've already ordered the windows for the spare bedroom. It'll be yours once they're installed. I've also..."

"Stop please! You've done more than you need to do merely by allowing me to stay with you, at least for a while. You're making me feel uncomfortable again." She began to unload her supplies into the garage.

"I'm sorry; it's just that Eli's enthusiasm is somewhat contagious. She actually has a list of things she wants me to do for you, and it gets longer every day."

"Don't worry, I'll talk to her today. This has got to stop."

"Don't be too hard on her; I enjoy doing things for you. You fit perfectly into our lives."

"What a nice thing to say!" she looked up at him. His expression was hard to read.

"I'll go wake Eli. She can help you move the heavier pieces." Dawson headed toward the house.

“Really, Doctor, don’t wake her up. I can manage just fine. And Doctor? Thank you again. I’ll not soon forget what you’ve done for me. You can count on it!” her voice sounded almost as hard as it had when he first looked into her golden eyes in the vault.

§

Dinner that Sunday night was a bit different than usual. Eli and Elaine sat next to each other with a bag each, while Oskar and Papa had roast beef and Yorkshire Pudding. “Well, all we need is a photographer and we have our Christmas family portrait right here,” Elaine said, a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

Oskar laughed, “But who would we send it to?”

I’m not sure, Oskar. Elaine? Any friends that we don’t know about?”

“Doctor, you know exactly as many living vampires as I do, fortunately for all of us, I think.”

“Papa, tell us about flying with Elaine. She told me all about it. Was it fun, or were you scared?”

“Yes.” He smiled at her. “Yes to both questions.”

“Well, it was definitely fun for me,” Elaine said. “And I saw a side to your Papa that I hadn’t seen before.”

Dawson looked a little uncomfortable.

“What, Elaine? Tell us!” Eli leaned across the table, flashing a grin at Papa.

“I discovered what a cute little boy your Papa was.” She smiled gently at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you know he wanted to be Superman when he was Henry’s age?”

“Really, Papa?”

“Not quite, Eli. I just wanted to fly like him, not be a superhero.” He took her hand. “You remember that night in Karlstad when you first showed me your wings? I’m ashamed to say that, in the brief moment before I thought about how hard your life must have been, I envied you for those wings. A part of me that I hadn’t thought about for many, many years wished he could be you just long enough to try out those beautiful wings. And when I finally lived a part of your life that day in your apartment, and realized the terrible price you had paid for them, I was ashamed of myself. But Eli, I can’t help it. They’re still beautiful and mysterious to me. Not as beautiful and mysterious as you, but a close second.”

Eli sat in his lap and put her arms around him.

“And now look at me.” He said, enthusiastically, “I’m surrounded by beautiful wings! Who could ask for anything more!”

“Wait a minute! I don’t have any wings.” Oskar pouted.

“No Oskar, but you have a pair at your disposal any time of the night.”

“Only if he doesn’t beat me at scrabble. And you do too, now Papa. You have Elaine’s wings.”

Elaine looked at him with an amused smile on her face. “What do you say, Doctor? Ready for a longer flight? The night is young!”

He laughed, “Don’t tempt me! But I’ve got too much work to do tonight. A big shipment is arriving at the lab tomorrow and I have to confirm the current inventory.” He sighed with relief as he saw she wasn’t going to press the issue. At least not this time, he thought to himself. Time to change the subject.

“We do have a more important issue to discuss, however. It concerns how we are going to explain Elaine’s presence to the neighbors.”

“We could say she’s my aunt from Sweden,” Eli volunteered. “who’s got the same disease that I have.”

“That might work, except she doesn’t speak Swedish.” He thought a minute. “Perhaps your older sister who was also adopted as a child and brought to England. Some relationship with you would be practically a necessity, in order to explain the fact that you both have the same extremely rare condition.”

“I would be honored to be your big sister, Eli.” She looked at Oskar, “That would make you my little brother, too. How do you feel about that?”

“But you’re already my big sister.” Oskar said, timidly. “I...I felt that way that first night when we talked to each other the very first time. You listened to me and made me feel safe, and you didn’t really know us yet. And you’re funny. I like that.”

“And I like your honesty and straightforwardness, Oskar. When you first read me and unassumingly let me read you, I saw how sweet and gentle you were—mostly. If I had a little brother, I would want him to be just like you.”

Oskar blushed, but she had made him feel so good, he couldn’t hide his smile.

“Then it’s settled! We’ll go with that story. Elaine, I’ll leave it to you to come up with a credible backstory. Since we just met you, we can believably claim to be ignorant of the details. And we can say you’re staying here because you wanted to be closer to your only sister, and you’re

helping me in the lab; that last part is true, by the way. I expect you to help us out as best you can, despite your philosophical differences with our methods; this is a family enterprise, largely funded by Eli herself. Does that sound reasonable to you?”

“Of course! Eli’s future is inextricably tied to my own – and Oskar’s too for that matter.”

§

The bell rang. Eli ran to the door and let Jack and Henry in, “Come on in! I’ve got someone I want you to meet.”

“Yeah, we know. Your older sister.” Jack said, “I just wanted you to know she passed the ‘Mom’ test last night.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mom likes her, a lot. She can be pretty tough sometimes, especially since your sister is someone that is going to be around you a lot. Mom really likes you, so she’s kind of ‘motherly.’ She’s taken an interest in your welfare, like it or not.”

Eli grinned, “I kind of like it.” She turned to Henry, “Elaine’s the one who made that sculpture in my room.”

Henry stopped suddenly, “She won’t...say anything about me, will she?”

“Of course not, Henry. She wouldn’t!” she headed for the kitchen.

“Elaine, I want you to meet Jack and Henry Shaw, our good friends.”

“Hello boys. I met your mom last night. I’m Elaine Bell, Eli’s sister,” Elaine said as she shook their hands. “Eli and Oskar have had nothing but good things to say about you both.” She smiled at them. A few more niceties and the kids all headed for the pool.

Elaine and Dawson relaxed on the patio, watching them swim. “This must be really hard for Eli, behaving like a normal child.”

“She IS a normal child.” Dawson said, a bit defensively.

“No, she most definitely is not, outward appearances notwithstanding. No one who has been through what she endured at her changing, let alone 200 plus years of fending for herself, and dealing with sexual deviates to survive, could possibly be undamaged. Remember she also has a sexual identity problem.”

“You’re right of course, but I would like to think that her obvious unique inner strength plus exposing her to love and stability can mitigate the damage. She truly enjoys the interaction with

the boys, and seems to be determined to ‘belong’ to humanity again. You know how competitive she is; yet she restrains herself, because having good friends is even more important to her.”

“Be careful, Doctor, you tend to overlook the negatives in Eli’s life. Love is sometimes blind – especially yours.” She smiled at him.

“Well, I now have you to keep me on track.” He smiled back.

“Not to be a wet blanket, but there are other issues that concern me also. Are you sure you want them to be so visible in the neighborhood? In two or three years at the most, everyone will begin to notice that they’re not aging. Especially Jack and Henry, then his mother, then the neighbors, then, inevitably, the tabloids, largely because of Eli’s sunsuit, and all the attention it attracts already. It could really escalate if the story attracts the attention of anyone versed in the science of arrested aging or development. They could be in real danger. It could jeopardize everything you’ve worked for.”

“I can’t just keep them in a cave for the twenty or thirty years it might take me to come up with a cure. They’re just children. They deserve a life.” Dawson protested.

“But they’re both children with a past! Actually, Oskar is the bigger danger to you. You could spend years in jail if he’s ever discovered. And even twenty or thirty years might not be enough time as far as Eli’s past is concerned. You have to wait until the families of all Eli’s recent victims have died. Then, and only then could you survive the publicity. And even then you’re in danger. You’re in danger because they’re immortal. Believe me, if anyone even suspects that they’re immortal, you will be in grave danger. More danger I suspect than if they found out Eli was a vampire. Some will be after you for the secret; others because in their eyes your children, and probably you yourself, are evil, spawned from evil and an offense against God. Until you are able to perfect and make available your ‘vaccine’ against aging, you and the children could be in mortal danger. It would lessen considerably once the world was saturated with ‘immortals.’”

“The longer Oskar remains undiscovered, the less likely it will be that he ever will be found. In five years, no one will believe he’s Oskar, no matter how much he looks like the pictures. They will think he’s too young. And no one’s ever seen Eli but us. And of course the neighbors. And vampires are considered by virtually everyone to be a fable; a fairy tale. No one would believe it. There is also no way that she can be linked to any crimes.” Dawson was becoming a bit agitated.

“Really? You don’t think fingerprints have been taken at any of the crime scenes where Eli’s victims have been discovered? And I’m sure other evidence exists also. She’s a 12-year-old child, not a Professor Moriarty. And, thanks to all their exposure in the neighborhood, there will be no shortage of witnesses to the fact that Oskar doesn’t age either.”

“You make some valid points, but the bottom line is, mankind owes Eli and even Oskar a chance at happiness, and I’m not going to postpone it because of some people’s propensity to haul out the pitchforks and torches.” He saw Eli glance in their direction, a worried look on her face and quickly lowered his voice. “I repeat, I won’t make them live in a cave because there’s a chance that they might be discovered.”

“Don’t’ you see that the odds are against you? Sooner or later, some minor accident will reveal Eli’s rapid healing powers to others. Her strength is even more likely to be revealed; in fact, it already has been revealed to Jack and Henry at least once, and certainly to Seth. Who’s to say that one or all of them in time, couldn’t put two and two together? She’s just a child, limited by a child’s lack of foresight and planning and sense of caution. And she’s spontaneous and wears her heart on her sleeve. It’s just a matter of time before she makes a mistake, and allowing her virtually unlimited access to the public makes it all the more likely that it will be sooner rather than later.” She said heatedly.

“Enough!” Dawson realized that she was only being logical. He had thought of most of these things himself, but for some reason had let them slip away the happier the children became. He was hooked on their love and their appreciation for everything he had done for them. It was part of his atonement for his past he realized. Of course she was right, but he couldn’t bring himself to change anything at this point.

“I’m sorry, Doctor. I didn’t mean to upset you, but I’m truly frightened for them. I’m becoming quite fond of them myself.” She sounded sad to the point of melancholy.

“No, you’re right, Elaine. You’re right about almost everything you’ve said.” He put his head in his hands. “Maybe if we had a talk with Eli, we could ‘tone her down’ a bit, but she’s not going to like it, and in fact, may be incapable of doing it. And that’s just one small aspect of the problem.”

Eli hesitated a moment, then climbed out of the pool, slowly walked over and sat down beside him. “What do you want me to do, Papa? I’ll do anything for you.”

And there’s the crux of his problem, he realized. She really would do anything for him and that put the onus on him to make sure he gets it right. “Eli, all I can ask of you is that you be careful and think before you do anything that could expose your abilities to others. It’s of paramount importance that you keep this foremost in your mind at all times.”

“I’m sorry Papa. I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes. I know it’s my fault that Detective Ellstrom died. If I hadn’t flown out over the crowd, he never would have been fired and probably wouldn’t have found the apartment.”

“Eli, he would have found us anyway. You changed the path that he took, but the conclusion was inevitable; it was the kind of man he was. His future was already written when you rescued Oskar and he made it his goal to get you at any cost.”

“Eli, are you coming?” Jack yelled from the diving board.

“Go ahead Eli! We’ll talk later. You’ve done nothing wrong; don’t worry.” He kissed her on the cheek. She sprinted for the pool and cannonballed in, splashing Jack, who slipped off the board and landed flat on his back in the water.

"I'll get you for that!" he started after her, and, to his great surprise, caught her quickly. He tickled her mercilessly and dunked her, figuring that he wasn't going to get a chance at her again anytime soon. She usually outran him easily.

"Swim, Eli, swim!" Henry yelled.

Oskar yelled at him, "Jack you can't do that! That's my job!" He jumped in and together they tickled her until they had her splashing and screaming as she tried to get away.

"Take it easy, you two. I think she's had enough. Let her go before someone gets hurt." Dawson yelled at them.

Eli scrambled out of the pool and calmly walked up to Papa with a smug smile on her face, "How'd I do?"

Elaine roared with laughter. "Doctor, did you ever feel like you've bitten off more than you can chew? You'd better thank your stars that she's on your side, or she'd have you running in circles."

"I don't know what you mean, Elaine." She said innocently. She turned to Papa, "I'm still going to get the last penny though," she grinned at him, turned, and headed back to the pool.

"I stand corrected, Doctor. I think she is fully capable of controlling herself, if there's enough incentive. And I think you've given it to her. She really wants to please you; it's one of the only ways she can show you how much you mean to her. I suspect that you haven't asked enough of her in the past."

"I haven't needed to. She seems to have an instinct for figuring out what I expect of her."

"She's had a lot of practice over the last 220 years figuring out what men want of her." Elaine said, soberly. "Believe me, I know how it works. You're just lucky it hasn't manifested itself in darker ways. Ways that were a part of her life for longer than we've been alive."

"It could never happen." Dawson said with conviction. "For that to happen, she would have to doubt my love for her. Has she told you about the egg?"

"What egg? No I guess she hasn't."

Dawson proceeded to fill her in on everything; the egg's history, how she came by it, and why she gave it up, despite his protests. "She decisively gave up the only material thing she had attached any value to, because she didn't want to lose me, or at least what I symbolized to her; her concept of a real family. She had Oskar already. What was her great need at that point; that she felt she had to do this? I think she's trying to replace the family she so brutally lost so many years ago. Her sense of herself depends on it."

"Do you think, then, that her love for you is contrived? That it is a selfish love?"

“Not at all. I’m sure it’s real. And you’d better watch your step. I think she has plans for your future too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think she wants a sister, Elaine. She wants a mother.”

Her voice was suddenly dark and cold. “Really! What an interesting idea! But you’re way too young for me. And we’re not even of the same species. Aren’t there laws against bestiality?”

Dawson was startled; then he felt the rage building as his face turned red. “Your pessimism I can deal with, but there’s no excuse for your self-loathing! How can you understand and forgive Eli for the thousands of innocent people she has killed to survive, and not forgive yourself for a single mistake that cost you 40 years of your life? Are you going to let this man control your life even after he’s nothing but a pile of ash? You’re better than that! Can’t you see it? Even two twelve-year-old children can see it.” He paused, “And believe me, I see it too. I told you that you fit into this family perfectly. I don’t make such statements lightly. And because of that you’re causing problems for me personally that I certainly don’t expect you to understand at this point. Keep these awful thoughts to yourself! You’ll get no support for them here! The Spanish Inquisition ended a long time ago. There are no curses; no inevitable descent into the darkness; no infinite atonement for imaginary sins against an imaginary God! Your Hell is self-imposed. Get over it!” He stood up quickly and headed for the door.

“Doctor! Please sit down.” She pleaded.

He hesitated a moment, then sat.

“I’m afraid I’m not a 12-year-old child. I don’t have the immunity to despair and hopelessness that children have. 40 years is a long time; not as long as 200 years, but long enough. Please! Give me a little time to adjust. I’m sorry if I hurt you in any way. I have the bad habit of speaking before I think. For 40 years that’s one of the few luxuries I indulged in. I meant nothing personal by it.”

“Elaine, you would be cured in an instant if you could see yourself the way Eli and Oskar see you. Or even the way I see you for that matter. In your own words, ‘You’re among friends here.’ We’re not fooled by your ridiculous self-flagellation. And I personally am not going to sit still while you make light of and insult our affection for you.”

He saw Eli’s anxious look out of the corner of his eye. He shook his head at her and waved her off.

“I’m sorry Doctor. I’ve never had anyone so vehemently defend my honor before. Believe me; I’m not used to it. Henceforth I’ll try to live up to your expectations,” she said sarcastically. She leaned back in her chair. “I mean it,” she said gently. “If only for Eli. And by the way, she has you wrapped around her little finger. You’re cursed! You’re on an inevitable descent into total

self-sacrifice.” She squeezed his hand, and headed for the door, “Would you like something to drink? I certainly would.” She flashed him a mischievous grin as she saw the look on his face.

As soon as she went inside, Eli hopped out of the pool, plopped down beside him and took his hand. “Papa, why are you and Elaine always fighting? Are you angry with each other?”

“Absolutely not, Eli. It’s just growing pains. With Elaine, fighting is a method of working out honest differences. And we still have a lot of those. It’s all good; don’t worry. She’s worth it, don’t you think?” he smiled at her.

“Yes, Papa, I know she is.” She gave him a knowing look, not dissimilar to the look of the cat that just swallowed the canary. He smiled as he remembered that look when she spun around in front of him that night in Karlstad, after he saw her beautiful wings for the first time. *What a plotter she is!* He knew it would be dangerous to underestimate her. *Thank God she’s only 12.*

Chapter 15: Elaine Reminisces

Elaine pulled the covers up over them and kissed them both on the forehead. “Goodnight Butterfly. Goodnight Oskar.” She turned off the light and closed the door behind her. She was beginning to really enjoy this nightly ritual; it made her feel like she finally belonged to something better than herself—a good feeling, overall.

“What do you think Oskar? Do you think she’ll stay?”

“I hope so. I really like her. She sure has you figured out though.”

“What do you mean?” She raised herself up on one elbow.

“I just don’t think you’ll be able to get away with the things you do with Dad. She’s wise to you.”

“I don’t take advantage of Papa. Take that back!”

“No, no! I didn’t mean that; it’s just that Dad does things for you that seem to be too much, and it’s like you don’t notice or something.” He looked confused for a moment, “No, that’s not what I mean either. If Dad thinks you want something or need something, his first reaction is to get it for you, even if you don’t ask. It’s like you’re precious to him or something. I’m not complaining or anything; you’re precious to me too” he smiled at her shyly. “Anyway, Elaine seems to think a lot about these things. I don’t think you’ll always get what you want from her. And I don’t think she’ll be as forgiving of our mistakes as Dad is.” There! He’d finally figured out how to say it without getting her mad at him.

Eli thought about it for a minute, “I don’t care. It doesn’t matter to me a bit. I like her and I want her to stay. And Papa wants her to stay too,” she said with conviction. She thought about how much she loved it when Elaine tucked them in. “Oskar, you don’t mind that Elaine says good night to us every night, do you?”

“No. It kind of reminds me of my own mom, but Elaine seems to really mean it. She really cares about us, doesn’t she?” he smiled at the thought. He knew he could read her if he wanted to, but he felt funny about doing it now that she was staying with them. He had quickly learned how to ‘not’ read someone and was so good at it now that he didn’t even have to think about it anymore.

§

Elaine joined Dawson in the living room. “They’re so sweet together! I love tucking them in. I wonder how they really feel about it though; most kids their age would be embarrassed by it.”

“Maybe it’s different when a big sister does it – or a new Mom.”

“If you’re trying to bait me, it won’t work – this time. I learned my lesson and will keep my personal thoughts on the matter to myself.”

“What’s the matter? Are you afraid you’re going to lose another argument?”

“What makes you so sure I lost the last one? One thing I learned during those 40 years was who to blame for my problems.”

“Elaine, would you mind if I asked you a few personal questions? I promise I won’t judge you or lecture you on ‘How to get over it.’” He smiled at her.

“Go for it, Doctor. I don’t mind at all.”

First, however, I would appreciate it if you would call me ‘Richard’ – or ‘Papa’ or ‘Dad,’” he smiled, “Anything but ‘Doctor’ or ‘Professor.’”

“I’ll give it a try, but I don’t promise anything.”

“How did you get involved with the Other One? And how long were you – with him before you discovered that he was a vampire?”

“It’s okay, Doctor – I mean ‘Richard,’ you needn’t worry about offending my sensibilities. I met him at a pub near Cambridge, and I slept with him. I thought he was a real hunk when he cleaned himself up, and I was still in my life-long ridiculous rebellious stage. I was, as it turned out, much younger than he, and his skills and prowess in – all matters sexual, were remarkable, to say the least. Our relationship was essentially lust at first sight.” She paused, “I’m such a shallow child,” she said lightly. She remembered how deeply those words had hurt her when her beloved father attacked her with them after she flaunted her relationship with the Other One.

“Elaine, your frankness and honesty is startling to me. I don’t quite know how to take it. But if you’re telling me all this to convince me that you’re unworthy of all our efforts, you’ve failed miserably. The only victim of your mistakes has been you yourself.” He paused, “What was his name?”

“He had a name once, but I’ve long since forgotten it – deliberately. Eli’s name for him captures his essence perfectly. He was the ultimate Other One: other than compassionate; other than loving; other than sensitive; other than caring, and finally, other than human; These self-delusions were figments of my desperate imagination, born of my naiveté, stubbornness, defiance, and self-righteousness. Traits that torment me to this very day – except for naiveté of course; that one was painfully stripped from me, both by the Other One and unintentionally by my sweet father,” she said grimly. “My father was as loving and caring as you, before I destroyed him. I’ll never, ever forgive myself for that.” She looked at him defiantly.

“I certainly won’t argue with you about it, at least not today.” He smiled at her. “But what happened in your relationship that brought you to where you were when he died?”

“After a few years – you have no idea how long self-delusion can sustain itself when the only person you ever loved is dead, and you have nothing to fall back on – I began to realize what an

empty, brain-dead individual he really was. He never told me where he worked, and I never saw him between sunup and sundown. He stayed in my apartment, and I never questioned where the money he gave me for our expenses came from. He was virtually the only person I had contact with after my father died in that first year. And I never even tried to put two and two together. I was already his slave and didn't know it.

"One night, after I gave him a piece of my mind, embellished with my usual wit and diplomatic charm, he hit me hard and sent me flying across the room. I made the mistake of telling him to get out and never come back. That was when he first...revealed himself to me; and as his true self, raped me over and over again. In a sudden epiphany, I finally understood where his legendary stamina came from. You can't imagine what was going through my mind as this...thing from my worst nightmares attacked me over and over again. I blacked out several times, and each time, the first thing I saw when I regained consciousness was his smug triumphant grin, and his dirty yellow fangs." she said coldly. "When he finished, he dragged me out of the apartment, and carried me through the dark streets for over 10 miles to the cemetery and finally to the tomb and into his vault, where I essentially stayed for the rest of my life. But I became his possession during those first unimaginable terror-filled hours. He stopped pretending to be human and I had to endure the most disgusting individual I had ever known demanding intimacy with me whenever he pleased. He got rougher and rougher until one night he became impatient with my human frailties and bit me. I remember feeling elated when I saw him coming for me because I thought he was finally going to kill me. But he didn't. That's when my life got even more interesting. Because, you see, he turned me solely because he knew that vampires healed themselves."

Her voice wavered uncharacteristically for a moment. "I was terrified for weeks; even months, as I tried to deal with the horror of what I had become. I desperately wanted to leave, but I was more afraid of the unknown at that point than I was of him. After all, I was now immortal. What did I have to fear from him? So I stayed – and stayed. But I soon learned that there were things far worse than death. After a few...arguments, He convinced me we should hunt together. I was the 'bait' he used to lure unsuspecting men to us. He taught me how to harvest the blood efficiently; consequently I never had to kill anyone for it. He, on the other hand, was more careless. We traveled all over the country feeding. He allowed me my art, because it kept me out of his hair and out of parts of his life he never revealed to me – until later. By this time, I was so used to the abuse, that I considered it an unpleasant but necessary part of my life. And I had no other options. I had truly closed that last door."

"Late one night, he lost patience during one of our hunts in the country, pulled a man out of his car at a stop sign, and dragged him to the side of the road. He strangled him to unconsciousness, and was inserting the tube, when we heard a child crying in the back seat of the car – a young boy of about 11. I quickly stood between them so the boy wouldn't see what was happening to his father – a pointless precaution as it turned out. Without a word, he quickly bled the man, then casually broke his neck. I had just barely cried out, when he brushed me aside and went for the child. I stood there in shock while he dragged the boy out of the car, stripped him naked and...he..." she looked away. "Doctor, the fact that Elias somehow lived through his ordeal is amazing to me, since I watched the process first hand. It lasted for hours. Over and over again I tried to stop him, but his obsession was stronger than my will. Finally, I realized that I was the

only one still screaming. They were both covered with his blood! When he...finished, he put both bodies in the car and set it on fire. And I couldn't stop it. I was helpless against him."

She paused a moment and put her head in her hands. "The next night, I left him; or at least I tried. He caught me quickly and after a fierce battle, chained me up in that room, where I stayed until he found Eli. He fed me just enough to keep me alive, but weak. It was about this time that he began bringing children to the vault. He brought boys AND girls; it was all the same to him. I never saw them, because after my attempted escape, he kept me chained in my room. But I certainly heard them. I heard them crying, screaming, and dying. I knew when they were dead because they stopped screaming. And of course, being a vampire now, and starving, I could smell their blood – and I wanted it." Dawson saw the tears in her eyes. "I wanted it in the worst way. They screamed, they bled, and foremost in my mind was their blood. These sweet, innocent children being subjected to unbearable pain and unimaginable terror, and I wanted their blood! If he had known what it would have done to me if he had let me in there with him and given one of them to me, he would have done it in a flash, but he was one-dimensional. In the midst of my disgusting bloodlust I was thankful for that one blessing; that he was too stupid to realize how simple it would have been for him to destroy me completely."

"Elaine, I..." he reached for her hand, but she pulled it away and shrank back in her chair away from him.

"When there were no children, he played with me. He did things to me that..." she looked down at her feet a moment, then, with difficulty looked directly into his eyes. "Suffice it to say that he gave me a real education in human anatomy. Specifically female anatomy. An education I would like most desperately to forget. It was then I realized what he had done to the girls." She paused for a moment, collecting herself. "As time went by, fewer and fewer children visited with us. The last was a couple of months before your paths crossed his. Fortunately for the child, he died suddenly before the Other One had built up a head of steam. He took it out on me instead, but I was happy to suffer in that poor child's stead. It was the least I could do." Her eyes had a hollow look now, as she sat forward in her chair and looked at him with a strange intensity, "I wish I could have done it for all the others. I really wish I could have done it for all the others..." Her voice trailed off, and she closed her eyes for a moment.

"Elaine, you should stop now." Dawson was worried for her.

She ignored him. "Their deaths are all on me. If I had overcome my fear of him, I could have ended this that night at the stop sign. He would have been easy to dispatch while his attention was on that poor child. I had my full strength, and he was distracted; but I was afraid, and consequently that poor boy died an unimaginably horrible death. When Jesus said 'blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth' I don't believe he had cowards in mind. Every death I witnessed and every drop of their innocent blood I craved was a result of my cowardice. And that, Richard, is why I owe Eli so much. Her awful suffering at his hands is the price she unknowingly paid for my freedom. Everything I am and ever will be from that point forward I owe to her chance encounter with him, and the subsequent hell you all went through to destroy him. I also owe you personally more than I can ever repay. I most humbly thank you for

everything you've done for me." She glanced up at him for a moment, then looked down at her feet.

Dawson stood up. "Come with me." He held out his hand. Reluctantly, she took it and walked with him out into the back yard. The moon's reflection in the pool danced and changed shape quietly and mingled with the rippling shadows of the trees, "Do you recognize this place? This is where my children play. This place is full of their lives; full of their happiness. Eli has just recently awakened from a 200-year-long nightmare; Oskar from a much shorter, but in his own mind, equally horrible, lonely, loveless one. All this is the very least I can do for them, to keep them safe and comfort their beautiful, sweet, damaged souls." He gestured toward the house. "And there they are, sound asleep in their bed. And one of the things they are looking forward to in their dreams is another day in which you will be a part of their lives. Why? Because they recognize a soul mate when they see one. I know you don't believe this, but sometimes things have a way of balancing out. You can do nothing about your past but use its hard lessons to determine your future. It's in your hands now. You are loved here. It may not seem like enough right now, but I assure you it is. You sometimes don't realize how much it matters to you until you lose it."

She smiled at him, "Thank you, Doctor. It has been such a long time since..." her voice trailed off.

"You're welcome!" He hesitated, then in a lighter tone, said, "And believe me, there's more to come. So be prepared for holidays, birthday parties, and even fun in the sun. Your life will soon become incredibly boring and normal. Do you think you're up to the challenge?"

"I hope so, 'Rich' but somehow, I can't believe your lives will be boring for very long. There are too many odd and interesting members of this family including yourself."

"Even me then? Which am I – odd or interesting?"

"A bit of odd, and a plethora of interesting." She smiled at him. She was beginning to realize that this man, this highly intelligent, unassuming man, was a godsend to her. The very things about him that grated on her nerves; his quickness to see the best in everyone and, in spite of his keen mind, his naiveté with respect to the ever-present darkness in the real world, were the very things that had given her a second chance at her life. If he weren't exactly who he was, she would be dead – or worse. She felt as though she needed to stay, if only to protect him from himself. Two precious lives now depended on him for everything. They really depended on him! All could be lost if something happened to him. She made a quiet pact with herself. Nothing would happen to him on her watch.

§

She awoke to the sound of soft purring and felt Eli's slim arms around her waist. She noticed that the sun was just beginning to shine through the round window as she opened her eyes and stretched. She carefully turned around and wrapped her own arms around Eli, and pressed her

cheek against hers. Eli purred even louder as she nestled up against her neck, then suddenly opened her eyes. “Good morning, Elaine.” She yawned.

“Good morning, Butterfly. Where’s Oskar?”

“He went downstairs with Papa. I thought I’d wait for you.” She sat up and dangled her bare legs over the side of the bed, swinging them back and forth. Elaine sat up next to her and put her arm around her.

“Thank you again for giving up your room for me. I love it here! Especially your window.” She reached for her hairbrush on the nightstand.

“Let me do it.” Eli took the brush from Elaine and began gently brushing her hair. Elaine closed her eyes; it felt so relaxing, and since Eli enjoyed doing it so much, she couldn’t refuse her. It reminded Eli of when she used to brush her sister’s hair when her brother or father weren’t around to tease her about it, “back when I was a boy,” Eli had said.

“Elaine, do you like Papa?”

“Yes I do, Eli. Why do you ask?”

“Because you seem to be mad at him a lot.”

“Well, he does try my patience sometimes, but he’s got a good heart, and he always means well. How could I possibly dislike a man like that? Plus, he comes with the highest recommendations from one of my favorite people in the whole world.”

Eli smiled, brushed her hair aside, and kissed her on the back of the neck. “I was worried that maybe you would leave if he got you too mad. I was going to have a talk with him.” Her voice sounded very grown-up and serious.

Elaine laughed. “Eli, I didn’t make the decision to stay lightly and I would never leave just because your Papa and I argued. It would take a whole lot more than that, and it would be my fault; not your Papa’s.” She took the brush from Eli. “Now, let me do yours.”

Eli turned around, and pressed her back up against Elaine for a moment, then gently patted her on the legs. Elaine kissed her on top of the head and began brushing. She noticed that Eli’s hair had developed a healthy shine and a gentle wave since they had been brushing each other’s hair regularly for the last couple of weeks. It was actually quite pretty. Oskar had noticed right away.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do if you’re cured?” She leaned forward and smelled her hair. She had always liked the smell of clean hair, but Eli’s seemed special somehow. A very distinct, pleasant odor that had become an inseparable part of her overall impression of Eli. Everything about her smelled good to her; her skin, her hair, her breath. She regretted that she would lose her keen vampire senses if she were ever cured.

“You mean, WHEN I’m cured? And remember, you’ll be cured too! First, I’m going swimming in the daytime, then I’m still going to get the last penny before Jack gets it. Then I’m going to have roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for dinner on Sunday night. I know I’m going to like it because it smells so good.”

“I like your priorities! I think the first thing I would do is sit outside and watch the sunrise. Then I’d spend all day getting a sunburn while I painted a picture of your Papa’s beautiful house, then I’d watch the sunset. But I might take a little break and go swimming with you.” She hugged her tightly. “Well, we’d better get up or they’ll be up here to get us soon.”

They got dressed together and went downstairs to Oskar and Papa, who were waiting for them at the kitchen table.

“It’s about time!” Oskar said.

“Well, it’s your own fault! You kept me awake with your snoring half the night.”

“You know I don’t snore! But you purr.”

“I thought you liked my purring!” she pouted.

“I really do! But...I couldn’t think of anything else to say.” He blushed.

“Good morning, Elaine.” Papa said, smiling.

“Good morning, Rich.”

Eli giggled, “Rich? Who’s that? Is that you, Papa?”

“Apparently Elaine seems to think so.” He sounded a bit annoyed. “My Mother was the last person to call me that, and it ended at my insistence when I was eleven.”

“Well, since I’m almost old enough to be your mother, I guess it’s appropriate then.” She smiled at him.

“I think you need to pick an age and stick to it, rather than picking the one that gives you the upper hand in a given situation.”

“Is that your way of expanding eloquently on the phrase, ‘Make up your mind how old you are’?” she said, sarcastically.

“Now children, stop fighting before someone gets hurt,” Eli parroted.

“Listen to Eli, Rich. Pick on someone your own size.”

“Dad, you have to wait until she’s not looking. Then POW! You catch her off guard.” Oskar said confidently.

“Oh Sure! Like that works for you!” Eli said smugly.

Papa stage-whispered, “Never resort to fisticuffs with a vampire, Oskar. It’s a battle you’ll never ultimately win. You have to keep your wits about you and use your superior mental faculties to beat them.”

“Oh Sure! Like that works for you!” Elaine said smugly.

§

Eli sat at the lab computer, printing out the results of the latest DNA tests. They had so far not been able to find the key to deactivating the strand containing the parasite’s modification of the genetic code. It was turning into one failure after another, and Dawson was running out of possibilities. He was afraid that his basic premise may have been wrong after all. Elaine had picked up on their routine quickly, since she had taken basic Botany and Biology classes at Cambridge for her degree in art, and was analyzing the second strain, in which Dawson was honing in on Oskar’s portion of the altered DNA that halted aging. He felt they were much closer to a breakthrough on this one, since Eli had been so easily able to successfully ‘infect’ him merely by injecting him with Oskar’s blood. But he was determined to eliminate the dormant vampire portion of the strand completely before he would even consider his work a success. He felt uncomfortable just thinking about it lurking in Oskar’s and his body, waiting for God knows what, to activate itself.

However, Elaine working in the lab had freed him up for other work, with which he was going to surprise the two vampires in his life tonight at dinner.

“Papa, this one didn’t work either! She threw the papers down on the desk in frustration.

Elaine stepped up behind her and put her arms around her. “Eli, every time we try and fail, it brings us closer to the answer. It narrows down the possibilities. It’s like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. The closer you are to completing it, the faster you go, because the possibilities become fewer. Take heart! We’ll get there.”

Eli kissed her on the arm. “Elaine, do you really think so?” Dawson winked at her. He knew she wasn’t convinced that they would ever succeed, but the fact that she would encourage Eli told him more about Elaine and her new commitment to their family than anything else.

§

“Okay, Oskar, bring it out.” Oskar stepped into the living room with a dress bag, laid it across the back of the couch and unzipped it. Here’s one for you...” he handed Elaine a couple of hangers with a light turtleneck and pants on them. “And one for you, Eli.” He handed a second, smaller set to Eli. He tossed them each a pair of what looked like thick cotton socks.

“What’s this all about, Rich?”

“Yeah, Papa. We have plenty of clothes.”

“But these are magic clothes, Eli. You can go out in the daytime with these on.”

“But Papa, there’s no MPET.”

“Ah, but there is, Eli. It’s bonded between two layers of cotton. These clothes look normal.”

“You don’t happen to have a set in mauve, do you? White on black is so...yesterday.” Elaine said, disapprovingly.

“Ha, Ha. Very funny!” Dawson said, pretending to be annoyed. “Come on, you two, try them on. I have another surprise.”

They quickly helped each other put on their new sunsuits, making sure everything was tucked in and snapped together properly. “What about boots, Papa?”

“Put on the special socks, but pull them up as high as you can. They should come to just below your knees. Then you can wear any shoes you like.”

“But, what about our heads and faces? Won’t we burn?”

“No, Eli, your hair never burned; it’s made mostly of keratin, just like anyone’s hair. But you’ll need this.” He handed them each fat silver tubes that looked like huge tubes of toothpaste. “Rub this on your neck, making sure it goes on several inches below the top of your turtleneck and cover all the exposed skin on your faces, necks and ears with it. Think of it as Eli’s Liquid Glass. And last, but not least, here are your sunglasses.” He handed them each a set of goggles, but they were designed in such a way that they looked like real sunglasses. They could barely see the transparent material that surrounded the lenses and pressed against their skin. “You’ll still have to wear gloves, because the sunscreen would eventually rub off on contact, but they’re light and modern looking. I don’t think you’ll attract much attention, other than from your incredible cuteness.” He winked at them. “To be on the safe side though, you should both wear hats with as wide a brim as you can. I have several styles here for you to choose from.” He laid several on the table.

“I’ll take this one. It looks like Madeline’s hat,” Eli twisted and turned it until she was satisfied. She shook her head as two black ribbons swung off the left side of the hat and brushed her shoulder. “Oskar, get that goofy look off your face!”

“You’re so cute!” he pinched her cheek and quickly stepped behind dad before Eli could make a move for him.

Papa gave her a stern look. “No funny business in that suit, Eli.”

“Later, Oskar” she glared at him. He defiantly blew her a kiss.

Elaine picked a wide-brimmed sun hat. “I can just see myself planting flowers with Mrs. Anderson in this one.”

These are not as perfectly secure as the old suit, Eli, so no fighting and no pushing bullies into the stream. You’ll have to behave like a young lady.” He turned to Elaine, “And you’ll have no trouble behaving like the old lady you are.”

“Make up your mind how old I am, Rich.” She responded, a bit irritated.

“What age do you prefer; real or ideal?” he grinned at her.

“As long as Eli is twelve, I’m 26,” she fired back,

“Okay, enough of this! Let go out back and see how they work. And I can then check one off my ‘How to make Elaine Happy’ list.”

“What list, Papa?”

“Eli, Elaine has made a list of things she thinks we need to do to keep from being noticed, and I think she’s right – in most cases.

§

“Let me talk to them about friends,” she pleaded later that evening. “I think it’ll be easier for them coming from me.”

“I don’t know, Elaine. They might hold it against you personally. They know it’s your list.”

“Let me give it a try, Richard.” She headed upstairs.

Eli and Oskar were sitting at Eli’s table doing homework when Elaine came in. “We need to talk about something a bit more serious than not being noticed in public.” She sat down at the table with them. “We need to be equally careful closer to home. Remember, anyone who knows you well, will notice within a couple of years that you two are not aging. We need to eliminate that possibility.” Oskar and Eli looked at each other.

“That means you will have to gradually stop seeing Jack and Henry; not right away but over a period of six months or so. We’ll schedule ‘activities’ for you that will give you believable reasons why they can’t come over, and we’ll do it gradually, to make it easier on them. We’ll start next week with...”

“NO!” Eli said firmly. “I won’t! And Oskar won’t either, right Oskar?”

Oskar was clearly upset, but said nothing.

“Elaine, Oskar has friends now for the first time in years. I won’t let you take them away from him! I won’t!”

“I know this will be hard for you, but I think...”

“I’m fine! I’m used to being alone; I’m not going to let Oskar get used to it too.” She gritted her teeth and crossed her arms.

Oskar smiled at Eli appreciatively. “Elaine, Jack is my very best friend. I’ve never had a best friend before. Isn’t there any other way?” He pleaded softly.

That did it. Elaine melted like a popsicle. “Oskar, I...” She stood up quickly, turned and retreated down the stairs. Dawson was waiting for her on the second floor. “I thought so! You’re a fraud.” He put his arm around her. “I’ve got another idea, but it’ll be a bit difficult to sell. Go back up and tell them we talked and you changed my mind. They can keep their friends, but only these two.”

“I’m not going to let you take the fall for me! This was my idea. And it was a bad one! I own it.” She turned and went back upstairs.

Eli and Oskar were sitting together at the table, deep in thought. Elaine stepped quietly up behind them and put her hands on their shoulders. “I’m sorry. This was completely my idea. Your dad was against it from the start and he was right. We’ll figure something else out. You can keep your friends.” She kissed them each on the cheek and turned to leave, when they both grabbed her and hugged her fiercely. “Thank you Elaine!”

“Don’t thank me, Oskar. Your dad convinced me.” Just a white lie, she thought to herself.

“Eli shook her head and smiled, “I agree with Papa, Elaine, You’re a fraud.”

“There’s one too many vampires in this household.” Elaine said sternly. “And the smallest one needs to mind her own business.” She flashed her a sly smile and headed for the door. Oskar, relieved, started in on his math homework.

“Elaine’s a fraud. Elaine’s a fraud.” Eli taunted in a sing-song voice. “Elaine’s a...”

Oskar heard her gasp suddenly and turned to look, but she was gone! He heard a blood-curdling scream coming from his room and rushed across the hall, but the door slammed in his face. He heard the lock turn. “Dad! Come quick!” He yelled down the stairs, then put his ear to the door. It wasn’t necessary. He heard a loud bone-chilling growl and another scream. He was getting worried. He had never heard Eli scream before. It was awful! The door shook as something heavy slammed into it. He heard his bed slide across the floor and his table banged against the wall. “Elaine! Don’t! Please ...!”

Dawson rushed up the stairs, “Oskar, what’s going on?”

“I think Eli got Elaine mad at her! They’re fighting in my room!” They heard a loud thud, then they heard furniture moving and finally, they heard the window to the back yard swing open. Dawson turned the key in the lock, quickly opened the door and glanced around the room. Everything seemed in its proper place; everything looked normal except for the deep gouge in the door. Elaine was standing at the window with her hands behind her back looking down into the back yard.

“Elaine, where’s Eli?”

“Rich, I had to teach her a lesson. She needs to know that certain behavior is not acceptable in a proper English home.” She had an impish gleam in her eye. “And, as you must know from personal experience, it’s hard to discipline a young, spoiled vampire.” She turned and looked out the window. Oskar and Dad followed her gaze into the back yard. Nothing!

Oskar suddenly got a knowing grin on his face and reached under the bed. Nothing there either. “Elaine, what did you do with her?”

“I tried to reason with her, but you know how stubborn she can be sometimes. She just wouldn’t listen...” her voice trailed off. “She’ll be back in a few days after she cools off.” She looked out over the tops of the trees in the backyard. She patted a pile of clothes strewn on the window seat. One shoe was dangling precariously on the edge of the roof just below the window.

Oskar leaned out the window, “Eli!! Where are you?!”

“MMFFF!!”

Oskar spun around and looked up. He felt dizzy at first. It looked like she was standing upside down at the peak of the high ceiling – at the same time she was standing right side up.

“Actually, I can’t take full credit for this. Oskar’s own experience was my inspiration, and Eli’s agility and considerable strength forced me to be more innovative and creative than usual.”

Eli was hanging head first from a large old metal chandelier hook in the ceiling, but since her clothes were reversed exactly as she had done to Oskar, and her Madeline hat placed carefully on a soccer ball wedged between her legs complete with a smiley face, it took Papa a second or two to realize it. Elaine had tied her hands together with her shoelaces, but had placed Oskar’s Rubik’s Cube in her hands so she couldn’t free herself without dropping the cube. Fear of damaging her hat kept her from moving her legs. Her socks were in her mouth and secured with a piece of duct tape and her beautiful shiny, wavy black hair was almost obscuring her face. The package was complete and everyone roared with laughter. Eli’s eyes were golden.

“Uh, Oh,” Oskar said turning to Elaine. “I think she’s mad.”

“Impossible! Our even-tempered, calm, contemplative Eli never loses her cool.” Elaine mocked.

Oskar quickly slid his table under her, climbed aboard, reached up, and peeled the duct tape off her face. The socks came with it, along with a bit of skin. “Oouuch!! Oskar, be careful, you...”

He stood on his tiptoes, gave her a big wet kiss, then jumped down off the table. “Ptooey! Eli, your breath smells like dirty socks. You need to work on your oral hygiene.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits, and became even more sinister looking. “I’ve got plenty of time to get even, Oskar. Maybe tonight when you’re asleep...”

“What makes you think you’ll be sleeping with Oskar tonight? You look comfortable where you are.” Elaine said, with her hands on her hips.

Papa turned to Oskar, “Another life lesson Oskar. Never try to mediate a conflict between two vampires. People afterwards will always remember what a bloody idiot you were.”

Eli giggled, completely undermining her valiant attempts to look dangerous.

“Aha! The Butterfly is back.” Elaine leaped gracefully up on the table, grabbed Eli around the waist, lifted her feet off the hook, spun her around, and dropped to the floor, grabbing her Madeline hat as it fluttered to the ground. The soccer ball bounced across the room. Eli curtly handed the cube to Oskar.

“Now would someone untie me? I don’t want to break my new shoelaces.” She quickly redressed herself, then jumped up into Elaine’s arms. “That was fun! Let’s do it again!”

“I heard you screaming, Eli. It didn’t sound fun to me.” Oskar was concerned.

“Well, that part wasn’t fun. Elaine, you’re really scary; especially when you growled at me! Is that how I looked when I came in the window, Oskar?”

“Well, yeah! You did! I almost...” he blushed.

“I’m sorry Oskar, I won’t do it again, I promise!”

“Don’t do that Eli, it was kind of ...fun. Kind of like a rollercoaster ride.” he blushed again.

Chapter 16: New Relationships

September 16, 1984

Elaine adjusted the straps on Eli's new bathing suit. "There! How does that feel?"

Eli moved her arms around and stretched. "Just right. Want me to do yours?"

"No thanks, mine's fine." She looked out her window. "Oskar and your Papa are already outside with Jack and Henry. We'd better hurry." They headed down the stairs together.

"Do you know what day this is Elaine?" Eli slipped her arm through hers.

"No, Eli. Should I?"

"It's been a year since you came to stay with us." Eli smiled at her. "I remember when I first saw you watching us in the vault. You really scared me."

"You didn't look scared. You actually looked kind of fierce – for a pint-sized vampire," she teased.

"Oh Elaine! As soon as we talked I knew you were going to be with us. I'm so glad you came that night!"

Elaine squeezed her tightly, "Me too, Butterfly." They stepped out back, and Eli immediately headed for the pool. Elaine sat down next to Dawson. "Where's your suit, Rich? Aren't you going in tonight?"

"Not tonight, Elaine. Tonight is special." He reached under the chair, and pulled out a huge bouquet of Roses. "Happy anniversary, Elaine."

"Damn! Am I the only one who didn't remember? It just goes to show you how time flies when you're having fun." She took the bouquet, breathed the scent in deeply, and carefully laid it on her chair. "And it shows me the great lengths some members of this family will go to in order to have an excuse for a celebration" she smiled, "But Eli already reminded me." She peered at him closely, "She didn't remind you too, did she? It doesn't count if she reminded you."

He stood up, and without saying a word, took her by the hand and headed for the garage, "I couldn't think of a thing to get the vampire who has everything, so I improvised." He opened the door for her and escorted her through her studio. With a flourish, he opened the door to the garage.

"What's this? A car? We already have a car."

"This one's a bit different. It has EliGlass. And it's new. And it's yours. It's a 1984 MG Maestro 2.0 Efi."

“Whatever that means. Rich, it’s beautiful! And blue! My favorite color.” She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. “I guess you didn’t run out and buy this yesterday did you? How long have you been working on this?”

“About 6 months. The windshield was the most difficult to fabricate. You know, safety glass, compound curves and all. It’s hardly an off-the-shelf item.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” She gave him a funny look, “Rich, why’d you do this? It’s not as though it were my 100th birthday or anything.”

“I did it because, as I’ve told you before, I like doing things for you; besides, I felt strongly that you and Eli needed another layer of protection in the daytime as well as a more reliable car. And this anniversary is more important to us than your birthday. ”

“Us?”

“Okay, me.” He handed her the keys.

Without a word, she threw open the garage door, hopped in, adjusted the seat, started the car with a roar, and squealed out into the driveway, missing Dawson’s car by inches. She slammed on the brakes and rolled down the window. “Well? Are you coming?”

“What about the kids?” he stammered.

“They’re with a vampire for God’s sake! Super strength? X-ray vision? Vampiric superior intellect? Let’s go!”

“Superior intellect? In your dreams!” he said as he climbed in next to her.

“I got you in the car alone with me, didn’t I?” she flashed him an evil grin. She slammed the car in reverse, squealed out of the driveway, threw it in first as they lurched out into the street, and in a cloud of burnt rubber, they disappeared around the corner. The kids watched them over the side fence as they went by. They could hear the squeal of tires with each gear shift and finally the continuous squeal as they rounded the long curve at the end of the next block.

“Wow! You’re sister’s cool! Can we go for a ride with her sometime?” Jack asked excitedly.

“Sure! Maybe tomorrow. We’ll ask her when they get back!” Eli said.

“You mean, if they get back...alive.” Oskar laughed.

20 minutes later they heard the squeal of tires again, as Elaine and a pale Dawson hit the driveway and lurched to a stop within inches of her studio wall. “How’d I do?” she jumped out of the car, closed the garage door and opened his door for him.

“Remind me to fasten my seat belt next time. In fact, when you drive, it’s going to be mandatory for everyone in the car. I’m not even going to ask how you learned to drive like that.”

“Its like riding a bike. Once you learn, you never forget.” She grinned at him. “My dad collected sports cars.”

“Well, you’re probably the designated driver in this family from now on, you realize. The kids were all watching you over the fence when we started out. Your popularity in the neighborhood has just climbed to new heights.” He smiled at her. “I knew you’d like it. I just had a hunch.”

She put her arm around him and leaned her head on his shoulder. They walked back out to the pool together. “We’ll take it for a test drive with the kids tomorrow – in the daylight. And I’ll do all the driving of course. Superior vampire reflexes and all.”

“Elaine! Come on in!” Jack yelled. Elaine kicked off her shoes, sprinted for the pool and dove in.

“Papa? Are you coming?” Eli shouted. The boys were clustered around Elaine, all talking at the same time.

“Maybe later, Eli.” He sat back in his chair watching them swim. He felt deeply happy for the first time in years. It wasn’t that Eli and Oskar didn’t make him happy; they did. But having Elaine around for support and, as it turned out, much-needed practical guidance, made it much easier for him to relax and enjoy himself. And her strong sense of responsibility and her ability to bond so well with the kids made him even more certain that things would work out for them all. The thought of her ever leaving made him very uncomfortable. He closed his eyes for a moment and leaned his head back, deep in thought. Everything suddenly got very quiet. No one was talking. He opened his eyes and looked up, sensing that something wasn’t right. He was correct.

“Go!” Elaine yelled. All five of them cannonballed into the pool right in front of Dawson, who disappeared behind the resulting wall of water. He was completely soaked.

“Really children! Was that necessary?” He gave Elaine a dirty look.

“WE thought so!” Elaine said sarcastically. You’re being a stick-in-the-mud. You haven’t gone swimming with us the last two times. She climbed out of the pool, grabbed a towel and dried her hair. Eli, Oskar, Jack and Henry stood a bit timidly behind her.

“Its okay, kids, I know who the real instigator of this little prank was.” They all grinned at him and jumped back in the pool. “Coming Elaine?”

“No, I think that’s it for me for a while.” She sat on the edge of the pool watching them chase pennies.

Eli swam over to her and crossed her arms over the edge of the pool, “Do you think Papa’s mad at you?” she whispered.

“He’s never mad at me, Eli. He just pretends to be sometimes. And he’s too stodgy and proper to do anything about it.”

Eli suddenly grinned and backed away from her just as a blast of ice cold water caught Elaine in the back of the head. She turned quickly and was hit directly in the face by the same powerful blast. Dawson stepped back a bit, gripped the hose firmly and took even more careful aim, directing it right between her eyes. She flailed around as she tried to get to her feet, but no sooner had she gotten upright than Dawson hit her full in the chest. The walkway was so slick by this time that she fell over backwards into the pool, towel and all.

She quickly popped to the surface, threw the wet towel at him and in one smooth motion lifted herself out of the pool and strode purposefully towards him, eyes blazing. Dawson stood his ground aiming the hose at her face the entire 4 meters, right up until she grabbed it from him, threw him over her shoulder like a rag doll, and ran towards the pool at full speed. In one mighty leap, she soared over Eli’s head and landed with a huge splash almost in the center of the pool. They both disappeared beneath the surface.

Jack, Henry, and Oskar were speechless. They had scrambled out of the pool as soon as they saw Elaine, with Papa over her shoulder, sprinting towards them and were now standing by the diving board with their mouths open. Eli was still laughing hysterically.

No sooner had their heads broken the surface than Papa pushed her back under water again and headed for the side. Elaine popped up next to Eli, winked at her and hopped out of the pool. She grabbed Dawson’s arm and helped him out. “Rich, are you okay?” she whispered.

He sat down in his chair with a loud squish, “I’m fine. But I don’t want to hear any more lectures from you about how Eli needs to watch her public displays of strength.” He smiled gently at her. “And just so you know, that wasn’t nearly as much fun as our flights together.”

“Wow, Eli. Your sister is even stronger than you are!” Jack said admiringly. “It must run in the family!”

“I think you’re right Jack.” She smiled to herself.

“And boy has she got guts! Imagine her being brave enough to treat your dad that way.”

“I can’t imagine what he’s going to do to her now,” she said solemnly “He can’t let her get away with that in front of us. It sets a bad example.” She smiled to herself as she tried to imagine Papa disciplining Elaine for anything.

Jack nodded, knowingly. She was really going to get it, he was sure.

§

Dawson leaned back in the lounge chair, thankful for the pleasant quiet time they could enjoy only after the kids had gone to bed. It was still warm outside, even though it was close to midnight. A gentle breeze whispered through the trees, “Elaine, I’ve been thinking,” he said hesitantly.

“Don’t strain yourself, now” she said with mock concern. She adjusted her pillow and turned toward him.

“I’m extremely fond of you. I wanted you to know that.”

“I like you too, Rich.” She smiled at him. Where did THAT come from, she asked herself.

“That being the case, I’ve had a great deal of trouble dealing with you being here, because of my...wife and child. Frankly, it’s made me quite uncomfortable.”

“Where are you going with this? Is there a problem?” she was genuinely alarmed. This didn’t sound like him at all.

“No, No! Quite the contrary.” He stammered. He reached for her hand. She pulled it back quickly.

“Spit it out, Rich! What’s the problem?” she felt suddenly afraid for some reason. He was acting...different. Really different! And different, in her experience, was usually not good.

“The problem is...was...that I’ve had trouble dealing with my feelings for you for a long time. My guilt got in the way.”

“Guilt? What have you EVER done to feel guilty about?”

He hesitated a moment, trying to find the right words. “I killed my wife and child with my selfishness and stupidity.”

Her jaw dropped, “And you think I take on too much responsibility for my past mistakes! Don’t be stupid! You’re a perfectionist. I understand completely why you wanted to finish your book that afternoon, and what’s more, I’m sure your wife did too. It’s probably one of the reasons she married you. It’s near the top of my own list of spousal characteristics I looked for long ago in men – back when I was a woman.”

“Let’s not go down that path again, Elaine. You know how mad I get when you beat yourself up needlessly.”

“Look, Rich. I know you’re a member in good standing of the Elaine Bell admiration society, but you need to learn to take my word for it on some of these things. He made me feel as neutered as Eli thinks she is.”

Dawson sighed. This conversation was getting way off track. He sat up in his chair, took her hand firmly and looked directly at her. "Elaine, I love you, and I want you to marry me."

She was dumfounded. It had never occurred to her that he could feel this way about her. How could anyone? She was a nothing and had been a nothing for over 40 years. She was the epitome of damaged goods. She suddenly felt a deep sadness as, simultaneously, an odd sense of relief washed over her. How could this wonderful man, this man she loved and respected so much, even begin to see anything of value in her? It was all lost so long ago, long before she closed that last door. Back when her brashness had destroyed what her father had loved the most about her. Was any of it left? He certainly seemed to think so. And, after living with him all this time, constantly barraged by his often-irritating encouragement and support, she felt an occasional glimmer of hope herself. But was it enough?

"I can't, Rich." She said firmly, "I love you dearly, but I can't." she knew this absolutely, unequivocally. But how could she explain it to him? She tried to blow him off. "It's a nice car and the bouquet was beautiful, but I still can't marry you," she said lightly. She still couldn't believe they were having this conversation.

"Why not? And I'd better not hear the word 'neutered' in any of its multitudinous forms in your excuse." His voice was intense. She realized he wasn't going to be sidetracked. He was clearly intent on getting a real answer to a serious question.

"Because I'm a – thing; a vampire! And I am what I am because of ...the Other One. I will not allow any vestige of him to be a part of anything good in my life. Until it's gone, I'm not 'marrying' anyone, least of all, you." She hesitated a moment. "I love you too much." She realized how sweetly painful it was for her to say those words to him. They frightened her; indeed they terrified her. Saying them meant that she had cause to hope for a better future, and she had been surviving this last year only because she was living day to day, happy just to be allowed around two beautiful children and their wonderful father. Too often, late in the night she would awaken from the same nightmare in a cold sweat; that she had been found out, that they had finally and inevitably realized what an awful, empty, cowardly person she was and she was forced to leave, despised by them all, to go back to that awful hole in the ground alone. She stood up and walked over to the pool, her arms wrapped around her body.

He came up behind her quietly and put his arms around her. "I understand. I really do. Are you telling me then, that you'll marry me when you're cured?"

She turned towards him and studied his face carefully. "Yes. That's what I'm telling you."

"Then, that means we're engaged." He kissed her.

"Rich, are you certain you want this? I..."

"Elaine, between Oskar's unconditional acceptance of you from the very beginning, Eli's love and trust, and my own love of everything that you are, I'm certain. Your common decency and

selflessness are just added bonuses. You are beautiful to me in every way. And I want to spend the rest of my life proving it to you.” He kissed her on the forehead.

“And remember, in this family, there are no secrets. It’s simply impossible. You don’t have to wear your heart on your sleeve here. Oskar can see into it without your help. And he’s got a big mouth and an even more dangerous soul mate. And the two of them have often, and without my encouragement, confirmed all my suspicions about you. Their unconditional endorsement of your character, with their special way of knowing things about you that you don’t know about yourself, makes it impossible for me to doubt your humility, your honesty, and your love for all of us. But I certainly didn’t need their help; I knew it already. I see it every day in your actions. What is it you think gives your life value, if it isn’t the way you lead it? What defines your character more than what you are willing to do to help the ones you love? Elaine, you’re a fraud, and I love you for it. Your father would be proud of what you’ve become.”

She hugged him tightly, her eyes shiny. “Thanks, Richard. You always seem to know just what to say.” An overpowering sense of relief washed over her.

Eli stepped back from her window and closed it quietly. She climbed into bed and snuggled up against Oskar. “Oskar!” she whispered loudly. “Are you awake?”

“I am now,” he grouched, as he opened his eyes. “Why’d you wake me up?”

“We’ve got a new Mom,” she whispered as she kissed him.

July 30, 1995

Dawson sighed as he signed for the package and watched as the courier returned to his armored vehicle and drove off. He knew what it contained, and he had mixed feelings about it. He was sad, because he knew that someone had died alone; someone he had great respect for. The thought that this kind man had outlived his wonderful wife, and had no children to mourn his passing was oddly depressing to him; he took it much harder than he had expected he would. He carefully placed the package on the kitchen table. It seemed much heavier than he had remembered; but perhaps it was the packing material. No matter.

Elaine came in quietly and sat down beside him. He kissed her on the cheek, and showed her the letter – short and to the point, unlike most documents he had seen in the past written by expensive lawyers.

“How do you think Eli will feel about this?” she asked.

“I honestly don’t know. Of course she’ll be quite happy in some sense after she wraps her mind around it, but she’s unpredictable.”

“Well, why don’t we find out?” she said, “Eli! Could you come down here for a moment?” she shouted.

“Coming, Mom!” Eli and Oskar came bounding down the stairs and plopped down at the table across from them.

“What’s that?” Eli asked, nodding at the package.

“It’s a package for you, Eli, but first I need to explain something to you. Do you remember the man that bought your egg?”

“My egg? Sure, I remember him. He and his wife were really nice! They even told me I could visit the egg whenever I wanted.”

“I think that was largely because they were so impressed that you could put it together, Eli. But He and I talked alone together months after it was in his possession, but before his last payment, and we reached an agreement on the final disposition of the egg. If he were to die without an heir, the egg would revert back to you, no strings attached and no money due. He felt that it should go to someone who could really appreciate it.” He handed her the letter.

“July 14, 1995; Dear Dr. Dawson, I regret to inform you that...” she read on in silence. When she finished she looked up at Papa, puzzled. “I don’t understand. He died and didn’t have anyone he could leave his property to? How awful!”

“Not exactly, Eli. With an estate as large and valuable as his, distant relatives came out of the woodwork making claims on it, but his collection of artifacts was off limits. All but your egg were given to museums in different parts of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Your egg came here, as per his promise to me.” He pushed the package toward her. “It’s yours once again, and I can’t think of a more appropriate place for it.”

She gingerly unwrapped the package and opened the box; inside, buried in packing popcorn, she saw a smaller box wrapped in bubble wrap. She took it out carefully and opened it slowly and delicately, barely able to contain her excitement. Inside was her beautiful shiny black egg! She held it to her chest for a moment, then handed it to Elaine. “See, Mom? See how pretty it is! I told you!” she was grinning from ear to ear.

“Eli, there’s another box in here.” Oskar said, reaching past the popcorn and pulling out another small bubble-wrapped box. He pulled a note from under the rubber band encircling it and handed it to Eli.

“I couldn’t bear to separate them,” she read. Excited again, she opened the box, and lifted out...the white egg! “He gave me the other one! Papa, he gave me the other one too!” She held it up for everyone to see, then gently placed it next to the black egg and slowly rotated it until she was satisfied.

“What’d you do that for?” Oskar asked.

“Now the eggs line up. They’re both right side up.”

“How do you know? The pieces are so tiny! They look the same all over.” Oskar said, puzzled.

“No, she’s right.” Elaine assured him. “I can see it too. The pieces on one are the mirror image of the pieces on the other. How amazing!” She picked up the white egg and carefully turned it around examining it closely. “Eli, you had them both aligned with the same patterns facing up, but how do you know that those patterns are on the top?”

“Because I remember how the crowns fit into the yolk, and how the yolk lined up with the pieces. I put it together hundreds of times, remember?” She carefully placed the egg next to the other one again.

“I know someone who’s turning over in his grave right now.” Papa whispered to Elaine. “This is the ultimate poetic justice, don’t you think?”

Oskar, with an even bigger grin on his face, pulled yet another box out of the package. “What’s this? Was there a third egg, Dad?” He handed it to Eli. This one had no note, and was a wider, flatter box. She looked at Papa, then cautiously unwrapped it. It was a beautifully carved Ebony base with two impressions in the platform surface, clearly made to display the two eggs side by side. It was oval shaped with a 5cm thick base resting on four 2cm-in-diameter ebony spheres. But it was clearly quite old. She hesitated a moment, then handed it to Papa.

Style-wise, it seemed a bit too ornate for the eggs, Dawson thought to himself, but it did have that extra element of absolute perfection and completeness that had attracted his attention when he first saw Eli’s egg. Even so, this was probably made by someone else – or the original story had gaps in it. He turned it around. On the end was a symbol he recognized immediately; the coat of arms of the Törnkvist family. He handed it back to Eli. “It’s impossible that these two eggs were ever together on this base before you sold yours, since Törnkvist or one of his people obviously had it made in anticipation of receiving them, or immediately after they came into possession of the white egg. Since it’s not part of the original presentation, I can store it away if it makes you uncomfortable.”

She shook her head, “No, it’s okay. It is pretty, so I know he didn’t make it himself. If someone made it for him, He probably made them do it.” She thought about it for a minute. “No, I’ll keep it. Whoever he was, he did nothing to me and it’s really pretty!”

She stood up quickly, “Can I take them up to my room? I want to see what’s inside the white egg.”

“Of course you can, Eli. They’re yours! You don’t mind if we watch, do you?”

“I want you to!”

“Good! We’ll be up in a few minutes. You two go on ahead.”

Eli and Oskar carefully carried them up to her room and placed them on her table. She turned them over and over, examining them and remembering all those lonely days she had spent putting her beautiful egg together, and playing with the tiny crowns in the golden yolk. Even though there were memories of loneliness and despair associated with it, overall she felt a great fondness for it; it had helped her get through some tough times, and although she had no need of it now, she was extremely happy it was home again. Now, she had the chance to get acquainted with the white egg. She knew there was nothing in its yolk, but she was curious anyway and wanted to see for herself. And she so enjoyed puzzles!

She picked up the base and turned it around, examining it closely. The coat of arms was carved into each end at the major axis vertices, and small cameos of gargoyles with chillingly familiar fangs were carved on each of the minor axis co-vertices. Intertwined serpents filled the 4 gaps between them with their heads facing the coat of arms. Separating their heads from the coat of arms were sun symbols.

She placed the base in the center of the table and gently placed her black egg in the first depression, then the white one next to it. It was so perfectly made that the eggs just touched each other. She moved in closer and looked at them intensely. Something wasn't right.

"Which one goes in which slot?" Oskar asked. "Or does it matter?"

"I don't know, Oskar, but something's wrong. They don't fit right." She looked at the base more closely. There were subtle tiny gaps between the eggs and their respective impressions in the platform, which would have been fine, except that she could see that there were very subtle variations in the rim of the impressions, which suggested to her that they weren't flaws, but deliberately formed to accommodate the eggs in one position only. Upon closer examination, she noticed that the four serpents at one end of the base had tiny white eyes and at the other end, black eyes. She switched the eggs. It was better, but not perfect. "There's still something wrong." She looked more closely.

"Oskar squinted at them, "They look perfect to me." He tried to wiggle one, but it seemed to fit perfectly in its depression.

"Aha!" Eli carefully picked up the white egg, turned it end over end and gently put it back in its proper impression. "That's it!" she exclaimed. "They're right now. All I have to do is rotate them right-side-up and they'll be perfect!!"

"Boy, you're picky! They were just fine before. Besides..."

There was a loud 'click' just as Eli got the alignment exactly right. They looked at each other. Eli caught her breath, as she intuitively realized that this base could be a puzzle of some sort. She laid her head on the table and looked under the base. Nothing seemed different. Without touching anything, she slowly moved around the table, examining the carving carefully. She stopped as she noticed one of the gargoyle cameos was now protruding from the surface about a half a millimeter. Still, it was so well constructed that she could see no sign of a gap between the

cameo and the surface. It still looked as though it had been carved out of a single piece of wood. "Look at this, Oskar."

He looked at it closely, "I can't see anything. What am I looking for?"

She sighed impatiently. "You can't see that? Look how far it's sticking out!" She reached down and pushed it back into position, but it sprung back immediately. There was another click, and the gargoyle on the opposite side popped out about 2 centimeters. "You can see that, I hope." She said sarcastically.

"Yeah! That's cool! Maybe there's a secret compartment or something. With a treasure map!" He reached over and pulled on the gargoyle. Nothing happened. He pushed on it gently, but it seemed locked in place.

Eli pushed him aside and gently turned it. It rotated smoothly 180 degrees, then again locked in place. They couldn't move it at all. "Did we do something wrong? Nothing happens no matter what I do." She gently pushed the first gargoyle again, but it was now rigid.

Once again she slowly moved around the table examining the base carefully. Nothing was different! She examined the coats of arms carefully. Nothing. This was getting her nowhere. She examined the eggs again, making sure they were still lined up. Then, in desperation she slowly moved around the table once more. She must have missed something... There it was! She realized suddenly that the serpents' eyes had all reversed color. She carefully switched the eggs to match, and as she lined them up, they heard a series of clicks as the gargoyle rotated back and retracted, and the one opposite became flush with the surface once again. The eggs popped up slightly, revealing a hairline crack between their platform and the rest of the base. Eli carefully lifted the platform with the eggs off the base, exposing a small chamber with something glittering inside. "Oskar! It's the missing set of crowns!" She lifted them up carefully, making note of the fact that one end of the chamber was perfectly formed to hold them tightly in place. They sparkled and glittered as the sunlight struck them, and tiny dots of light danced on her zenith blue bedroom walls.

"Eli, there's a note!" He reached in, carefully lifted it out, and handed it to her.

"Elias, a terrible injustice perpetrated against you has now been ever so slightly mollified. The puzzle is now complete and it is yours by rite of passage. Your fortuitous acquisition of part of this piece at a critical point in my family's history, released my descendants from an indescribably dark future. I and the never-to-be-born, voiceless children of my lineage thank you from the bottoms of our hearts. May the rest of your eternal life be as pleasant and life-fulfilling as the last fourteen years."

She read the signature carefully, "Gudmund Törnkvist II." Her hand shook as she reached into the base and pulled out what appeared to be a piece of folded stiff white paper, but as she unfolded it, she realized it was a photograph. A photograph she recognized immediately. It was taken at night, in front of the Other One's tomb thirteen years ago. She saw Elaine in the moonlight, wings outstretched, her feet just leaving the ground. Just behind her was... herself,

wings just rising up as she stumbled in her attempt to follow quickly behind. It was a picture of the beginning of their first flight together! “Papa!! Mama!!” Eli was frightened! He was alive, and knew who she was, and where she lived. And he had known for a long time!

Chapter 17: Revelations

They all huddled together looking at the note and photograph. “I thought he was dead!! You told me he was dead!” Eli was shaking.

“Eli, the research showed him as having died in the attack and subsequent destruction of his estate. His body was found burned to ashes. In exhaustively reading between the lines, I found nothing further that could possibly be described as vampire activity occurring in the area after his death – only before it.” Papa examined the signature more closely. “Let me get my original notebooks. I think I may have the answer.” He headed for the stairs.

Eli was frightened! She remembered his overpowering presence, his sadistic smile. His mysterious, almost magical way of ...knowing things; knowing how things were going to play out before they even began. How he changed the dice to pick her when they had plainly picked someone else. She remembered how she had avoided looking into his eyes after that first time because of what she saw there.

Elaine took her in her arms and comforted her. “Eli, together, you and I have the strength to beat him if necessary, no matter what his intentions. But his note seems to suggest that he is ... somehow grateful to you for taking the egg. How could that be?”

“I don’t know!” she sobbed. “He wouldn’t be! He couldn’t be!” She knew deep down inside that ‘grateful’ was not in his vocabulary. What could it all mean?

Papa came down the stairs with a smile on his face. “Eli, he is dead! Look at his signature more closely. Gudmund Törnkvist the Second. This man was his son, or grandson; or the first in the male lineage that was named after him. And look at the note. He is clearly thanking you for something he feels you have done for him. And that would certainly not be the attitude of your Lord Törnkvist. Let me do a bit of checking online.” He sat down at Eli’s computer. “We’ll track this fellow down, and hopefully at least get a better idea of who he is and what he may want of you. Remember, he knew who you were at least 13 years ago. If he meant you any harm, he had ample opportunity to follow through without alerting you to his existence.”

“I find it interesting that he included this particular photograph. If he could take this one, undetected by two vampires, he certainly could have taken many others. Why this one? What’s his message?” Elaine asked.

“Maybe he wanted to scare us,” Oskar volunteered.

“Well, it worked! I’m scared!” Eli put her arms around him.

“I don’t think that was his intent, Eli. This one photograph actually ties us all together, and tells us that he is fully aware of the connection.”

“What do you mean?” Eli looked at her, puzzled.

“Lord Törnkvist, probably this man’s father, knew the Other One personally – in fact he probably turned him. The Other One, of course, lived in the tomb in the photograph. I was his prisoner for 40 years, and you and I were about to learn a great deal more about each other at the instant the picture was taken.” She smiled at Eli. “And you lived with your Papa and Oskar. He must have known who you were, or else why the elaborate preparation of the egg base? So! He had to know ALL this beforehand, or else why would he have felt compelled to take this picture 13 years ago? I really can’t imagine which of us he was following that night. It could have been either of us – or neither of us for that matter. If it were me, why would your presence have made him take the chance on being discovered taking the picture? And if it were you, it just verifies the obvious fact that he is a vampire. No one else could possibly have followed you. And again, why would he have taken the picture? As I said before, he took the picture to prove that he knew we were linked together 13 years ago. And that he has been observing us all this time.” She saw the look on Eli’s face and quickly added, “but he’s not your vampire, Eli. I’m certain of it.”

Elaine picked up the empty package, peeled off the packing slip, and unfolded it. “The itemized list of contents shows only the two eggs. It’s very specific. The weight of each egg is listed down to the gram, and the total package weight is also indicated. Oskar, run get the postal scale from your Dad’s study.” Oskar headed upstairs. Elaine gathered up all the packing material, boxes and bubble wrap and placed it back in the original package, just as Oskar came down with the scale. Without the base and its box, the eggs and the packing material together matched the weight on the packing slip.

“We can be almost certain that the base was added to the package after the packing slip was attached. With the security surrounding a package with this great a value, how would that be possible?” she asked.

“Sounds like an inside job to me,” Oskar said in his Hercule Poirot voice as he twisted an imaginary mustache.

“I’m certain that you’re correct, Oskar.” She smiled at him. “This man, or whatever he is, clearly has connections in the right places.” She thought a moment, “So we can infer that the second set of crowns has been in his possession all this time; probably from the beginning. And the base, which we know to be old, was designed to hold them. But for what purpose? Did he envision this situation over 100 years ago? Did he somehow know that his ‘Elias’ would be able to solve the puzzle and find his note? If so, HOW could he have known? He also must have known that only someone who knew the puzzle intimately could know how to align the eggs properly. In other words, he knew that you were the only one, Eli, other than himself, who could ever hope to solve it. You had the only egg that still had the crowns in it. He had the crowns for the second.”

Dawson interrupted, “If this article is correct, Gudmund Törnkvist the Second was born in 1855. This was within a year of the destruction of the Törnkvist Estate. He was the son and direct heir of your Lord Törnkvist. The fact that he seems to be alive now is certainly an indicator that he is also a vampire, although the article shows him as having died in 1915. Unless, of course, he’s lying to us.” He thought a moment. “Unlikely though, if Elaine guessed right and he was following you that night, Eli.”

“That presents us with an intriguing question. He must have been conceived after Lord Törnkvist was a vampire. Does that mean vampires are fertile and can successfully impregnate humans? Or other vampires? Who was his mother?” Elaine sounded puzzled. But it seemed unlikely to her that vampires could be fertile, since she didn’t get pregnant during her 40 years in the Other One’s ‘care.’

“Mom, does that mean he was born a vampire?” Eli asked. She was feeling a bit more at ease now that they were discussing him more objectively.

“Not possible, Eli.” Elaine suddenly realized, “This is a grown man. If he had been born a vampire he would have stayed one day old forever; or perhaps only a fertilized egg. Another argument against vampires being able to procreate. Someone turned him as an adult, but we may never know how or why, unless he chooses to enlighten us. But be sure of the fact that he means you no harm. Oskar, you need to be on the alert a bit more than usual, in case he feels the need to get close to us again.”

Oskar nodded. “Don’t worry, Eli. If he gets anywhere near us, I’ll know.”

“Another puzzling thing about the base is the fact that it could not have been made without the two eggs being together when it was designed. Its entire operation as a puzzle depends on the eggs fitting perfectly into it. When could this possibly have happened? The eggs were never both in Lord Törnkvist’s possession. You always had the black one, Eli, until we sold it. And that was only 14 years ago. The base appears to be much older than that. Is there ever a time when you didn’t have the egg?”

“No. I’ve always had it.” It’s been with me every day of my life since I ... found it. At least until I sold it.” She was puzzled. How could this be?

“I don’t know Eli. It’s a real mystery.”

“How about when you were hibernating, Eli? When you were hibernating with me, I could have taken anything away from you and you wouldn’t have known. I could have even cut your hair short and dyed it, and you wouldn’t have known until you woke up.” Oskar quipped.

“But no one took it! It was always there!” she protested.

“Unless someone borrowed it and returned it before you woke up. In fact, I really think that’s the answer. It ...fits somehow.” Elaine said.

Eli’s eyes got big. “Don’t say that! Don’t even think that! That would mean he saw me, that he could have ... touched me, or killed me.” She trembled.

“Well, I’m not convinced,” Papa said, “That sounds pretty far-fetched to me. Why would he have gone to all that trouble to prepare for a future event he couldn’t have predicted? There must be another explanation.”

“Remember what Sherlock Holmes said,” Elaine said sarcastically, “Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

“The logical flaw in that statement is that there’s no way to know when you have eliminated all the potential ‘impossibilities’” Dawson retorted. “A basic flaw that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle never acknowledged.”

“Logical to a fault, as usual,” she said snidely. “Meanwhile, Eli is left without a definitive answer to a very important question.”

“One we may very well never have an answer to, sadly.” He said solemnly.

§

Oskar heard Eli screaming all the way upstairs in his room. He rushed down quickly only to find her, back against the wall, at the front door. “Eli! What’s wrong?” He put his arms around her just as Papa and Elaine came rushing in.

She knelt down and picked up two large black-and-white photographs and a padded envelope off the floor and handed them to Papa. She was trembling so hard he had trouble taking them from her. “These came in the mail, addressed to me.” She said in a small, frightened voice. “And there’s another for Oskar!”

They looked at the first photo closely. It was a new print, but the image had the slight graininess and texture that indicated it was probably made from a very old negative, or possibly a positive, of some sort. It was a picture of a young girl lying on her side on a straw bed against a heavy stone wall of some kind. Her dress came to just below her knees and her bare legs and shoeless feet were pulled up to her chest. Her arms were together beside her head and her hands, next to her face, were tightly gripping strands of her long black hair. She seemed to be staring directly into the camera. Next to her head was a small wooden box, with several familiar objects just visible inside. A dirty blanket lay at her feet in a heap.

They gasped simultaneously as they recognized Eli’s beautiful face.

Dawson immediately picked up Oskar’s envelope and laid it on the table. “Don’t open this yet, Oskar.”

Papa quickly handed the photo to Elaine and looked closely at the second one. He felt a sudden chill. The wooden box had clearly been moved. So had Eli. She was lying on her back, her black hair neatly brushed and her blanket pulled up under her arms and over her chest. Her eyes were closed and one arm was at her side. The other was wrapped around a stuffed bunny. The shadows and lighting for this one were subtle, but there was no mistaking the photographer’s intent. Eli’s face was bathed with a soft light, enhancing her natural beauty in a most remarkable way. Whoever took this was an excellent photographer. He gasped suddenly as he spotted, next to her head just inside the circle of light, the two eggs, side by side, on the black ebony base. He glanced at Elaine as he realized she was right again; he had underestimated her uncanny ability

to sense the feng shui in Eli's otherwise dark life. "Eli, do you remember when you owned this dress? Do you remember where you were?"

"Yes Papa. It was the cellar of an old outbuilding on the ruins of an old estate near...the castle. It was soon after I found the egg, within 10 years or so, but before I went to England. I went through two hibernations there, but the first one was when I had that dress. That means he knew where I was both times." She had tears in her eyes. "Oh, Papa! I'm afraid!" she put her arms around him.

"Eli, look at this second photo carefully. What do you see?"

"What do you mean, Papa? He moved me! He brushed my hair, just like the Other One did!"

"No Eli. It's not the same. Whoever did this cared a great deal about you. He closed your eyes. He symbolically kept you warm. He gave you comfort." He pointed to the stuffed rabbit. "You still own this rabbit. I've seen it in your box. This...man cares about you, whoever he is. And look at the eggs! Elaine was right and this tells us even more about this man. The eggs are positioned next to your head, one white, one black, inside the circle of light around your face. See how the base is turned slightly but deliberately, the white egg closer to your face, the black one closer to the camera? I think he did this on purpose; I'm not sure why, but it looks deliberate. Yet they are irrevocably bound together, symbolized by the base. And for whatever reason, these eggs are clearly instrumental in his deep interest in your welfare. "

"Wait a minute!" Elaine interjected. "We've assumed that he was born as per the article you found! We know the date of his death was wrong. Why not the date of his birth too? He couldn't have been born in 1855. That would have made him around ten when these pictures of Eli were taken. Very unlikely, I think. The logical explanation, when we eliminate the 'impossibility' of him being conceived by a vampire, is that he was born BEFORE Lord Tornqvist was a vampire and turned when he was an adult – in plenty of time for him to have been an adult at the time the photographs of Eli were taken. Elementary, my Dear Watson."

"Well done! You're right, of course! Which means he was an adult when Eli stole the egg, and fully aware of the circumstances. Which means he probably knew of the episode on the road when you stole the egg, Eli. The accounts of the men who were bringing them to his father, and the condition of the two dead men would have been known to him. Which, in turn, means he was almost certain you were a vampire, and a small one. Depending on how long and how often his father got away with slaughtering innocent children and turning some of them, it may not have taken him long to narrow down the list of possibilities. Church birth records would have quite possibly given him your name." He hesitated, "But I have no idea how he found where you hibernated; how he made that final connection and was able to physically locate you."

"If he cared about me, why didn't he help me? Why did he stand back and let me live alone for another 100 years? And only after I was happy and had a new life, did he ... start scaring me."

Elaine and Papa looked at each other, "Eli, I can't answer that one." Papa said. He took her in his arms. "Perhaps he'll tell us someday. He certainly seems to have decided to begin a dialogue

with us.” He was beginning to think he was wrong about this man’s identity. This man is clearly not the one described in the article. Too many things didn’t fit. So, if he isn’t that Gudmund Törnkvist II, who is he really?

Dawson looked at the padded envelope. No return address. He started to put the photos back into it when he noticed there was a small flat package at the bottom. He pulled it out quickly, and unwrapped it, revealing an elongated oval cameo about 10 centimeters wide, carved in two interlocked pieces of jade, with two familiar profiles facing each other. Oskar and Eli! The images were perfect down to the finest detail; there was no mistaking them. Eli’s profile was in white Jade; Oscar’s in black. The oval frame was half black, half white, in contrast with the color of each profile. He turned it over and read the inscription etched on the back. **“The secret of your strength lies in your differences.”**

“What does that mean, Papa?”

“I’m not sure, Eli. Perhaps it means you and Oskar complement each other; that together, you’re stronger than both of you are separately. That the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” He handed it to her.

“I like that, Papa.” She put her arm around Oskar.

Dawson realized that, at least in this case, she seems to have completely forgotten the fact that the son of her worst nightmare had clearly been very close to Oskar physically at some point. And Oskar hadn’t sensed him.

“Oskar? May I open yours?”

“Sure Dad, go ahead,” Oskar stepped back.

Dawson carefully felt the envelope, then opened it carefully. He pulled out several large photos and laid the first on the table. It was a picture of two children standing very close to one another on top of a jungle gym in an apartment complex courtyard. It was Oskar and Eli! He recognized her clothing immediately. Oskar’s hand was brushing Eli’s cheek. And his face had that look on it that he had seen hundreds of times before, every time he told Eli he loved her. Eli’s eyes seemed to be staring past him, her head slightly tilted and her mouth open just enough for him to see...fangs!

Elaine, startled, looked at her mouth more carefully. She realized immediately that Eli’s fangs were clearly retracting. Oskar had been in real danger, she thought to herself.

Oskar and Eli gasped simultaneously. Eli was wide-eyed as Oskar took her in his arms. “He was there too! How could that be? And why? Why is he doing this to us?”

“Oskar, when was this picture taken?” Elaine asked.

“The...the time that Eli almost...but she didn’t! I felt so sad for her, that she didn’t know her own birthday, that she didn’t get any presents. I just wanted to hold her, but I was afraid, but I had to do something so I...”

“You had just met her?”

“We had only known each other a few days. She had taken a bath for me, because I was rude to her and told her she smelled bad.”

“I took the bath because I was going to...” she stopped and looked down at her feet.

“You wouldn’t have!”

“Should’ve, would’ve, could’ve! At least we’re all in agreement that this was a pivotal moment in your future lives together, to say the least. This is no coincidence,” Elaine said decisively. She took the second photo from Dawson.

Eli, with Oskar in her arms, running out of the side door of the pool in Blackeberg, steam rising from their bodies in the cold night air. Eli, covered with blood, had a terrified look on her face. Bloody footprints stretched from the door into the snow behind her. Dawson shuddered as he remembered the newspaper accounts of the incident.

“We all know when this one was taken. Clearly another pivotal moment in your lives. This man has an uncanny way of being in the right place at the right time.” Elaine said. She picked up the last picture. Puzzled, she showed it to Oskar. “Who are these boys, and what are they doing to you?”

Oskar remembered that day clearly. It was autumn, and it had just stopped raining. Jimmy and Jonny Forsberg had ambushed him just outside the playground after school. He had stayed late in the library, hoping they would get tired of waiting for him. No such luck. Jimmy had grabbed him from behind and Jonny was forcing mud in his mouth and smearing it all over his face. He had said something to Jonny in school earlier; he couldn’t remember now what it was. It didn’t matter. But this was the result. Something like this was always the result... he looked up at them startled. “This happened way before I met Eli. Way before she lived next door. He took my picture before I met Eli.” He was more intrigued than frightened.

Dawson looked at Elaine, “This adds a whole new dimension to this mystery. Isn’t this one of the ‘impossibilities’ Holmes would have eliminated?” He stared at the picture again, “Oskar, are you sure?”

“I’m sure. See that hat I’m wearing? They took it. I never saw it again.” He picked up the envelope and searched inside, hoping there might be another cameo or something else neat. At the bottom of the envelope was a flyer, advertising a lecture series at Karlstad University. Dr. Dawson’s picture was on the cover. “Dad, this is just like the flyer I found in our mailbox in Karlstad. It’s what gave me the idea to come and talk with you to see if you could help us.”

Dawson took it from him. “Oskar, these were never sent out en masse. They were only distributed through channels at work and sent out to other colleges throughout Sweden. They were never mailed to the general public. I have no idea how it could have gotten in your mailbox. It looks like Eli’s mysterious ‘benefactor’ even had a hand in our meeting and subsequent relationship.”

“The bottom line is, the ball is still in his court. He has proven that he knows a great deal about all of us. We still don’t know what his intentions are. And we can’t hide from him.” Elaine said.

“That about sums it up. All we can do now is wait.”

§

November 29, 1995, 8:30PM

Oskar and Eli were waiting nervously in the living room when the bell rang. They heard Papa as he greeted Jack and Henry at the door, then led them quietly to the couch, where they both sat down facing the two of them. Eli glanced nervously at the ice chest next to Papa’s chair. Elaine came in, sat down next to Papa and put her arm around him.

“Happy birthday, Eli,” Henry smiled at her. “Although, in your case, I’m not sure what that means.” Henry had grown up into a slim young man, 6’4” tall, and full of the devil. At 23, he was already famous for his on-campus pranks. His intelligence, disarming smile and sense of humor had allowed him to get away with things he could easily have been held accountable for. And he was well on his way towards a PHD in Nuclear Physics.

“Dr. Dawson said you have something important to tell us, and that you had picked your birthday because you thought it was an appropriate time to ‘spill the beans’ as you put it. Now what could you possibly have to tell us that makes you so obviously nervous? Are you going to tell me how you always managed to get that last penny?” Jack smiled at her. Jack, with Papa’s support, had just completed his PHD in Molecular Biology, and had begun work in the lab. He was a bit shorter than Henry; only 6’2 and a bit stockier. When Henry passed him up at 15, he had never heard the end of it.

“I always got the last penny, because I always could. I could have gotten them all if I had wanted to. It’s all a part of my ... secret.” She smiled at him coyly.

“I almost forgot. It’s your birthday, so I thought it would be appropriate to turn this back over to you after all these years.” Henry handed her the trophy the two of them had won together in the inner-tube contest.

Eli was delighted, “You kept that all these years?”

“It was the first time, but by no means the last, that I ever beat my ‘little brother’ at anything.” He slapped Jack on the back. “Now! What is this secret of yours? Can we guess first?”

“If...you want to.” Eli said, a bit confused.

“Henry and I have talked about this for years now, Eli.” Jack said, “No offense, sir, but your explanation as to why the three of them haven’t aged didn’t seem right to us. Our dear mother, bless her heart, has always believed everything you’ve told her, but we were more skeptical. One of them, maybe, but two of them, clearly unrelated to each other genetically; extremely unlikely. And Elaine appearing out of the blue like she did, pretending to be Eli’s sister didn’t add up either. She looked nothing like Eli, and no offense, Doctor, but your relationship with her didn’t come across to us over the long term as a father-older daughter relationship. You treated her as though she were an equal partner in your family. The second year into my studies I became more and more certain that there was something you haven’t told us about them. There is no genetic mutation that caused this, and I suspect you know exactly what did.”

“You’re right, of course,” Dawson said. “Now that you’re working in the lab, Eli, Elaine, and I thought this would be the right time to come clean with you about their condition – and, in a way, my own condition, as well as Oskar’s.”

“I knew it! You’re in much better shape than you should be at 65, even with good genes. You haven’t changed since the first year the two of them came to live with you.” Henry said, triumphantly. “And Elaine! She was the deciding factor in our suspicion about some funny business in the Dawson household. If she had the same genetic problem as her ‘sister’ why did she age to her mid twenties before she stopped?”

Dawson smiled at them, “First, I want to thank you both for your patience, AND your trust. I’ve known all along that you suspected something, but, out of deference to my family, have said nothing. As Eli has told me repeatedly, you two are their best friends in the world. I think you’re going to find the explanation well worth the wait.” He sat down. “Eli, tell them how old the two of you are.”

Her voice was a little shaky as she began. She hoped they would understand, but would they be able to be her friends any longer after they knew the whole truth? “Well – Oskar had just turned 13 when you met him, so he’s now your age, Jack” she hesitated. “I was born around 1750, in Sweden. I don’t know my real birthday; Papa gave me this one.” She watched as their mouths opened in astonishment.

“But...that’s impossible! How have you survived all that time? Your allergy to sunlight! How could you have not died ...” Jack’s voice died away as he became lost in thought. “But when did you stop aging? And why?”

Eli took a deep breath as Papa came over, sat down beside her and took her hand. She had insisted that she tell them herself, in spite of Papa’s willingness to do it. “I ... I was 12 years old. And it was because I was infected by a bite. Right here.” She pointed to her neck. I stopped aging, became allergic to the sun and ... other things. I can’t eat food.”

“That’s not true! I’ve seen you eat. You made cookies for years at our house. And we had dinner at your house after swimming hundreds of times.”

“But Jack, you never saw me eat, did you? Take my word for it; I can’t eat food.”

“But how do you survive without eating?” he was completely incredulous.

“Do you want me to take over Eli?” Papa asked softly. She looked at him gratefully and nodded. “She does eat, Jack. She eats...this.” He reached into the small ice chest and pulled out one of Eli’s bags.

“But that’s blood! She can’t eat that.”

“But she does, Jack. And therein lies the truth of what Eli really is. And why she’s allergic to the sun. And why, if she had wanted to, she could have beaten you easily at any game in which strength or speed were a factor. And why she can do...this.” He nodded at Eli. They had thought this part through carefully. She could show them her eyes, but that would probably just confuse them...as it did him so long ago. Her claws or talons could frighten them or, as Oskar put it, ‘gross them out.’ No, it had to be her wings. With her wings, she would still be Eli to them, and the truth of what she was would be impossible for them to ignore or brush aside.

She stood up quickly, “Jack, please, please don’t hate me. Henry, I’m sorry I’ve had to keep this a secret from you both. You don’t know how many times I wanted to tell you.” She took off her sweater, and before they could say a word, put her arms at her sides, and raised them slowly, revealing, amidst the now familiar cellophane crackle, a pair of velvet-black wings.

They both sat stock still for a full minute; then Henry began laughing, “You mean I won a diving contest with a Vampire as my partner? It hardly seems fair, does it? Does that mean we have to give back our trophy?”

Eli blushed, then broke out into a wide grin. “Oh, Henry! I thought you would both hate me. I was so afraid.”

Jack looked at Dawson, then back at Eli, with a solemn look on his face. He quietly stood up and walked purposefully towards her. She put her arms down and backed away, suddenly afraid of him, afraid that he was angry or disappointed with her; but she moved too slowly. He grabbed her, put his arms around her and hugged her. “Eli, I can’t imagine what you must have gone through all those years alone. And living with...what you must have had to do to survive before your Papa took you in. And Oskar! You must have known or you wouldn’t be here. My God! The questions I have! Eli? Can I touch them?”

She smiled at him, “Sure!” she raised an arm and held it out to him hesitantly. He took her hand in his and ran the other one down her arm, his fingers probing the intersection between her skin and the soft velvety web. She jerked a little, then giggled.

“Tickles a little, does it?” he grinned at her, then took both her hands in his. “Eli, I always knew there was something special about you, but I had no idea how special.” Finally he sat down with

his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, and just looked at her. “Eli, I have absolutely no idea what to say.”

“I do!” Henry interjected. “I hope you’re not hungry. There’s a lot of really healthy blood in this room right now.”

“If I were, you’d be my appetizer,” she scowled at him.

Dawson stood up, “Okay, Eli. I think we’ve made our point. You can put your sweater back on now. Any questions?”

Henry raised his hand. “Can you fly faster than a speeding bullet? Leap over tall buildings with a single bound?” Eli nodded as she smiled at him. “So does that mean that Elaine is also a vampire?” He looked at her with a new respect.

“Yes, Henry, she is.” Dawson said, “And, like Eli, she was turned against her will by a monster who is now dead.”

Dawson became more serious. “There was another way we could have told you all this, but Eli wanted you to hear it. But the rest is more complicated, so I think we’ll try something else. But first, I want you to know that Oskar is responsible for bringing us all together. He knew and loved Eli long before I ever met her. They’re not brother and sister. They’re soul mates who have saved each other’s lives, actually and figuratively, many times over. They love one other deeply – very deeply. Now, I want you each to take one of Oskar’s hands. You are about to experience one of Oskar’s unexpected gifts.” Dawson had insisted that the details of Elaine’s experiences were to be off limits to them. He felt strongly that her wounds needed more time to heal. He felt ever more strongly about Eli’s past, but she had insisted. ‘They’re my friends, Papa. They need to know,’ She had told him.

Oskar stepped over to them and held out his hands to them. Eli sat beside him, put her arms around him and kissed him lightly on the cheek; then they all went on the dark journey together.

No one said anything for a long time. Finally, Jack turned to Dawson. “Sir? What can I do? I have to do something. I can’t just...” there were tears in his eyes. Eli’s dark side made him extremely uncomfortable as the reality of thousands of people having died to keep her alive sunk in, but somehow, vividly reliving her horror and turning as an innocent 12-year-old boy still made her the ultimate victim in his eyes – and all her victims were ultimately victims of Lord Törnkvis. No, Eli was STILL an innocent in his eyes, because he knew her and had known her for 14 years; and he loved her.

“I can’t believe all these things happened to you! And some of the worst of them happened right under our noses and close by,” Henry said slowly, “I always wondered why you had spent so much time on your trip to Sweden, and why you were back so suddenly. We really missed you, you know; especially Jack. Near the end, he was afraid you weren’t ever coming back.”

“Me too,” Oskar said, shuddering. “But that was the last time she ever hibernated.”

“So you were once Elias. That explains a lot to me. Some days I would simply adore you; other days, you were my best friend. I could tell you anything as a friend, but there were some things I was afraid to tell you, because you were a girl. When we got a bit older, and Dr. Dawson told us your disease made you stay small as well as young, I was protective of you both, like I had been towards Henry when he was small. I thought of you as my little tomboy sister, and I would have beaten up anyone who made fun of either of you for being so small for your age. Now? Now you are once again my best friend; my little tomboy friend.” He hugged her again. For a brief moment he saw her as he had seen her that first day when they all swam together; sweet, pretty, and mysterious. His first love.

“I told you they would accept you, Eli. They know you too well for it to be otherwise.” Papa put his arm around her. “And working together, we’ll soon have a cure for you too. That is, if Jack wants to work on your antidote along with the aging vaccine.”

“More than anything in the world!” Jack said. He couldn’t take his eyes off of her. Their relationship had a whole new meaning now. She was actually older by far than he was, but she was still the same mysterious little Eli of his childhood. He couldn’t yet wrap his mind around it all. He thought back to the first time he saw her in her sunsuit by the stream; the way she exuded self-confidence; the way she handled Seth. He felt all the odd pieces of the puzzle falling into place in his mind. “And Elaine! You always seemed older and wiser than your age, and you still do to this day. I’ve always been a bit intimidated by you. There was always something about your intensity that frightened me. I guess my instincts were right.”

“I’m harmless, Jack. Just ask Richard.” She smiled at him evilly. “At least as long as I’m well fed.”

“Absolutely no comment!” Dawson said.

“And why have you two not married yet?” Henry’s eyes sparkled. “Your... ‘children’ call you ‘Mom.’ And your relationship with the good Doctor is hardly father-daughter. Based on what I’ve observed between you two over the years, it really does seem to be husband-wife” He paused, “But based on your real ages, it should be more like mother-son.”

“Gee! We never looked at it that way before! You’re right! I should adopt him!” She glared at him.

“What do you think, Elaine? The kids turned out okay. Should we get married?”

“Why Rich, I thought you’d never ask!” She kissed him on the cheek.

“Actually, boys, we’ve been ‘engaged’ for over 10 years. That’s why Eli and Oskar call her ‘Mom.’ She’s earned it.”

“Now that’s a long engagement! Just waiting until you’re sure?” Henry goaded them.

“Actually, Henry, we’ve talked about it for years. But Elaine feels she can’t marry me while she’s a vampire, and I respect her position on this – although I do try to talk her out of it occasionally.” He got a twinkle in his eye. “But she insists it’s for my own safety. She says she’s afraid she’d kill me.”

“Shut up, Rich!” she turned red. Henry and Jack roared with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Eli asked, puzzled.

“Never mind, Eli. It’s just geriatric gutter humor.” Elaine glared at them.

“Well, Jack, that should give you real incentive towards finding a cure for vampirism.” Henry said, chuckling.

“Not nearly as much incentive as I have!” Dawson said.

“I don’t know, Henry. Perhaps if I were offered the position of Best Man at the wedding...”

“Done!” Elaine said. She smiled at Dawson. *I’ll get even with you later*, she thought to herself.

§

Elaine put her bags in the trunk of the car. She rechecked her shopping list, making sure she hadn’t forgotten anything, then slammed it shut and slipped into the front seat. She was on a painting kick at the moment, and had picked up some pre-stretched canvas, frames and some new oil paint. She had some new ideas about how to paint night scenes from her ‘unique’ point of view that she wanted to explore. This was the best time of the year for night painting, she thought to herself. The long nights plus the weather patterns this time of year were perfect. She looked forward to having Eli by her side, asking questions as she worked. Eli could see and at least partially understand why she picked the colors she did and how she blended them; and she could tolerate the cold winter weather. Rich, no matter how well intentioned, simply couldn’t see what she and Eli could see. She pulled out of the parking lot, lost in thought.

“Hello, Miss Bell. I have a few things I need to discuss with you.” his deep voice resonated in the closed space of the car’s interior. She slammed on the brakes as she realized there was a man in the back seat. How could she have missed him?! “Just keep driving, Elaine. And keep your eyes on the road ahead of you. That would be safest for both of us don’t you think?” She stole a quick glance at him in the rear view mirror, just as he lowered his head and moved to the right directly behind her. It was Törnkvist! She recognized him immediately from the photo of the painting in Rich’s notebook.

Chapter 18: The Puppet Master

“The circle is now complete. A few things remain to be done, and then I can...rest.” His voice was deep and soothing; reassuring – almost hypnotic. “How is my Elias? Is she happy in the life I’ve designed for her?”

Elaine said nothing. She deliberately altered her route to take them even further from home. In spite of her strong feeling that he could have their best interests at heart, there was no way he was going to get close to her family with her help, especially after seeing his face. She increased her speed slowly, her mind racing. She had a full tank of gas and if, in her judgment, he posed a real danger to them, she wouldn’t hesitate a second before driving the car into a brick wall. She pressed the child safety button on the armrest, locking the car doors in the back seat against being opened from the inside.

“You need to relax a bit, Elaine. I have no intention of ‘invading’ your beautiful home at this time. You may drive wherever you like...and as rapidly as you wish.” He paused, “I have some things I would like to discuss with you, but first I need to know. How is my Elias? How is your Butterfly?”

She caught her breath. How could he know Eli’s nickname? “Eli is just fine. And she will continue to be that way if Dr. Dawson and I have anything to say about it.”

“When’s the wedding Elaine? Still having problems with the cure? How long has it been now? Thirteen years? You should give it up and marry him. He won’t wait forever, you know.”

She felt the anger rise up in her. No matter what his intentions, he had no business snooping into their private lives like this. “He’ll wait as long as it takes! I know him and I have absolute faith in him!” She really did know this she realized, now that she had said it out loud. It just hadn’t sunk in until she put it in words. She smiled to herself at the thought of him waiting patiently for her, respecting her position at his own expense, without giving it another thought. She realized at that moment how very much she loved him for it. And she finally knew with conviction that he loved her unconditionally.

“Thank you, Elaine.” He said softly. His voice hardened. “Are you both prepared to spend the rest of your eternal lives together, your love for each other unconsummated, as you baby-sit two eternal children? Taking care of them, knowing they’ll never progress beyond their current age? Knowing they’ll be frozen forever as they are, with no hope of ever growing up or being able to understand the real world? Frozen in their ignorance?”

“Yes! Yes! Whatever it takes! We love them with all our hearts. And no one will ever succeed in coming between us or harming our family!” *What was he trying to do*, she wondered. It almost sounded like he was going down a list of questions on a job interview.

“How seldom in life do we hear the correct answers to the difficult questions! And how seldom are these answers given with honesty and conviction.” he sounded satisfied, even proud. As though he had finally won some great battle.

“What’s your point? Get to the point! I’m not in the mood for games! Too much is at stake here!” The road was straight here. She could safely build up a great deal of speed if she needed to.

“Every day in our lives, we make choices. These choices determine the path our future will take, and we try hard to make the right ones; however, sometimes those choices have unexpected results. For example, just by staying at work too long and arguing with your wife a few seconds longer that you needed to about whether or not to drop everything to accompany her and your son to a soccer match, you make her just miss the second stoplight on her route to the field, causing her to enter an intersection a minute or two later than she normally would have, and ...you lose everything you worked for in a ball of fire, when the poor man who struck your car would have sailed harmlessly through his red light if she hadn’t been delayed. Your final decision to stay at work will have killed three people. The rest of your life would be profoundly affected by those few seconds she was delayed.”

She felt a chill. Was there anything about them that he didn’t know? “What are you trying to tell me?”

“I am my father’s son. Ask Elias about my father, and she will tell you my father had a ‘gift.’ She wouldn’t have known what to call it, but she knew about it. He could see some not insignificant distance into the future, as can I. You would think that this would be a good thing, but it’s not as straightforward as it sounds. The consequences of reading the future are many, but the most important one is, that by knowing it you can’t help but change it. Let me give you an example. You’re a Cambridge student studying for an exam. You need a good grade or you’ll lose your scholarship. You stay up late, form study groups and ace the test because your fear of failure is so strong it drives you to do your best. What if you had the ability to see into the future a few days, and saw that you had aced it? Fear of failure would no longer motivate you to study that last section of the book that made the big difference on the test. You might slack off just a bit, just enough to change your final score, causing you to lose your scholarship. But then you would be able to see that new result and become afraid again.” He paused a moment. “And this is a very simple example of the endless loops that foreseeing the future can trap you in.”

“Am I supposed to sympathize with you at this point? Forgive me if I’m finding it difficult.”

“Merely the act of making you aware of all this is changing your future as we speak. I can see it subtly flowing and redirecting itself in my mind with each new piece of information I give you. For example, I know you will marry Dr. Dawson sometime within the next five years. This has become clear to me within the last five minutes. Evidently, something that has transpired in that time has solidified that future for you.” He paused a moment, then continued. “And revealing this information to you at this moment has had no effect on that future. Congratulations! Your marriage is now part of what I, with slight trepidation, like to call the ‘Stable Future,’ that future that is comparatively difficult to change. Whether or not you want to risk changing it by telling Dr. Dawson about this part of our conversation is up to you,” he teased.

Having completed a wide circle through the local side streets, she pulled back into the parking lot at her art supply store, parked and turned off the lights. She turned in her seat and looked directly at him, studying him carefully. The only thing about him that was familiar was his face. She realized now that he was slimmer and looked significantly younger than his father's portrait. He was actually very distinguished looking. He didn't exude that sense of arrogance and overindulgence that his father's portrait portrayed and he was wearing a modern black business suit, complete with tie. "Forgive me." She said sarcastically. "I appear to be underdressed for the occasion. You should have informed me of the dress code, as well as given me a bit of advance notice of our meeting. Now, why are you telling me all this?"

"I'm trying to make it easier for you to understand the great difficulty I have had trying to protect Eli from harm for almost 140 years while guiding her on a path that seems most likely to make and keep her happy. You see, I owe her everything."

"I'm not sure I can give you a passing grade on your efforts," she said curtly. "Eli's life for the last 140 years has been almost as much of a nightmare as the first 100 years, except for these last fourteen. Why didn't you just take her in and protect her yourself if you cared so much?"

"Haven't you been listening?" he said sharply. "That would have destroyed us both. I saw it clearly. Don't you think that would have been my first choice if it had been possible? You don't know how difficult it was for me to finally accept the truth of it. I could find no way to protect her while keeping her with me at the same time. Every path led to disaster. No, protecting her from afar was the only solution – until I found her a family."

"But she survived on her own for over 200 years, going through her own hell dealing with pedophiles, scumbags and even angry mobs."

"You know Eli quite well by now. Do you really think she could have survived on her own all that time? The first 100 years before I was involved were relatively easy; population density was quite low, society was much more loosely organized and communication between villages was primitive. She could have been an idiot and still survived. The last 140? Not so easy. Civilization has advanced further technologically in that last 140 years than in all the previous centuries combined. And the population of the area mushroomed. She's bright, but she's only twelve. She's impulsive, careless, and relatively weak. Believe me it's been a nightmare just protecting her from her own mistakes. The only rest I got was when she was hibernating. And even then, there were a few close calls because the locations she picked were not as secure as they should have been. And I had to protect her without her realizing it. She absolutely could not know that I was involved. It would have weakened her resolve, with disastrous consequences."

"I don't like your characterization of Eli at all! These may be flaws from the viewpoint of pure survival, but her virtues far outweigh them."

"Of course they do! Her strength of character alone is a large part of what has made it possible for me to save her. Without it, her life would still be a nightmare, and she would still be alone."

Elaine was getting a bit irritated. “How have you ‘designed’ her life? That sounds arrogant to me; as though she had no part in her current happiness; that it was all your doing.”

“Far from it! She and her ‘virtues’ as you call them were pivotal in directing her future at every juncture. I only set her up for her successes by giving her opportunity. There were many over the last century, but I will cover only the ones you are familiar with. Håkan, for example. I burned his house and forced him to flee to the streets where Eli eventually found him.”

“Why?! He was a pedophile!”

“Because if I hadn’t, Eli would have made a different choice; a critical choice that would have destroyed her sanity, and eventually killed her. Your ‘Other One’ was indirectly involved and would have been directly involved later if that future had come to pass. It’s a small world isn’t it?” He smiled grimly. “Håkan was the lesser of two evils. And, just as important, he had connections in Blackeberg. I...arranged for the apartment next to Oskar to be empty at exactly the right time. He jumped at the chance after he blundered while trying to get blood for Eli.”

“But...why Oskar? Clearly you knew of him before they moved to Blackeberg.”

“I was desperate. Everything else I had tried had failed. Eli was too suspicious, too alienated from society and frightened to ask for help. I set up several scenarios, but she was unable to make that critical step or take that final chance necessary to make the connection. Finally, I thought that if she had a ‘connection’ to someone her age, but not as jaded, I might be able to break the cycle. With difficulty, I found several possibilities, but Oskar was perfect! He was just dark and lonely enough. I knew I had guessed correctly once Eli and Håkan moved in next door to Oskar and I could see the possible futures for her spread out like healthy branches on a vigorous young tree. Once I put them near each other and they fell in love, all their own doing by the way, everything else was comparatively easy.” He paused for a moment.

“But their happiness together overwhelmed me,” he said softly. “I hadn’t considered it. I hadn’t planned for it, and more importantly, for some odd reason, I hadn’t seen it in their future, but there it was in all its unique magnificence. Who could have anticipated it? It was a holy thing to me. Oskar, an unassuming 12-year-old boy had given my Eli something she needed most desperately; something I couldn’t show her for over 100 years, no matter how much I wished to.” His voice wavered. “Consequently, their ‘Stable Future’ became so inevitable that I didn’t have to interfere again until they were in Karlstad. And all I had to do then was put the good Professor’s flyer in their mailbox. Oskar’s natural intelligence, respect for education, and childish naivety, won over not only Eli, but set up the professor also. Dawson’s great loss, which I take absolutely no credit for, made him far more sympathetic towards the children than would otherwise have been the case. Another stroke of incredible good luck. But it was close. If I didn’t know better, I would be inclined to think there was another guiding force in her life beyond mine – perhaps the ‘Great Leveler of the Playing Field,’ or the ‘Great Mathematician,’ who’s sole job is balancing the books of life.”

“And then there was you,” he continued. “I agonized over you because their future was somewhat stable without you. I could have redirected Eli the night she flew to the cemetery that

first time, but her future with you in it was so much better, that I decided to let the chips fall where they may. And your 'Other One' appeared in Eli's future on fully 50% of the paths she could have taken, with terrifying results. It was as though their paths crossing was a Stable Future; one that I had to circumvent at any cost. The path with you in her life was the only one in which he was...dispatched. It was an easy choice."

Elaine was angry. She didn't like the idea of being somehow coldly manipulated behind the scenes by this man, no matter what his intentions. "You mean, you put Eli in the Other One's hands, and made her go through that hell, just to get rid of him? How could you have done that to her!?"

"Did you not understand me? It was the path with the lowest risk to her. I knew she would survive. The other paths...not so likely. Your nightmare with the Other One was nothing compared to what could have happened to Eli. Remember, she's a child, and he was a pedophilic sexual predator. And frankly, you were a surprise. Not until the Other One was dead, did your future with Eli solidify into a stable one. One very interesting development is that Eli does seem to be getting much better at surviving. She's learned quickly that the more people that are on her side, the better. Her choices are getting better and her more directed impulsiveness brought you into their family, kicking and screaming."

Elaine smiled, "Well, on that point I agree with you completely. Now, what is it you want of me?"

"I would like to meet Eli face to face one time. Once is all I can risk. More than that, and the future gets cloudy for her. I don't know why, but she and I just don't mix nicely. Perhaps it's my family curse." He paused for a moment, "Everything I have done recently; the photographs, the cameo, this meeting, and the eggs – especially the eggs, have all been done to soften her towards the idea of me. To perhaps prepare her for our meeting. Before I continue, however, I do have one question that has been bothering me since my little family left Karlstad. It's a small inconsequential thing, but...how did the good Professor find Eli's birthday? It was only after much difficulty that I discovered it going through records that have long since been destroyed."

"So! You can't see everything. You're fallible. But that's obvious to me, albeit not to you. If you and your famous father could see the future correctly all the time, how is it your father was killed by mortals and you were forced into the dark life you obviously would not have picked for yourself? I'm tempted to keep the answer from you just because your obviously unjustified arrogance in thinking you can control other people's lives like you do, has gotten out of hand. I sense that it has caused you to cross the line many times, and what's more I think you know it; but I think the answer to your question is interesting enough that I'll tell you anyway. Richard gave her that birthday because it is exactly ½ a year from Oskar's. No other reason than that. I'll leave it to you to figure out what the odds are that that particular day is the correct one. And in case you are mathematically challenged, I assure you the odds are NOT simply 1 in 365, except to a mathematician with no imagination and no understanding of yin yang."

"Frankly, I'm not interested at all in your take on my 'arrogance,' or your simplistic off-handed account of my father's death." he said angrily. "My concern has been, first and foremost, Eli's

safety.” He stared coldly at her as his rage boiled to the surface. “Believe this: If I thought for a second that any one of you was becoming a negative force in her life, that person would be eliminated. Don’t underestimate my resolve in this. Not one of you is off limits.”

“Do you really think you’re going to win a pissing contest with me?” she said sarcastically. “If so you’ve underestimated MY resolve! You care about her only because of some ancient outmoded idea of maintaining family honor and your misguided sense of duty. She earned our love! She didn’t get it from us because of some twist of fate. Do you really think that she thought about what the results of her stealing the egg would be? She was simply hungry and opportunistic. Your fondness for her is based on a faulty antiquated ideology!”

His face turned red with anger and his eyes turned golden. She could see the fangs slowly lengthening in his half-open mouth.

“Go for it! Give it your best shot!” Elaine’s claws and fangs crackled into being as she rose up in her seat. “What does your future look like now?!” she snarled. “As I’m sure you must realize, ignorance of my immediate future will almost certainly bring out the worst in me, considering what’s at stake! The crystal-clear determination I have isn’t diluted by one of your ‘endless loops.’ How’s your ‘loop’ working out for you right now?”

“Foolish woman! Everything you have; your Richard, your Eli, your Oskar, you have only because of me!”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. I only know that it is impossible for you to undo what is done. I have Richard, Eli, and Oskar in MY care and you will NOT be able to harm any of them without going through me. Do we understand each other?” she glared at him.

“Have I aroused your motherly instincts, Elaine?” he hissed. “You, who have considered yourself neutered for over 40 years?”

“Don’t patronize me with your bullshit stereotypes. As intelligent as you are I would have expected you to move into the 20th century with a bit more ease than you have. Or are you too old and set in your ways, frozen forever as you are, with no hope of ever being able to understand the modern world?” she mocked him with his own words.

“What would you do if I were to tell you that your future in her life has changed; that it now spells her doom?”

“And I’m sure you’re telling me this as a disinterested neutral party. Don’t waste your breath!” Their faces were now only inches from each other.

He took a deep breath, backed away and sat down suddenly. His eyes rapidly lost their iridescence and his fangs retracted. “Elaine, I think that we need to agree to disagree. For our own individual reasons, Eli’s welfare is still our common goal. You need me as much as I need you.”

“Debatable! Why do we need you? Eli was becoming a happy, reasonably-well-adjusted child until you began frightening her with your messages. In spite of our assurances that you’re probably no threat to her, she’s regressing; she’s becoming fearful and distrusting again, solely because of your mixed messages with their sinister overtones. ”

“Sinister overtones? How dare you accuse me of trying to deliberately frighten her!”

“How *dare* I? How passé! Does anyone in real life ever say that anymore? Do you realize how stupid that sounds today? No of course you don’t. 20th century, remember?”

He sighed deeply, “Okay! You win! Let’s start over. I apologize for underestimating your ‘Resolve.’ And you DON’T need me as much as I need you. My ‘designed life’ for Eli has taken on a mind of its own – yours!” he smiled at her. “You’re quite formidable, you know. I’m not used to...accommodating other points of view other than my own, and I intensely dislike hostile criticism. What’s your excuse?”

“I don’t like being treated as a means to an end. 40 years of it have made me a bit sensitive to being manipulated by someone who has no business playing with other’s lives.”

He sighed again, “Okay, now that we understand each other, I promise not to ‘manipulate’ you without your permission,” he said sarcastically. “In return I expect to at least be given the benefit of the doubt before you jump down my throat for the perceived mistakes I’ve made. Believe me, the last thing I wanted to do was frighten Eli. Don’t you understand that if she hates me, I’ve lost?”

“You’ve lost only if your desire to help her is primarily self-serving.” She paused, “But I do understand that you would like her to know what you have done for her and why; it’s only natural after 140 years of hard work.”

“There! Now was that so hard? What can I do to make this happen?” he sat back in the seat.

“Let me discuss this with Richard, Eli, and Oskar,” she said. “I promise, I’ll try to talk her into it, but it’ll never happen if she refuses. Are you okay with that?”

“No, but it’ll have to do. Now, would you unlock the door for me?”

“How will I get hold of you? No, wait. You’ll get hold of me, right? It’s your talent.” She smiled at him.

“I’ll contact you within the next few days, if that’s all right,” he said, as he stepped out of the car. If only she knew how difficult predicting their future had become for him over the last few months. It was as if their future had become enveloped in fog. Elaine had been right. He was actually unable to see clearly the outcome of the violent confrontation that had almost occurred. It had flickered before his eyes like an old silent film. He tasted her blood as his fangs sank into her neck and she died in his arms; He felt himself die as her oddly-shaped, razor sharp claws decapitated him; he died, she died. The only constant was the sound of Eli sobbing. He had to

back down this time. And, he was worried. The distance he could see into the future was getting shorter and shorter. He found himself having to guess half the time. And his own future? He saw only blackness. The last time this had happened was just before he had killed his father. It was hard to believe how long ago it had been; the middle of the last century.

§

“No! I won’t do it! I will NOT dishonor what’s left of the family name!” Gudmund paced back and forth in front of his father. “What you’ve become is on you! I refuse to wallow in the filth and inhumanity you seem to enjoy so much. If you feel you need company in your little games, why don’t you just turn Jacob? He enjoys the mutilations almost as much as you do!”

“What a hypocrite! Do you not kill with as much zeal as I? Do you not enjoy a good meal the same as I?”

“Perhaps! But I don’t relish it as you do. I’m quick and my victims die a painless death. I didn’t choose this life; you chose it for me. And now look at the trouble your arrogance has gotten us into. Alexander’s men are demanding that both eggs be returned to them, and we’ve only got one to give them. Didn’t you see this in your future? What’s the matter, Papa? Getting old and careless?”

“How dare you speak to me like that?” he growled, “I’m your father and I expect you to show me proper respect.” Secretly, Törnkvist was concerned. Gudmund was correct; he hadn’t seen the outcome of his little ‘escapade’ with the eggs. The theft of the black egg on the road had caught him completely by surprise, and Alexander having traced them back to his estate before he was prepared was an even bigger surprise. He had always had trouble seeing the future when his son was nearby, but he knew that was the result of the natural uncertainties caused by the interaction between two people whose knowledge of the future was constantly redirecting it. When alone, it had always been crystal clear, although the distance he could see varied greatly from path to path.

“You lost your right to my respect when you turned me against my will. And your insistence that all my children and their children’s children face a similar fate, is unacceptable to me.”

“Unacceptable or not, time will tell, and as I’m sure you can see as clearly as I, this will all come to pass. It’s out of your hands now.”

“You’re lying! For the last week, I’ve seen nothing but blackness in our future. I’m not even certain which door you will leave through when you’re finally done enjoying yourself at my expense.” His hatred of his father knew no bounds. He had already decided that there would be no more children. He would not put his poor wife through any more anguish. Losing one son to his father would be hard enough on her.

“I’m though with you! Go hide under your pregnant wife’s petticoats. I’m going to cut off the snake’s head tonight. Without Alexander to lead them, they’ll soon lose their resolve and go

back home with their tails between their legs. Then I can get down to the business of finding the thief.”

Gudmund smiled to himself. He had already narrowed down the possible culprits with his father’s unwitting help. His journals of sadism and sexual exploitation of children for over 100 years had been quite detailed. Since he had persuaded the men who had seen the child run into the forest to describe the wounds on its victims, he felt certain they had been killed by a vampire. A vampire child. And there was only one source for those. He saw both witnesses off, purses full, to parts unknown. He had to keep ahead of his father on this one, although he would have loved to have seen his father’s face when he learned who had caused him so much trouble.

Both of them turned suddenly as the sound of gunfire echoed through the hall and Jacob rushed in breathlessly. “Master, they’ve come! You said we had more time! What are we going to do?” His disgustingly fat body shook all over as he fell to his knees in front of Törnkvist.

“Go look after the children!” he snapped. “If you keep them calm, keep your fingers out of the girls, and none of the boys have peed in their pants by this evening, I may let you have one for yourself tonight.” He watched, amused, as Jacob waddled towards the side door smiling broadly.

General Sandeen moved purposefully across the hall flanked by two Lieutenants. “Master, they’re attacking from the north and west, but my men are easily holding them off. Your Elite Guard is still at your disposal, and on your order, we can move around behind them through the forest trenches and trap them in a crossfire.”

“Very well, General. Give me a few moments.” He turned to Gudmund, as the general made a fast exit through the main hall doors. “And if you’re thinking of slipping away during the excitement, just remember. I have given instructions as to the final disposition of your wife and unborn child if such a situation arises. And she WILL have more children!” he said coldly, “If you’re not up to it, I’ll accommodate her myself. See how that future looks to you.” He smiled pleasantly.

Gudmund felt the rage rise up in his throat. *Enough! Why have I endured this for so long? This will end today!* Two quick steps took him to the wall where, with all his strength he pulled hard on the heavy drapes. The massive iron rods groaned as the wall brackets bent and then broke, sending a twenty-foot high wall of royal velvet drapes and iron curtain rods crashing to the marble floor. The full light of the afternoon sun bore down on them through the huge windows, but he stepped quickly back into the shadows, drew his sword, and as his father raised his hands to his face and turned angrily towards him, swung with all his might. Törnkvist’s hands reflexively grasped at empty air as his head bounced and rolled across the great hall. His headless body, spouting a plume of the very blood he had wrenched from thousands of his small defenseless victims, swayed in the sun for a moment, then crumpled to the floor. Gudmund could smell the burning flesh as he quickly headed for the door that a fat, smiling Jacob had stepped through only moments before.

He turned and for a moment watched the flames rise, blackening the ceiling and igniting the mountain of velvet. “How does your future look to you now father? You’ll be happy to know I

finally did your bidding. I cut off the snake's head!" He hurried through the door. One more evil creature to deal with, some village children to release, then he and his new family would escape through the aqueduct at the rear of the estate. Suddenly his future became clearer, and a great sadness washed over him. His only child would be born sterile, and he knew he would have no more. No more of his children would ever have a Vampire as a father. The Törnkvist lineage ends here. The family honor had been destroyed beyond redemption and no one would mourn its demise. He could dimly see his future descendants wink out of existence one by one as his resolve hardened, and his future became fixed. He smiled grimly to himself as he imagined them all soundlessly thanking him for what he had done on their behalf.

Chapter 19: Family Reunion

Elaine pulled into the garage, quickly closed the garage door and hurried upstairs to the study. She closed the door behind her softly as Dawson looked up from his desk, relieved. “I was starting to worry. You were taking much longer than usual.”

“Rich, I just had a long discussion with Törnkvist. He was waiting in my car when I finished my shopping. He wants to meet with Eli.”

He stood up quickly, “Which Törnkvist!? Was it...?”

“No! It was his son. I intensely dislike the man. He’s arrogant and overbearing, but as badly as he’s handled this so far, I honestly think he has Eli’s best interests at heart.”

Dawson’s voice was hard, “Eli will make the final decision, but I have already made mine, and I’ll have no problem telling her what it is.”

“At least keep it to yourself unless she asks you for it...please?”

There was a quick knock on the door, but before they could react, Eli and Oskar rushed in. “Mom, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to, but you were so loud I couldn’t help it,” Oskar blurted out. “I read everything! Was he really going to kill you? He really grew fangs and claws?”

“Elaine, what’s he saying?”

“It’s not important! Nothing happened. We came to a mutual -- understanding, once he realized he wasn’t getting past me.” She turned to Eli and put her hands on her shoulders. “He wants to meet with you, Butterfly. He assured me he meant you no harm and was actually trying to reach out to you with his gifts, notes and photographs. He was trying to show you how long he has been protecting you from harm because of the gift you inadvertently gave his family.” She went on to describe the conversation in detail; his ability to see the future, his manipulation of Håkan, the vacant apartment next to Oskar, the flyer in the mailbox, and his strong desire to finally meet her face-to-face.

Eli sat quietly for a moment. “Only with Oskar. I’ll only talk to him if Oskar is with me. And you. And Papa! Only then!”

Elaine turned to Dawson. “How does that sound? Reasonable? Safe enough? No matter what his intentions, he won’t try anything when he’s outnumbered four to one – and Oskar’s talents will be critical in this meeting.”

“Eli, are you absolutely sure? You don’t have to do this at all if you don’t want to. You owe this man nothing.”

“I know, Papa. But maybe...” she was afraid to say it out loud. The one question she wanted to ask him. He was the only one who might know the answer. She had to see him for that one

reason alone, she decided. "I'll do it. Tell him I'll do it." She sat in Papa's lap and put her arms around him.

He held her tighter than usual as his feelings for her rose up and he could feel a lump in his throat. He kissed her gently on the cheek. "I love you," he whispered to her. "My beautiful Eli." He stroked her hair softly, then took her face in his hands. "We'll all be there for you. You'll be safe in our hands."

"Okay, Elaine, tell him we'll do it, but only under Eli's conditions. It's all of us, or nothing."

§

They were all sitting together on the back porch waiting, when the bell rang. Elaine squeezed Eli's hand, gave her an encouraging smile, and went to the door. Gudmund stood there looking like a typical Fleet Street barrister, with his dark gray suit, shiny black shoes, and large official-looking monogrammed briefcase. "Good evening, Elaine, how is Elias tonight? Have you been able to assuage the damage I unwittingly caused?" his voice was soft, but she could still feel its strength; its intensity.

"Come in Gudmund. She's much better, but she's understandably nervous about the meeting." She turned and ushered him out to the back.

"Please, have a seat," Dawson said as they stepped out onto the porch. Eli was in the center on the far side of the table, with Oskar seated to her right, and Dawson at the end of the table next to Oskar. Elaine quickly sat down next to Eli, and Gudmund sat alone directly across from Eli.

"Good evening, Elias. Again, I apologize for causing you any discomfort. I assure you it was not my intent."

Elaine could feel Eli's hand tremble slightly, then tighten around hers. "My name is Eli," she said, almost in a whisper. "I've been Eli ever since..." her voice trailed off.

"Yes. Again, I apologize! Eli." He repeated it as he tried to understand it; to understand what it really meant to her to be Eli. But he found it impossible to imagine what would have gone through the mind of a naked, defenseless young Elias strapped to that bloody table, fresh off the farm, having experienced only the love and warmth of his family and friends, growing up in a world that, up until that awful moment had seemed friendly and secure and full of purpose and order. The cold, terrible, unbearable finality of what was done to him as he lay there, arms and legs spread out before them in humiliation with all those smiling eyes watching him writhe in agony. Could he have even understood the significance of the loss? Or was it the sight of his father drinking his blood and delicately, but purposefully, sucking the severed remains of his boyhood dry that drove it home to him? Perhaps seeing a part of his identity being treated like the unwanted remains of a meal, and tossed into the corner for the dogs when he had finished? Did it come to him all at once? Or was it a gradual realization once his terror had subsided, as he lay alone bleeding in his cell? ...Eli.... So much meaning was buried in that name she had chosen for herself. A part of his name, lost forever.

“You...look like him.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t imagine how that must make you feel.” He felt shame for the first time in over a century, as he looked into the deep blue eyes of this beautiful, eternal child, knowing she was probably right now reliving the sins of his father. He thought about the many times before that he had looked into her sightless eyes as he protected her while she slept her long sleeps. This was infinitely more difficult for him; it was almost unbearable.

She hesitated a moment, then, “Did you love your father?”

He thought a moment, “When I was your age, I loved my father, even though I thought I knew what he was. When I grew up, married, and brought my new wife home, I felt his hostility and his strange darkness for the first time. Something had changed. There was a widening divide between us. When we fought over the future of my not-yet-born child, my father came into my bedroom late that night and turned me. And as he changed me forever, I hated him. When I saw for myself one night what he did to the children...to you and so many others, I loathed him.” He shook his head slowly, “Did you know that you are the only innocent still alive? I searched everywhere, but you are the only one.” His voice was soft and gentle. “Some of the innocents died at my father’s hands as you would have, had you gone home; others because they weren’t as clever or careful as you. Some died because they hadn’t enough respect for the sun. Some sweet ones, a bit older and softer than you, died of broken hearts. Some not-so-innocent older ones, left intact by my father for dark reasons he never shared with me, embraced what they were and went their own way.” He paused a moment and ran his hand unsteadily through his hair, “And some of our ‘kind, loving’ God’s very young ones starved to death crying in the darkness, alone and afraid, impossibly far from the warm loving arms of their mothers. You alone among all the innocents survived.”

Eli’s eyes glistened, “Elaine told me it’s because of you.”

“I’ve thought so for over 100 years, Eli. In fact, I thought so when I talked to Elaine last week. But now? No, Eli. I’m convinced it’s because of you and who you are in spite of what my father did to you. Look around you. Look at your family. Do you think I did this? I didn’t even foresee the important parts of it. You unwittingly but determinedly gathered them all together into a strong family by yourself.” He turned to Oskar. “You know I speak the truth. Your gift makes it impossible for me to deceive you.”

“He’s telling you the truth, Eli. And more. He’s afraid of your judgment of him, because... ‘the nightmare of your life was caused by someone unbearably close to him by birth. His bloodline is responsible for more suffering that he can bear to acknowledge.’” Oskar repeated what he was reading with difficulty. The words and ideas were foreign to him; almost beyond his understanding, but he could vividly feel the pain of it. He looked up, startled, “Eli, he really...cares about you. I can’t explain how; it’s different. To him, you’re like a...jewel, or an ‘icon’? I don’t know what that is exactly, but it’s something special; something unique, something...holy?”

“Oskar, your confusion is one of the disadvantages of your eternal youth. There are some things you will never be able to understand, but I do appreciate your unsolicited attempt to explain it. You’re close enough, I suppose.” He smiled at him. “Eli is a wonderful accident, unwittingly created by my father over 100 years before his death, and the indirect cause of it.”

Oskar’s eyes got wide. He quickly took Eli’s hand in his, as Lord Törnkvist’s last day played out before their eyes. Elaine looked up at him, startled as she suddenly understood his angry response to her flippant remarks about his father’s death. She squeezed Eli’s hand.

Eli’s voice was just a whisper, “You...you killed your own father! You killed him because...” she paused. “What happened to your wife and your little boy?”

“My wife died of breast cancer ten years after we left the estate. My son, to whom I gave my identity, died after a long, relatively happy life. He died in my arms. I refused to turn either of them to save them. There are things infinitely worse than death.”

“I’m sorry. You must have been lonely.”

“Not so lonely. I had you to look after.”

“Elaine told me that you couldn’t talk to me because we would both have died.”

He smiled at her. “No, Eli. I would have died sometimes; you would have died always, and I couldn’t have that. But I assure you, you are safe talking to me now. You don’t need me anymore.”

She looked down, “I ... I’m sorry. It’s hard for me to...look at you.” This time, her trembling was visible to him. He felt dirty; unclean, like a leper. He knew he would never be rid of the curse of his father. Hundreds of tortured victims cried out to him from the past, accusingly. ‘Why didn’t you stop him sooner? You could have saved us, you coward! You only saw fit to step up when your own wife and child were threatened! We didn’t mean enough to you.’ Coward. That summed it up nicely. Once the wrapping on his sophisticated self-delusional intellect was stripped off, he was a coward and a mass-murderer – nothing else.

“Please, don’t.” Oskar said, shakily. “I can’t...” He took Eli’s hand again.

She jerked, as though she had put her finger in a light socket; then looked directly at him, a look of wonderment in her eyes. “He hurt you too!” She got a dark look on her face, “I hate him! I really hate him! I’m glad he’s dead!”

“No, Eli. He hurt YOU. I had a choice and I made the wrong one. You are the only correct choice I’ve made in over 140 years.”

“But...why did you want to see me?”

“Because I wanted you to see me; to know of my existence. I wanted you to know that all those years you were not alone.” He looked deeply into her eyes. “And I wanted to give you one last gift.” He put his briefcase on the table and opened it. He carefully removed a thick folder and placed it in front of him. He slowly and deliberately snapped his briefcase closed and placed it on the floor next to his chair.

“Eli, I know that losing your family on top of everything that happened to you must have been unbearable. During my search for you, as I narrowed down the possibilities and followed the trails of death, I found many cases like yours, but ultimately, you were one of the few that made no attempt to reconnect with your family afterwards. Why not? Why didn’t you try to go home?”

“I...I couldn’t! I would rather have them think I was dead. I loved them too much to put them in danger. I knew that ...your father would find out I was still alive and he might kill my family if he found me there. And I didn’t want them to know what I was. I was ashamed.”

“I thought as much.” He reached into the folder and handed her a large photograph. “This was taken about two weeks ago. There are many, many more where that came from.”

Eli gasped as she looked at the photo. It was a photo of herself smiling into the camera. She was standing on the bridge over the Serpentine. She was wearing a short-sleeved blouse, a pair of shorts and tennis shoes. And, judging by the short shadow she cast, it was around noon. “That’s not me! Who is that? She looks like me!”

“That, Eli, is your ever-so-many-great grandniece. I’m sorry to have to tell you your brother died in a work-related accident soon after your family moved to Stockholm. But your sister married well, and her line has prospered. The bulk of the clan has moved to England over the last 80 years or so, and your sister’s great, great, great, great grandson lives in London. This is his daughter. And here is your entire family back.” He slid the folder over to her. “I also have several large photo albums that I’m sure the rest of your birth family would be delighted to see if you choose to make them aware of your existence, but you have plenty of time to make a decision on this. After all, you’re immortal. But I would...”

He didn’t get a chance to finish. Eli leaped over the table, wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him tightly. Hesitantly at first, he put his arms around her; then more firmly. Dawson could see the tears in his eyes.

“I’ve held you in my arms countless times before, but this is the first time you’ve held me back.” He whispered to her. “You’ve finished me! I’m done.”

She felt his warmth as she imagined him holding her all those many years ago while she was hibernating. It was like having a Guardian Angel. And he had answered the one question she had wanted to ask him. “But why? Why did you look after me? I didn’t do anything to help you on purpose. I was just...hungry.”

“It’s complicated, Eli. Suffice it to say you were the only good thing that ever came out of my father’s sins, and I had no choice but to keep you safe. Once I found you, you were my

responsibility – forever. I was too late for so many others. You were all I had, my only chance to...make things right. And as I said in my note: for whatever reason, deliberate or not, you saved my family from my father's idea of a black dynasty. I owe you more than I can ever begin to repay. I owe you compensation for sins committed against you by my family, and I owe you boundless gratitude for saving my progeny from the darkness of our mutual disease. For it is a disease; never doubt it! It makes those of us weaker than yourself succumb to its darkness in thought as well as in deed."

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Now, I'm sure you have questions. Let's talk a while and get to know each other."

Oskar raised his hand. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Oskar. What's on your mind?"

"Eli's told me a lot of things about her life since she stole the egg. Why didn't you help her meet nice people instead of ...guys like Håkan. They made her life awful. And there were lots of them like him. How could you do that to her?"

"I understand your confusion Oskar. It does seem like I didn't help much doesn't it? But you have to understand that, in order for Eli to meet you, she had to meet Håkan first. And in order for her to meet her Papa, she had to meet you first. And in order to meet Elaine, you all had to deal with the Other One first. And now, here you all are. Unfortunately, sometimes you have to deal with the bad to get to the good." He directed his last thought to Oskar, *And if she had met nice people all her life, perhaps she wouldn't have had the insight to recognize the love you offered her.*

"I still think you might have done just as well using nicer people." He put his arms around Eli protectively and glared at him.

Elaine flashed a quick grin at Dawson. *Leave it to Oskar to ask the question that's been on all our minds. Except Eli's of course.* She did understand Gudmund's point, but still...why so many? Was it really necessary? On balance, she had to believe it was, or at the least, HE thought it was. His sincerity didn't seem to be an issue anymore. Not with Oskar on duty.

"What would have happened to Håkan if you hadn't burned his house?"

"I'm not sure, Eli. He most certainly would have had a dark future, but to be honest, I was more concerned about yours."

Oskar could feel the steely resolve behind the comment. He shuddered as he thought about what it would be like for anyone to be an obstacle in his path.

But I'm sure his dark future wouldn't have included mass murder and blood collecting. Håkan was clearly an unwitting sacrifice on the altar of Gudmund's holy quest. Elaine had scarcely finished the thought, when she realized that Oskar was looking directly at her. He knew, and

understood. And she knew he wasn't letting Eli see his thoughts on this. *For an eternal 12-year-old, he has a surprising maturity in some areas. Areas usually related to Eli's welfare.*

Oskar smiled at her. *Thanks, Mom!* He thought. *I won't tell her. She'd feel awful if she knew.*

"What's my niece's name? What's she like? Is she nice?"

"Her name is Hannah, and she's a sweet, kind girl. Her room is full of animals; mice, gerbils, hamsters, and a big, fluffy dog. Her parents are at their wits' end with her. They kid her about having so many mouths to feed. She cries if she accidentally steps on a bug. When they find a spider in the house she makes them take it outside, rather than kill it."

Eli smiled to herself as she thought about her. "I wonder if she would...like me."

"There's only one way to find out, Eli." He smiled at her.

"But I can't. It sounds nice, but I can't. Not until Papa and Jack..." She smiled at Elaine. Elaine knew how she felt.

"Why did you take our picture on the Jungle Gym? Did you know what was going to happen?"

"No, Eli, I didn't. There were two equally possible futures, and to be honest, I expected the worst. I saw you going through the change..."

"You thought I was going to kill Oskar?"

"I did. And then Oskar surprised the both of us. And you surprised and delighted me. One of the few times the future was cloudy to me."

§

It was approaching daylight when he and Elaine finally said 'good night' to the kids. Elaine tucked them both in and Eli took Gudmund's hand as he kissed her on the forehead and brushed back Oskar's hair. "Good night, you two."

They stepped out and quietly closed the door behind them. They slowly went downstairs to the living room where Dawson was waiting. "Did Eli ask when you were coming back?"

"No, thank God. I couldn't have lied to her."

"What are your plans now? You are welcome here any time, you know. I can't help but think there must be a way for you to do this safely."

"Actually, there are many ways now, but unfortunately, I can't avail myself of any of them. I'm done now. I need to ... rest."

“No! You don’t!” Elaine suddenly realized where this was going. How could she have missed all the hints?

“Yes. I do. You have no idea how difficult it is for me to stay alive each day. I understated my position when I told Eli that the weaker of us succumb to the darkness of this disease. Do you realize how many innocent people have died on my account? Only Eli could know and she is shielded from its awful reality by her youth. I’m selfish. If I weren’t, I wouldn’t have requested this visit. I would have gone quietly into the daylight; now, my death will hurt her. The longer I stay, the more often I see her, the harder it will be for the both of us.”

Elaine looked at him more closely. “How long has it been since you’ve...fed?”

“I’ve been fasting for four weeks.”

“What do you mean, ‘fasting’?”

“I mean I haven’t killed anyone for four weeks.” He said curtly.

“Let me get you something,” Elaine turned and headed for the kitchen.

“No! Didn’t you understand me? I’m done. The beast is in me now. It’s all I can do to keep from trying to kill you all. This is the last battle and the one I WILL NOT LOSE.”

Elaine could see him trembling. She could smell his lust for blood. She understood deeply how they must all have appeared to him as they sat around the table together. She remembered. She was suddenly in awe of his inner strength. She could never have resisted those urges at this late stage of starvation. “Eli too?” she whispered.

He nodded, tears in his eyes. “I wanted her first! Holding her in my arms without destroying her was my first and greatest victory – and the last part of my future I could see clearly. I only need one more victory. Now you understand another part of the reason I had to see her. I needed the resolve. I have to beat him when he’s at his strongest. I want to watch him die at MY hands. Of course he’ll win in the end. He’s an animal; a predator. When he dies, he’ll go where all animals go when they die, no better, no worse than any of the others before him. I on the other hand am an abomination. I long ago dismissed the concept of a benevolent God. No loving God could ever allow something like me to exist in the world of man. I’ll go where all abominations go: to Hell if there’s a God; to oblivion if there isn’t. Either is preferable to living.”

“But the cure. Richard is close to the cure.”

“I have no doubt. In fact I was sure of it some time ago. But it doesn’t change what I am and what I’ve done.”

“But you were turned against your will, like Eli.”

“And the similarity ends there! Eli agonized over everyone she killed. I’m more like my father than you might think. It’s impossible to live with someone like my father for as long as I did without being touched by him. But I’m certainly not going to bore you with an accounting of my sins. They’re too numerous and well-defined to share with you in the vain hope that you will somehow be able to rationalize or explain them away because in the short time you’ve known me you can see something worth salvaging. Your entire family is, in my opinion, much too forgiving of these things; consequently, your concern for me lacks credibility and falls on deaf ears.

“And, just to make absolutely sure you understand the difference, don’t you EVER doubt that Eli is still pure and untouched by her years of killing. A child is incapable of understanding the finality of death the way an adult can. And, more importantly, she heals herself after each killing. Did you think that a vampire’s healing ability only heals her body after injury? It also heals her mind. She would have gone insane otherwise. I would have thought you would have been aware of that yourself, Elaine, after your own experiences with your Friend. Only an amputation is beyond its abilities. You see, it has to keep its host healthy and intact in order to feed efficiently.”

“It hadn’t occurred to me, but of course you’re right,” Dawson said. “It explains a lot to me in retrospect, including you, Elaine. Your 40 years of hell would have precluded any chance, at least in a normal person, that you could have become the fiercely protective and loving mother you’ve become. As well as the love of my life.” He smiled at her. “Irony, isn’t it? The vampire in you unwittingly restored you to me intact.”

Gudmund nodded in agreement, “Similarly, Eli has the memories, but not the permanent scarring in her brain that ordinary mortals have to contend with after trauma. And Elias was particularly strong-willed before he was turned. Think about it. Do you think a normal child, after killing even one person and living alone with, and doing the bidding of pedophiles for even 10 or 12 years would be capable of loving Oskar so easily? Her gradual willingness to love easily and quickly, her ability to see the best in people as she now does; do you think that would be possible if she couldn’t heal her mind as well as her body? As Oskar so simply put it when he read my mind, she’s a beautiful jewel, an icon representing the best of what a decent human being should be after acquiring four lifetimes of dark memories without damage to her still young soul. I couldn’t allow her to die!” he paused, “But now she has you two, and my work is complete. And I need to go before it’s too late. I, and only I, will pick the time and place of our collective death.” he glanced out the window. “Tell Eli how much I loved her.” He quietly slipped out the front door and closed it softly behind him.

They watched as he went out to the black limousine parked at the curb; watched as a dark stocky chauffeur opened the door for him and the car drove smoothly and silently away. “I didn’t see the limousine there earlier,” Elaine said, puzzled. “I wonder how long it’s been there?”

“I find myself more interested in his relationship with the driver.” Dawson said, “Did you notice the Törnkvist crest on the door?”

They stood there a moment, thinking about the tragedy of Gudmund's life and his determination to end it because of what he considered the irreconcilably contradictory way he had led it. There were no easy arguments to persuade him otherwise, they realized.

"Can you imagine the conflict in the man? Weighing the deaths of the thousands of people needed to sustain his own life against his desire to save Eli, whose own existence caused thousands more deaths, created a terrible dilemma for him."

Elaine nodded, "Finding Eli alive certainly caused him ethical problems. I'm sure in retrospect that he would have finished himself as soon as his son died. He's a man who takes his personal responsibilities very seriously. I can't help wondering why he couldn't have worked his feeding out without killing if it meant so much to him. If the Other One could do it, why not Gudmund?"

"You're right. I think there may be a darker side to him than he's revealed to us. I think his compassion for the children may have been an anomaly in an otherwise darker soul. Remember how quickly he turned on you in the car. And how casually he sacrificed Håkan, and probably many others, for Eli. And I find it interesting that he failed to mention the obvious fact that Eli's strong aversion to him at first was due to the fact that his father's horrible crime against her, and the terror she endured, occurred before she was turned." He shuddered as he remembered that day in Karlstad when he relived that nightmare. "Thus those scars still remain pretty much intact."

"It's so sad!" Elaine put her arm around him, "He's a living Shakespearian tragic character, doomed to die because of his own irreconcilable flaws." She felt a bit guilty that she was so casually summing up his life in such a superficial manner. He was far more of an enigma than that. And she knew he meant well. She thought about how he had cleverly maneuvered her into realizing the strength of her love for Richard and his commitment to her. She took his hand and squeezed it tightly.

He kissed her gently and put his arm around her. They went up the stairs together.

§

Gudmund sat at his desk, surveying the row of boxes stacked in front of it. "Let's see...have I forgotten anything? The box of Eli's family photo albums; the box of Eli's hibernation and life photos and journals; the will and disposition documents for all my properties; the final box of surprises..." he smiled to himself. Eli's beautiful face was all he could see before him. The huge 7x5-foot portrait he had made years ago, a composite of several of his best photographs, stood against the wall.

He thought about how many times he had betrayed his core beliefs by preserving her life. Every time he held her sleeping in his arms and didn't carry her into the sunlight with him, he caused hundreds more to die. But he couldn't. He could never bring himself to do it, and he couldn't bear to leave her alone. And the years went by so quickly.

The clock on the mantle showed a few minutes past 12:00. *It's time*, he thought to himself. He walked over to the outside door and opened it. It was a beautiful day with large fluffy clouds casting slowly moving shadows across the huge 4-acre lawn. He could feel the indirect sunlight prickling his exposed skin; even more as he stepped up to the edge of the doorframe's shadow.

He stood in the open doorway for a moment and thought about Eli, about how precious she was to him. Then he remembered how hard it had been for him to keep from feeding on her when she threw herself across the table into his arms. He thought about how his own puppet master had pulled his strings now for over 140 years; and how he was about to sever the strings forever. He had won. He had used the puppeteer against itself. He felt its mindless rage well up in him as it realized it had decisively lost the final battle. He had deliberately starved himself just to drive home to him how necessary his final decision was. *Enough! Why have I endured this for so long? This will end today!* The words to his father echoed in his mind, as he felt his resolve harden. He stripped his clothes off, stepped into the sunlit yard and decisively slammed the door shut behind him. He strode purposefully across the lawn as he felt the sun searing his naked body. He held his arms out at his sides, leaned back and looked directly into the sun for the first time since his father turned him in the darkness as his wife cowered in the corner of their bedroom. He had never been alone since that day. The puppeteer was with him always, even on their trips together into the future. The pain almost overwhelmed him; he choked back the urge to scream as his eyes became milky and the sunlight boiled their colors away into darkness. He stood in place turning around and around, face to the sun, feeling it hungrily eat at his flesh like a starving animal. The puppeteer screamed in anger; he could feel it trying to regain control; to run for the door, for the cool darkness and the healing...and the feeding. He held his ground until his knees buckled beneath him and he fell backwards onto the cool damp grass. He felt momentary relief as the sun passed behind a small cloud and simultaneously the predator swirled up around him once again. With all his remaining strength, he arched his back and spread his arms out beside him "What does your future look like now, child of my father?" He growled through the pain. "Die now!" He felt the sun bear down on him with a vengeance as it reemerged from behind the small cloud. He smelled the burning flesh, felt the flames burst around him, and suddenly, he was alone. Sweetly, softly, and silently alone. His beautiful wife's face floated before him for a moment, then the fleeting faces of all the children whose deaths he had indirectly caused by his lack of courage; and all the victims of his selfish self-serving mission to save one insignificant child – but he had no regrets. She was saved and nothing could change that. He shook his fist at his imaginary God—the God who had forsaken him that night while his poor wife screamed in terror. This was done in spite of Him, not with His blessing. Hell would be a welcome relief to him. "Do your worst!" he hissed. His last flash of the future hit him with a jolt; a future without him in it. Eli sitting on her bed sobbing -- crying for a dear lost friend; crying for a deeper connection that would never be made.

Chapter 20. The Meeting

Rich and Elaine sat in the darkness in the living room. They could still hear Eli crying upstairs, and the low murmur of Oskar's soft consoling voice. The news of Gudmund's death had hit her hard.

He shook his head sadly, "You should have seen her when I first met them. There was a toughness about her; a kind of fatalism. She had a cat-like predatory way of moving. She trusted no one but Oskar. She was almost a feral child. Now look at her. She's...almost fragile; she's vulnerable, trusting. The older she gets, the younger she seems. She's almost 12 again. And yet...every time something unpleasant happens in her life, I see that primal look in her eyes that I saw that first day. Her past will always haunt her, it seems, and understandably so."

"It's all because of you, Rich. And Oskar of course. But you gave them both the loving, stable environment necessary for them to evolve into what they are today."

"As long as we're placing blame here, I think your 13 years as their mother had a lot to do with it too. They have a real family now, and your contributions to it have been indispensable."

"Richard Dawson; always the romantic." She said kiddingly.

"I didn't mean..." he stumbled.

"Shh!" she kissed him gently. "If I haven't figured out how to read between the stodgy lines by now, I never will." She smiled at him.

They heard movement upstairs. Eli's crying had stopped, and the sound of banging, boxes sliding across the floor, and furniture being moved replaced it. Oscar hurried down the stairs, flashed them a brief smile, and disappeared into the back yard. He quickly returned and hurried back upstairs with a bundle of...something. They looked at each other.

"Should we..."

"No. Let's leave them alone. If they need us, they'll let us know." Dawson whispered. "By the way, Gudmund's lawyer called this afternoon. He said the paperwork would be finished in about a month and that he had a few things to bring over to us at that time, along with the will. It seems the beneficiaries of his estate are all living in this house, save one."

"Really? I wonder who it could be?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say it was his chauffeur and jack-of-all-trades. I met him a few days before Gudmund...died."

"You didn't tell me you had met anyone but Gudmund that night. What was he like? Do you think he was..."

"I'm almost certain of it," he said. "I arrived just before the sun went down and he buzzed me in. When I opened the door, he stepped back into the shadows as the sunlight reflected off my windshield and caught him in the face."

"Do you think he poses any threat to us now that Gudmund is dead?"

"Unlikely. He was fiercely protective of him though. He watched me like a hawk the whole time I was there. His eyes were like ... yours when you came after me after I blew you into the pool with the hose."

"I slipped. You and your ... 'hose' had nothing to do with it!" She scowled at him.

"Really! I have four eye-witnesses who remember it quite differently," he taunted. "Shall we take a vote?"

"Okay, okay! You win! But it was a lucky shot," she mussed up his hair and kissed him on the forehead. "But why do you think he'll leave us alone?"

"Because he was loyal to Gudmund. And Gudmund assured me, in his presence, that Eli's safety and happiness were his primary concern at this point."

"Well, I still don't like the idea of another vampire nearby that knows so much about us," she said worriedly. "But you're probably right." She tilted her head as she listened for signs of activity upstairs. Everything had been quiet now for a half hour or so. "They're pretty quiet. Do you think Eli is okay?"

"I think now would be a good time to see how they're doing," Rich said as he headed for the stairs. He looked at his watch. 8:30. They should still be up, especially tonight. They went upstairs and peeked in Eli's door. "Can we come in? Elaine said softly.

"Sure!" Oskar said. He was sitting at her table, reading a book. The box of albums was open at his feet and several of them were next to him on the table.

"Where's Eli?" Dawson couldn't see her anywhere. But the window was open. He felt a pang of fear as he remembered what happened the last time she left at night by herself.

"She...wanted to fly for a while. She was so upset, I didn't want to stop her."

"But where did she go?! Did she tell you where she was going?" Visions of the Other One flashed vividly before his eyes."

"She went to see Hannah," he said sheepishly. "She didn't want to talk to her; only to see her. But I think she'll talk to her anyway."

Dawson and Elaine looked at each other. "Well, I hope she took some clothes with her. First impressions can be pretty important," Elaine chided.

“Yeah, she took her backpack with clothes and stuff in it. She said she’d be back by 10:00, and for you not to worry. She said she wouldn’t do anything stupid.”

Yeah, I remember how that worked out for her the last time, Dawson thought to himself. He couldn’t help it. What she went through alone at the Other One’s hands that night still disturbed him, even after all these years.

“Really, Dad! I think she’ll be okay. No vampires there.” Oskar smiled at him. He nodded towards the bookcases and Eli’s computer desk. “What do you think? Eli did it herself.”

They both turned, and saw immediately that a shelf on her bookcase had been removed and her eggs, their new cameo, the Dawson Lecture brochure, and several photographs stood in the larger space the missing shelf provided. In the center, with a vase of flowers beside it, was a photograph of a much younger Gudmund, with his arm around his new bride. They both looked very happy.

“She said she was going to change the pictures every week, except for the one.” He nodded at the box on the floor. “And there certainly seem to be enough to last her a long time.”

Elaine could tell that Richard wasn’t really listening. He was really worried for Eli. “Rich, if she’s not back by 9:30, I’m going after her. You’ll not talk me out of it.” He flashed her a grateful smile.

§

Eli flew low over the row of two-story, red brick homes and dropped silently into the dark street. She quickly stepped behind a hedge, retracted her wings, put on her blouse and shoes, slipped the backpack back on and stepped out onto the sidewalk. She walked slowly down the block, looking at house numbers. She crossed Tillingham Way and continued down Twineham Green, which circled around a small park and re-emerged on Tillingham Way about a half block down. The yards were all well-lit and well-kept, with nice orderly flowerbeds separated by low, dark green hedges and cobble-stoned driveways and sidewalks. “One... two... four!” There it was. Hannah’s house. 4 Twineham Green. She stood there for a moment in front of the low brick wall, then crossed the street and sat on a post at the edge of the small park opposite the house. Her house was one of the few on the block that had a small grass-covered yard in front. She could see her mother and father through the gracefully curved front window, watching television. Upstairs through a similar window on the second floor, she could see Hannah and her older brother sitting at a table, reading. The centuries melted away as she watched them; her ever-so-great grand-niece and nephew. She felt odd, seeing them for real; real people in a real house with a real family. Her family.

“Hannah! Time to take Einstein out for his walk!” Eli heard her mother call out to her from the living room.

“Okay, Mom!” Eli saw Hannah stand up and disappear towards the back of the house. A couple minutes later, the porch light came on and Hannah was dragged out the door on the end of a leash by the whitest, fluffiest dog she had ever seen. And big. He must have outweighed Hannah by 50 pounds. “Einstein! Heel!” The dog ignored the command completely and pranced around the small yard impatiently, dragging her along behind him. “Einstein!” she said crossly. “Stop!!” He stopped so suddenly that she almost ran into him, then held his head down and looked up at her guiltily. “How many times do I have to tell you? Wait for me! I can’t keep up with you.” She bent down and hugged him tightly around the neck. Knowing he had been forgiven, Einstein began bouncing around excitedly, and a bit more slowly led her through the gap in the fence beside the hedge, turned left, and started down the sidewalk at a fast clip. Eli sat stock still, hoping they wouldn’t notice her – which they didn’t. They continued on down the sidewalk and around the corner toward Tillingham Way. Eli quickly stood up and climbed the tall bushy tree next to the post, sat on a low limb behind a thick wall of leaves, and watched her continue on around the green. As they rounded the corner and started back toward the house on the park side of the street, Einstein, suddenly alert, jerked the leash out of Hannah’s hand, ran up to the base of the tree, looked up at Eli, and let out a short bark. Then he sat down with a smug look on his face, staring at her.

“Bad dog! Whatever am I going to do with you? You just don’t mind!” Hannah reached down and picked up the end of the leash as Einstein, still watching Eli, let out another short bark. “Whatever is the matter with you this evening? There’s nothing there! See?” She reached up and shook a branch. Her eyes got big as she spotted Eli and stepped back quickly. “Who are you? What are you doing in my tree?”

“I don’t see your name on it anywhere,” Eli retorted, “Besides, you live over there.” She nodded at Hannah’s house. “This tree is on public property. I have as much right to be here as you do.”

“How do you know where I live? You’re not from around here.”

“Duh! I was right here when you came out of your house with that huge mop on a leash. I watched him drag you around the park until he finally got away from you.” She grabbed the branch with one hand, swung down and dropped gracefully and silently in front of her. She looked at her sternly for a second, then broke into a big grin. “Boy, he’s big! And cute too! His name is Einstein? Why’d you call him that?”

“Because his hair looks like Einstein’s. All poofy!” she fluffed up Einstein’s fur to make her point. “And he’s really smart!”

“I dunno about that. He certainly doesn’t mind very well.”

“That’s what I mean! He understands everything I tell him. I know he does! But he chooses to do his own thing. He only minds when he chooses to. He thinks things over carefully and then says to himself, ‘Nope, I don’t think I can accommodate her at this time. I have another, more important agenda.’ Isn’t that what smart people do?”

Eli giggled, “I never thought of it that way before. You may have something there.” She crouched down and rubbed Einstein behind his ears. He immediately put his head on her knee and wagged his tail at her.

“That’s it! You’ve won him over completely! He’s your friend forever now.” She looked at Eli more closely. “You look familiar somehow. Do I know you from school? What’s your name?”

“My name is Eli. But I don’t live around here. I’m just...visiting.”

“My name is Hannah. Do you have any pets? I actually have quite a few myself.”

“No, no pets. Unless you count my brother.”

Hannah laughed, “I have one of those too. Sometimes I think pets are a lot less trouble.”

“Yeah. And pets don’t beat you at scrabble.”

“I love scrabble! But I usually beat my brother Jason at it. I read a lot more than he does.”

“I almost always beat Oskar too, but I never beat Mom and Papa. My papa’s a professor at Oxford, and my mom’s an artist. She went to Cambridge,” Eli said proudly.

“Wow! You must be really smart then.”

“Actually, my brother and I are both adopted. We’re from Sweden originally.”

“Really? We’re Swedish too, but my family’s been here a long time now. My last name is Sandstrøm,”

“My last name now is Dawson.” She realized she was probably giving Hannah too much information about herself, but she couldn’t help it. She was entranced by her. She felt close to her; Hannah was a solid link to her past...to her mother and father – and her dear sister.

“Eli Dawson! That’s a nice name. It sounds quite sophisticated.”

“Hannah Sandstrøm! Wow! That’s a tongue-twister. Try saying that real fast 100 times. My name’s boring compared to yours.” Eli grinned at her.

“You’re funny!” Hannah gave her a quick hug. “And you’re nice too! I’m glad I found you.”

“What do you mean!? I found you first.”

“No, Einstein found you first!”

“Hannah! What are you doing out there? Who’s that?” Eli watched as her brother came across the street and walked up beside Hannah. His eyes suddenly got big. “Hannah! She looks exactly

like you! Exactly!” he grabbed her by the shoulders, turned her around and pushed her up next to Eli. “You’re both exactly the same height, your hair is the same color, and you ... look... exactly... alike!!”

“Eli, this is my crazy older brother Jason. Jason, this is Eli, my new friend.”

New friend! Eli felt a warm glow deep inside. Hannah had no idea how close they really were. Or was it how incredibly far apart they were? The stark reality of what she was flooded to the surface; she was deluding herself to think that she could ever be friends with this sweet child, this 12-year old girl who couldn’t kill a bug. Contrast that with how many people she had killed over the centuries. “I...I should probably go. My ... uncle will be worried if I’m not home soon.”

“You can’t go,” Jason protested. “You’ve got to at least let Mom and Dad see you first.” He took her by the hand and led her across the street, flanked by Hannah and Einstein. “I can’t wait to see the look on their faces.”

Eli sighed to herself. This was going to be worse than she thought. What could she say to them?

“Mom, Dad, you need to see this! Hannah has a new friend that you’ve gotta see.” He led them into the living room and posed them side by side in front of their parents.

“Eli, this is my mom and dad, obviously.” Hannah smiled at her. “Mom, Dad, this is Eli Dawson. I met her outside on the green. Einstein found her in my tree.”

“Glad to meet you Eli,” her father said. “You’re right Jason, she looks exactly like our Hannah.” He looked at Eli carefully. “It’s astounding, actually. What are the odds? Where are you from Eli, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I’m Swedish originally, but I’ve been here for...a long time now.” She was beginning to realize how difficult lying consistently was. To lie properly you needed a very good memory. “My brother and I were adopted, but my parents are from here.”

“You look so much like Hannah I can’t help but think there may be a common ancestry,” her mother said. “Do you know what your Swedish surname was?”

“Yes, actually I do.” She said proudly. She thought about Gudmund’s meticulous work on her genealogy “It was Örn.”

“Very interesting. That’s an historically old Swedish name. Do you know what it means?”

“Yes, ma’am. It means ‘Eagle’” Eli said shyly.

“Quite correct.” She smiled at her. “Do you speak Swedish?”

“It’s my first language. I learned English ...later.”

“Well, I’m impressed. You have no accent at all. You must be a very bright girl.”

Eli blushed, “Thank you, but I think it’s just that I’m good at languages.”

“Well, its nice to have met you, Miss Eli Dawson.” She turned to her children. “Have you two finished your schoolwork?”

“I have,” Hannah said, “But Jason still has a book report to do.”

He gave her a dirty look. “Okay, okay. I’ll get right on it.” He headed for the stairs. “Bye Eli.”

“Bye, Jason. Good luck on your book report.”

He smiled at her as he went up the stairs.

“Mom, can we go out for a while?”

Okay, Hannah, I know it’s Friday night, but stay on the green please. It’s getting a bit late. Eli, do you have far to go? We can drive you if you wish.”

“No, thanks. I’m just over on Southover near Old Finchleians.”

“Okay, then, but be careful on your way home.”

“I will, thanks.

Hannah took her by the hand, “Come on Eli, let’s go climb a tree!” They hurried out the door and across the street.

Eli reached up, grabbed the low branch and effortlessly swung herself up. Hannah quickly joined her. “I’m glad you’re here, Eli. My brother says he’s too old to climb a tree with me anymore, and it’s so much fun.”

“It is fun isn’t it?” Eli remembered climbing with his brother so very long ago, but the trees near their farm were much taller and more dangerous. He could barely keep up, and his brother had been much older than Jason and still climbed with him. “Wanna race to the top?”

“No, it’s too dark. Besides, it wouldn’t be fair. I know the tree a lot better than you do. I know the best ways up, and the ways that dead-end.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“No! Please don’t. I don’t want you to get hurt. I just met you.”

Eli smiled at her, “Thanks, but I’ll be fine. Just stop me if you think I’m going too fast.” She disappeared into the darkness.

“Boy you’re a good climber,” Hannah said, a bit out of breath. They were just about as high as they could go safely, but after watching how effortlessly Eli climbed, she felt like she could have just kept going all the way to the top.

They sat there quietly for a while, looking at the stars and casing the neighborhood. Hannah filled her in on all the local gossip and neighborhood eccentrics, and where all the shortcuts and hiding places were. From this height, they could even see into some of the back yards. It was cool out, but it felt kind of pleasant after all their hard work in getting up there. On a sudden impulse, Hannah took off her necklace and handed it to Eli. “I want you to have this.”

“But... why? It’s so pretty.”

“Because I feel like you’re a kindred spirit, like in *Anne of Green Gables*. And the locket already has your picture in it.” She smiled at her. “Here. Let me put it on for you.” Eli pulled back her hair as Hannah put the necklace around her neck.

Eli was touched. “Thank you so much; it’s beautiful!” she hugged her tightly. She felt terrible that she had lied to her; she was so very nice.

“Hannah? Can you keep a secret?”

“Sure!” she said excitedly as she slid over next to Eli and took her hand, “I love secrets!”

“I’m not who you think I am. I’ve been lying to you a little. I actually came here just to find you.”

“Me? Why me?”

“Because I know we’re related. And you look so much like me. We’re part of the same family.”

“That’s really neat! But how do you know?”

Eli slipped off her backpack, pulled out a mailing tube, gently removed an old yellowed scroll and spread it out across their laps. It was a portion of her family tree, beginning in 1730 with her parents, and continuing through her sister, uninterrupted, up to the marriage of Hannah’s parents and the births of their two children, Hannah and Jason. But all branches except the uninterrupted path directly to Hannah’s family were discontinued, with numbers in circles at the branch ends.

“Wow! That looks really old.” Hannah exclaimed excitedly. Is it worth a lot?”

“Only to us.” Eli smiled at her. “And the latest entries are obviously not that old. The last was made 12 years ago when you were born.” She reached into the backpack and pulled out a photocopy of the scroll, but smaller. “This is for you. But you have to keep it a secret,” she whispered.

Hannah looked at the scroll carefully for a few minutes, “But, where are you? I don’t see your name here anywhere.”

“Well, I’m there. That’s part of the secret. But I can’t tell you where I am right now. But soon, I hope.”

“I so love a good mystery! Will you tell me if I can figure it out?”

“You won’t be able to. But I promise that, if you do, I’ll tell you. After all, we’re kindred spirits.” She squeezed Hannah’s hand tightly.

“But, you said you lied to us. You didn’t lie to us at all! You never said we weren’t related, and no one asked why you were here.” Hannah said with conviction.

Eli sighed. She shouldn’t have come, but now that she was here, she was going to make the most of it. “Have you ever heard of a ‘Lie of Omission?’ That’s a lie that you tell by not setting someone straight on something you know they’ve misunderstood.”

“What did you ... not tell us that we misunderstood?” Hannah smiled as she thought about how odd that sounded.

“That I’m really not a twelve-year-old girl that has a relative of yours on the family tree parallel in time but on a different branch.” *Boy was THAT statement full of lies of omission*, she thought to herself.

“I’ll have to think about that one for a while,” Hannah said, sounding a bit confused. “Is that a clue to your mystery?”

“It’s the biggest clue! Just remember, I’m on the family tree in your hand. And I did lie to your mom and dad. I told them I was staying on Southover.”

“Well, where are you staying then?”

“I’m not staying anywhere. I live near Hampstead Garden, with Papa, Mom, and Oskar. Oskar is the only one who knows I came here tonight.”

“But how did you get here? By bus? Your parents must really be worried by now.”

“I can’t tell you that. Sorry. It’s part of the secret.”

“And how are you going to get home? It’s getting late. It’s almost 10:00. My dad can take you home, if you’d like.”

“No thanks. I can manage. And I don’t want them to know I lied to them; they’re so nice.” She hadn’t realized how late it was. “But you’re right, it’s getting late and I need to go.” She quickly rolled up the scroll, stashed it in her backpack, and started down the tree.

“Wait for me!” Hannah called out to her as, much more slowly, she picked her way down through the darkness. By now, Eli was out of sight. “Eli? I can’t see where I’m going.” She hadn’t climbed this high in the dark before, and once she got a few feet down into the tree, the thick foliage blocked the streetlight. It was almost pitch black. She felt for a branch, stepped out into thin air, lost her balance and felt herself beginning to fall. She grabbed a small branch, but it broke with a loud snap and she tumbled outward out of the tree in slow-motion.

For a brief moment, she saw an unobstructed view of the ground as it rushed up towards her and she instinctively threw her arms out in front of her. Suddenly, she felt an iron grip on her wrist and she was jerked to a stop with her feet dangling three feet above the ground. “Gotcha!!” All she could see was the big grin on Eli’s face as she looked up at her. With one hand, Eli smoothly pulled Hannah back up to the big branch and deposited her there safely. Hannah hugged her, still shaking a little.

“You saved my life! Now we’re blood sisters!”

Eli hugged her back tightly. “I guess we are, huh! Blood sisters! I like that.” She carefully lowered Hannah to the ground, then dropped quietly down beside her. Suddenly, Eli reached up and caught Hannah’s copy of the family tree as it fluttered out of the tree towards them. “I think you forgot this.”

“Hannah looked at her for a second, then burst out laughing. Eli quickly joined her and they sat facing each other holding hands, laughing until there were tears in their eyes.

“What’s so funny?”

Startled, Eli jumped up, spun around and... “Mom! What are you doing here?”

Elaine was standing in front of them, hands on her hips and a frown on her face, “I came to get you of course. Your communication skills need a bit of work. I believe you need to remind yourself to let us know when you feel like going on a solo nighttime excursion. Do you realize how much you worried your father? Keep in mind what happened the last time you did something like this.”

Hannah jumped up. “It’s my fault! I kept her talking so long, we lost track of the time. Please don’t be mad at her. It really is my fault! I wouldn’t let her go.”

“ANOTHER advocate? Eli, what am I going to do with you? You recruit them faster than I can fend them off. You must be Hannah.” She held out her hand, “I’m Eli’s mom.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Dawson. You’re not going to punish her, are you? Please don’t! She saved my life!”

Elaine smiled at her and turned to Eli, “What do you think Eli? What would be a proper punishment for an incorrigible child who sneaks out at night without telling either of her parents

where she's going? And unnecessarily worries her Papa who cares more about her than anything in the world?"

"But I knew Oskar would tell you where I was as soon as you found I was gone!"

"Ah, but you see, the key is, AFTER we found you were gone. I'm really disappointed in you, Eli. I thought we were past all this. You worried your father and there's no excuse for that. It was only out of respect for your grieving process that I waited so long to come after you. And, as much as I think you deserve it, your Papa made me promise not to punish you." She turned to Hannah, smiling, "And your heart-felt plea didn't fall on deaf ears either. You and her Papa, at least for the moment, have saved her."

"Thank you so much! I couldn't bear for her to get into trouble on my account!"

"Believe me, Hannah, she doesn't need your help to get into trouble. She's quite good at it all by herself." She gave Eli a big hug. "Ready to go home, Butterfly? Your Papa's waiting for you. And Oskar too."

"I'm really sorry, Mom. I just had to get away. I wasn't thinking. I'll apologize to Papa as soon as we get home. I'll see you later, Hannah."

"Wait! Shouldn't I introduce your mom to my mom and dad?"

"You can't! Please, Hannah, don't tell them my mom came. I feel bad that I lied to them. Next time, I promise."

"Okay, Eli. It'll be part of the secret!" she walked with them down to the corner, where an immaculate shiny-blue, like-new 1984 MG sat waiting for them. Eli threw her backpack in the back seat, climbed into the front, and rolled down her window. She reached out and took Hannah's hand as Elaine got in next to her.

"Kindred spirits?" she whispered.

"Kindred spirits!"

"Blood sisters?"

"Blood sisters!"

Eli squeezed her hand tightly, slipped a small piece of paper into her hand, and winked at her. "Mom, show Hannah what a fun driver you are! Please?!"

"It's kind of late Eli, I don't want to upset anyone in the neighborhood with all the noise."

"It's okay, Mrs. Dawson, most of the neighbors are old and deaf anyway. And the rest of us stay up real late. You won't bother anyone." Hannah was getting excited.

“Okay Eli. But fasten your seatbelt please.” She smiled at Hannah. “Why don’t you step back on the green a bit?”

“Eli grinned at Hannah. Wait’ll you see this. Mom used to drive race cars.”

“Sports cars, Eli. sports cars. There’s a big difference.”

“Whatever! She’s really fast, Hannah. Watch this!”

Elaine scanned the green and surrounding area carefully, looked back toward Tillingham Way, listened intently for a moment, then pulled quietly away from the curb. She revved up the engine a couple of times, popped the clutch, and squealed down the street past Hannah’s house, squealed around the first corner, then the second, then accelerated back towards Tillingham Way. Hannah turned and watched, holding her breath as they completed the circle around the green. Still accelerating, Elaine slid sideways out into Tillingham Way, corrected for the skid just a bit and with a screech of tires, poured on the coal. The last thing Hannah saw was Eli’s smiling face hanging out the window, hair blown back in the wind, waving furiously.

She stood there for a few minutes as the roar of the engine faded away in the distance, then she opened the note Eli had given her. Her phone number and address.

She tucked her family tree safely inside her shirt and walked slowly across the street, smiling to herself. She opened the door and ran into her mom and dad in the midst of rushing outside. “Are you okay Hannah? Who was that? Did you see?”

“I sure heard it! I walked Eli up to the corner, so I couldn’t see who it was. As soon as I heard it, I came running back, but I was too late. It was gone!” She felt a pang of guilt, but after all she couldn’t very well reveal even a part of their secret; and she was pretty darn certain that hadn’t been a Lie of Omission.

“These hooligans are getting brasher all the time. They could have killed someone! If you had been crossing the street...I don’t even want to think about it!” He hugged Hannah, then walked her back in the house. “Did Eli get along safely? Did you see her cross Tillingham?”

“She’s safe, Dad. I watched her out of sight.” *At least that’s the truth.* She smiled to herself.

Finally, she said her good-nights and went slowly up the stairs to her room, her head filled to the brim with her exciting new secrets and her mysterious new friend. *Where did she get our family tree? How did she know where I lived, or what I looked like? What had happened the last time she left home at night without telling anyone? What was she grieving about? Had someone close to her died? How did her mom know my name? Does she get into trouble a lot? I don’t believe it! She’s too nice! And how could she be so strong?! Even my brother couldn’t have grabbed me out of the air like that.* She rubbed her wrist, where she could still see the imprint of Eli’s fingers. She could see the beginnings of the bruise she knew she would have tomorrow. *And her mom! She’s a bit intimidating. I don’t think I’d want to be on her bad side. But she seems like she’d be a lot*

of fun, too. And she called Eli 'Butterfly.' I wonder what that means. She sat down at her desk, pulled the family tree out of her shirt and began to study it carefully. Let's see... Mr. and Mrs. Örn had three children: Arvid, Anne, and Elias. Anne married Loffe Leandersson and had four children. Arvid died at the age of 23...how sad! And Elias... his branch goes off to the side and ends. His tree must be on another page, but I guess he's not on my tree. Let's see...Anne's and Loffe's children were named... When she finally woke up with her head on her desk, it was 3:00AM. She carefully hid her family tree under her bed, climbed in and went quickly to sleep. But not before the imaginary faces of all her long-dead ancestors passed before her. I'll figure out who you are, Eli. Just you wait.

§

As soon as they were well away from Hannah's house, Elaine slowed down to a reasonable speed, and headed for home. "Thank, you, Mom. Especially for...that." She laid her head on Elaine's shoulder.

"Any time, Butterfly." She hesitated, "Was she...what you expected?"

"No. Even more! She's sweet and kind and trusting. Like Oskar! Mom, I like her a lot! And I know I can't be her friend. She would hate me if she knew what I was; what I have done."

"Where have I heard that before? Before Oskar? Before your Papa? Before Jack? Before Henry? Eli, you have a batting average to die for. I know it's a real long shot in this case, but don't give up hope. Anything is possible. And Papa and I will do everything we can to help you reconnect with your family. Believe it."

"I believe you. I really do!" she laid her head in her lap.

Chapter 21: Eli's Choice

Eli was on her way upstairs when the phone rang.

"I'll get it!" Oskar picked it up in his room. "Hello?"

There was a pause, "Oskar? Is that you?"

"Eli? I thought you were downstairs. In fact, I know you're downstairs! I can hear you coming!"

She giggled, "I'm Hannah. Can I talk to Eli?"

"Hannah! You sound exactly like Eli. She told me all about you. She really likes you, you know. And Einstein too."

"I like her too; a lot. You have a nice sister, Oskar. Can I talk to her?"

"Sure! She's right here. Eli!! Phone!! It's Hannah!"

"Okay, okay, you don't have to shout." She walked in and grabbed the phone from him. "Hello? Hannah?"

"Eli? I miss you! When can you come over again? We need to talk. I have some questions about our family tree."

"What kind of questions?"

"Well, there seem to be some mistakes on it. A couple of things don't make any sense. Besides, I'm bored. Can you come over? Mom says you can spend the night."

"Sure! I'll clear it with Mom and Papa first, though."

"Good idea. I'll wait."

Eli bounced down the stairs and out into the yard where the sunlight could still be seen just touching the tops of the trees against the back fence. "Mom, it's Hannah. She wants to know if I can come over and spend the night."

"Ask your dad." Elaine looked over at Rich.

"Papa?"

"Ask your mom." His eyes twinkled.

Ha, Ha, very funny! Can I go? Please?" she stood there with the phone in her hand, fidgeting.

“Sure, Eli. I’ll take you. Want to come meet the Sandstrøm’s with us Rich?”

I can’t Elaine, I’m meeting Jack at the lab this evening. Eli, bring her over here sometime soon. We’ll have a pool party like in the old days.” He remembered how enjoyable it always was with the inherent chaos and the laughter of the children. It had been a long time since Jack and Henry had grown up, and Elaine’s insistence that they be careful about allowing too much contact with outsiders who would notice that the children weren’t growing older, had severely limited these pleasant events.

“Hannah? I’ll be over in a little while. Mom’s bringing me.”

“Okay, Eli, but...drive quietly, okay? Mom and Dad still don’t know who that was the other night.”

§

Elaine winked at them both as she pulled slowly away from the curb. “Quiet enough, Hannah? I promised Eli I’d be good.” She drove very slowly around the green, exaggerating each turn as she went, but when she pulled onto Tillingham Way, she popped the clutch, and with a small, barely audible squeal, accelerated down the block.

“Your mom is so neat!” Hannah exclaimed as she waved.

The two of them quickly went back inside and upstairs to Hannah’s room, but Eli paused to wave at Jason as they passed his room. “Hi, doppelgänger!” he called out to her.

“I prefer to be called ‘Hannah Jr.’” she retorted.

Hannah helped Eli unload her small suitcase into a drawer she had emptied for her. Eli immediately slipped out of her shirt and pants and put on a light blouse and shorts, since that was what Hannah was wearing and she wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible. Even after all these years, she had trouble dressing properly for the temperature. Papa had helped her pack her sun-proof clothing and had reminded her to take her special sun screen, Madeline hat, and glasses. They were going to pick her up around noon and there was no telling what they would be doing before then. Elaine had warned the Sandstrøm’s about Eli’s sensitivity to sunlight, but underplayed it a bit, since their new clothing was so effective

“Eli, my parents really like your mom. I’m so glad!”

“Me too. I think she likes them too. She talked to them long enough. Now what questions do you have about the family tree?”

“Well, it says here that my grandmother had a baby, a baby boy, before she was married, at about 17 years of age. That didn’t happen. She married my grandfather when she was 20 and had my father and my aunt. They were her only children.”

“I don’t know Hannah. The ... person that gave it to us said it was exactly right. He assured us there were no mistakes. Did you ask your mom?”

“No! What if it’s true? She would never tell me anyway, and it might get you in trouble with her.”

“Well, I’m sure it must be true, but I’m really sorry. It must have been terrible for her. What else do you think is wrong?”

Well...every time a child is born that is not a direct descendant, the branch ends and there’s a circle with a number in it at the end of the branch. I suppose that refers to another page with another tree on it. Correct?”

“Yeah that’s right. You’ve got it. What’s the problem?”

“Well, there’s one name here at the beginning that has a branch, but there’s no number; just a dotted line that goes up about 2 centimeters, past Anne’s children, and then ends. What does that mean? None of the others do that.”

Eli smiled at her, “Boy, you’re good! What do you think it means? I’ll give you a clue: It’s not a mistake.”

“You mean it’s part of the secret? Tell me!”

“Sorry. Only if you guess right.”

“You’re mean! Give me another clue.”

“Nope! That wouldn’t be fair.”

Hannah sighed, “Well, it’s got me flummoxed. I’ll have to think about it awhile.”

“What do you do for fun around here?” Eli figured it was time to change the subject. “Should we go climb the tree again?”

No, I haven’t climbed it since you saved my life. I know! Let’s go for a walk and I’ll show you the neighborhood. I’ll take you over by Old Finchleian’s. You know, near where you were staying?” she teased.

“Ha Ha. Okay, let’s go. Maybe we can catch a bat or something.”

“Eeeww. Don’t you dare!” She headed for the stairs, “Mom, can Eli and I go for a walk? We won’t stay out too long.”

“Okay, Hannah, but don’t go too far. And don’t lose Eli.” She smiled at them. I’ll have some hot chocolate ready when you get back.” They were already at the door.

Once outside, they hurried up to Tillingham Way, crossed the street, turned right and headed towards Southover. Eli really liked Hannah's neighborhood. The houses were all neat and tidy, the streets were swept and everything seemed fresh and clean. Old established trees hung out over the sidewalks, their huge sturdy branches almost meeting above the road. It seemed almost as though they were walking through a long tunnel.

"Maybe next week you can come over to our house. Papa says you can come to a pool party if you want. You could even bring your brother if you want."

"Thanks, but he has soccer practice every Saturday, but I'd love to come. Your brother sounds nice on the phone. I'd like to meet him."

"He's more than nice. He's my best friend in the whole world! I know you'll like him." She realized that tonight would be one of the few nights they had been apart after all these years. She felt a sudden pang of guilt as she realized how quickly she had accepted Hannah's invitation, and sweet Oskar hadn't said a thing. She would really thank him when she got home. Maybe she'd make him some cookies.

Hannah ran her hand along the high brick fence next to the sidewalk as they turned left on Southover. "Do you have a boyfriend? Practically all my friends in school have boyfriends but me. Mom and dad say I'm too young yet, but to tell the truth, I don't even care for boys. They're loud and dirty."

Eli laughed. "No I don't have one either, but Oskar is anything but loud and dirty." And he's only six months older than me."

Eli stepped out of the way behind Hannah as four or five older boys, talking and laughing loudly, came down the sidewalk towards them, passed quickly and continued on. *They smell like cigarette smoke, they're loud, and they're kind of dirty.* Eli smiled to herself.

One of them looked back at them for a moment and they heard him say to one of the others, "Did you see those identical twins? Nice!!" They all turned to look, then continued on, mumbling quietly to one another.

Eli and Hannah looked at each other a second, then Hannah giggled.

"They thought we were twins!" Eli said.

And they thought we were 'nice?'" Hannah was puzzled. "But we are twins. Twin sisters." She hugged Eli. She thought about how mysteriously exciting it was that they had met; that Eli had a secret she was sure she would finally share with her, and how close she felt to her after so short a time. It was as if they were destined to be together, that fate was directing their lives somehow. *I like her so much! It's like I've known her all my life.* She took Eli's hand and began to run, dragging her along behind. They ran hand in hand down the street until, out of breath, Hannah stopped by a gravel driveway and gestured towards a sign behind a low hedge.

“Here it is! Old Finchleian’s Memorial Ground.” She turned into the parking lot. Eli followed her across the lot and out onto the playing field on the path between the low brick clubhouse and a high, thick hedge. Hannah led her out into the middle of the field and they lay down on the cool grass together and looked up at the stars. “My brother and I used to come here when we were younger, and we would just lie here and talk about things. He just doesn’t have the time to come here with me anymore. And I heard they’re going to put up lights so they can play at night,” she said wistfully.

“Oskar and I like to sit out at night beside the pool and talk -- sometimes with Mom and Papa. Sometimes we even go down to the stream near our house and just sit and watch the water. I guess he’s not too old yet, huh?” *And he’s not ever going to get too old either*, she thought to herself, happily, *at least, not without me*.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Eli. Mom doesn’t like me to come here alone at night.” She snuggled up against her and took her hand. “It’s so nice and warm out tonight. I could almost go to sleep here.”

“You should have brought Einstein. We could have used him for a warm pillow.”

Hannah laughed, “He wouldn’t lay still long enough. He’d jump up and bark at every little sound. Then he’d want to play.”

Finally, they both got quiet as they lay there watching the stars. Hannah had told her the names of all the constellations she knew, almost as many as Eli did. And Eli had told Hannah her different names for them; names that were distant and ancient – even older than her grandfather’s grandfather’s grandfather; names his father had told him when they lay on the grass together at night, watching the sheep on the high meadow. She felt relaxed for the first time since Gudmund’s death. She took a deep breath, smelling the night air as only she could do. The faint smells of the recent game still lingered; the smells of leather, rubber, torn grass, and even perspiration, but it wasn’t unpleasant at all. And Hannah smelled sweet and soft, like soap, lavender shampoo, and Einstein. They felt the cool breeze against their skin and listened to the chirping of the crickets. Eli had always wondered why crickets seemed for the most part to chirp in unison. Was it some sort of cricket symphony? Did they gather every night and play their unspoken favorite piece of music? Together, they watched as the sliver of moon disappeared momentarily behind a small cloud. Hannah looked at her watch for a minute, then announced. “It’s about 72 degrees out tonight.”

“How do you know,” Eli asked, surprised.

“You just count the number of cricket chirps in 15 seconds, then add 37 to it. That tells you the temperature.”

“Really? I never knew that. Let me try!” Eli checked her watch and began counting. Suddenly the crickets stopped.

“Darn crickets! So unreliable,” Hannah complained.

“Shh! I hear something.” Eli stood up suddenly and looked towards the hedge. “Hannah! Let’s go,” she hissed.

“You’re scaring me, Eli. What’s wrong?” She got to her feet quickly and took Eli’s hand.

Damn! It’s too late! She thought fast, “Hannah? Let’s go climb a tree.”

“What? Why?!”

“Hello, girls! What are you doing out here all by yourselves!” Eli watched the glow of his cigarette as he approached.

“Hannah! Move slowly over towards that big Oak behind the clubhouse,” Eli whispered. She kept herself between Hannah and the large, stocky boy emerging from the darkness as she slowly backed toward the tree. “We’re minding our own business! Why don’t you do the same!” she said defiantly.

“Eli, He’s one of the boys that passed us earlier!” Hannah sounded relieved. “Hi! Do you live around here? We saw you earlier on the sidewalk.”

He smiled at her. “You’re much nicer than your sister. She’s a bit rude, don’t you think? What do you think, John?”

Hannah nearly stumbled as she backed into someone in the darkness. She felt his hands as they settled on her shoulders. “I agree, Rod. This one’s much nicer. It’s hard to believe they’re twins. Maybe like Jekyll and Hyde?” He squeezed her shoulders tighter as his thoughts turned dark. *This could really be...interesting!* He turned suddenly and looked toward the hedge “Got ‘em!” he shouted.

“Hannah. Listen to me carefully,” Eli said, in a low voice. “When I say ‘Einstein,’ run for the tree as fast as you can.” She could see a third boy rapidly approaching from around the far end of the hedge.

“But, Eli...”

John shifted his hands closer to her neck, caressed it for a moment, then put his arms around her waist and pulled her up against him. He smelled her hair, and nuzzled the back of her neck. He was thinking fast now. “I choose this one. You’re on your own, Rod. You and Lamar can play with that one.” Hannah’s skin crawled as she wriggled to get free, but he just tightened his grip. *We’ll have to shut them up after. But they’re so young they’ll likely be too scared to say anything, especially if we rough them up a bit.* “Upsy-Daisy.” He bent over and got a better grip on her.

“Eli!!”

“Einstein!!” She spun around and lunged for John’s legs, just as he lifted Hannah off the ground. They landed in a heap, but Hannah quickly jumped to her feet and disappeared into the darkness. “Go, go, go!” Eli shouted, as Rod flicked his cigarette away, wrapped his arm around her neck and lifted her off the ground. An angry John grabbed her by the legs “Got her!! Goddamn it! I’ll show you, you little bitch! Lamar! Go get the other one! I’m sure you can outrun her!” Lamar lumbered past them, gaining speed as he sprinted into the darkness after Hannah.

John let go of Eli’s legs, drew back and punched her in the stomach as hard as he could as Rod held her in front of him, arm still wrapped around her neck. She deliberately stopped moving and went limp. Out of the corner of her half-closed eye, she could see that Hannah had made it to the tree safely, but Lamar was close behind her. *Time for a change of plans*, she thought to herself.

Hannah scrambled up the tree safely and headed up into the higher branches. Lamar stood at the bottom with his hands on his hips. “Come down outta there! You won’t like it if I have to come up after you. It’s a long way down.” He really didn’t want to have to climb the damn tree after her. What a pain in the ass that would be. *Bloody hell! They’re almost too young to be worth the trouble*, He thought to himself.

“Stay there, Lamar! We’ve got the other one!” Rod grabbed Eli under her arms and dragged her toward the tree. After about 20 feet, he realized what hard work that was, picked her up, and threw her roughly over his shoulder. John stood there a moment looking across the street to see if anyone had noticed all the commotion. Nothing. Not a single porch light came on, and there was no movement. He followed Rod over to the tree, where Rod, completely out of breath, roughly dropped Eli in a pool of light from the nearby streetlamp. “We’ve got your sister down here! If you don’t come down right now, we’re going to hurt her...a lot.” John pulled out his knife and stepped into the light so Hannah could see it. He held the knife up for moment, then pointed it down at Eli’s motionless form.

“Eli! Are you okay? Please, don’t hurt her,” she sobbed. “I’m coming down.” She stepped gingerly down to a lower branch.

“Hannah! Stay where you are,” Eli shouted, as she jumped up and quickly stepped out of the light. She wanted desperately to get out of this mess without having to reveal herself, but she was running out of options. She could either show them what she was and try to scare them off, scaring Hannah at the same time, or she could show Hannah part of what she was and save her. Killing them was NOT an option; not with Hannah watching. She would never expose her to such a thing, or throw her entire neighborhood into a turmoil over the deaths of three...nothings. *Poor Hannah! She must be terrified. She’ll never be able to come over here again without being afraid. Her whole neighborhood will seem different to her from now on.* She remembered vividly how she had felt after Lord Törnkvist’s Jacob, with the flash of a knife, destroyed her innocence forever. She could feel the anger rise up in her. She felt her eyes change; felt them turn golden and cat-like. She clenched her fists at her sides and tried her best to force the Parasite back into its hole. *No blood! No fangs! No feeding!* She concentrated on Hannah and could vividly see in her mind’s eye what she would certainly look like to her; and her anger ebbed.

“What the hell?! Jesus Christ! Look at that!” Rod stepped away from her quickly. “Look at her eyes!”

“What? What are you babbling about? Get her!” John lunged at her, but she easily dodged out of the way, sprinted past Lamar and scrambled up the back of the tree. She was safely out of their reach before they could even react.

“Damn it, Rod! Why didn’t you grab her?! Now we’re going to have to go up after them. We can’t just let them go. They can identify us. What a mess this is turning into! All I wanted was a little ass and now it’s turning into something far worse, unless we get a handle on it. We’ll stay here. Lamar, go get your dad’s pistol.” Lamar disappeared around the corner of the clubhouse. John’s thoughts were darker now. *That one is not going to intimidate easily, if at all; she’s tough. She’ll tell. Damn it! Whether we get any tonight or not, we may have to.... Damn! Damn! Damn!*

“You two better come down now. It’s your last chance. I’ll give you five minutes to get down here, then I’m sending Rod up after you.”

“Why me? Why don’t you go get them?” Rod protested.

“Because it’s your bloody fault they’re both up there in the first place! ‘Look at her eyes,’” he mimicked in a falsetto voice. “What the hell’s the matter with you anyway? She can’t weigh more than 70 pounds soaking wet!”

Eli scrambled up beside Hannah near the top of the tree. She saw immediately that Hannah’s street, or at least the other side of the Twineham Green circle, was just over the trees on the near end of the field. She could actually just make out her house through the trees on the other side of Tillingham Way. *So near, yet so far*, she thought to herself.

Hannah, still sobbing, put her arms around her, “I’m so glad you’re okay! I couldn’t bear it if they hurt you.”

Eli looked at her intensely for a moment. “You...you would have come down the tree to save me?”

“Of course! They were going to hurt you! I had to! And you saved my life.”

But I didn’t endanger my own to do it, she thought to herself. She gently put her arms around Hannah and hugged her, “I’ll protect you,” She whispered. “Don’t worry about anything. But we’ll have to move fast. And you’ll have to trust me completely. Can you do that?” She felt an overwhelming urge to keep this beautiful child, this kindred spirit, this dear sister, safe at any cost – even at the cost of her anonymity.

“Yes!” Hannah said with conviction.

“You have to promise you won’t tell ANYONE this part of my secret.” She took both of Hannah’s hands in her own and looked into her sweet, deep blue eyes, exact copies of her own. *I wonder if that’s the way my eyes look to Oskar.*

“I promise!”

“Three minutes!” John shouted. He sounded fainter up here than she had thought he would. *Thank goodness, Hannah probably didn’t hear the part about the pistol. They weren’t talking loud enough.*

Eli climbed a bit further up into the tree and stepped out on a branch that had unobstructed access to the sky. Hannah hesitantly climbed up beside her.

“Please, don’t be afraid.” Eli took off her blouse, rolled it up in a ball and stuffed it in her pocket. Hannah suddenly noticed that Eli wasn’t holding on to anything. She was perfectly balanced on the limb. She stood there a moment, looking down at her feet; then she put her arms at her sides, looked directly at Hannah, and grew her wings.

Hannah gasped and grabbed the branch tighter. “What...what are you doing?”

Eli’s wings rustled softly as she put her finger to her lips, “Shhh! You promised, remember? Now, put your arms around my neck and wrap your legs around my waist. Don’t worry. I won’t lose my balance.” She looked down and saw Lamar running across the field with the pistol. “Please, Hannah, trust me. Please? I have to get you out of here.” She turned her back towards Hannah.

Okay, Eli.” She wrapped her arms around her neck.

“Tighter! You can’t hurt me. Tighter! Now, your legs.”

Hannah wrapped her legs around her waist and squeezed with all her might. She pressed her cheek against Eli’s.

“Now you might want to close your eyes. But you don’t have to if you don’t want to.” Hannah could feel Eli’s smile.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Eli spread her wings and, seemingly in slow motion, fell forward, powerfully but silently flapped her wings twice, and floated magically out over the field. She banked silently to the left, gently flapped her wings twice more, floated over the tree line at the end of the field, over the nicely manicured back yards and trim two-story brick homes, and glided silently down into the green across Tillingham Way from Hannah’s own.

Hannah closed her eyes as Eli fell forward off the branch, then opened them quickly as she felt the wind from her wings swirling around her, and her hair twisted and turned in the vortex, mingling with Eli's as it swirled chaotically around her face. She gasped as she felt Eli's body press upward against her as her wings dug into the air and lifted them up. She felt exhilaration as suddenly Eli wings were still and, as one, they banked rapidly towards the tops of the nearby trees. Eli's black velvety wings fluttered in the wind as they passed over the familiar back yard where she and Jason had played for years with Richy Johnson until his family had moved to Manchester. She closed her eyes again as Eli descended rapidly onto the green in front of their house.

Hannah clung to her tightly for a minute, then dropped to the ground. "Eli, that was ... amazing," she said breathlessly, "I...How did you do that? You're beautiful!! Are you a fairy? But you can't be! An angel?"

"Shh! Remember, you can't tell anyone." She looked around carefully. "Hannah? Will you be safe here for about ten minutes? Will it be okay if I leave you alone? I need to make sure they won't ever do this again."

"Please don't! I don't want you to get hurt. Please stay, Eli. I'll just tell my dad and he'll call the police."

"They can't hurt me, Hannah. That's part of my secret too. But I won't go if you're too afraid to be alone."

"I'll be fine, Eli. Go ahead." She was actually quite frightened, but she wasn't about to let Eli know. "I'll wait right here for you."

Eli hesitated a moment, then smiled at her, "I'll be right back." She tapped her watch. "Ten minutes. No more." She turned and smoothly lifted off towards the field. Hannah watched her disappear over the treetops, then looked around fearfully, imagining the remaining boys stepping out of the darkness and dragging her away. Finally, she hid herself in a big bush near the road.

§

"Time's up," John shouted. He reached out his hand. Lamar handed him the pistol. He nodded to Rod. Grumbling, Rod started up the tree.

"Are you looking for me?" They all turned at the sound of her voice.

"How the hell did you get down?" He gave Rod a dirty look. "Where's your sister?"

"Safe."

"Rod, keep climbing. She's got to be up there."

"Don't waste your time. I told you, she's safe."

Rod stopped again.

“Damn it, Rod! Get your ass up there! We’ll take care of this little bitch. Grab her, Lamar.”

“We need to talk,” Eli said calmly as she dodged back, stuck her foot out and sent Lamar sprawling face first in the damp grass.

John raised the gun and pointed it at Eli. “Now that was stupid!” Get her Lamar! And try to stay on your feet this time.” *Yep. I’m going to have to finish her. But there’s no reason why I can’t do her first.* He relished the idea. *Sex and revenge, all at the same time. And double the pleasure!* He looked over his shoulder. “Rod? Haven’t you found her sister yet? When you do, be gentle with her. I want her down here in one piece.”

In a flash, Eli stepped to the right, lunged at John and snatched the gun away before he could react. “Get up against the tree, both of you. Rod, get down out of the tree. Now!”

Rod climbed down quickly and stood next to the other two, shaking like a leaf.

“Now, strip!”

“What?”

“You heard me. Take your clothes off! All of them! Or...” She waved the pistol at them.

“You’re just a little girl. You don’t have the nerve.” John walked slowly towards her, reaching for the gun.

Typical bully! Just like the ones that made Oskar’s life so miserable. She thought about her own miserable existence before Oskar; all the men in her life who had once been boys like these. And they want to do these things to Hannah and.... Her eyes blazed with anger. And changed. And this time she didn’t stop the transformation.

John stepped back, his eyes widened, and he stood there quietly, staring at her.

“I see we understand each other finally.” She opened her mouth and showed them her fangs.

“Now, take off your clothes!” Her dark angry voice sounded primal; unearthly.

They stripped down to their underwear, then paused. “All of them!” she growled.

Once they were standing naked in front of her, she looked them over disgustedly, then shook her head. “Just as I thought.” Her voice was now savage; soulless; threatening. “Not a decent-sized prick among you! But if you try anything like this again, WITH ANYONE, you’ll lose what little you have. I give you my word!” She nudged each of them in the crotch with the barrel of the pistol to make her point. “I’ll bite them off myself!” She gave them another fang-filled smile as her golden eyes blazed. “Or maybe I’ll just tear them off.” She reached for John with a clawed

hand as he turned his head away and pressed his back against the tree. “And if you tell anyone about either of us, you’ll lose more than your pricks. Now, toss the clothes over there!” She nodded toward the clubhouse.

Once all their clothes were in a pile, she motioned towards the tree. “Now, climb the tree. All the way to the top.” One by one, they clambered up the tree and gingerly worked their way into the upper branches, oblivious to the scrapes and scratches they collected along the way. She pulled out their wallets, examined them carefully, and then threw their shoes and clothing up on the roof of the clubhouse.

“Everyone comfortable? Here’s where I say goodnight. Say hello to the neighbors for me.”

She emptied the gun into the tree trunk one shot at a time, letting the echo from each die out before firing the next. By the time she had finished, porch lights up and down the block were coming on and several angry men with flashlights were already crossing the street towards the field. Eli dropped the empty pistol on the ground.

In her nicest, lilting, little girl voice, she admonished them, “Now, mind your manners, boys. Remember, my sister and I know where you live. And I’m the nice one.” She held their wallets up in the light so they could see them clearly, flashed them a pretty little smile, put them in her pocket and disappeared into the darkness just as the first flashlights appeared around the clubhouse corner.

§

Eli glided silently down in front of Hannah’s bush and retracted her wings, but before she could even get her blouse back on, Hannah rushed out and put her arms around her. “I was so scared! Then I heard the noise and got even more afraid. I thought they had hurt you.”

“I told you they can’t hurt me. And they’ll never hurt you again either. They’re afraid of you.” Eli held her tightly.

“But why?”

“They’re afraid of you because they’re afraid of me,” she assured her as she stepped back and put her hands on Hannah’s shoulders.

“Eli! You’re wearing my locket!”

Eli smiled at her as she buttoned up her blouse. “I haven’t taken it off since you gave it to me.”

They walked hand in hand across the green and back toward the warmth and safety of Hannah’s home.

“I guess we shouldn’t tell Mom and Dad any of this, huh. Even about the boys?”

Eli smiled at her. “I think that would be a good idea, if that’s okay with you. At least for now. Someday soon, I hope.” She remembered Gudmund’s prediction that Elaine and Papa would marry within 5 years. Maybe that meant...

“Hannah? I’m not going to be able to drink hot chocolate with you. But I don’t want to hurt your mom’s feelings. I can’t have breakfast in the morning either. Is that okay?”

“What DO fairies eat then, Eli?” Sitting in the darkness alone, Hannah had decided that Eli was a fairy. “I know they’re supposed to like butter and cream. And sugar,” she said earnestly.

Eli smiled at her. “Thanks, Hannah, but I won’t need anything. I just need you to help me cover up the fact that I’m not eating anything.”

“My brother and I are quite good at it. I’ll handle it! Are you sure you don’t want anything? We have some nice sugar cookies, we have honey, and Dad puts cream in his tea. And we also have clotted cream if you like that.”

Eli squeezed her hand tightly, “Hannah, I’m not a fairy. Really, I’m not.”

“Well, until you tell me your secret, you’ll be a fairy to me.” Hannah really knew she couldn’t be a fairy, but it was so nice to think it, that she couldn’t resist. Eli was her fairy and that was all there was to it.

“Mom, we’re back!” Hannah held the door for Eli. Einstein bounded down the stairs, put his paws up on her shoulders and licked her face. “Einstein! Down!” As usual, he ignored her completely.

“It’s okay, Hannah. I like him too.” She hugged him around the neck.

§

Finally, after a fast game of scrabble and a bit of slight-of-hand with mugs of hot chocolate, the three of them said their goodnights to Hannah’s parents and went up the stairs together. Jason waved as he went into his room and flopped down on his bed, hands behind his head.

“Thanks for covering for me, Jason,” Eli called out as they passed.

“You’re welcome, Hannah Jr. It’s to my advantage to keep my food avoidance skills honed.” He grinned at her.

Eli laughed, “I like your brother, Hannah. He’s funny.”

“You wouldn’t think so if you had to live with him,” she joked.

They slipped into their pajamas, complimented each other profusely on their respective good taste in bedroom attire, had a brief pillow fight with Einstein, turned out the light, and got into bed together.

“Eli?” Hannah said quietly, “You don’t mind if I think you’re a fairy do you?”

“No. I kind of like it. Nobody’s ever called me a fairy before.” *Lots of other things, but never a fairy.*

She pulled her locket out, opened it and showed it to Hannah. “Now I have a picture of my sister AND my brother in my locket.”

“This is your brother? He’s cute! All that blond hair! I could just hug him and pinch his cheek!”

Eli laughed, “If you did that, he would turn bright red.” She paused, then her face lit up. “I know! When you come over I want you to rush up to him and hug him. You’ll see!” They laughed together.

They lay there quietly for a few minutes, then Hannah snuggled up against her and put her arm around her. “Good night, my Fairy. Sweet dreams!”

“Sweet dreams, Hannah.” She smiled as she remembered Oskar tapping those words through her wall that night so long ago, when she first began to love him.

§

“Eli? Eli! Please wake up. Please!” Hannah was up against the wall trembling.

“Hannah? What’s wrong?” She was instantly alert. She could hear Jason breathing in the next room, Einstein snoring in the corner, and assorted gerbils’ and hamsters’ fast, tiny little breaths in their cages. But no danger.

“I dreamt about...those boys. They were cutting you, and I just stood there watching. I didn’t do anything; I was too afraid. They had a knife and you were bleeding.”

“Hannah, it’s just a dream. I know in real life you would attack them, kicking and screaming. They wouldn’t have a chance against you. We’d take them out together.” She took her in her arms and pulled her back down in the bed with her. “I know you would! I just know it.”

Hannah trembled against her. “Hannah, please don’t be afraid. I’ll always be here to protect you. I promise. And fairies never go back on their word.”

Hannah kissed her on the cheek. “I love you, Eli, no matter what you are.” She snuggled up against her, and finally, after fidgeting and readjusting herself several times, drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

Eli cried to herself for all Hannah had lost tonight. She saw the worst of the real world encroaching on Hannah's pure, safe, love-filled one, and there was nothing she could do about it. And she knew if she had just left her alone, none of this would have happened. Hannah's world would have almost certainly lasted a bit longer. She kissed her on the cheek and gently stroked her long black hair. She watched her all night as she slept, just in case she woke up again, alone and frightened.

Chapter 22: The Cure

“You can come in,” Oskar whispered to Elaine, as he stepped across the threshold. Elaine quietly retracted her claws and stepped in beside him.

“Okay, Oskar. Now go wait for me in the car.” She whispered. She stepped past him, sniffed the air for a moment, then went silently down the hall past two bedrooms, and stopped in front of the third. She wrinkled up her nose; the whole house smelled of cigarette smoke, stale beer, and mildew. She listened for a moment, then carefully opened the door and stepped inside John’s room.

She moved quietly over to his desk, reached into her pocket, pulled out his wallet and laid it in plain sight next to his new one. She slipped the note under it. *Sweet dreams*, it said; that had been Eli’s suggestion. Elaine smiled to herself. Even if John got up the nerve to tell anyone the details about that night, the note wouldn’t help him prove his case at all.

She slipped quietly out of his room and, after examining the front door for any sign of damage, headed for the next block, where Oskar was waiting with Eli in the car. This was the last of them and all had gone off without a hitch. “Good work, Oskar! Let’s call it a night. If there was any danger of the three of them speaking of their little twin ‘monsters’ to anyone. I think this will end it. She started the car and they headed for home together.

§

Eli jumped up from the bulky lab computer excitedly. “Papa! Papa! Look at this!” She grabbed the printout and ran towards him, knocking over her chair and a lab stool. “It worked! It worked!”

Papa took the papers from her and scanned the results carefully. Eli appeared to be right. The two immortal mice he had injected with their latest antidote appeared to be aging. Besides not eating as much, their DNA, although still containing the vital Vampire sequence, was no longer responding to it. It was no longer functioning. They had found the switch. “You’re right Eli. This is the one!”

She jumped up and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Oh Papa! Does this mean you can marry Elaine now?”

He smiled down at her, “Yes Eli. If she still wants to after having to live with us all these years,” he teased. “And it means that you can be a child again. But one that will grow up to be an adult. You and Oskar. Together.”

Eli jumped down and ran for the elevator and bounced back and forth in front of the door waiting as the arrow above the door slowly rose from the 1st to the 3rd level. The door opened slowly and she collided with Oskar as she rushed in. “Oomph! Eli, what...” She grabbed him and squeezed him hard, but he lost his balance and they fell into a heap on the elevator floor as the door closed behind her. She grabbed his beautiful face in her hands and kissed him.

“Oskar, we have it! Papa said we have it! We are all going to be cured!” The elevator started back down. “Oh Oskar! I’m so happy! Do you know what this means? We can go out in the sun together. We can have dinner together. We can do...anything we want! We can go anywhere we want, whenever we want!” She sat up and straddled him. He looked so sweet laying there looking up at her with that big goofy smile on his face. She loved him so much. She lay down on his chest, held him tight and pressed her cheek against his. He put his arms around her gently. He loved it when she was happy. She was even more beautiful to him when she was happy. And when she was happy, everything seemed brighter to him. Also, her beautiful blue eyes sparkled when she was happy. She kissed him on the neck just as the elevator door opened and Elaine, her face buried in a book, tripped over them, dropped her book, and barely regained her balance. “What on earth are you two doing down there?! You almost killed me!” Eli leaped up into her arms. “Papa found the cure! You and Papa can get married now!” All Elaine could see was Eli’s smiling face, two inches from her own. She laughed in spite of herself. “Eli, you’re impossible! I wouldn’t mind the fact that you wear your heart on your sleeve, but it beats so loudly sometimes we can’t hear anything else!”

She cocked her head to one side, “I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“I mean I love you, Eli. And all your noise too! Did I hear you right? The last lab results were positive?”

Eli was exasperated, “Yes, yes!! That’s what I’ve been telling you!” Once again, the elevator doors opened on the third floor. Papa was standing there waiting for them.

Elaine looked at Rich with a big grin on her face. “You did it.” She said softly. She couldn’t believe it. After all these years. “You did it!” she shouted. She rushed over to him hugged him tightly and spun him around. “Does Jack know yet? Jack!!” she shouted.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming.” He stopped quickly as he saw them all standing there looking at him. He looked at Dawson, “You didn’t!” They all nodded together. His first thoughts turned to Eli, “Eli, that’s wonderful! I’m so happy for you.” She ran over and put her arms around him, “And Elaine can marry Papa! And you can be the Best Man.”

§

Jack’s own work on the aging vaccine had been the first success story. All he really had to do was make what they already had, safer. With the 15 years of advancement in DNA research coinciding with his advanced degree, he was finally able to perfectly isolate, then strip out the already-switched-off vampire strand, removing any possibility that a future mutation could inadvertently switch it on again. But now that they had it they had absolutely no idea what to do with it. It was a potential bombshell. How should they release it? Should they just have a news conference and release it to the public? Should it be freely distributed, or rationed out? Should anyone have access to it? Should they and their families take it themselves in secret, or would that be somehow unethical? Eli had already been asking him about Hannah and her family. And Oskar had even asked about his own mother and father. And Jack himself was fighting the urge

to inoculate his mother; he and Henry knew they still had plenty of time to think about it for themselves. He relied heavily on Dr. Dawson for advice on the matter, because he was the only adult who could really look at this objectively.

The ramifications were mind-boggling. Retirement benefits would have to be abolished, except for the very old and handicapped, but those younger, healthier retirees already receiving them would certainly resist losing them. Major legislation would have to be passed to reflect the inevitable societal changes. Strict laws would have to be passed limiting the number of children that could be born, especially to immortals. Would any government be up to the task? There was already a population problem. This would only exacerbate it, possibly to the point of global warfare for survival. They had discussed it many times and the only thing they had all agreed on is that none of them were qualified to make such a decision. The instinctive urges of mankind to have children, to procreate, was as strong as the will to survive. Both would be in jeopardy if the secret got out without some kind of preparation. Jack's suggestion, that they hold off until they could insert a strand that severely limited fertility, or actually caused infertility, had been met with some skepticism by all, even Oskar and Eli. Eli had a fantasy that once they were cured, perhaps she and Oskar could grow up, get married and by some miracle, have children. He had to delicately explain to her that in a society with population overload and filled with immortals, turning a castrated boy into a fertile woman would not be a high priority in the scientific community. And there were religious considerations also. Many would consider it an abomination; a circumvention of God's will. Their lives could even be in danger as a result. This would all have to be handled very carefully.

§

"Rich, I think Eli is really worried about my getting the injection. At first, she insisted that she go first to protect me; then she wanted us to do it at the same time. She seems confused and uncertain about the whole process. You know how she reacts to change of any kind. We have to be careful how we handle her."

"How about Oskar? Does he have any problems with it? Of course it won't do much to him except reactivate the aging process just like with the mice, or with me."

"You know Oskar. He seems to be oblivious to the effects his decisions have on himself. His motivations always seem to be centered on Eli's welfare and happiness first, ours second and, if he even thinks about it at all, finally his own. He's the most unconsciously unselfish person I have ever known. So much so that I'm not sure it's healthy for him."

"I know. I have to be always on my guard to make sure he doesn't fall through the cracks when we make family decisions, he's so damn agreeable."

"Perhaps if we keep her busy...Eli!! Come down here! I want to speak to you."

Eli thundered down the stairs and swung into the kitchen on the doorframe. "What, Mom?!"

“Our final decision has been made. Jack, your papa and I have decided I’m to go first, and within a day or two at the most, we’ll do you.”

“But Mom!”

Elaine interrupted, “Eli, I really need your help on this,” she said earnestly. “If it turns out I can’t eat anything after the cure, I’m going to need you to be there to re-infect me. It’s really important! Do you have the stomach for it?”

Eli’s eyes got big, “Of course I do! I’ll do anything you want! I can be there the whole time?”

“Of course Eli,” Papa said, “All of us, including Jack and Henry, will be there. We’re doing this here at home in Elaine’s old room. Which reminds me. Would you and Oskar move the boxes out of her room and put them back down in her studio for us? It would be a big help. We’ve scheduled this for tomorrow evening.”

“Sure!” she dashed up the stairs.

“Rich! I had no idea you could think on your feet so well! And besides, I would much rather do this at home anyway. Should I call Jack and tell him our change of plans?”

“Yes, but do it quietly.” He smiled at her. They both knew that if something went wrong, there was an even chance that Eli would not be able to re-infect her; at least not quickly enough to save her if there were serious problems. And since they already had frozen and processed samples of Eli’s and Elaine’s ‘infections’, Eli’s bite wouldn’t really be vital anyway. But it would certainly be quicker. And if Elaine lost control, Eli would be the only one strong enough to even begin to handle her.

§

Elaine’s bed was normally up against the window, but they had turned it 90 degrees so they would have access from both sides in the event of a problem. Jack had insisted on giving her the injection, although he reluctantly agreed that Richard should have the final say on any other action taken as a result of any unexpected complications. Jack was genuinely worried about his objectivity in any life-threatening situation related to Elaine...or Eli for that matter.

“Are we ready?”

“Go for it, Jack,” Elaine said firmly. She was sitting on the side of the bed, having refused to lie down unless she felt it was necessary.

Jack lifted the vial, filled the syringe and, without hesitation, plunged it into her shoulder.

“Everyone, breathe now. In, out, in, out.” Elaine said sarcastically, “What did you expect? A flash of light, a clap of thunder, and a dark sinister form floating away from my body, cursing and spitting?”

Eli grinned at her, “I was kinda hoping...”

Oskar nodded vigorously, “Yeah, I was REALLY hoping we’d see something like that.”

“Do you feel anything at all at this point?” Jack asked.

“No. Nothing.” She glanced at the heart monitor. *Slightly elevated blood pressure and increased heart rate, but under the circumstances, normal*, she thought to herself. She hadn’t allowed herself the luxury of imagining what her life would be like after. It was like a door waiting to be opened. Never mind that Eli had already bounced back and forth through her door hundreds of times since they verified the stability of the antidote.

Four Hours passed. As near as anyone could tell, nothing had changed. Eli and Oskar were reading books, Jack and Henry were dutifully writing down all of Elaine’s vitals, and Richard was getting more and more nervous.

“Rich. Did you forget to wind your clock? It stopped running.” Elaine said abruptly.

Dawson looked at her intently for a moment, then turned to Eli, “Eli, go check the grandfather clock in the living room for me will you?”

“But Papa, it’s running just fine. I can hear it. I can always hear it...” Everyone turned to look at Elaine.

“It’s working,” Jack said quietly. He handed her Eli’s book. “Read this aloud for me.” She began reading as Jack stepped over and flipped off the light.

“I...I can’t see. I can’t see to read!!” Elaine exclaimed. She looked at Rich and smiled. He took her hand and squeezed it tightly.

Jack quickly flipped the light on again. Richard checked his watch and wrote something in his notebook. Eli, wide-eyed, backed away from her and sat down in a chair against the wall.

“Oskar? Think something to Elaine,” Jack said softly.

Elaine? Do you really think it’s going away?

She looked at him intensely, “Oskar, I can’t hear you. I can’t hear you at all!” she reached out and took his hand. “Again!”

Elaine! Can you hear me?”

She nodded, “I can hear you now Oskar. But I think it’s all you at this point. It’s your talent doing all the work.”

No one noticed the frightened look on Eli's face. And Oskar's attention was on Elaine.

"Elaine? How do you feel? Can you stand up?"

She stood up and made a full turn with her arms outstretched "No problem." She bent down and picked up the footstool. "Umph! It's heavy!" She quickly put it down again, and sat on the bed.

She suddenly looked up at Richard, startled, "It...it's gone! Dead! The parasite is gone! I'm alone. I'm really alone for the first time in over 50 years! I'm really alone!" she held out her hands and tried to grow claws. Nothing. She turned and smiled wistfully at Eli, "I guess I'm going to have to start using my tools on my sculptures again, Eli." She smiled at her. Eli didn't smile back. No one noticed in all the excitement.

"Elaine, I want you to lie down. You're perspiring heavily." Richard popped a thermometer in her mouth.

A strong metallic smell suddenly permeated the room. He quickly removed the thermometer. "98.8 degrees. It's going down." He pulled out a cotton swab, wiped it across her chest and put it in a plastic bag. "Elaine, why don't you take a quick shower? I think you're leaching out a great deal of salt, most of which is probably not simple Sodium Chloride; and it's not all free ions or oxidized metals either or the smell wouldn't be so strong." He took her arm and they went together down the hall and into the bathroom.

"How could this be happening so fast?" Henry asked. "It seems unreal."

"Well, according to Elaine, and to Eli also, becoming a vampire only takes a few hours. The process is usually complete within 8 hours or so." Jack said. "Is that right, Eli? Eli?"

"She must have gone with Dr. Dawson and Elaine." Henry said. They began recalibrating the heart monitor and reloading the chart paper in the ECG module, while Oskar watched intently.

"Are you okay?" Richard asked worriedly. She had washed and rinsed repeatedly for almost an hour before they finally seemed to have gotten rid of the smell.

"I'm fine, Rich. I feel like I'm all stuffed up, though. I can't hear, I can't smell, and I can't see. If I weren't one of you again, I'd feel sorry for you -- as a species! Nothing personal." She grinned at him.

She suddenly got down on one knee in the tub and, still dripping wet, looked up at Richard and took both his hands in hers, "Will you marry me? I know we haven't known each other as humans for very long, but I think it'll work out just fine! At least now it won't be a *ménage à trois*."

He stepped into the tub and hugged her tightly. "Yes! Unequivocally!"

“And it’ll be just you and me. Rich, you have no idea how it feels to be alone in my own skin for a change. After over a half century!” She put her head on his shoulder. “Just imagine how Eli will feel.”

Eli moved away from the bathroom door, quietly slipped down the hall, and hid halfway up the stairs to her room.

Rich kissed Elaine on the cheek. “We’d better get back in and hook you up again. We don’t want to miss anything.” He quickly stepped out of the tub and handed her a robe. He put his arm around her and led her back down the hall into her room, where she was promptly manhandled back into bed and reattached to all her equipment. Jack even let Oskar help hook her up.

“Are you okay, Mom?”

“I’m fine, Oskar. Where’s Eli?”

“I thought she was with you.” He looked around. “I’ll go get her.”

He started for the door, just as Eli stepped in and slowly walked over to the bed. “Are you okay, Mom? Can I get you anything?”

“Eli, I’m perfectly fine. Don’t you worry about a thing. The worst is over.”

“Is it Mama? Are you sure?” her voice sounded tense. She laid her head on Elaine’s chest.

Mama? She never calls me ‘Mama’

“What? What did you say? I couldn’t hear you!” Eli had tears in her eyes.

Elaine was startled, “What’s wrong, Butterfly?” she reached up and kissed her on the forehead.

“I’m just worried about you, that’s all. I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to...” she got quiet.

Elaine knew there was something wrong. But she knew that Eli was determined to keep whatever it was to herself, at least for now. She would talk to her about it later, as soon as they were all sure she was safely through this.

§

They were working in shifts now. Jack and Henry were asleep in Oskar’s room. The sun had been up for a couple of hours; it had been over fourteen hours since the antidote had been administered, so most of the changes should have taken affect by now. Everyone was getting a bit more relaxed. Oskar was making breakfast down in the kitchen.

Elaine stood up, paused, then let her robe drop to the floor. She looked down for a moment, then raised her arms. “Nope! I was really hoping I could still grow my wings, but I guess I’ll have to

take the bad with the good.” She smiled wistfully at Eli as she put her robe back on. Eli’s mouth opened slightly, then closed again.

“Elaine? Are you hungry at all?”

“I’m not sure. Rich, hand me a bag will you?” He nodded to Eli, who quickly disappeared and reappeared a minute later with a bag. She handed it to Elaine, then sat against the wall and watched intently. Elaine unclamped the bag, raised it to her lips, hesitated, and quickly reclamped it.

“Nope! This absolutely does NOT appeal to me in any way! In fact it’s disgusting! She looked quickly over at Eli, but she couldn’t read her expression at all.

“Eli?” Papa handed her the bag.

Eli took it quickly and disappeared once again down the stairs. After a few minutes, she reappeared carrying a bowl of chicken soup.

“Eli made this for you herself,” Richard explained. “She insisted.” He winked at her, “And I know it’s good because I tasted it myself. What do you think?” he handed the bowl to Elaine.

She smelled it, then dipped her spoon in and brought it to her lips. It smelled good, but she was a bit apprehensive. She took a sip. Wonderful! She had forgotten how good food could taste. She began eating. She could feel its warmth as it went smoothly down her throat. There was no revulsion, no sudden cramps, nothing. “Eli, this is wonderful! You’re a good cook.” Again, she couldn’t read the expression on Eli’s face. It was as though she was looking right through her – like she was somewhere else. Elaine was becoming genuinely worried now.

She finished the soup, but she was still hungry; very hungry! But she thought it was wiser if she left it alone for now. No sense in pushing her luck.

“Rich, I feel like sitting out by the pool. What do you think? Can I give it a try?”

“I think so, if you’re careful. But remember, you’re as white as a sheet. The sun is still not your friend. Fifteen or twenty minutes tops, at least the first time. Let us unhook you first.” Jack and Henry had just gotten started after their nap. “Looks like we got up just in time,” Henry said. “The final test!”

They all stepped out of the room so Elaine could get herself dressed. She stood there a moment looking out the window; then impulsively, she unlatched it and slowly opened it. She put her hand in the sun; then her arm. Nothing. She slowly opened the window and felt the unfiltered sun on her face for the first time since she was dragged into the Other One’s hole. She shook the dark thoughts off, then quickly closed the window and got dressed. She went down the stairs, stepped out on the back porch where everyone was waiting for her, and calmly walked past them, out the door that Rich was holding open for her and plopped down in her favorite lounge chair. She suddenly realized that Eli wasn’t there. On a hunch, she looked up at Eli’s window, and saw her

quickly step back as soon as she realized that Elaine had spotted her. “That’s it! Rich, stay here with everyone for a minute. I’ll be right back.” She strode purposely into the house, up the stairs and into Eli’s room. Eli was lying on her bed, face to the wall. Elaine sat down beside her.

“What’s wrong, Butterfly?”

“You can’t call me that anymore!!”

“Eli, look at me. What’s wrong?”

Eli sat up, tears in her eyes, “I don’t want to talk to you! I want Oskar!” Tears were streaming down her face. She turned back against the wall sobbing. Elaine sat there for a moment, then quietly got up and went down the stairs and into the back yard.

As her eyes met Oskar’s he suddenly looked up at Eli’s window and ran for the door. Elaine sat down abruptly. “Rich, I think we should stop now. Let’s save the celebration until we’re sure I’m 100 percent okay. Besides, I’m worried about Eli. Something is bothering her and it’s quite serious.” She still felt the sting of Eli’s rejection, in spite of herself.

“Let me talk to her.”

“No, Jack, I think this one is Oskar’s. Let’s go in and finish up the tests. I’m sure you’re both tired.”

“We’ll stay if it’s okay with you two. Oskar’s bed is quite comfortable, and we have to prepare for Eli’s injection.”

“You’re welcome to stay, but I think we’ll put off Eli’s injection until we know what’s bothering her. It’s going to be enough of an ordeal for her under normal conditions.”

§

“Eli? What’s wrong?” he lay down on her bed and put his arm around her. She turned around and took his hands in hers and pressed them against her chest. “Oh Oskar! I can’t do it! I’m afraid.”

“You can’t do what? What do you mean?”

“I won’t get the shot! I won’t! I can’t!”

“But...why? I thought it was what you wanted more than anything. To grow up so we could get married.”

Because I love you, because you can hear me and know that I love you, and I can know that you love me. That will all go away. Elaine has already gone away and she already hates what I am. She was disgusted by what I have to eat; what she had to eat only yesterday! And I can’t tell her

how I feel anymore. She's gone and she'll never come back. And she doesn't care! She can't fly and she doesn't care! She can't hear and she doesn't care! She can't see those beautiful things we saw together in the darkness when she painted and she doesn't care! And once we've changed, once you've changed, I won't be able to talk to you or Papa like this ever again. I'll be all alone again, just like before. All I'll have is my strength and my wings – and my beautiful sounds and beautiful night things. I won't give them up too. If I do, I'll have nothing. Nothing! I'll be lonely and I'll be weak besides. I can't do it Oskar! I can't!

Then, I won't do it either! We'll be together just like always. And I can help you talk to Mom and Papa. I can do that, remember? I promise!

“I love you so much, Oskar!” her relief washed over him like a flood, tumbling him over and over like a pebble in the rapids. For a minute, he couldn't even think as her fear of being alone and her love for him buffeted him back and forth like a feather in a storm. He clung to her with all his might.

Chapter 23: The Sacrifice

Elaine paced back and forth. “How could I have been so stupid! Rich, why didn’t you warn me?”

“I had no idea! It’s hard to put yourself in the mind of a child who’s a vampire, let alone a child who’s been a vampire for so long that she can’t remember what it was like to be human. How terrifying all this must have been for her! A part of her had to have felt as though she was being railroaded into this.”

“To Eli, it looks like I’ve deliberately rejected most of what she now holds dear and all the good things about her, and embraced what seems to her to be a severely handicapped existence. Loathing what I was means loathing what she still is; what she’s been for 99% of her life. My God! How could I have been so stupid! I spent so much time talking about what we would gain that I didn’t remember what she would lose. And with me in her life the last 14 years, I’ve inadvertently added significantly to what she will lose. Damn it! How can I ever make this right with her?”

“Give her a little time. Perhaps Oskar can help also.”

“No, we’re going to have to get used to doing this without Oskar’s ability. It may soon be gone so we can’t count on it in the future. No, I have to do this myself.”

She thought hard for a moment, then, “Rich? There’s something I feel I absolutely have to do for Eli, but you have a big investment in it too. I need to have your approval for this.” They walked out into the back yard, and stood under the trees at the back fence, talking quietly. Finally Richard nodded, and together they moved back toward the house.

Oskar watched them from Eli’s window. “Eli, what are they doing out there?”

She stepped up beside him, but remained quiet. Oskar didn’t have any idea what to do any more. He had worked hard just to convince her to let him tell Mom and Dad how she felt. How could they respond if they had no idea what was bothering her? She owed it to them to let them know, he had argued. That had done it, and she had softened enough to allow him tell them; but only if he did it out loud. No telepathy.

There was a knock at the door, “May I come in,” Elaine asked softly.

“No!” Eli sat down at her table and continued reassembling her white egg.

“Eli, please,” Oskar pleaded. “You don’t have to say anything. Just listen. Please? What could it hurt?”

She sighed. “You can come in.” she mumbled.

Elaine opened the door slowly, “Oskar? Would you mind...”

Oskar gave Eli an encouraging smile as he headed for his room. He knew that he would be with her anyway. *Eli, please give her a chance.*

Elaine sat down at the table, searching her mind for the right words. “Eli, I want to apologize to you. Not for enthusiastically embracing my inoculation, but for not explaining it to you adequately. Do you really understand why I didn’t want to marry your Papa while I was still a vampire.”

“I don’t care!” Eli looked at her, stony-faced.

“Yes, you do. Why else would you be angry with me? At least grant me the courtesy of an answer to a simple question. Is that asking too much?”

“Because you hated being a vampire. You didn’t want Papa to be married to a vampire.” She said coldly.

“No, Eli. It was because of how I became a vampire – because of who made me a vampire. I didn’t want any part of the Other One in my life. I didn’t want his infection coursing through my veins in my happiest moments with your Papa. I love him too much for that. I couldn’t bear the thought.” She looked Eli straight in the eyes. “If I had been infected by you, I would have married him 15 years ago, vampire or not.”

Eli smiled in spite of herself.

Elaine reached across the table and took her hand. “Eli, I love you. You’re the reason I’m here with your wonderful family. You saved my life. There’s a special place in my heart for all our nights together painting, flying, and just talking. You’re the light of my life. How could I ever hate anything about you?” She stood up and went over to Eli’s memorial to Gudmund. “This is the beginning of one of the happiest nights of my life.” She picked up Gudmund’s photo of Eli and herself lifting off on their first flight together. “I was aching to share my art with someone who could appreciate it and when you loved it as much as I, so much so that we forgot the time, I fell in love with you. And I’ve loved you ever since.”

“That’s ... that’s when you called me ‘Butterfly’ for the first time.”

“Because you’re my Butterfly, and you’ll always be my Butterfly, like it or not.” She smiled at her. “You were so sweet when you were trying to keep up with me, and trying so hard not to reveal how hard it was for you.” She went over and put her arms around her. “Eli, that was just the beginning. You have always been my advocate. From the first night we met to the night I came to say goodbye to you all, you fought for me. I wouldn’t have stayed that night if it hadn’t been for you. I owe you my life. Did you think I had forgotten? I remember you falling asleep in my arms that first night, and I carried you, purring, into Oskar’s room and put you to bed. And I remember kissing you goodnight for the first time. And the thousands of times after that. You are an indispensable part of my life. And I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

She sat down at the table next to Eli, “If you decide to get the inoculation, I’ll miss your wings too. But remember, if you decide to stay as you are, your papa and I support you. This is your choice. You’ve spent 250 years earning the right to that choice.”

“I can’t do it! It would be like if Oskar poked out one of his eyes, cut off one of his legs and punctured one of his eardrums. And all he got for it was a walk in the sun and a bowl of soup.”

Elaine smiled at Eli’s graphic description of her sense of the differences between herself and a human. To her, it was reality. She had lived with the benefits of her disease for so long they were an integral part of her. In her eyes, the inoculation would be a step down the evolutionary ladder. The downside of her condition had been mitigated for 17 years by her papa’s resourcefulness. She had a permanent place to stay, a stable food supply and people around her who loved her. The inherent instability and darkness of a vampire’s life had been removed from the equation. And Eli had forgotten. But Elaine knew there was more to it than that.

“Eli, what are you really afraid of?”

Eli got up and went over to her window. Papa was busy in the backyard scooping leaves out of the pool, but she saw the worried look on his face as he glanced up and spotted her in the window. She smiled at him as she thought about what a sweet, gentle, loving man he was and wondered at all the sacrifices he had made for her all these years, expecting nothing in return. “I don’t want to be alone,” she said softly. “And I’ll be alone! I can’t talk to you anymore. And you can’t talk to me! When we were together at night, you just touched me and I saw what you saw and felt what you felt. That’s gone now along with all the beautiful things that only we could see.” Her voice faltered, “When Oskar and I are lying in bed together at night, we think each other to sleep. That’ll be gone too. When I want to tell Papa how much I love him, all I have to do is kiss him and he sees. He’ll never see it again!” She turned toward Elaine with tears in her eyes. “I miss you so, Mama! I miss your thoughts, I miss your eyes and I miss your beautiful wings.”

Elaine took her in her arms. “I’m sorry, Butterfly.” She sat down on the bed and pulled Eli down next to her. “I should have considered your feelings when I made my choice. I’m so sorry! I lost sight of the sweet child in you because your strengths are so extraordinary.”

She took Eli’s face in her hands. “If you wish it, I will become a vampire again, but there’s a condition. The infection has to be yours, and you have to infect me yourself.” She paused for a moment, “Your papa and I have discussed this at length, and he has agreed.”

Eli looked up at her wide-eyed. “You would really do that? Papa would let you do that?”

“The thought of a part of you coursing through my veins is an altogether different matter. It would sort of mean that we were related by blood.” She smiled at her. “And, yes, your Papa is okay with it.”

“I...I couldn’t!”

“But I thought it was what you wanted. And remember, it would be given and accepted with love.”

“But...I can't! I could never do that to anyone!” She thought about her pact with Oskar.

Elaine smiled at her, “The offer stands. There's no expiration date on it.”

“But my infection is worse than yours! Look who infected me! And why!”

“Eli, you own your infection now. You've learned to live with it in quite innovative ways. Your careful, measured use of it to save Hannah proves that you are the one in control when it counts the most. I would consider it an honor to be infected by you.”

Eli got a twinkle in her eye and kissed Elaine on the neck, “Just practicing,” she giggled.

Elaine kissed her on the mouth. *I mean this Eli, with all my heart. It's your call.*

Oh Mama! I can hear you!

“It's your talent now, Eli. Not mine. I'm handicapped now, remember?”

“Thanks, Mom. I'll try to take good care of you, in spite of your weakness ... and blindness...and deafness ... and winglessness. You poor defenseless creature.” She patted her on the back.

“Remember, Eli. No expiration date.” She stood up, still holding Eli's hand. “Am I forgiven for my stupidity?”

“Yes, Mama. I love you so much.”

“And I know that, Eli. And I'll know it always. And I'll know it even if I can't hear you any more. And for the same reasons, you will know that I love you. We poor humans just have to remind each other of it a bit more often.”

§

“Did she accept your offer?” Richard asked.

“Of course not! She instinctively knows what the infection really means. And it's not a decision she would ever make lightly because selfishness is not one of her flaws. But she did make me realize what I had really given up to get here.”

“Well, I was kind of hoping she would have already reinfected you. You were kind of exciting as a vampire. Now you're just ... normal. I'm going to miss our flights together too.” He smiled at her mischievously.

“Why, Rich! You continually surprise me! Maybe I’ll go have a quick talk with Eli...”

“Don’t you dare! You’re unpredictable enough as it is. And as a willing vampire you would become insufferable. I’d have no choice but to let Eli infect me too.”

“Now, that’s something I would like to see!” They laughed together. But Elaine knew that was an impossibility. Not that she would even want it for him; she loved him exactly as he was, but she knew it would destroy him. There were some people in the world that simply could not survive for long, close to such evil. Richard was one; Oskar was another. Sweet Oskar! Eli didn’t know it, but she had almost lost him that morning they sat watching as the Other One burned. Elaine had seen it herself in one of Oskar’s unguarded moments, in a dark place deep in his soul.

§

“What about Hannah, Eli?” Oskar asked, “She’s going to grow up and you won’t. You’ll lose her forever.”

“I know, Oskar! I know!”

“In fact, we’ll have to keep you a secret. She can’t know what you are.”

“Why? Why not?”

“Because she’d eventually tell her parents, and her parents wouldn’t allow you to ever see her again, even if they didn’t believe her, that’s why. We never told Jack and Henry or their mom for the same reason. Mom explained it all to us, remember? And they grew up without us.” Oskar relived the pain he had almost forgotten. They had stayed friends, but it was different. Their interests grew apart and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Other than Eli, they were the only real friends he had ever had. He was acutely aware of the fact that, if Eli didn’t go through the cure, they would probably be the last.

“And when she gets older, do you think she’ll be content to believe you’re a fairy? She’ll ask you questions you won’t be able to answer.” Oskar realized he was being cruel, and he didn’t understand why he was doing it. But he couldn’t stop himself. “You’ll have to end the friendship soon, so she’ll forget about you. In fact, you probably shouldn’t see her anymore.”

Eli had tears in her eyes. “But Oskar, I ...”

“Eli, you can’t have everything you want!” He turned and stormed out of the room, ran across the hall and plopped down on his bed. *Why is that so hard for her to understand? I’ve understood it my whole life, and she’s 200 years older than me!*

Oskar? Please don’t be mad at me. I’m sorry. I know it was hard for you with Jack and Henry. It was hard for me too. Eli hesitated as she stood in his doorway. For a moment she had a fleeting feeling that she couldn’t come in without him inviting her.

He rolled over and looked at her, “But we have a choice now, Eli. We can either do this, or not do it. We’ve never had a choice before. You’ll lose your ‘powers;’ I understand that. But you’ll also lose that thing in you that almost killed me while you were hibernating. Remember that?!”

“But it didn’t! I warned you!”

Oskar sighed, exasperated, “What’s the matter, Eli? Are you afraid to grow up with me? Are you afraid I’ll get too ‘grown up’ for you? Or that you’ll get too ‘grown up’ for me? Are you afraid that maybe I’ll want to have ‘sexual relations’ with you and you can’t have them with me? I’ve read all the books too, you know.”

“Oskar, I... Yes. I AM afraid. I’m afraid you won’t love me anymore. Look what almost happened to Hannah with those older boys. And I remember all the others before I met you. Where’s the love in what they want? And I know it won’t be your fault, but that’s what will happen. And I can’t bear the thought of you leaving me because of something I can’t help.”

“That can’t happen. How could I stop loving you because of something you can’t give me and that I’ve known almost since we met that you couldn’t give me? That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Because you’re a boy, Oskar. When you’re...not a boy any more, you’ll understand. And then it’ll be too late.” She stepped through the wispy, ethereal barrier at his threshold, and sat down on the bed beside him. “I love Hannah! She’s a part of me; a part of my family! But I could stop seeing her; really I could! But I couldn’t bear losing you Oskar, especially not THAT way. If I lost you I would...” she buried her face in his chest, sobbing.

“You’ll never lose me, Eli. How could you think I’m like them? What would it take to make you understand that?” He pushed her away, “I’ll cut it off!! Then I’ll be like you. Will you trust me to grow up with you then?!” he shouted angrily.

She grabbed him and pulled him tightly up against her, “Don’t even say that! Don’t think that!”

“You say we should trust you because you can control your parasite. Yet you won’t trust me to control my...” he searched his memory for the right words, “sexual appetite.”

“Oskar, I’m so sorry! You’re right; it’s not fair. And I do trust you! I’m so stupid. I just don’t like things to change, Oskar. We’re so happy now; I don’t want anything to go wrong.”

Oskar rubbed her back. “Nothing bad will happen no matter which choice you make Eli. I promise you.”

§

Hannah and Eli stood side by side looking in the mirror. “Do you think we can fool them Eli?” Hannah asked excitedly.

Eli smiled at her, “Oskar, never. Mom and Papa, maybe.” She knew Mom wouldn’t have been fooled before the cure, but now? She wasn’t sure. They walked down the stairs together, each in the other’s clothes.

“I bet I can fool Oskar, Eli.” Hannah’s eyes twinkled.

“It’s a bet!”

No sooner had they reached the bottom of the stairs, than Hannah rushed onto the back porch, grabbed Oskar and hugged him tightly. He hugged her back, kissed her on the cheek and waved at Eli, “Hi Hannah.”

Hannah reached up and pinched his cheek. “I’ve wanted to do that since Eli showed me your picture last weekend. You’re so cute!!”

“Oskar’s eyes bulged as he let go of her quickly and stepped back. His face turned bright red.

“I told you Hannah! Look at his face!” Eli doubled over laughing.

Eli! I’ll get you for that.

You’ll have to be able to pick me out of a lineup first!

Oskar moved toward her quickly, just as she realized she couldn’t make it to either door without moving so fast that Hannah would notice. Oskar smiled at her as he realized she was his! He feigned a quick move to the left and grabbed her belt as she went right, sending her sprawling to the floor. He was on her in a flash, flipped her face up and tickled her mercilessly.

She squirmed and twisted, laughing so hard there were tears in her eyes. *Oskar, no fair! I can’t fight back with Hannah watching.*

Fair? Who said anything about being fair? Now I know why you want to stay a vampire. It’s because you’re afraid this might happen to you more often. “Say ‘Uncle!’”

“Never!”

“Say ‘Uncle’ or I’ll...” he slung his leg over her, straddled her, and reached for her neck with both hands, an evil grin on his face. Eli’s eyes widened. Oskar knew how ticklish she was around the neck. It was normally an unspoken ‘off limits’ area. But now...she could feel his fingers tentatively exploring her collarbone, poised for the final assault.

“Uncle! Uncle!”

Oskar threw his arms up triumphantly, as though he had just roped and tied off a calf, then jumped up and took a step toward Hannah.

“Please! Not me! Uncle!” she laughed as she held her arms out in front of her and backed away.

“You’re a guest and Eli’s blood sister. You get one free pass.” He bowed solemnly.

Eli scrambled to her feet quickly. “Papa? Be honest! Did Hannah fool you?”

“I’m afraid she did Eli. And your Mom too. Hannah, you’re three for three.”

“Boy, you owe me big time, Eli!” Hannah said, gleefully.

§

Only in the pool could Hannah be distinguished from Eli. She had a light tan that, next to Eli’s pale white skin, looked positively brown. With Hannah and Oskar, plus both Mom and Papa in the pool, it reminded Eli of the old days. They even threw the penny a few times.

The meal afterwards was very different for Eli. She slipped out and ate alone in the kitchen for the first time since Elaine was cured. It felt strange and a bit lonely though, as she watched them all talking and laughing on the porch.

Eli? Do you want me to come in with you?

No, Oskar. I’m fine. And she realized she really was. She could do this. She still had Oskar and would always have Oskar. She could stay a vampire forever if she wanted to. But there was Hannah. And all the other relatives that she now had, but could never really know unless...

§

“Eli? Can I ask you some questions?” It was after 11:00 before they had finally said ‘goodnight’ to Oskar, and climbed into Eli’s bed together.

“Sure!” *Here it comes*, Eli thought.

Be as honest as you can, Eli. Oskar thought to her encouragingly.

“I noticed that you didn’t eat here either, and that no one paid any attention.” She paused as Eli nodded. “Do they know your...secret? Do they all know?”

“Yes, they do, Hannah.”

“They all know you can fly?! Really?”

Eli smiled at her. “They’re my family. Of course they’d know.”

“Are you the only one?”

“...Yes.”

Her eyes lit up as something dawned on her, “Eli, did you fly to my house the night we first met?”

“What do you think?” Eli smiled at her.

“I think...yes! That would explain everything. I wondered how you could’ve gotten there so fast on the bus, once I knew where you lived.”

“You’re pretty smart, Hannah. Yes, and I flew around the neighborhood a few times first. That’s why I knew to tell your parents that I was staying near Old Finchleians.” They both got quiet as they relived that night.

“Eli? I wanted to thank you again for saving my life before. Both times.” She took Eli’s hand. “Do your mom and dad know what happened?”

“I told them everything. They think you were really brave.”

“I was scared to death! You were the one who was brave.”

“Hannah, you were willing to fall out of a tree with me, with your arms around my neck, just because I told you to trust me. You were willing to come down the tree and surrender yourself to those boys, just to save me. You could have been killed. I knew they couldn’t hurt me. I wasn’t brave at all.”

“Are you saying that fairies can’t be brave?” Hannah smiled at her.

Only when they decide to give up their powers. Oskar thought to her.

“Only when they decide to give up their powers, Hannah” *Thanks for that, Oskar.*

“But why would they do that?”

“So they can grow up.”

“You mean, kind of like the Lost Boys in Peter Pan?”

“Exactly like that!” *Nothing like a soul mate to put things in perspective,* she thought to herself. *So which am I? Peter Pan, or a Lost Boy?*

“Well, I’d hate it if you had to give up your powers, Eli. It would be kind of sad. You are so beautiful with your wings. But I’d be lonely if I had to grow up without you.”

“I’m not a fairy, Hannah. You know that, right?”

“I know, Eli. But I know you have to have given up something to be what you are. I just know it. That’s the way things work in the world of magic; and, I think, even in the real world. My dad always says you can’t get something for nothing.” She got a faraway look in her eyes. “I wonder what an Eli would have to give up in order to be so kind and beautiful, a wondrous winged creature...”

Oh Oskar, I don’t want to have to give up Hannah!

Eli, you’re going to have to decide soon which way you’re going to go. Everything depends on your decision. Hannah’s future with us depends on your decision.

I know, Oskar, I know. I have to think!

Chapter 24: The Decision

The lawyer closed his briefcase decisively, and got up from the table. “Are there any other questions?”

“No, I think we’re fine. You’ve done an excellent job summarizing the trust and your detailed breakdowns are quite clear.” Richard said.

“Well, if anything comes up, just give me a call. You have my card.” He smiled at Oskar and Eli. “Mr. Törnkvist thought the world of you two. He worked on this trust with me for at least three years before his...accident. I wish you both the very best. I was his lawyer for many, many years and he was at his happiest when dealing with the trust.”

Elaine showed him to the door as Oskar and Eli looked over their individual packets with Papa.

“Well, children. What are you going to do with all this new wealth? Any ideas?”

“Some of mine’s going to as many of the families I ... hurt as I can find,” Eli said decisively. “Remember when we talked about this, Papa? That’s what I want to do. Will you help me?”

“Of course, Eli. I promised you I would. And it certainly doesn’t have to wait. We’ve got a nice start on it with the lists you’ve already given me. Oskar?”

“I want to give some to my Mom and Dad. I still care about them; especially my Mom. She really tried, you know.”

Elaine sat down with them. “That’s really thoughtful of you, Oskar, and I agree. She did. Your dad and I will look into it for you.”

“And the rest, I want Eli to have – or you and Dad.” He really didn’t want the money; it just put pressure on him, and he wasn’t an adult; he didn’t need it. Outside of a new computer, video games, or books, he had no idea how to spend that much money. *Maybe a new TV for Mom and Dad?* He knew they wouldn’t buy one themselves.

“No, Oskar. It’s yours. But you don’t have to spend it; just put it away and use it when you think of something to do with it,” Eli said.

“I think you’ll be surprised at how quickly things will occur to you, Oskar.” Elaine said. “You’ve got a good heart.”

“Well, first things first.” Let’s see what this first box holds for you.” Papa handed Eli the small box that Gudmund’s lawyer had indicated she could open at any time. Eli hesitated a moment, then gingerly unwrapped the box, and removed a small, black velvet jewelry box. She opened it carefully, and immediately recognized the stone from Gudmund’s wife’s wedding ring, although the setting seemed different. There was a note inside.

Eli read it aloud. “Eli and Oskar. This gift is in response to one of my last, clear views of your collective future, and it came quickly after my fascinating visit with you both. The stone you will recognize, but the setting is your own, Eli. I saw it clearly as Oskar slipped it on your finger on your wedding day. I’ll say no more, lest I say more than I should. I’ll only add that it was a view of a ‘Stable Future.’ You were the driving force in my life, the one decent excuse I had to keep on living. I can never repay you for that.” Eli felt a deep sadness. She knew he had died at his own hand, but couldn’t fully understand why. Perhaps if she were older...

“But this looks like an engagement ring, Mom. Where’s the wedding ring?” Oskar asked.

“Oskar, engagement rings didn’t become popular until near the end of the 19th century, long after Gudmund got married. This was all there was back then.”

“Isn’t Gudmund assuming a lot?” Papa asked, grinning. “Oskar hasn’t even proposed to Eli yet.”

“We’re just kids!” Oskar said, turning red. He knew he was old enough in real years, so he could really marry Eli if he wanted to – and Eli, of course was plenty old enough, but marriage? It seemed like something that only older people did to prove that they loved each other. *Eli and I don’t need it.*

He could feel her smiling at him.

“Well, he didn’t say that I couldn’t try it on.” Elaine slipped it on her finger and held it out so everyone could see it. “It’s absolutely beautiful!! What do you think, Rich? Should we make one to match it for our wedding?” She quickly took it off and put it back in the box.

“Too late, Elaine. The wheels are already in motion after your dramatic proposal in the tub the other day.” He winked at her.

“Why Rich! I didn’t think you had remembered, with all the excitement of the day.”

“That...I wouldn’t forget.” He kissed her on the cheek. “And you better get used to the idea too, Oskar. You know Gudmund’s batting average on his predictions.” Oskar turned red again.

“What about all these presents, Papa? What do you suppose that means?”

“I don’t know Eli. All I know is that for the next nine years, each of you will receive a special gift from the trust on your birthdays. At the end of that time, the remainder of the estate will be given to you both, which, I understand, includes a castle in Romania.”

“You’re making that up!!”

“Am I, now?” His eyes twinkled. “We’ll see...”

§

He really hadn't wanted to go to the lab today, but he was getting more and more uneasy about the direction their latest tests seemed to be heading. Elaine had sensed the tension and had insisted on coming with him. "Rich, how many times have you run the test? Often enough to be sure?"

"Yes, but I ran it again anyway. It's too damned important to take any chances at all that we're wrong. With you, it doesn't matter. You've made your choice willingly, as an adult, with your eyes wide open. Eli, on the other hand, is in a lose-lose situation. She's too young to make this new, more difficult choice maturely, and will never be mature enough until eight or ten years after she's made it. And then it will be too late, if she decides as an adult that it was the wrong choice."

He flipped on the computer, waited impatiently for it to boot up, selected the DNA sequencing software and rapidly typed in the now-familiar series of commands. As soon as the results appeared on the screen, he hit the 'print' button, walked over to the lab printer and grabbed the summary sheet, not waiting for the detailed report that followed.

Richard shook his head as he checked and rechecked the printout. "Elaine, you need to see this."

She stepped over to his desk and looked over his shoulder. "The results are the same?"

He nodded. "How are we going to tell Eli? Her decision is becoming difficult enough for her without this. This makes your promise to her moot and her own decision much more important. On the other hand, it makes perfect sense."

"And it's certainly an unexpected side-effect of the cure. In fact, in the long run, this solves the fear factor in the eventual outing of Eli as a vampire if she chooses to remain one. And, consequently, gives her two more reasons to do so. I don't like it at all! I know it was my idea to run this test, but I certainly wish we hadn't now."

Richard looked again at the ten Petri dishes he had carefully removed from the incubator. Five had the familiar lemon-yellow growth they had come to expect all these years when growing their vampire-infected cultures; the other five were dirty white. No sign of infected growth whatsoever. He placed an infected dish on the sunlit windowsill and watched matter-of-factly as it burst into flames and quickly burned itself out. They would discuss this with Eli and Oskar this evening. He carefully locked up the samples, put their results in his briefcase, and walked with Elaine to the elevator.

§

As soon as Oskar and Eli were seated, Elaine stood up at the end of the table; her voice was solemn. "Eli, we have something to tell you about the antidote. Your Papa and I just confirmed it today. I misspoke when I offered to let you reinfect me. I'm afraid it's not possible."

"What? What do you mean?"

“It turns out that the antidote is also a vaccination. Once injected, you become immune to the bite of a vampire.”

“But...how do you know?”

Papa took over. “We’ve run tests on four different cultures. The results are the same for all. Of course we can’t be sure it’s permanent, but the mechanism for immunity seems to suggest it. The switch that activates the infection isn’t just turned off as you and I originally thought; it’s actually gone from the strand. Consequently, the vampire segment is, for all practical purposes, isolated from the rest of the immunized strand. It has essentially become ‘junk’ DNA. As soon as the original unmodified strand is reintroduced via a vampire’s bite for example, it folds itself into its twin and the switch breaks away as though cut off with a knife. It’s actually a very effective process and could lead to new methods for developing vaccines in the future.” He watched for Eli’s reaction carefully, but she was unreadable.

“So that means that if I decide on the antidote, there’s no changing my mind?” her voice was even; emotionless.

“Yes, Eli. That’s exactly what it means.”

Eli looked at Elaine and smiled. “I ...I guess you won’t have to worry now that I might want you back.”

“Who was worried? I told you it was your call, and I meant it.”

Eli paused a moment, then stood up abruptly. “You’re right, Oskar, I need to break it off with Hannah as soon as possible. It’s not fair to her and I’m not going to lie to her anymore. I’m not doing this. I’ll just have to give her up, just like we did Jack and Henry.” Her voice was cold and hard.

“I’m so sorry, Butterfly! I didn’t imagine that this would be the outcome...”

“It’s okay, Mom. I’m not mad at you; you didn’t know. It’s not your fault. I just can’t do this! I’ll stay the way I am, with Oskar.” She put her arm around him.

“Eli, you need to think this over more carefully. I know this is a shock, but it doesn’t change things as much as you think. DNA research is still in its infancy. Someday we may be able to...at least restore some of your abilities. Remember, they’re still locked in your DNA, and we have plenty of samples of your unaffected blood.” Dawson realized that the decision was ultimately hers, but he wanted to make sure she had examined all the possible outcomes.

“And Oskar told me about your fears of growing up with him and all that entails, including his sexual maturity and your fears as to how to deal with it. You have to know that there are options.”

Eli sat down again and looked at him questioningly. She hadn't realized that Papa had given this much thought. To her it had always been something between Oskar and herself; an unsolvable problem if they grew up together. Unsolvable because she had nothing more she could give him that would bring them closer together as he became a man, without degrading and demeaning herself. 200 years of experience with her occasional 'helpers' had taught her that much. There had always been a dark ending; usually fatal, as their increasing demands drove her deeper into herself and her loneliness. She had never managed to stick it out with any of them for more than a few years, so acquiring them had always been a last resort. The darkness of what she was didn't mix well with their own. Håkan had only been the last, but by no means the worst of them.

"Eli, if you are sure you want to be a girl, there are estrogen treatments we can give you once you take the antidote. You are at exactly the right age for these. You will, for all practical purposes, become a girl. You will look and feel like a girl, even more than you already do, and effectively be a woman when you grow up. The moment you are given the antidote, you become treatable, a clean slate sexually. You will be what you want to be, unambiguously. And when you finally take the aging vaccine, you will be locked in forever as a woman, and you and Oskar can continue the relationship you've always had. And who knows what the future holds? At some point, we may even be able to...restore what you've lost by replacing it with the female equivalent.

Eli's mouth opened. She had never considered it before, and all this time Papa had the answers. But would it be enough? In her experience, there was nothing pleasant at all about sexual contact. At best it was mechanical; at worst it made her feel like a toilet. Was it worth the risk? She didn't think so. And she could tell by the look on Papa's face that he sensed it.

"Eli, you are only 12, despite the centuries you have lived. You know this; we've discussed it many times before. That's why what I'm going to tell you now is likely to be very difficult for you to understand. But you have to try, Eli. You have to try hard, because it's so important in the context of the decision you have to make."

"Have you given any thought to what your 'immortality' really means? What all our immortality means? It merely means that when any one of us dies, it will be because of an accident or an event outside our control. And it is virtually certain that it will happen. Forever is a long time. No one, not even a vampire can truly live forever. Planets die. Solar systems die. According to one of the latest theories, the Universe itself is dying. There is no such thing as immortality. Everything comes to an end. Some day, you and Oskar will be separated by death. It could be tomorrow, it could be in 10,000 years. But it will happen! And you have to understand this in order to appreciate what you have and what your choices are."

"First and foremost, never forget; your longevity is a double-edged sword. If Oskar were to die, you could conceivably be alone again for longer than it took the continents to form. Perhaps even long after the sun has died and turned to dust. Likewise, if your mom or I were to die. Loneliness is part of all our lives; don't ever think you've safely left it behind. Would you really want to go through those eons alone as a child? Examine your past."

“You have to decide whether this great wealth of time you’ve been given should be spent as an eternal child, with your powers, or as an adult without them, and with all the ‘slings and arrows’ that result from adulthood. You are happy now, but the depths of your sorrow and likewise the heights of your happiness are limited by your age. There are so many things you will never be able to understand as a child. Do you want to spend your share of eternity handicapped by your youth? Or do you want to take a chance and develop your mind to its full potential? Just as you can’t explain to me the wonders of your enhanced senses, I can’t explain to you the maturity, insight and knowledge that come with age. You and I are each in our respective versions of Plato’s Cave. And you need to decide whether you want to remain shackled, head turned toward the wall watching the shadowy world of the other cave dwellers, or whether you should follow Hannah out of the cave into the adult world. One thing to remember, Eli, is that Elaine is the only one of us to have seen both caves. Perhaps she is better suited to give you advice. Please, talk to her.”

§

Eli and Elaine stood, backs against the wall in her studio, looking at their favorite painting, still on its easel. It was a huge canvas, still unframed because Elaine had been constantly adding new subtleties each time they visited the site, and Eli, under her close supervision, had begun to do the same. They had flown there countless times as the painting progressed and Elaine had gradually taught Eli how to really ‘see’ at night. It was amazing to her how Elaine could manipulate her eyes just as she reformed her claws; she was even more amazed at what she could see when she successfully mastered the ability herself. How could she not have discovered this herself after more than 200 years in the darkness? But she knew it was because of the artist in Elaine’s soul. A talent of which she only had enough to allow her to see the breathtaking beauty in what Elaine created. She wondered absently if this was because Elaine was an adult. Was this part of what Papa was trying to tell her? She shook her head slowly, as she realized the painting was finished, complete or not. The principal artist was blind.

They talked of many things; of what love is and what love expects. What is required to sustain love, and how Oskar’s love differed from Rich’s and her own. About how love and beauty are intertwined in complex patterns, each sustaining the other in so many beautiful and unpredictable ways. And Eli understood. Not all, but enough to give her a hint as to what her life could be like. But would it? Love can also be fragile after all, easily destroyed if not carefully tended to. Eli was afraid still.

§

The moon bathed Oskar’s room with light as they lay together in bed. They both loved it when the moon was so perfectly positioned in the night sky that it seemed to have selected them alone, of all the people in the world, to shine down on. As always, their love for each other was there in the background, just beneath the surface, like the steady sound of a breeze blowing through the trees, a sound she knew she would never hear again if they grew up together. She fiddled absently with a button on his pajamas. “Oskar? Why haven’t you fought me for what YOU want? It’s as though you don’t care. How can that be?”

He reached up and put his hand on her cheek. “Eli, I loved you way before we could think together. I left everything to come with you, with no regrets, all before my ‘talent.’ We got our first apartment together. I was there when you killed that man near our apartment after he hit me with his gun. I held you during your first nightmare in Karlstad. I was there when we first met Papa. I remember when you almost died saving my life from a stupid moose. And I remember our first flight together when you rescued me, how I saw through your eyes for the first time. For times like that one, I would miss it, but it means nothing to me without you. I suppose a part of me would like to grow up, just so we could have better control over our lives, and not have to hide what we are. But I’m not afraid. I know I would still love you in spite of your fears. That’s why my choice doesn’t matter. Yours is what is important.”

“Oskar, it’s almost as though my years of experience in the world have made me so much more unsure than you. I guess I’m not as old and wise as you think. How can you be so certain?”

“Because I know you. And I know what I feel. And I know why. And I know you are strong, but I still want to protect you, because ... I couldn’t bear the thought of you being hurt.” He smiled at her. “And if you were cured, I could really do that, because then you could be hurt as easily as I could. I’d even have to be much more careful when we wrestle, because, after all, you’d just be a girl; especially if you took Dad’s estrogen treatments.”

She smiled at the thought, “But who’d protect you? I like being able to protect you. I’d be so afraid for you if I couldn’t do that anymore.”

“Dad’s done just fine without your powers. And so has everyone else we know for that matter. We don’t need ‘em – no offence. We especially don’t need what goes along with them.”

“You’re right Oskar, we don’t need...that.” She hugged him. It was still there, of course. She could always feel it lurking, waiting patiently for the right moment, be it from hunger, anger, or fear; the mindless beast that, once awakened, wrenched her life from her violently and did what it had to do before it crawled back into its cave, sated, oblivious to the price paid. She shuddered, put it out of her mind, and pressed her cheek against his.

They lay together a while drifting in and out of sleep, sharing in each others’ wispy dream fragments as they passed fleetingly between them.

Oskar?

What?! Oskar had just selected a promising dream and was going with it.

I think I’m going on a short flight.

Eli, I don’t think it’s a good idea, Papa...

I’m just going to Mom’s and my special place. You know it’s not dangerous.

He sighed, *Okay, Eli. I’ll wait up for you.* She sensed his concern, and reassured him.

She climbed out of bed and took off her pajama top, hesitated a moment, then stripped down completely. She climbed, naked, up on the windowsill and launched herself into the back yard, over the trees, and back up over the house. Oskar watched her go, then reached over, turned on his light and picked up his book. He stayed with her until she gradually faded away over central London.

§

She rose on the updraft until she reached that perfect height, and the bare essence of Elaine's beautiful painting lay before her. Once, this beautiful vista would have been enough for her, as it was on their first flight together, but now...she gazed down at the city, Big Ben and Parliament on her right and the moonlit Thames snaking away into the distance. She gently adjusted her wings as Elaine had taught her, until she hung motionless in the air, perfectly balanced on the updraft.

Her pupils grew larger and more elongated as her rods and cones, at her direction, expanded their sensitivity upward into a different range of light frequencies, just as Elaine had taught her. She caught her breath as the transmission towers and power lines suddenly began to glow and the ethereal flames, bolts of lightning, and blasts of light leapt from them as though they were living breathing things. She watched them cascade and tumble together, some caroming off the clouds, others passing through them and disappearing into the night sky on their long journey across the universe in a multitude of brilliant colors. She watched as some of them projected flickering shadows of buildings against buildings and others passed through them as though they had no substance at all and disappeared into the Earth. She raised her eyes to the horizon, where each transmission tower randomly blazed and sparkled with its own signature colors and patterns, which dissipated randomly into the distant sky, twisting and turning as they bounced off the copper-clad steeples and gold-leafed domes of the city. The city had been transformed into a magnificent creature of light and energy, joyously casting off wave after wave of brilliant spears of light, lighting up the darkness around her.

She could almost feel them as they penetrated her body, leaving small glowing craters on her skin that faded rapidly from bright red to pale blue-gray and were immediately obscured by the next wave of kaleidoscopic needles of light, flashing and dancing over her iridescent moonlit body. She imagined that she could hear them pattering against her skin like a soft summer's rain.

She remembered Elaine's triumphant smile as her mouth opened in wonderment the first time she had successfully made the shift. She remembered watching, awestruck, as Elaine's wings glowed and pulsed with color as the endless streams of energy pouring up from the city struck them, some bleeding and rippling into the deep velvety blackness; others passing through as though she weren't there at all.

Her eyes shifted again, and she could see the ribbons of the normally invisible aurora twisting and turning in the starlit sky. She could almost hear the soft hissing as they folded and slid against one another.

And finally, the beautiful deep indigo, strangely quiet, but powerful solar wind, stretching out into the vastness of space as far as she could see, blowing through and past the Earth as though it had encountered nothing but a minor flaw in empty space, pounding against the earth's magnetic field, which, in a blaze of yellow-orange light, bent and deformed against the relentless pressure of the great winds. The sheer power of the never-ending wind always made her feel small and insignificant as it rushed by, the only real thing in a world of her own imagination; a world without substance. The solid feel of the very Earth and the beautiful city beneath her dissolved away, and together they became the fairyland of Hannah's imagination, bathed in that unearthly blue light, with Eli hovering above it all as the quintessential Fairy Princess. She smiled at the thought, as the warm memories of Hannah and her soft sweetness and gentle humanity came back in a welcome rush; the only truly real thing in this intangible world.

She sighed as she dropped out of the sky and reluctantly headed for home.

§

She stood alone for several minutes looking at Elaine's beautiful painting with its myriad colors and textures, a mere ghost of the reality of what they had shared together so many times; then she purposefully blended three carefully selected colors together on the palette to produce the one color she could see clearly in her mind's eye. She dipped her small brush into the final mix and hesitantly brought it up to the canvas, to a small, insignificant area near a small tower just before the horizon. She delicately added a few brilliant but understated flashes of light, then stepped back and viewed the overall effect. She nodded to herself, cleaned and put away her brush and moved quietly up the stairs to Oskar's room.

He looked up as she slipped in, moving silently and gracefully, pale white, a fairy, bathed in the moonlight. He smiled at her, slid quietly out of bed and gently put his arms around her. "You've decided! Oh, Eli, you've decided!" She smiled back as she slipped into her pajamas and kissed him lightly on the forehead.

"And it's the right decision, Oskar! I know it!" She took his hand and pulled him gently toward the door. "Let's go tell Papa."

Oskar and Eli walked slowly hand-in-hand down the hall, barefooted, to their father's room; to her dear Papa's room, and knocked lightly on the door.

END

Epilogue

Epilogue, Part 1

“Don’t go too far girls, and be back by 9:30,” Hannah’s mother called out to them. Eli led a reluctant Hannah down the street toward Southover and Old Finchleians once again. It had been over a month since their encounter, and it had taken Eli quite some time to convince Hannah to revisit the field with her.

Eli could feel her tremble a bit, now that they were actually on their way. “Please, Hannah. I’ll be with you, but if you’re not ready, I’ll understand. We can go back.”

Hannah smiled at her and walked a bit faster, stepping ahead of her a few feet. “I’m okay, really.” She was terrified, but she knew Eli was right. She had to do this.

“It belongs to you, Hannah. Not them.” They’ll never come around here again, I promise.”

“I know, Eli, but it doesn’t help. I’m afraid.” They crossed Tillingham Way at the corner, and headed up Southover.

Eli stopped and hugged her tightly. “You never told your parents, did you? Why not? They would have helped you, and supported you. Your brother probably would have wanted to go after them for you.” She knew why, but she also knew Hannah needed to be reminded.

“Because I promised you!” Hannah sounded surprised that Eli had even asked. “And what could they do? I knew those boys would never come back because you told me so, so I knew I was safe. But...” She took Eli’s hand as they walked along the sidewalk. She felt ashamed. Eli was right; there was nothing to be afraid of, so why was she? Didn’t she trust Eli?

“Papa told me a story yesterday about a cat that learned too much from an unpleasant experience it had. He said I should tell you.” Eli thought carefully a moment to make sure she got it right. “We should be careful to get out of an experience only the wisdom that is in it -- and stop there; lest we be like the cat that sits down on a hot stove-lid. She will never sit down on a hot stove-lid again -- and that is well; but also she will never sit down on a cold one anymore.”

Hannah smiled, “Your papa is so nice! So I’m the cat, right? Did he make that up?”

“No, I think it was someone called Pudd’nhead Wilson.”

They turned in at the low hedge, passed the sign, and crossed the parking lot. It was almost as dark as it had been on that night; the only difference was the slightly larger sliver of moon in the sky. As they passed by the clubhouse Hannah glanced over at the tree; the tree where Eli had saved her life for the second time. She followed the treeline to the right and could barely make out the lights from Richy Johnson’s old house through the trees. Hannah clung tightly to Eli’s arm as they walked across the field.

Eli led her over to the spot where they had talked before, and pulled Hannah down on the grass beside her. “I have some things I need to talk to you about, and I thought this would be a good place to start. This is our special place now. It’s the place where I found out how really brave you are and how much I love you and trust you.” Eli could hear the crickets in the background, warming up before the concert. She smiled at Hannah.

Hannah sensed the seriousness in her voice. “What is it, Eli? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Hannah. Papa and I just agreed that there were some things about our family that you have a right to know. And particularly things about me.”

Hannah held her breath. *Is Eli going to tell me her secrets? About what she is and how we’re related?* She felt a twinge of fear and apprehension; a feeling she had more and more often as her ideas about the world were changed by things she read and saw, and usually for the worse. “You don’t have to tell me anything, Eli. You know that, don’t you?”

“I know. But I owe it to you. More than you’ll ever know.” She hesitated. “Hannah, would you like me even if I wasn’t a ... fairy?”

“Sure! You’re my blood sister aren’t you?” She paused, “But you’re serious aren’t you?”

Eli nodded, “Because Papa has found a cure for my ... sun allergy. But it means I would lose my ability to fly. Forever.”

“How sad that would be! But you should do it if you think it’s best for you. The sun could really hurt you if you’re not careful, right?” Hannah sounded really concerned.

“Actually, if I didn’t have the clothing that Papa made for me it could kill me.”

Hannah gasped, “Could it really kill you? Then it’s decided! You have to do it! I couldn’t bear it if you got hurt.” She hugged her tightly.

“There’s more.”

Hannah squeezed her even tighter.

“I’ll be able to grow up with you.”

“What do you mean? You’re my age. Why did you stop aging? Because you’re a fairy? When did you stop aging?” She thought for a moment, “How old ARE you, Eli?”

Eli hesitated a moment, then in a low voice, “About 243 years old.”

Hannah tried to wrap her mind around the idea, but couldn’t. “But, you’re only 12! You’re like me; just a kid! I know it!”

“Hannah, I’m 12, but I’ve been 12 for 243 years. I never grew up. But I will grow up now, and it’s partly because of you.”

Hannah smiled at her, “So I’m kind of like Wendy?”

“Yep! You’re Wendy, and I’m a lost boy.”

“But how about your family? Are they really old too?”

“No. I was alone for about 230 years. I found my Oskar first. Then Oskar and I found Papa. Then we all found Mom.”

Hannah looked confused, “It doesn’t make any sense!”

Eli sighed. “I know Hannah. But please believe me. It’s all true. And I wanted to tell you as much as I could before I got the shot that would cure me. There’s so much more, but Papa told me to go easy on you this first time. He and Mom trust you too, Hannah. And most important of all, Oskar trusts you.”

“But Oskar hardly knows me!”

“He has his ways. He knew when you pinched his cheek.” Her eyes twinkled.

“Eli, just about the time I figure something out, you give me a new puzzle. It’s so exciting and fun!” she frowned as all of what Eli had just told her suddenly sank in. “You were alone for 230 years? How awful! How did you manage? Where were your birth parents?”

“I...They died of old age, but I was alone long before that. Before Oskar, I’ve been alone since I became...what I am.”

“But why? Eli, I wish I could have been there for you!” Hannah had tears in her eyes. She grabbed her and kissed her on the cheek. *Is that the price you had to pay to be a fairy? It’s way too much!*

Eli, startled, pushed her away. “What? What did you say?”

“I said, ‘I wish I could have been there for you.’” Hannah looked at her, puzzled. “What’s wrong?”

“No. What did you say after that? It sounded like, ‘Is that the price you had to pay to be a fairy? It’s way too much.’” Her mind was racing. It was impossible, but...what could it mean? She knew she could do this if she put her lips on Papa’s but that was the only way with a human. Until now?

“But...I only thought it! How could you...?” Hannah took Eli’s hands in hers and smiled. “Why didn’t you tell me you could hear me thinking? It would have saved us so much time.” She grinned at Eli.

“But I can’t! I mean, I can’t usually! I mean, Oskar...” she stopped. *Sweet Hannah! It doesn’t even bother her that I might be able to hear what she’s thinking. It doesn’t even occur to her that she might think something she doesn’t want me to hear.* She felt a closeness to her; a deep warmth she hadn’t felt for anyone else before Oskar. She gently kissed Hannah on the cheek. *I love you Hannah, my kindred spirit, my sister.*

I love you too Eli, my fairy, my magical creature.

Hannah started giggling. “That’s so absolutely cool! Another secret I can’t tell anyone!”

“It’s a new secret for me too, Hannah. You’re the first one, outside of my family.”

“Your whole family can do this?” Hannah’s eyes got wide. “They heard my thoughts the whole time I was there?”

“No, no. Only Oskar, and only when he touches you. Except for me. We don’t have to touch.”

“And when I touched him?” She turned beet red.

Eli laughed, “I think Oskar would love to see your face right now. It would be the ultimate revenge for him. But he didn’t do it on purpose. He only did it when you pinched his cheek.”

“But I was thinking about how REALLY cute he was!” She turned red again.

“And Oskar thanks you.” Eli was amused and couldn’t pass up the chance to rub it in.

“But Oskar can’t fly. Oskar isn’t a ... fairy.”

“No. He was just a regular boy when I met him. Then...It’s complicated. I promise I’ll tell you everything; but just not right now.” Eli wished she had found this out sooner. *Now, it’s almost too late. In a few days, I’ll lose it all. Unless...*

“Let’s go somewhere new!” Eli stood up and took Hannah’s hand.

“Sure! Where should we go?” Hannah was excited.

Eli looked up and pointed at the sliver of moon. “How about there?”

Hannah’s heart raced, “Really?! You’d do that for me?”

Eli grinned at her, took off her shirt and handed it to Hannah. “You’re not afraid are you?”

“Afraid? Of what? I know you won’t drop me. We’re kindred spirits! Where are you taking me?”

“To a place where my mom and I used to go all the time. Put my shirt on over yours, though. It might be a bit cool up there.”

Finally, she took Hannah’s hands. “And you must know this is now a really special place. The place where we tell each other our secrets. You can’t be afraid of it any more. It’s a magical place now.” They both became quiet for a moment and listened to the crickets chirping their way through the third movement of their symphony. Then Eli raised her arms over her head, thought her wings as large as she possibly could, larger even than when she had rescued Oskar, and looked at Hannah. In a solemn tone she chanted, “I want you to come with me to a special place, a place where no human child has ever been before. A magical place where only fairies go.”

Hannah put her arms around Eli’s neck, boosted herself up, and wrapped her legs tightly around her waist. Eli spread her wings, crouched and leaped forward, gently rising into the air. She flew half the length of the field only three feet off the ground, rose up suddenly and banked between two tall trees, dipped her left wing over Hannah’s house and headed for London.

§

Eli searched for a stable updraft, found one and settled in. Hannah tightened her grip as they rose rapidly upwards until Eli feathered a bit and slowed to a stop. “What do you think?”

“I...It’s beautiful, Eli. It’s so beautiful! And I’m not even cold. Oh Eli, I so love this! Thank you so much!” she kissed the back of her neck.

Stay, Hannah. Don’t move. Eli opened her eyes into her magical world, and Hannah was suddenly bathed in the kaleidoscope of colors as the city’s pulsing energy surged up around them.

Hannah gasped. *Eli what is it? What are you doing?!*

This is my world, Hannah. One of the few things that will be difficult for me to leave behind. I never would have imagined that I could show this to you, ever. Now this is really our special place; yours, mine, and Mama’s.

Hannah was overwhelmed as she tried to make sense of it all. Eli’s eyes moved up and down the immense spectrum of light as one vista after another presented itself to her, so rapidly that she had hardly the time to process one before it dissolved into another.

This is your place, Hannah. Eli stopped as the City was once again bathed in the ethereal indigo of the solar winds and began flickering and pulsating in the glow as though it were a magical underwater kingdom of light and promises of unimaginable possibilities.

Hannah hugged her tighter and kissed her on the cheek. *I pretended you were a fairy. Now I know you’re one!* She could feel Eli’s tears. Eli could feel her love.

§

Hannah broke the comfortable silence when they began circling her neighborhood once again. “Everything looks so...ordinary now. The real world seems so drab and unexciting.”

“Let’s see what we can do about that.” Eli suddenly dove down over the green and pulled up just in time to land gently on the very same branch in Hannah’s tree where they had talked the first night they met. “You realize that this really messes up your game don’t you?”

Hannah had tried once to explain her ‘game’ to Eli, but she really never got the point; just the rules. As Hannah had explained it to her, “Each of us is born with a huge spool of imaginary string. The string begins to unwind from your spool as soon as you leave your home. You have to make sure the imaginary string you are unwinding behind you wherever you go, remains untangled. This means that if you walk clockwise around a tree three times, you have to untangle yourself by walking back around it three times and reel the string back in. If you run around the block, you have to run back around it the opposite direction. If you don’t, you’ve lost that string forever, because you never rewound it. You must keep the string untangled, and as short as possible, because when you finally run out of string, you die.”

“That’s Okay, Eli. It was worth it. Besides, you can loan me some of yours. I’m sure you still have plenty left.”

Hannah gave Eli back her shirt, and they settled in on the branch, legs dangling into the darkness, and arms around each other’s waists. Hannah leaned her head on Eli’s shoulder. “I feel so good tonight Eli. Knowing that you are going to be with me now forever feels so good. And sweet Oskar. I want Jason to meet him. I’m sure they’ll like each other.” Hannah saw only good things ahead of her; endless wonderful possibilities, great fun, and long quiet talks where she could share all her thoughts with her soulmate. Her world was, without exception, a beautiful place again.

“I know they will, Hannah.”

Eli heard the familiar sound of Mom’s car as it pulled up to the curb in front of Hannah’s house.

“We’re up here, Mom!”

Elaine started for the house, as Eli shouted even louder, “WE’RE UP HERE, MOM!!”

Elaine turned, smiled, and crossed the street. “What are you two up to? Are you about ready to go?”

Eli dropped to the ground in front of her as Hannah slowly worked her way down through the branches. Eli took her hand and helped her down from the big branch. “Mom, I took Hannah to our special place and showed her everything! She could see! She can hear me! How can that be?”

Elaine looked at Hannah, startled. “I really don’t know, Eli. Are you sure?”

“We’re sure!” they said in unison. Hannah giggled. “See how much we think alike? We’re really sisters, you know.”

Elaine smiled at her, then took both their hands in hers and walked with them across the street. “We should hurry, because Oskar is waiting up for you. But I need to talk to your parents about something first. How would you feel about giving Eli’s Papa a DNA sample, Hannah?”

“Would it hurt?”

“Nope. It’s just a swish of a cotton swab on the inside of your cheek. No pain whatsoever.”

“Okay!” She led them both into the living room. Her mom and dad stood up. “Elaine! How’ve you been? How’s Richard?” Livia smiled quickly at Eli and Hannah. She still couldn’t get used to seeing them together. It was a bit unnerving.

“We’re both fine, but Richard has a favor to ask of you. Eli may have told you that he found a cure for her sun sensitivity?”

“Yes she did,” Nils said “We’re so happy for you. But if Eli can now get a tan too, I’m not sure how we’ll be able to tell them apart.”

Elaine laughed. “First things first. Next week, the cure; then the tan.” They all sat down. “Richard’s curiosity has been piqued by Hannah’s uncanny resemblance to Eli and he would like to get your permission to take a DNA sample for his research. It could answer some questions you had for me last time, such as whether or not she and Eli could actually be related. And he hopes it will help him understand the underlying mechanism of her...sun allergy. If they’re related, the DNA differences could be very revealing.

“Hannah? How do you feel about it?”

“I really want to, Dad. I know we’re related! I can feel it!” she squeezed Eli’s hand. *And I have the family tree to prove it.*

“You won’t be too disappointed if you’re not?”

“Nope! Because I know we are.” Hannah said confidently. She realized suddenly that she would know it even if she didn’t have the family tree.

Livia put her hands on her shoulders. “Hannah, you have an entirely too optimistic view of the world. You need to be a bit more realistic.”

“Later, Mom. I’ll do that later.” Hannah grinned at her. Livia shook her head. “Go on up and get your stuff together. It’s getting a bit late and I’m sure Elaine doesn’t want to wait for you forever.” She gave Hannah a swat on the behind as she and Eli headed for the stairs.

“Sometimes I’m really afraid for her,” Livia said, “One of these days, she’s going to be brought down out of the clouds, and for her it’s going to be a tough fall.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Livia. As short a time as I’ve known her I think she’s extremely well grounded, thanks to you two. I think she’ll get through it just fine.” She paused, “and she’s a real fireball. It’s been a long, long time since I’ve laughed as much as I did when she stayed over last time.”

§

Hannah and Eli piled into the back seat, talking and laughing. “Seat belts!” Elaine scolded.

She pulled away from the curb quietly, circled the green and turned onto Tillingham Way.

Hannah leaned forward and put her hands on the back of Elaine’s seat. “Mrs. Dawson? Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, Hannah, ask away!”

“You’ve...seen what Eli showed me tonight? The beautiful lights? The fairy city?”

Elaine looked back at Eli, questioningly. Eli nodded.

“Yes, I have Hannah.”

“But how? You’re too...big for Eli to carry like she did me. “

“Are you sure?” she grinned at her mischievously.

Hannah looked at her intensely for a moment. “Yes! I’m sure!” she crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat.

“Well, Eli doesn’t have a thing on you so far as intelligence goes. You’re right of course. I got there on my own.”

“But...Eli said she’s the only one in the family that can fly!” Hannah was puzzled. She knew Eli wouldn’t lie to her.

“She’s right, Hannah. I can’t fly – anymore. I’ve already had the shot that Eli is having next week.”

Hannah gasped, “You’re a fairy too?! Why didn’t you tell me, Eli?”

“Because that’s Mom’s secret to tell. I can only tell you mine.”

“Good answer, Eli.” She glanced back at Hannah, “And I’m afraid that, at least for now, that is the only secret of mine I feel I can tell you right now. I hope that’s okay, Hannah.”

“It..it’s fine!” Her eyes were big as she looked at each of them in turn. *Where was she? In a car with two ‘fairies’? How many were there? Was the world full of them? Do they have secret meetings?* Her head was spinning. “How do you find a fairy?!” she blurted out; then giggled as she realized how stupid that sounded.

Eli and Elaine laughed too. “Actually we found each other.” Elaine said. “Oskar, Eli, and her Papa found me, and later I found them.” Elaine had to admit that Eli was right. It was quite a pleasant thing to be called a fairy – especially by a child.

Hannah opened her mouth, hesitated, then closed it again. *There are too many secrets. It’ll take forever to learn them all.* She smiled at the thought. *What fun this is! And I’m going to stay the whole weekend at a fairy’s house.* “Wait a minute! You said you were a fairy for 243 years, but were alone before Oskar for 230 years. And you told me that Oskar was a normal boy when you met him. But Oskar’s only twelve! Or is he around 26?” She exclaimed triumphantly. She had figured out a secret on her own. “So I’ll be the only one in your house this weekend who can’t vote?”

Elaine laughed, “I hadn’t thought of it that way, but no, the rest of the world still thinks they’re 12, so they’re still in school – at home. It gets complicated when you don’t age past 12.”

“That must be hard for you and Oskar, Eli, losing all your friends every few years.”

Damn! She has the uncanny ability, for all her naivety, to get right to the important stuff. She’s so much like Eli in that way! Elaine thought to herself.

“Well, we’ll start aging next week. No one else will leave us behind.” Eli smiled into her new-found mirror -- Hannah.

We! Hannah realized that there were now even more questions, mostly about Oskar, and why he’s not a fairy but not aging, but she could wait. She had plenty of time now. She rested her head on Eli’s shoulder and thought about what she had already seen and heard in just the first three hours of the weekend.

Epilogue, Part 2

“Hello, Hannah! You are Hannah, aren’t you?” Oskar grinned as he plopped down at Eli’s table.

Hannah blushed and slid her chair away from him a bit. “You know I am! Eli told me that you two could think to each other, and after last time, I’m sure you won’t forget to do that ever again while I’m around. At least not until after next week.” She flashed him an evil grin.

“Wow! You’re feisty, just like Eli. Or are you Eli? Let me check.” He reached across the table.

“Don’t touch!” Hannah wagged her finger at him and backed away.

“So! Eli told you everything, did she? No more secrets?”

“It’s no use, Oskar; I’m on to you now. You know exactly what Eli’s told me and what she hasn’t. You can read her mind, and I suspect you can read it even if she doesn’t want you to. But you certainly aren’t going to read mine if I can help it!”

“See? Just as I told you Oskar; she’s really quick, and usually right.”

Oskar settled back in his chair. “Hannah, I just want you to know that I didn’t mean to hear you last week. I’m really sorry,” he said earnestly. “And you also need to know that I never listen to Eli when she doesn’t want me to. And besides, half the stuff she thinks about is boring anyway.” He ducked as Eli pretended to swing at him. “Truce?”

“Truce!” Hannah smiled at him, paused, and then stuck out her hand.

Oskar hesitated a second, then shook it firmly.

“Can you really listen to Eli and talk to me at the same time? You must have done that now, or else how could she have told you I’m ‘quick and usually right’?”

Oskar and Eli looked at each other. “You’re making my head swim, Hannah,” Oskar said. He grinned at Eli “She is definitely your sister, Eli. And that makes her my ... sister too, more or less.” He stood up, pulled her up out of the chair and hugged her. *Hannah, I have a lot to thank you for. More than you know.* He stepped back with a smile on his face. “I mean it Hannah.”

She grinned from ear to ear. “This is going to be such great fun! Tell me some more secrets!”

Eli looked at Oskar a moment, nodded and went over to her bookcase. She pulled a framed photo out of the drawer and set it on the table facing Hannah.

“That’s your Mom! With wings! And you? But neither of you have clothes on! And you’re flying!!” She saw how the bright moon subtly bathed them in its light. “What a magical picture!” *How beautiful they are together!* she thought. “You should call it, ‘Fairies in flight.’ Or ‘The Journey Begins.’”

Eli smiled at the thought. “That WAS the first time we ever flew together, even before she came to live with us. And she showed me our special place for the first time.”

“Eli, who took the picture?”

Eli looked at Oskar smugly, *See, Oskar?* “Hannah, that’s one of the biggest secrets of all. But I can’t tell you that one yet.”

Hannah made a mental note. “So this was about 13 years ago? Before I was even born?”

“Yep! And there’s more. Come on, Oskar.” She stood up, took Hannah by the hand and led her downstairs, into the back yard, and through the door into Elaine’s studio. “Stand here!” She turned on the light, revealing their last painting, still on its easel.

Hannah gasped audibly. “Eli!! It’s your place! And with the lights! How did she do that? It’s so, so beautiful!”

“Do you really like it?” Elaine stepped out of the shadows.

“Mama! What are you doing here in the dark?”

“I...sometimes miss the ‘before’ days Eli. I like to sit here and think. And I’m trying to figure out where my art will express itself next, now that I’m ‘handicapped’” she smiled at her.

“Just remember, Mama, Monet was still painting when he was almost blind. You told me so yourself. If he could do it, I KNOW you can; you’re so much better than he was!”

Elaine laughed, “The final word from the Great Eli, the world’s foremost unbiased art critic.” She hugged her tightly.

“What’s this?” Hannah asked. She was standing next to Oskar’s ‘floating hand’ sculpture.

“That’s you, Eli! What’s Oskar doing?”

“He’s trying to save my life. It’s from a kind of...dream I had, where we saved each other’s lives.”

“No, you saved mine. I was just kind of ... stupid.”

Hannah looked at them skeptically. “I don’t believe either of you. There’s more to it than that, right Mrs. Dawson?”

“Right, Hannah; another secret we’ll definitely share with you another time.” She shook her head. *Hannah’s quite shrewd and intuitive. I wonder where that comes from? Certainly not from her own life experiences.* “Well, it’s late and I’m going up to bed. Turn the lights out and close the door when you come in please.”

“Ok, Mama.”

She’s called me ‘Mama’ ever since I’ve been cured. I wonder what that means... She headed up the stairs.

“What’ll we do now? I m bored.” Oskar said.

“Let’s go swimming! In the dark!” Hannah said, excited. “It’s still nice and warm out.” She ran for the pool, leaned down and stuck her hand in the water. “And the water’s even warmer.”

Eli looked at Oskar and grinned. Suddenly, without a word, they both stripped down to their underwear, raced past Hannah and leaped into the pool. “Ha! Last, as usual,” Eli shouted when they popped to the surface.

“Don’t get used to it, because it’ll end next week.” He splashed her hard and pushed her back under water. “Come on in, Hannah!”

Hannah threw her clothes on the lounge, dove in, and popped up beside them. “I’ve never gone swimming in the dark before!” She looked up at the stars. “This is so neat; it almost feels as though we’re doing something we shouldn’t and someone’s going to come out any minute and run us off.”

Eli climbed out, and pushed three of the air mattresses into the pool. All three of them immediately scrambled up and lay on their backs looking up at the beautiful night sky. Eli took Hannah’s hand on one side and Oskar’s on the other and they lay there quietly for a while, side by side.

“Eli? Can you use your eyes here too? Do the stars look different?”

“A bit. They change colors in odd ways. Papa said it relates to how old they are and what kind of stars they are. And Pulsars really look interesting. And a black hole I found really isn’t black. Papa doesn’t understand that one.”

“You can see black holes?!” Hannah was astonished. “They’re so far away! How can you do that?”

“I don’t know. I can just see it. Papa showed me some star charts and he figured out that what I saw was near a star called V 4641, in the constellation... you call it Sagittarius, about 1,600 light-years away. He was excited because no black hole has been recorded in that area. He really wanted to have an astronomer friend of his look, but he ‘fought the temptation’ as he put it. So it’s our secret.”

“Is that all?” a pause, then Hannah giggled. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. Can you see anything else?”

“Well, there is one thing, but I don’t know what it means. Neither does Papa. Want me to show you?”

“Sure!” Eli helped Hannah climb onto her mattress, and put her arm around her. She held Oskar’s hand tightly as Hannah planted a firm kiss on her cheek.

Eli thought her eyes high up into the highest of the high end of the spectra and then – just a bit more. Suddenly, it was as though the very air around them was saturated with beautiful rainbow-like strings moving and flowing in coherent patterns that themselves waved slowly back and forth like wheat in a summer’s wind, propagating by mimicking, slightly delayed, the movements of the strings nearest them, standing like row after row of soft dominoes falling against one another, then resetting in unpredictable places, and falling again. It was chaotic and mesmerizing; yet somehow orderly and rigid, but underlying it all there was a real sense of purpose, as though the whole process were being directed somehow; as though it had a singular purpose for being as it was. As Eli moved her eyes across it, it responded as though the very act of watching it changed its character and meaning simultaneously; as though she were running her finger lazily across a glistening pool of oily water, sending the rainbow colors bouncing back and forth like ripples in a pond. Hannah gasped as she realized that her own body’s boundaries, her ‘edges’ weren’t real anymore. They faded into a mere idea rather than a tangible reality, and the dominoes cascaded through her and around her, resetting themselves, oblivious to her preconceived ideas of the ‘separateness’ of things. Her head spun, as her very concept of herself dissolved away, and she became one with Eli and one with Oskar, and all that existed in the universe was the One. She opened her mouth; then realized she couldn’t speak.

Eli closed her eyes.

Hannah could feel her heart beating hard in her chest. She was exhilarated. She looked into Eli’s smiling face, then at Oskar. He reached over and took her hand. *Weird, huh?*

“No, not weird; awesome!” She had absolutely no idea how to put what she had experienced into words. She didn’t know any that came close. “Where were we, Eli?”

“I don’t know Hannah. But it’s nice, isn’t it? It kind of makes you think about things differently.” They looked into each other eyes and understood.

“Even your reality isn’t real,” Hannah said quietly. She felt small and insignificant, as though she had just seen something really important; really momentous. She had had this feeling once or twice before in her life, but never this strong. It felt as though she were on the verge of realizing a great Truth of some sort, but needed one more small piece of the puzzle. And she didn’t know where to look for it.

“Fairies!”

“What?” Hannah was startled back to reality.

“You’ve got fairies on your underwear.” Eli exclaimed.

Oskar sat up on his mattress. “By George, you’re right Eli. She does! And they’re pretty pink ones!”

Hannah turned bright red. “I like them! My mom bought them for me when I was really into fairies.”

“Really! And how long ago was that?” Oskar needled her. “Do they have names? Which one is Eli?”

That does it! Hannah’s honor had just been besmirched. She scrambled across Eli, put her foot in the middle of her back and launched herself directly at Oskar. Eli’s mattress flipped over and dumped her into the water, just as Hannah landed on Oskar’s stomach, flat and with arms outstretched, with a loud smack. “Ooof!” Oskar groaned, just before he disappeared beneath the surface and the second overturned mattress. Eli lifted herself out of the pool just in time to see Hannah push Oskar back underwater twice more before he finally cried ‘Uncle.’ By this time, Eli was laughing hysterically.

Hacking and coughing, Oskar pulled himself out of the pool and flopped down on his back on the grass, breathing hard. Hannah followed close behind him and sat down on top of him pinning his hands over his head. “Say you’re sorry! Say you’re sorry for making fun of my beautiful fairy undies.”

“You’d better do it, Oskar. She means business.”

“Never!”

Suddenly, the porch light came on. “Oskar! Eli! We have neighbors who need their sleep, remember? I think you all need to come in and go to bed now.” Papa stepped out on the patio in his robe and slippers.

“Sorry, Mr. Dawson.” Hannah said meekly, standing up quickly and stepping away from Oskar.

“It’s not your fault, Hannah. It’s the bad influence of these two. They both know better.” He smiled at her and went back inside.

They quietly gathered up their clothes and tiptoed up the stairs. Oskar caught up with Hannah at the top of the stairs, and put his arm around her, “I’m sorry for making fun of your beautiful fairy ...things,” he whispered to her. He squeezed her hand and stepped into his room, closing the door behind him. He opened it again quickly. “Sweet dreams, Eli and Hannah.” They both smiled at him.

Eli and Hannah dried themselves off, put on their pajamas, and climbed into bed. “Eli, I really like your brother. He’s even nicer than I thought, and he’s so much fun! It’s hard to believe he’s so old.”

“But he’s not, Hannah. You know that, right?”

“I do, Eli. It’s just that...there’s so much I’m trying to understand at once. And you and Oskar are the hardest. There’s something about you two that seems... different, and I don’t mean that you’re a fairy and he’s whatever he is. It’s something else.”

They lay on their backs in the dark, holding hands and talking until finally they both drifted off to sleep. Oskar smiled to himself, turned over, and was himself asleep in an instant.

Hannah drifted in and out of sleep. She felt an underlying sense of unease, and couldn’t put her finger on its source. Finally, she fell into a deep sleep and dreamed dark dreams; dreams of vampires attaching themselves to her neck and, one after another, drinking her dry, despite her screams and attempts to get away. They dissolved into her recurring dream of John slashing Eli with his knife while Lamar and Rod held her arms and legs, only this time Eli grew fangs and claws and killed all three of them, drank their blood and, eyes glowing and fangs dripping with blood, flew off into the night towards Twineham Green – and her house. She awoke with a start, and felt Eli’s hands stroking her hair and caressing her cheek. “It’s okay, Hannah, I’m here. You’re safe.”

Eli, you’re a vampire aren’t you? Eli’s eyes turned golden, and she opened her fang-filled mouth and lunged for her neck. Hannah fell out of bed, hit the floor hard, and rolled into the wall. “Umph!”

She scrambled to her feet, heart pounding. Eli was still sound asleep. All of it had just been a bad dream, but it had been so vivid; so real. Hannah stood there looking at her for a minute as her heart rate gradually returned to normal; then she quietly climbed back into bed. Hesitantly, she moved up next to Eli as the intensity of the dream faded slowly away. As soon as she touched her, Eli reflexively put her arms around her and pulled her close.

It was just a dream! It was only a dream. With a sigh of relief, she snuggled up to Eli and went back to sleep.

Epilogue, Part 3

“Ready, Elaine?” Jack raised the syringe and tapped it lightly.

She nodded and looked at Rich. Jack emptied it into her arm, recapped it, then put the syringe in a plastic bag, sealed it up, and handed it to Henry.

“Okay, Rich. I guess I’ll look this way until the day I die now, sans vampire. You could do a lot worse than being married to a 26-year old immortal. That’s a real load off my mind, and I’m not speaking figuratively. Eli? Oskar? It’s your turn now. Let’s get you cured.”

Jack smiled at them and laid two smaller syringes on the table next to their bed. There was still a small uncertainty factor when it came to using the antidote on Oskar, since he really wasn’t a vampire, but all his tests and cultures indicated that the risk was vanishingly small.

“Oskar?” Oskar stepped up and rolled up his sleeve. Jack unceremoniously plunged the syringe into his arm, emptied it, and handed it to Henry. He picked up the final syringe.

“Eli?” She sat on the edge of the bed and held out her arm to him. She looked so small and frail to him; so vulnerable. He looked into her beautiful trusting eyes, remembering all the times they had spent together in his youth and exactly when he had fallen in love with her. He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. “I’ve waited a long time for this moment. Nothing could ever make me happier than what we are doing for you today.” He quickly gave her the shot, and kissed her again on the forehead.

She suddenly put her arms around him and kissed him on the lips. *I love you so, Jack.* She smiled up at him. “Now then! In a few years, I’ll be old enough to get the penny first again, even from you.” She held it up for him to see, then put it in a small box and placed it carefully in her nightstand. She nodded toward the corner, where a workout bench and a brand-new set of bench weights were laid out neatly. “Papa and I picked those out yesterday, so be ready. You only have 10 years or so to practice.”

“I’m looking forward to it, Eli; especially the satisfaction of getting revenge for all those years I pondered why you were always able to get the last one.”

Henry hooked them both up to the monitors and they all sat back and waited.

Eli? Are you okay?

I’m scared a bit, Oskar. She slid over next to him.

Eli, you’ve kept me safe from harm all this time. Trust me, Papa, and Mama to keep you safe from now on. Please?

She laid her head on his shoulder.

§

Unlike Elaine, Eli began feeling the losses after the first hour. Her sense of balance went first. She didn't test it; she just knew it. Then her ability to grow fangs and claws. Her strength faded slowly; she could feel it every time she stood up or sat down. Each time something changed she wrote it down. And Papa came over to her every time. He sat down next to her and put his arm around her. "Be brave Eli. I can't imagine how this must feel to you after all these years."

It's happening! Suddenly, she stood up, pulled her pajama top off and, with great effort, grew her last pair of wings. Oskar grabbed his camera and snapped a couple of quick photos, then stood there a moment, tense. He sensed that something was very wrong. Her wings slowly became dull and lifeless; gray instead of black. He tossed the camera on the bed, then quickly stepped over, put his arms around her neck, and kissed her as her wings gradually became transparent, and without a sound, folded and drifted away in swirling smoky eddies behind Jack just as he stepped past her to check the monitor. The bony spars began to retract, and then fell away and turned to dust as they softly struck the floor. Eli stood there a moment with her head down, then put her arms around Oskar and laid her head on his shoulder. "They're gone forever now, Oskar." There were tears in her eyes.

She felt the mindless rage rise up in her as her parasite finally sensed its approaching death. She could feel it trying to control her, trying to make her lash out and destroy those she loved, but it was weak and impotent for the first time since it had invaded her. It could do nothing but pace and growl in the darkness like a big cat who sensed its days as Alpha male were over forever. She looked up at Papa with a vengeful smile on her face. "Papa, it's dying. I can feel it." She went over to him, put her arms around him, stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the lips.

Dawson was finally face to face with the enemy and realized immediately that he had overestimated its sentience. It was a creature made up almost entirely of instinct: fight or flight; anger or fear; kill or be killed, feed or hibernate. But there was also something sinister there; something mindlessly cruel and matter-of-factly sadistic, like a fully fed cat that will still play with a newly discovered prey until it dies in its claws. He looked into its deep red soulless eyes and watched with great pleasure as it slunk away and died. He took Eli's head in his hands and kissed her again. "Thank you for that, Eli," he whispered. "Now, you're perfect again! I've seen you with my own eyes." He hugged her tightly. *I love you, Papa!*

§

She woke up next to Oskar. The room was dark, but she could make out Papa and Jack in the light of the monitor. She realized immediately that she was already blind. "Papa!" She got out of bed quickly and stumbled over the footstool, but Papa caught her before she hit the ground.

"Careful Eli, you could really hurt yourself now. We were about to wake you both up; you've slept for over six hours. Are you feeling okay? He unhooked her from the monitor.

"I'm okay, Papa. Where's Mama?"

“She’s making tea, Eli. Henry went down with her, but they’ll be back in a minute. Should I get her for you?”

“No, Papa, it’s okay.” She felt so warm and safe; all the people around her loved her and she loved them back. She was having difficulty remembering the worst of the dark days, and now she could forget them forever.

Oskar? Where are you? The silence was deafening. But she realized it was partly because IT was gone. She stood up and went over to her window. It was dark out; really dark. She could just barely make out the pool from the reflection of the lights that were on in the kitchen. She opened the window and realized she hadn’t heard the crickets until she did. And the downstairs clock. And the dripping faucet in the back yard. And Oskar breathing. She turned around quickly. Oskar was sitting up in bed, rubbing his eyes. *Oskar?* He couldn’t hear her. She sighed. She knew it was going to happen, but it still made her sad. “Oskar? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Eli. I don’t feel any different at all. I just can’t hear you anymore.”

“That’s okay Oskar. Papa said he’d get us both cell phones.”

Papa laughed. “I can only imagine what the monthly bill will look like.”

She grinned at him – and promptly fell over the footstool again. Oskar helped her up while Papa turned on the lights. “Oskar, close the window or we’ll get crickets in here. And watch out for that footstool.” He winked at Eli.

Elaine came in with a pot of tea and several cups. “Butterfly! You’re awake. How would you like a cup of tea? Feeling brave?” She filled a cup, dropped in two sugar cubes, added a touch of milk, stirred it a bit, and handed it to Eli. “I made it just like Oskar thought you’d like it.”

“Sure! I’ll give it a try.” She gingerly brought the cup to her lips and took a sip. It was good! She realized she was actually quite hungry – but for what? She took another sip, then a big gulp. It tasted so good!

“Take it easy, Eli,” Elaine cautioned. “It’s been two centuries plus, since you’ve eaten normal food. Don’t push your luck.”

Papa reached over and ran a cotton swab across her chest. I also think it’s about time you took a shower. I’m still uncertain whether or not it’s healthy for you to keep all that buildup on your skin for any length of time. Oskar? Go with her and make sure she’s safe.”

“Sure Dad. Eli?” he held out his hand, blushed, and led her into their bathroom.

“What’s wrong Oskar?” Eli smiled at him.

“It’s just that...I don’t get to really help you very often. You’re...were so strong, and stuff.”

She took off her pajamas and unsteadily stepped into the tub, shaking a bit. Oskar quickly grabbed her by the arm and steadied her. He quickly took off his pajamas and stepped into the tub beside her. “Are you okay?”

She looked at him solemnly “I guess I’m going to have to depend on you now, Oskar; at least until I get used to being so...weak.” She turned on the shower and together they cleaned her up as best they could. “Thanks, Oskar.” She turned around and hugged him tightly. *I’m so afraid!*

I’m so sorry, Eli. Startled, he stepped back. “I heard you, Eli.”

“I know! I heard you too!” she was suddenly very frightened. *What if the cure didn’t work on Oskar? What if he’s stuck forever as a 12-year old? He and Papa became immortal a different way and were never vampires. What if the cure isn’t a cure for him?* She grabbed a towel and stumbled out of the tub, lost her footing and sprawled across the tile floor, banging her head on the edge of the door. “Ouch!” She rolled over and grabbed her head.

Oskar saw the blood oozing through her fingers, grabbed a towel, and sat down beside her, pressing it against her wound. Eli went limp in his arms and began sobbing.

“What if this was all for nothing? What if you can’t start aging and I leave you behind?” *And I’m weak, I’m clumsy, and I’ve already hurt myself badly.* She started crying harder.

Elaine was there in a flash, “Let me see Oskar. How bad is it?” She carefully removed the towel, then breathed a sigh of relief. “It’s just a little nick! Those scalp wounds really bleed a lot Eli. You’re going to be just fine. The bleeding has almost stopped already.” She got the first-aid kit down and quickly applied Neosporin and put on a bandage. “You’ll be okay now, Butterfly.”

“Mama, Oskar isn’t cured! I can still hear his thoughts, but only when he touches me. I’m different, but he’s the same as before.”

Epilogue, Part 4

Papa nodded his head. "It looks like you're right, Eli. Oskar still seems to have at least his telepathic abilities with normal humans, although we don't have another vampire with which to confirm his long-distance abilities any more. But let me assure you, he is aging. All our tests showed that the antidote switches off his immortality DNA segment with the same mechanism that cured you and your mom. So don't worry. It just may take a bit longer for all Oskar's abilities to fade; we just don't know." He looked over at Jack, "And Jack is going to run the tests on Oskar's blood again in a few days just to ease your mind. We'll know absolutely when we get the results of those tests back."

Eli was sitting across the kitchen table from Papa, wolfing down a plate of peanut butter cookies with Oskar. "Do you think maybe he'll keep his ability? Is it possible?"

"Totally unknown, Eli. This is all new ground we're covering. It seems unlikely, but every day he has it increases the chances he'll keep it. Just keep your fingers crossed." He reached over and touched Eli's forehead. "There's only a faint line there now, Eli. It's been just three days and it's almost healed. It looks like you've still got a smidgen of your old abilities too."

Eli, after grousing around about how weak she was, had finally become a bit more comfortable with her 'handicaps.' She was still uneasy in the direct sunlight, but just chalked that one up to centuries of conditioning.

But she was feeling increasingly uneasy as the hour of Hannah's weekend visit approached. She hadn't seen her since she was cured and her few conversations with her on the phone had seemed a bit tense.

"Papa? How long before the other shots start working?"

"Well, Eli, they're working already, but puberty is a relatively slow process compared to the immediate changes your old abilities allowed. It can take quite a few years for girls to complete the process, and of course subtle changes will occur for many years even after that. Rest assured, you're on the steady road to being a real girl now."

"Kind of like Pinocchio wanting to be a real boy?" Oskar grinned at her.

"And remember, Oskar. You're on the same road now."

"Which brings up another subject," Elaine interjected. "Eli, how much more are you going to tell Hannah? You're already dangerously close to things that she may not be able to handle until she's much older. She hasn't been exposed to anything near the darkness you and even Oskar have experienced. She might just back away from you if you tell her too much. In fact, she might back away forever. Are you prepared for that possibility?"

"It won't happen! We're too close! She'll understand everything if I decide to tell her everything."

“I hope you’re right, Eli, but be very careful. She still half-believes you’re a fairy. There’s a huge reality gap between an imaginary fairy and a real vampire. Hannah almost certainly knows the stories about vampires; and, frankly, it’s odd to me that she hasn’t even considered the possibility. But she’s the eternal optimist. And that can be a weakness where such things are concerned.” *But it’s also Hannah’s strength. If anyone can see through the darkness, it’ll be Hannah. I’ve never met anyone quite like her.*

“I’ll be careful, Mama. I promise. I can’t lose her.”

They all turned at the sound of the doorbell. “She’s here, Eli.”

Eli ran to the door. Hannah was standing on the porch with a solemn look on her face. “Eli? Are you okay? You’ve sounded so ...distant on the phone. Did I do something wrong? If I did, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I was so worried about you! I didn’t sleep at all the night you got your shot. I kept waiting for you to call and tell me you were okay, and when you did I was so happy. Just ask mom.”

She turned toward Livia, who was standing behind her with her hands on her hips shaking her head. “She was, Eli. But I’m sure you knew that.”

“Even Jason was irritated with me, because I kept asking him if he thought you were alright. He says to say ‘hello, Junior’ by the way. Have you been out in the sun yet? You probably shouldn’t be out in it very long until you’re used to it you know. Maybe...”

“Shhh!” Eli put her arms around her. “You talk too much.” She hugged her tightly. And all her fears, all her doubts just melted away.

Hannah smiled at Oskar as he stepped up behind Eli. “Are you okay, Oskar?” she whispered. “I was worried about you too you know.” She turned around and saw that Elaine and her mom were talking by the car. “So you’re both completely okay? And you’re getting older?”

Oskar rubbed his chin. “Actually, no I’m not. It’s been three whole days and I STILL don’t have to shave.”

“You’re not besmirching my honor again are you?” she gave him the Look.

“No, no! I would NEVER do that!” he grinned at her and backed away. “I’m glad you’re here, Hannah. I kind of missed you myself. Things have been way too quiet and peaceful around here.”

“I really missed you too, Oskar.” she gave him a big hug and kissed him on the cheek.

It’s no use, Hannah. You can only embarrass me once by doing that.

Hannah gasped. “Oskar! You can still...”

“Yeah. Eli was really scared at first. She thought she was going to get old without me, but dad tested me and verified that I’m getting older. He doesn’t know why I can still... read minds.”

“Hannah! Would you like some of my cookies? I can eat them now, you know.” She rushed into the kitchen.

Hannah waited until she was out of sight. “What is Eli, Oskar? And what are...were you? None of this makes any sense to me.”

“I think Eli should be the one to tell you, Hannah. But she’s afraid.”

“Why? Why would she be afraid?”

“She’s afraid you won’t like her anymore.”

“There’s nothing she could say that would make me not like her, Oskar.” *Could I be right after all? That would explain almost everything...*

“Shh!” Oskar put his finger to his lips as Eli came in with the plate of cookies.

§

The afternoon went by quickly. Oskar and Eli took Hannah down to the stream where they first met Jack and Henry. Hannah laughed as Oskar described Seth going head first into the stream and was horrified when he told her about Eli’s broken window and how she had almost died. They walked back past Mrs. Anderson’s old house, now owned by her daughter who had moved in when her mother was ill, and stayed on after she died. But Mrs. Anderson’s flowers were still just as beautiful as ever. As hard as it was for her, Hannah consciously stayed away from any discussions about Eli’s past. She knew Eli would eventually bring it up, but she could feel the tension every time the conversation even slightly headed in that direction.

Oskar was still entranced by how much Eli and Hannah looked alike. Not only alike, but really identical. He noticed only today that Hannah had the exact same freckle between her eyebrows that Eli had. And the one on the left side of her jaw. He watched them carefully as they walked along the sidewalk ahead of him. They walked the same. Their subtle body movements were the same. Their arms moved the same. And they laughed the same way, with their eyes. It was spooky to him.

Later at the pool, he noticed that, now that she was ‘human,’ she even swam like Hannah, but better; more polished. They were both pleasantly surprised that she could still swim like a fish in spite of her ‘weakness.’ Fifteen years of practice had obviously paid off, even with her handicap. He resisted the urge to bring out the penny; things were going too well. He didn’t want to take the chance that it could bring Eli down, even though he knew she didn’t really take it seriously.

They had a pleasant dinner together. Elaine had made roast beef and Yorkshire Pudding, now Eli's favorite. *At least for today*, Oskar thought to himself. Eli had taken a quick refresher course from Elaine on proper dining etiquette and how to properly hold a knife and fork, since she was a bit rusty after over two centuries of drinking her meals.

All in all, everything had gone smoothly, Oskar thought to himself. Negotiating the minefield of Eli's past was more difficult than he had expected because, when they were alone as a family, aspects of Eli's and Mom's past came up all the time.

§

The three of them were relaxing around Eli's table after dinner. Mama and Papa had gone to bed, and they were just mellowing out and talking about nothing in particular.

Oskar had finally had enough. He slipped his hand into Eli's under the table. *Eli, you have to decide when and how much you're going to tell Hannah. I think you need to get it over with one way or another.*

You're right, Oskar. Eli stood up decisively, went over to her bookcase and brought back a worn photo album. She pulled out her favorite photo, the one Gudmund had first showed her, with Hannah standing at the bridge over the Serpentine, and handed it to Hannah. "This is the first picture I ever saw of you, Hannah."

Hannah recognized it immediately. "Eli! Where did you get this? I was only there this last spring. I still have those shorts, and I'm wearing the shoes now." She held out her foot. "No one was there except Mom, Dad and Jason, and we weren't taking any pictures that day. Who took this?"

"I think...it was the same person who took the picture of Mama and me flying" She knew it couldn't have been, because it was taken in broad daylight, but it was certainly someone working for him.

"Eli, I can't stand it anymore! You've got to tell me. How can I really know you if I don't know?" Should she do it? Should she take the chance? *What if I'm right? What am I going to do if I'm right?* "Eli? You promised me that if I guessed right. You'd tell me. Is that still the deal?"

"Yes." She looked at Oskar.

She took a deep breath, "I've tried to piece everything together, but nothing seemed to fit until..."

She began again, "Eli, you could fly, you were super strong, and you could see and hear things that no one else can. But you couldn't go out in the sun because it could have killed you. You didn't eat food, yet you won't tell me what you could eat. And you're...were immortal. You're not a fairy. Once I realized that absolutely, there was only one other possibility, at least in my

mind.” She paused. “And I dreamt about it the last time I was here, but was too afraid to wake you up and tell you about it.”

“Eli? Are ... were you and your mama...vampires?”

She looked directly into Hannah’s eyes. “... Yes.”

Hannah looked at her intently; then put her head down on the table and closed her eyes.

“Hannah? Please don’t...hate me. Hannah?” she could see tears in Hannah’s eyes.

Oskar slid over next to Hannah. “Please, Hannah; give her a chance to explain.”

Hannah raised her head, “Who do you think I am, anyway?” she said angrily. “Do you think I would for a second, change my opinion of Eli because of this? Eli’s the same person she was ten minutes ago and two months ago. Nothing’s changed except that what I wanted to believe about her isn’t true. But sometimes I’m just a silly kid, just like Mom says. It’s not Eli’s fault – It’s mine. All my silly stories about fairies have made it even harder for Eli and you, too, Oskar, to tell me the truth. Like you’re afraid that naïve Hannah can’t handle it. Well, I’m not fluffy! I just like fluffy things! And I’m not stupid!” she crossed her arms in front of her, defiantly.

“Wow! I guess she told us, Eli.” Oskar grinned sheepishly.

“What else do you want to know, Hannah?” Eli said quietly. “Anything you want to know, I’ll tell you.”

Hannah pulled the family tree out of her backpack and pushed it over in front of Eli. “Show me where you are on the family tree,” she said firmly. She felt a tightness in the pit of her stomach. *Please let me be wrong this time.*

Eli hesitated a second; then, “Right there, Hannah. That’s me.” She pointed at the Elias line.

Hannah gasped. “So! You’re Elias? A boy? And we’ve been sleeping together in my bed and your bed, and you didn’t think it was important enough to tell me? Did you think I would freak out or something? Well, you’re right; I am!” she got up and paced around the room. “And you lied to me too, Oskar? You knew he was a boy and you didn’t ever tell me? What’s the matter with you two? Is this some kind of game to you?” she paced even faster, then sat down on the window seat and stared out the window. “I want to go home.”

She closed her eyes. She saw John’s face leering at her. She saw Rod dragging Eli’s unconscious body across the field. She saw the look on Lamar’s face as he raced after her towards the tree. She couldn’t shake it off. *Boys! They only think about one thing. And what was Elias thinking about when we were sleeping together? What did he do to me while I was asleep? Did it all, finally, come down to that?*

“You’re okay with Eli being a vampire, but not okay with her being a boy?” Oskar said angrily. He thought back to his first feelings when he found out himself. And it hadn’t mattered to him. “And, for what it’s worth she’s not a boy. And she’s the same person she was ten minutes ago and two months ago,” he mocked.

“She didn’t lie to me about being a vampire! She lied to me about being a girl! No, the point is, you both made a fool of me. I trusted you and you lied to me! ‘Blood SISTERS’ you said.”

“You called me that Hannah, not me.” Eli’s heart was breaking.

“But you didn’t set me straight, did you? Why? Why would you do that?”

“Because I’m not a boy, Hannah! I’m a nothing!” Eli sobbed.

Hannah was confused; and she was suddenly concerned about Eli in spite of her anger, *I know Eli wouldn’t have done that to me. She couldn’t have! I’ve got to be wrong!* “What do you mean, Eli?” She knew she was angry, not ultimately because Eli was a boy, but because they had deliberately withheld it from her. It was insulting and demeaning. She felt that she had been betrayed by someone she loved more than anyone outside her own family – maybe even more than that. And, she had to admit, it DID bother her that Eli was a boy.

“I’ll do this, Eli.” Oskar held out his hand to Hannah. “Come here and I’ll show you.”

Hannah hesitated, “What are you going to do?”

Oskar grabbed Eli’s hand tightly. “Come here! What have you got to lose now? You’re going home, remember?” he said coldly.

Hannah reluctantly sat back down at the table, and gingerly reached for Oskar’s hand. She looked at Eli. “Eli, I’m...”

She saw His deep blue eyes. She felt herself being strapped naked to the table and struggled to get away. She felt the searing pain as her...his...penis was cut away. She watched Him drink her blood over and over again. Felt His fangs on her neck; felt the terror as she lay naked in the dark cell; felt herself thrown into the pit. She felt the pain as she left her loving family forever, and finally the pain of the first kill; then, the death of innocence.

Hannah jerked her hand away, stumbled across the room, and collapsed on Eli’s bed, as her hand reflexively moved to her groin. She curled up in a ball and stared blankly at the wall.

“It was too much, Oskar! We shouldn’t have!” Eli was frightened.

“I was mad, Eli. I’m sorry. But she had no right to say what she did! I wasn’t going to just sit there and let her ... hurt you like that!”

“She had every right, Oskar. In her mind, I lied to her. Every day I didn’t tell her was another lie. She’s right. She’s right!” Eli rushed over and lay down beside her on the bed. “Hannah, please, please forgive me. I’m sorry I hurt you, I’m sorry I’m a boy, I’m sorry I lied to you. I’m weak and selfish, I’m...”

Hannah turned around and pulled Eli up against her, “Shh! You talk too much.”

Eli melted in her arms.

§

Hannah held Eli’s hands in hers across the table. “I’m so sorry Eli. I can’t believe how selfish I am, I didn’t mean any of those things I said to you. I thought more about my stupid pride than about your feelings and your reasons. I should have trusted you.”

“It’s all right Hannah, it’s my fault. I should have told you that first sleepover. I knew how afraid you were of those boys. I just wimped out.”

“But I didn’t really tell you how frightened I had been Eli. It’s my fault. I didn’t want you to think I was a baby.”

“I would never have thought that, Hannah! You were so brave. I was the coward. I didn’t have the guts to tell you I had been a boy.”

“Let’s quit the blame game, okay?” Oskar grouched. You’re twin jerks! Get past it!” he paused and looked down at his feet. “I’m really sorry, Hannah. I didn’t mean to show you so much, but I was mad – and stupid. And I hurt you.

Hannah smiled at him, “It’s okay Oskar, I’m glad you did it. I just saw it; Eli has to relive it over and over. You’re a very nice boy Oskar, and you really are cute!”

Oskar, caught off guard, blushed again.

“I can’t believe you were born a boy, Eli. We look exactly alike! How is that possible?”

“Dad says it’s because neither of you have gone through puberty yet. You’re both sexless at this point,” he smirked.

“Speak for yourself, Oskar. You’re the same age, and girls mature faster than boys. You’ll be ‘sexless’ a lot longer than either of us.” Eli retorted. “Remember, I’m getting my shots now.”

“Yeah, Oskar. We’ll mature, become ravishingly beautiful, and you’ll...stay just as you are. Cute.” Hannah shook her head sadly.

“I give up! I can’t fight two of you, Eli.” He got up and headed for his room.

“Oskar, you’re not mad are you?” Hannah asked anxiously. “I...We were just kidding!”

He smiled at her, “I know, Hannah. I’m just tired.” He leaned against the doorframe and closed his eyes. Hannah quickly got up and walked over to him. “I like the way you stuck up for Eli, Oskar. You must love her very much.” Her eyes searched his. “She’s not your sister, Oskar. Right?”

He brushed his hand against hers, then grasped it firmly. *Hannah, Eli saved my life. She REALLY saved my life. I love her, and I’m in love with her. We’re going to marry when we grow up. She’s everything to me.*

Then I really must have hurt you when I was angry with her. You must have really thought I was an awful person. I’m so sorry Oskar; I didn’t know ...”

“I was mad at you, Hannah. But how could I stay mad at someone who looks so much like Eli? And who is as kind and sweet as she is?”

It was Hannah’s turn to blush. “Thank you, Oskar.” she kissed him on the cheek. “That makes you my blood brother, you know. Because we both love the same person.”

“Can you two get any mushier? Stop! I’m having a sugar rush!!” She got up and grabbed Oskar’s arm. “Stay! I don’t want you to leave. Hannah?”

“But...where will he sleep?”

“With us, of course. Since there are no secrets anymore, he sleeps with me every night. You’re not afraid of him are you?”

“Are you kidding? But...”

Oskar can’t talk to me anymore unless we’re touching. I don’t want to leave him alone in his room by himself.”

“It’s okay, Eli. I know how Hannah feels. I’ll be fine. It’s not like I haven’t done it before.”

“You think I’m afraid of you?” Hannah said, defiantly.

“Well...”

“That’s it!! Get over there and put on your pajamas. You do have pajamas, don’t you? Otherwise there’s absolutely no chance I’ll sleep with you in the same bed.” She shuddered dramatically.

As soon as Oskar closed the door, Hannah opened her suitcase, grinned and pulled out her new pajamas. She stripped down quickly, put them on, then turned around for Eli, who had already changed.

“Hannah, they’re covered with fairies!!” Eli laughed.

“And if Oskar says anything...” she got a dark look on her face.

They both turned as Oskar knocked lightly on the door. “Can I come in”

“Yeah!” they said in unison.

Oskar peeked in the door. “Is everyone decent?”

“We’re always decent, Oskar. Grow up!” Hannah scolded him.

Oskar came in looking a bit sheepish, and stood next to Eli.

“Oskar. You get in first. Up against the wall.”

Oskar quickly climbed into bed and pressed himself against the wall. Eli got in, backed up against him and pulled his arms around her. Hannah slipped in facing Eli with a big grin on her face as Eli pulled the covers up over them all. “I don’t think I’m going to tell Mom and Dad about this. I don’t want them to flip out,” she giggled. “You don’t snore do you Oskar? I’ll slug you if you do.”

“No, no. but Eli used to purr. I really liked that.” He kissed her on the back of the neck.

“You purred? How cute!” she pinched Eli’s cheek. “I wonder what Einstein would have thought of that? It’s a good thing you didn’t do that at my house!” They all laughed at the thought.

“You’re not a blanket hog are you Oskar? I tend to slug people for that too.”

“I tend to push people out of bed who slug me in my sleep. It’s just a reflex. I can’t be held responsible.”

Hannah whacked him on the arm. “I tend to slug people who threaten me, too.”

“Boy you sure have a low threshold of slugginess.” Oskar complained. “Maybe I should have worn a suit of armor instead of pajamas.”

“Oskar?”

“What is it, Hannah?” He sighed.

“This is fun!” She reached over and tousled his hair.

“Excuse me! Am I in your way? Would you two like to be alone? I could go sleep in Oskar’s room, if you’d like.” Eli complained.

“Don’t you dare!” Hannah grabbed her around the waist.

“Whazza matter? Afraid to face me without your ‘guardian angel’ nearby to protect you?” Oskar smirked.

“Are you besmirching my honor again?” she raised herself up on her elbow and glared at him; then slowly reached for him, an evil grin on her face.

“You forget, Hannah. I’m Oskar’s guardian angel too, and he has seniority!” she pounced on her and tickled her mercilessly. They both fell on the floor, arms and legs flailing about.

Oskar had an epiphany. “Her neck, Eli! Go for her neck!” *Let’s see how much alike they really are!*

Hannah screamed and flopped around on the floor as Eli began tickling her around the neck. “Uncle, Uncle! Eli, please!” she dissolved in laughter.

Oskar sat on the edge of the bed enjoying himself immensely. “I didn’t hear her, did you Eli? Did she say something?”

“UNCLE! I said uncle!” Hannah was lying on her back, completely out of breath. Eli rolled off and lay beside her, breathing hard. “See, Oskar? I’ve still got it! I don’t need my super powers.” She got up, grabbed Hannah’s hands and pulled her to her feet.

“Eli, I want to do this forever! I’ve never had a friend anything like you before.” She hugged her and put her head on her shoulder.

Reluctantly, Oskar backed up against the wall again, and Eli and Hannah slipped back in bed next to him.

“Is that it for the night? Have you had enough?” Oskar needled Hannah.

“I haven’t the energy left to slug you, Oskar! Be thankful.” She squeezed his hand.

They lay there together quietly for a few minutes.

“Eli? I have lots of questions, but...I think I’ll wait until tomorrow, okay? I’m kind of sleepy.”

“Me too!”

“Me too!” Oskar yawned. “Hannah?”

Yes, Oskar?”

“Nice pajamas...Ouch! You didn’t have to do that!”

“Yeah. I kind of did, Oskar.”

§

“Rich! You’ve got to see this! It’s priceless!” Elaine whispered. She grabbed the camera off the counter.

He got up from the kitchen table and followed her up the stairs, taking his cup of tea with him.

“Shh! Be quiet now.” She opened the door to Eli’s room and nodded toward her bed. Eli, Oskar and Hannah were still sound asleep; over, around and on top of one another, arms and legs hopelessly tangled. He couldn’t tell where one ended and the next began.

“Looks like they worked some things out last night.” He whispered. *How beautiful they look together. Two Eli’s and an Oskar.* Closer to the truth than he had ever thought possible. He had some news for them that would astound them. He could hardly wait to see their reaction.

“Should we wake them up?”

“There’s nothing I would like better. Just to see their faces.” Elaine handed Rich the camera.

Papa put down his cup of tea, framed them perfectly in the viewfinder, and then snapped the picture. The flash had barely faded when three sets of eyes popped open.

“Papa! What are you doing?” She spotted the camera. “You didn’t! How embarrassing!”

Hannah sat up quickly, “Mr. Dawson! Mrs. Dawson!” she turned bright red. Oskar rubbed his eyes and grinned sheepishly.

“Why don’t you three get yourselves dressed and come down for breakfast. I’ve got some very interesting news for you. I think you will be delighted, Hannah.” Papa smiled as they retreated out the door and gently closed it behind them.

“Your mom and dad are so neat, Eli!” she hopped out of bed and headed for her suitcase. “Oskar, get out of here! We have to get ready.”

“Okay, okay. I can take a hint.” He stumbled out of bed and headed for his room.

“Who’s hinting?” she called after him.

“I really like your pajamas, Hannah. They’re so ... fairy-like.” He quickly slammed his door and locked it.

§

The three of them raced down the stairs and plopped down at the kitchen table. “What, Papa? What news?”

“Why don’t we have some breakfast first?” He passed around the plate of bangers, while Elaine dished out the scrambled eggs.

“Slow down, Eli. The news will wait, and since you’ve not experienced indigestion in over two centuries, I suspect you’ve forgotten how ‘inconvenient’ it can be.” He smiled at her.

Finally, breakfast finished, they settled down and Eli poured them all another cup of tea. “Well, Papa?”

“Well, Eli, Jack finished the DNA tests on Hannah’s sample. And what he found was quite extraordinary. So much so that he ran a second test; and a third. The results were the same.

“WHAT, Papa? What were the results?” Eli was standing now, excited. She grabbed Hannah’s hand.

“We are related, aren’t we Mr. Dawson? The family tree says we are.” Hannah sounded a bit worried.

“Hannah, you’re more than related. Your DNA and Eli’s are an exact match. It’s as though you were identical twins. It’s completely impossible, but there it is. And now that Eli is getting estrogen injections, your DNA-dependent gender indicators are a perfect match also.

“I knew it!” Oskar exclaimed. “Dad, look at their freckles!” He pushed them next to each other and pointed out the two freckles, one on the left side of their jaws and the smaller one between their eyebrows.

“I never noticed that before, Oskar. You’re absolutely right!” Elaine said.

Hannah and Eli smiled at each other. “I knew it the first day I met you, Eli. Not that we were identical, but that there was a real connection between us. Something special.”

“Papa? Do you think that’s why Hannah could hear me and see through my eyes even though we didn’t have to kiss?”

“I don’t know Eli, but it seems like the most likely, though thoroughly unscientific explanation. The amazing thing though, is that you are identical. The chance of that happening is unimaginably small.”

“So if I had a real identical twin, she would be exactly the same as Eli? Is that what you’re saying, Mr. Dawson?”

“Exactly, Hannah. Eli is for all practical purposes, your twin sister. You could even donate organs to each other without fear of rejection. Yet, you’re over two centuries apart on your family tree.”

Dawson found the whole thing more worrisome the more he thought about it. It really was impossible, but it happened. How? He realized he and Jack had a lot of work to do. Perhaps a long talk with Hannah’s parents...

§

They spent most of the morning just talking in Eli’s room. Eli showed Hannah her refrigerator, now containing mainly cold pop, a pitcher of ice water, and a bottle of milk, but she made sure Hannah knew what had been there all those years before, and why it had a lock on the door.

Hannah was transfixed as Eli recounted the story of Oskar’s hard life, and how they had found each other, and how they had run away together. Papa had told Eli that she was not to burden Hannah with the deaths of the bullies or the death of Detective Ellstrom. He firmly believed that, although she could probably handle it, she shouldn’t have to at this point in her life. Having to keep a secret that involved what might be considered by some to be murder, was too much of a burden. There was plenty of time to tell her when they were all a bit older. Eli and Oskar had agreed, but only under the condition that Hannah was told that there were deliberate omissions from their stories at Mama’s and Papa’s request.

“I can’t imagine having to go off on my own and rent an apartment and pay bills like you did. You’re both so much stronger than I am.” Hannah had said.

She made them tell the story about Papa over and over again; about how he cared for them and protected them and took them in. “See Eli? It’s a fairy story after all, because you all lived happily ever after.”

So Eli told her the somewhat sanitized story of the Other One, how together, they had defeated him, and how they had met Elaine. She hoped it would give Hannah another taste of the reality and darkness of a vampire’s life.

“So your mama was a prisoner for 40 years in the Other One’s underground Castle? Until you, Oskar and your dad freed her? Now if that’s not a fairy tale I don’t know what is!”

Eli finally gave up. She couldn’t force Hannah to see what she didn’t choose to see.

She had giggled when Eli described their first flight together and how it had ended with them both standing naked in front of Papa and Oskar, Elaine’s wings fully unfurled. “Was it love at first sight?” she had asked.

“Hardly! Papa was very worried that she would be a bad influence on me, and he almost punched her out once because of it.”

“Like that could have happened.” Oskar said.

“No, Oskar. I think Mama would have let him do it.”

“Then she must have loved him,” Hannah declared.

Oskar smiled at Hannah. “No, she loved Eli,” he said. “Eli even saved her life.”

“No I didn’t, Oskar.”

“Yes you did! Mom says that if you hadn’t tried to talk Dad into letting her stay with us. It never would have occurred to her to turn to him for help after ... what happened.”

Hannah whipped out her notebook, “Another secret for later then? I’m keeping track you know.” She wrote something brief, then snapped it shut.

After lunch, they all went to Hyde Park together and posed on the bridge over the Serpentine, right where Hannah had been standing in Gudmund’s photo. All five of them together, one big family Hannah had said. Papa promised Hannah a framed copy of the picture for herself.

They stayed in town long enough to try dinner at the “Texas Embassy” near Trafalgar Square, but they all agreed that the food was a bit too greasy for their taste. And the place was kind of loud. “Honestly, I don’t understand why Americans don’t think much of our food. Theirs is awfully greasy and kind of tasteless to me.” Hannah said. “But thank you for taking me there, Mr. and Mrs. Dawson,” she said quickly. “It WAS an interesting experience.”

Elaine laughed as she worked her way through the heavy traffic, “That’s a nice recovery, Hannah, but you needn’t have bothered. Your license to complain comes with being a part of our family now.” She reached back and patted her on the leg.

It was dark by the time they pulled into the driveway. The kids were already halfway up the stairs before Rich and Elaine walked through the front door.

“What do you think, Rich? Is she strong enough to survive our family’s dark history?”

“Ordinarily, I wouldn’t think so, but remember, she’s essentially Eli. And Eli has that strength, hands down. I think it’s going to be hard for her, but I sense that same strength in her.”

§

Hannah had spent a good deal of time thinking about Eli’s life and it had dawned on her that she must have killed a lot of people over the years in order to survive. At first, she had wanted to ask Eli about it, but she realized almost immediately that Eli had no more control over that than Einstein had over his barking. She remembered once when she accidentally knocked a bird’s nest out of the tree and Einstein had attacked and killed the babies before she had been able to stop him. She wanted to punish him, but her dad stopped her. “Hannah, it’s his nature. He can’t

control his nature any more than you can control your breathing. He's done nothing wrong." She knew it wasn't the same; innocent people had lost their lives, but she also knew Eli was blameless; she had experienced the power of the parasite herself. She knew. She only hoped that Eli knew she was blameless.

"Eli, what do you miss the most? You know, about being a 'fairy'?"

"Hannah..."

"I refuse to call you ... that! Because you weren't! Your parasite was a vampire, but you were a fairy; you'll not be able to convince me otherwise."

"I agree with her, Eli. I couldn't have said it better myself." Oskar smiled at Hannah.

"Don't get all mushy again, please! I killed thousands of people. I'm not blameless here. I could have..."

"Killed yourself? Don't be silly! We would never have met then. And Oskar might have been killed. And your mama! And I! Twice!"

"Hannah, can't you ever look at things the way they really are?" Eli was exasperated.

"I could, but you're so good at looking at the dark side, I thought SOMEONE around here ought to look at the right side. You're a kindred spirit Eli, and I'm not going to sit here quietly and let you beat yourself up all the time."

"But I..."

"What do you miss the most, Eli? About being a FAIRY?" she glared at her.

Eli sighed, "I miss my wings. And being able to fly with Mama. And Oskar. And you. I wish we had more time..."

"I really loved that too! It was magical. I can imagine how Oskar must have felt when you rescued him! How exciting!"

"Actually, I was scared to death at first. Especially when Eli jumped out the window before I had a good grip on her. I thought I was going to die!" He shuddered at the thought. "Hannah! Could you feel her muscles when you were flying with her?"

"Yes! She' so strong! It was amazing!"

"And the feeling when she turns? Or comes in for a landing?"

"I know! I shut my eyes the first time. I couldn't see how she could possibly do it!"

“You’re doing it again!” Eli put her hands over their mouths. “Now, take a deep breath and think some dark thoughts! You’re both driving me crazy!” But Eli felt warm and fuzzy inside in spite of herself. She had to admit, Hannah was contagious.

There was a light knock on the door, and Elaine peeked in. “Don’t you think it’s about time for you all to go to bed? It’s getting a bit late.”

“Okay Mama!” Eli got up and headed for her dresser. Elaine smiled at her and closed the door quietly.

“Oskar? Get...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, Hannah. ‘Get out of here.’” he headed for the door.

“You’re coming back, right?” She blushed and looked down at the floor.

“Are you sure? I’ll be fine, really.”

“Oskar, for God’s sake! Put your pajamas on and get back over here!” Eli threw her hands up in frustration. *What on Earth is the matter with those two?*

“Eli, do you think I’m too hard on Oskar? I don’t want him to think I’m mad at him or anything.”

“Nah! He knows you don’t mean it. I do it all the time. He’s used to it.”

“Good! I don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

They changed quickly and were sitting together on the window seat when Oskar knocked on the door.

“Come in Oskar,” Hannah called out.

Oskar came in quietly and sat down on the window seat with them. He stared out the window into the darkness, then laid his head on her shoulder. “Eli? I’m so sorry you can’t see in the dark anymore.” He put his arm around her.

“Me too, Oskar.” She sighed, then slowly got up, sat down on the bed and held out her hands, “Oskar?”

He took her hands and slid past her up against the wall. Hannah waited until they got settled, then slipped in beside them. “Eli? What was your sister like? I saw her for a moment when Oskar showed me...” her voice trailed off.

“She was a little like you, Hannah. You have her smile.” Eli tried to remember exactly what she looked like, but it was so long ago, it was almost impossible.

“That means you have her smile too, Eli.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, but I guess you’re right, Hannah.” For some reason, the idea made Eli sad. It made her feel closer to Anne, but it only brought home to her how long it had been since she had said her silent goodbyes as Anne lay on her bed, crying for her Elias.

Don’t be sad Eli! Oskar wrapped his arms around her.

“Oskar, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean...”

“It’s okay, Hannah,” Eli said. “It’s not your fault. Sometimes I miss my family a lot, and you just reminded me of why.”

Hannah felt so sad for her. Eli’s whole life had been an unimaginable tragedy. She lay there quietly for a while, then reached down, slipped her hands into theirs, and drifted off to sleep, sharing her dreams with them both. She could feel Oskar smiling at her.

It was pitch black when Hannah woke up. She carefully extracted herself from the tangle of arms and legs, slipped out of bed, and moved quietly over to the window seat. With the moon gone, the stars were brilliant, and the Milky Way, usually not easy to see, was sharp and well defined. She tried to imagine all those stars as Eli had shown them to her, but it was almost impossible. She shook her head sadly as she realized once again the enormity of what Eli had given up. She glanced down into the back yard and realized the lights were on in the kitchen. *I wonder who could be up this late?* On an impulse, she quietly slipped out of the room, closed the door behind her and tiptoed downstairs. She walked timidly up to the kitchen door and peeked around the corner.

“Hannah! What are you doing up so late? Come on in and keep me company. Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, please, Mr. Dawson.” She sat down at the kitchen table and watched as he reached for a cup, paused a moment, then carefully brought down a cup from the top shelf and placed it in front of her alongside a small pitcher of milk and a bowl of sugar cubes. She grinned as she noticed the tiny fairies and elves dancing around the inside as well as the outside of the cup. “How pretty! Where did you get this?”

“It was my son’s when he was about seven.” Dawson smiled at her as he filled her cup. “He liked fairy tales.”

“It’s really pretty! I’ve never seen one like it before! And it’s a full-sized cup!” she turned it around and examined it carefully. “These are the most beautiful little fairies I’ve ever seen!”

“You really like it? Then I want you to have it.”

“I couldn’t, really! Doesn’t your son want it?”

“He died in a car accident a long time ago, along with his mother, Hannah. Not long after she made this for him. She was a bit of an artist too.”

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t know.” Hannah was mortified.

“Of course you didn’t! It’s okay Hannah.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “But I really want you to have the cup.”

How awful! Everyone in this whole family has had something really bad happen to them!

“Thank you so much Mr. Dawson!”

She carefully took a sip of tea, holding the cup with both hands. “What are you doing up so late, Mr. Dawson?”

“Believe it or not, I was thinking about you, Hannah. And how much you’re like Eli.”

“We’re kindred spirits, you know; like in ‘Anne of Green Gables.’” Hannah smiled at him.

“I’m not surprised, Hannah with an ‘h.’ And you kind of look alike too.” His eyes twinkled.

“You’re funny, Mr. Dawson,” she giggled. *He’s so, so nice!*

“So! What brings you down here in the middle of the night? Did Oskar push you out of bed?”

She blushed, “No, no. I just...was worrying about Eli and I couldn’t sleep. What’s going to become of her? All these things her vampire did to her. Whatever would happen to her if people found out? She could go to jail forever. Or end up in a cage somewhere.”

“We’ll have to make sure that doesn’t happen, won’t we?” *She lies awake at night worrying about that? What an amazing child she is!*

“And what about the other shot? The one that stopped Oskar from getting old? What if people find out about that?”

“Hannah, you let Mrs. Dawson and me worry about those things. Please don’t take this on yourself. I promise you; Eli is safe here.”

“I can’t help it. I’m so frightened for her.”

“Hannah, the best thing you can do for Eli you’re already doing. You’re being a strong, supportive friend to her. She lived for over two centuries all alone. She needs all the friends she can get, especially now that she is, in her own mind, defenseless.”

“She’s not defenseless at all, Mr. Dawson! She beat me up last night!”

“Yes, I know, Hannah. Mrs. Dawson and I heard the ‘agony of your defeat’ all the way downstairs.” He smiled at her.

“I’m sorry! I hope...”

Dawson held up his hand. “Hannah, don’t apologize. Elaine and I really enjoy having you over – we both really enjoy the chaos; even in the middle of the night.

“Mr. Dawson? How did you know it was me instead of Eli when I came in?”

He looked deliberately at her pajamas, then back up at her with a half-grin on his face.

“Oh. Right.”

“But I would have known anyway, Hannah.”

“What? How?”

“Because I know you now. It’s easy. But of course, I’m not giving away any of my secrets.”

Hannah yawned through her smile. “Eli and I will figure it out together. Just you wait!”

Dawson stood up and collected the cups, “I can tell you’re tired Hannah. Why don’t you go on up to bed? I’ll clean up down here. I’ll put your cup on the second shelf here in the corner where you can reach it tomorrow morning.”

“Okay, Mr. Dawson.” She gave him a big hug, then tiptoed back up the stairs.

There’s more to this child than meets the eye, but I can’t put my finger on it. On the one hand, she’s a typical 12-year-old, but there’s more. She’s smart in a very intriguing way; a perfect foil for Eli. If I didn’t know better.... He felt he was missing something – something important. *Well, no matter. We’re lucky to have her.* But he knew it wasn’t luck; If Gudmund hadn’t painstakingly researched the family tree, they never would have found her. He and Elaine needed to talk. He turned out the lights and headed up to their room. And they needed to get Jack and Henry involved. This whole impossible thing was driving him nuts.

§

Hannah opened the door quietly, tiptoed over to the bed and slipped under the covers.

“Hannah? Where were you? I was worried. I thought maybe I had pushed you out of bed or something, and you were lying on the floor badly injured.” Oskar whispered. She could just barely make out the big grin on his face.

“Ha, Ha. No, I just couldn’t sleep. I went downstairs and talked to your dad a while. He was up too,” she whispered back. “I was worried about Eli.”

“I worry about her too.” He delicately kissed her on the cheek; he didn’t want to wake her. “She’s so pretty, Hannah.” He paused, then slowly looked up at her. “I guess that means you’re pretty too, doesn’t it? Not that I’ve noticed or anything.”

Hannah blushed, then sat up, leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Oskar, you’re the sweetest boy I’ve ever met. I guess that’s why Eli loves you so much, huh?”

“Nah! She loves me because I’m so fierce and strong. You should see what I can do to a tree. When she saw me working over that tree, it was love at first sight.”

Hannah smothered a laugh, unsuccessfully. “Oskar, you’re as funny as your dad.”

“Yeah, he’s a riot. Especially in the middle of the night,” Eli yawned, then flopped over on her back and gently pulled them both up next to her. They lay there for a while, their heads resting on her chest, their faces just a few inches away from each other. They exchanged a grin, then slowly fell asleep to the steady, rhythmic rise and fall of Eli’s chest.

§

“They’re absolutely beautiful, Eli.” Hannah examined the white egg carefully. “It’s perfect!” She placed it carefully on its base.

“Watch this, Hannah!” Eli rotated the eggs carefully, then slowly went through the procedure. At the final click, the platform lifted and Eli set it aside to reveal the twin crowns in the base. She lifted them out of the base and held them up for Hannah to see.

Hannah gasped, “Those belong in the center of the egg? How magical!” she picked up the base and examined it closely. “Wow! It’s really heavy. I wonder how it works? Where are all the gears and springs and stuff that make it work?”

Oskar reached over and pointed at the side wall of the chamber. “See that faint line there? There’s another compartment there that we think has all that stuff in it. At least that’s where the noise comes from when it’s working.”

Hannah turned it over and looked at the bottom. “It’s a bit rough on the bottom, kind of like the underside of a dresser or something. You know; a part that no one ever looks at so it’s not really finished properly?”

“Yeah, we noticed that. It’s really not bad, except for the fingerprints in the varnish or whatever it is.” Oskar said.

Hannah looked at it more closely, “Yeah I see what you mean. Maybe he was in a hurry when he was finishing it.”

“I don’t think so Hannah. He had over a century he could have worked on it.” She snapped the platform back in place and put the base back on the shelf with the eggs.

Hannah leaned over and put her chin in her hands. “And he could also see the future. Neither you nor your mom can do that, right?”

“Right. But Gudmund’s father could do it too.”

“No, the point is he made the base so only you could open it. You’re the only one in the world alive who had seen the inside of the egg, and knew which way was right side up. You were the only one that knew all that, plus had the abilities to see those tiny differences that even Oskar couldn’t see. And he knew you would eventually open it, right? Even though it was made over 150 years before it happened?”

“Yes...What are you getting at?” Eli asked, puzzled.

Hannah thought for a minute, “If he could do all that, and make the base for the eggs so perfect that moving them just right made all the gears and stuff work, why would he make such a mess out of the bottom? Why isn’t it perfect too?”

“Maybe it is!” Oskar exclaimed. He carefully removed the eggs, took the base down off the shelf again and placed it in the center of the table, upside down. “Just a minute.” He got up and went into his room. He was back in a few seconds with a huge magnifying glass, with which he examined the base carefully.

“These fingerprints are small. There’s one at each end of the bottom. He looked at them closely. He suddenly jumped up, ran back into his room and returned with an ink pad and several sheets of paper. “Eli! Give me your hand.”

Oskar, after a few messy missteps, proceeded to get a reasonable impression of all ten of Eli’s fingers, which he examined carefully under the powerful magnifying glass while Eli grumbled in the background as she tried unsuccessfully to get the ink off her hands and arms.

“Eli, this is your fingerprint!!” he announced triumphantly. “It’s the index finger of your right hand.” He examined the second print. “So’s this one! They’re both your right index finger.” He pushed the base over to her.

“Put your finger there!” He pointed at the base.

No sooner had she placed her finger over the impression, than they heard a quite audible ‘click.’

Hannah gasped. Oskar and Eli looked at each other. Oskar quickly turned it around. “Now this side, Eli.”

Once again, they heard the familiar ‘click,’ but nothing else happened. Puzzled, Eli tried it in reverse; then tried it faster; then tried it with the base upright, but nothing they tried seemed to make any difference.

“Well, while you two geniuses try to figure it out, I’m going to go take a shower. I not only got the ink all over my hands, but it’s on my face and arms too. Oskar, you’re so sloppy; Sherlock Holmes would have been ashamed of you.” Frustrated, she got up in a huff and headed for the bathroom.

Hannah went over to the refrigerator and pulled out a coke. “Would you like anything, Oskar?”

Oskar’s eyes lit up when he spotted the pitcher of ice water. “Wait here, Hannah.” He brushed past her, grabbed the pitcher and headed for the bathroom, stopping for a second to open a drawer and toss Hannah a couple of towels. “You’re going to need these in a minute or so.” He put his finger to his lips, turned and headed for the bathroom, where they could hear the shower running.

Hannah stood up with the towels in her hand. Oskar, what...”

Suddenly she heard a blood-curdling scream from the bathroom, followed immediately by Oskar’s grinning face as he tossed the empty pitcher aside, ran across the room and crouched behind Eli’s table. Eli, red-faced and dripping wet, stormed into the room, slipped and fell on her butt with a wet smack and slid across the floor, coming to a halt at Hannah’s feet. Hannah saw...everything.

“Eli, I...” Hannah started. She had lived Eli’s nightmare, but seeing the results for herself, in the present, having been inflicted on someone she loved dearly, was another matter.

Eli jumped up, brushed by her without a word and, eyes blazing, headed for Oskar, but no matter how hard she tried to get hold of him, he deftly kept the table between them.

“Oskar, I’m going to get you! You know I will eventually.”

“Yeah? And what are you going to do with me when you do? He grinned at her. “I outweigh you, you know. and you don’t have your vampire buddy to help you out any more,” he mocked.

After a few fruitless attempts to psych him out by looking fierce, Eli gave up, broke into a big grin, and sat down at the table.

Oskar smiled at her, bowed, and sat down across from her. Without a word, Eli reached behind her. Hannah handed her a towel and she wrapped it around herself. “Thanks, Hannah.”

“Even?” she smiled at him.

“Even!”

“Oskar, this is the first time I’ve been really cold in over two centuries! I’d forgotten how...exhilarating it can be.” She shivered and rubbed her goose bumps; then she stood up, went over to her dresser and quickly put fresh clothes on. Hannah followed her with her eyes.

My poor Eli! How could anyone have done such a thing to her? She decided she would keep her thoughts on the matter to herself. If Eli and Oskar could do it, she certainly could. She sat down at the table and absently turned the base around in her hands. “Oskar, I have the funny feeling that you were once on the receiving end of that pitcher of water.”

“Hannah, you’re too smart for your own good.” He grinned at her.

‘Click’ Hannah was so startled she almost dropped the base. “Oskar, what...”

Oskar leaned over and stared at the base, where Hannah’s index finger was directly over one of the prints. He grabbed it from her and turned it around. “Do it again, Hannah!” He said excitedly.

She gingerly placed her finger on the second print. They both heard the resulting ‘click.’

He jumped up. “Of course! You’re identical twins!! Your fingerprints are the same! Eli! Get over here!”

As soon as Eli sat down, Oskar placed the base upside down on the table. “Now, both at the same time: Three...two...one...now!” Eli and Hannah smiled at each other as they pressed their fingers down firmly on the depressions.

The twin clicks were almost simultaneous, and were followed a second later by a third click. A small door, completely obscured by the uneven finish on the base, popped open.

All three of them leaned forward, their heads almost touching, and peered into the opening. It was shallow; no more than ½ inch deep, and appeared to be empty. But engraved in the exposed ebony base of the opening was a series of numbers and letters.

“PA V6 p12 HS BB CCR” Oskar read slowly. “Is that all?” He poked his finger in the opening and moved it around. Nothing. He pressed hard against the bottom of the opening, but it felt quite solid.

“Oskar, go get Papa.” Eli turned and looked at Hannah. Hannah, without a word, raised her arms up, palms out, towards Eli. Eli gently placed her palms against Hannah’s, smiled and clasped her hands tightly in hers. “Blood sisters?”

“Blood sisters.”

“Kindred Spirits?”

“Kindred Spirits!” Eli kissed her gently on the forehead.

§

“Good analytical thinking, Oskar, but unfortunately it’s based on a false premise.” Papa said, as he and Elaine followed him into the room.

“What do you mean?”

“Identical twins’ fingerprints are similar, but never identical. Random environmental factors, primarily in the womb, affect them just enough to produce discernible differences. Hannah? Do you mind?” He took Hannah’s right index finger rolled it on the ink pad and pressed her finger next to Eli’s print.

“Oskar?” Oskar handed him the magnifying glass.

Dawson studied the two prints for a minute or two, then put down the magnifying glass, a surprised look on his face. “Impossible! Elaine, they’re identical; at least insofar as I can tell from these prints, which are, admittedly, a bit crude.”

“Aren’t we getting a bit off track, Rich?” Elaine held up the base.

“Oh! Of course.” He took it from her and peered into the depression and read off the characters. “PA V6 p12 HS BB CCR”

“What do you three think it means?” he asked.

“Well, the V6 p12 might mean Volume 6 page 12, but I don’t know about the rest,” Hannah volunteered.

“Quite right! That’s exactly what I was thinking. Anyone else?”

“Does this have to be a secret code? Maybe it was just a note, like a string around his finger or something.” Oskar said.

“Then why would he have hidden it in such a way that only two people in the whole world could open it?” Eli said sarcastically.

“Maybe it was a note for you and Hannah?”

“We won’t rule that possibility out, Oskar, but clearly all the information isn’t here. He was at least being careful. He didn’t want just anyone finding the pot of gold. Theoretically, anyone could have found this cryptic message by simply taking the base apart or hitting it with a hammer enough times. He meant it for us and he knew that at this time and in this place, all the information we needed to figure it out had to be available to us. He also knew you two had to be together, in this house, with the base in your hands.”

“And he saw into the future! Do you think he saw us here, sitting around the table, Mr. Dawson?” Hannah felt the hair rise on the back of her neck. She looked around the room, half-expecting to see the ghost of the mysterious Gudmund lurking in a corner or under the bed.

“Certainly a possibility, Hannah.” He smiled at her. “Rest assured, though. He knew enough about you to single you out for Eli’s attention. I think he thought highly of you.”

He nodded at Oskar and Eli. “Why don’t you two go down and bring up Gudmund’s journals from Elaine’s old room?” They quickly headed down the stairs.

“Hannah. Would you mind if we talked to your mother and father about the particulars of your birth? You know, where exactly you were born, hospital, unusual circumstances?”

“No, Mr. Dawson. They’d tell you I’m sure! They’ve always called me their miracle baby. The doctors had told them that Jason would most likely be their only child. But I don’t know any of the particulars. I never thought to ask.” She sounded a bit apologetic.

“Thanks Hannah. I think they’re right. You certainly are a miracle child.” He winked at her, and looked quickly at Elaine with an excited glint in his eye. *Hmm. Why a miracle baby?*

Oskar and Eli stumbled into the room with two boxes of old lace-bound binders; Gudmund’s Journals.

“First, are they numbered. Eli?”

“They are, Papa.” She held up the first one. In the upper left-hand corner was a small gilded ‘Volume 1.’

She thumbed through them, extracted one, and excitedly handed it to him. “Volume 6, Papa!”

He turned it to page 12, and began reading. After a few minutes, he turned the page, then went back to page 11. Finally, frustrated, he handed it to Elaine. “See if you can get anything from this. He talks about repairing one of Eli’s hibernation places, and some trouble at the family home, but nothing jumps out at me.”

Elaine took even longer and went forward and back several times. “Rich, nothing stands out to me. Interestingly, he refers to aperture settings and shutter speeds when taking Eli’s photo with the eggs. He must have taken over 50 different exposures before finally getting what he wanted. He was a real perfectionist!” she said, admiringly, then shook her head, “And here I am getting further off-track than you, Rich. I guess our digressions expose our personal obsessions more than they exposes Gudmund’s secrets. Frankly, I don’t think there’s anything here that can help us.”

Rich put his head in his hands. “Think, children! What else could he be referring to”

“The only other books he gave us, other than published books, were all the photo albums,” Eli said. She jumped up, “Photo albums! ‘P’ ‘A’! ‘Photo Albums!’” She ran over to her bookcase.

“He didn’t number them, but I’ve put them in order on my shelf.” She pulled down the sixth album.

“How did you know how to order them, then?” Papa asked.

“By the dates on the pictures, Papa.” She handed him the album.

“Right, then.” *In order to find the right album then, one would have to have all of them in his possession. We’re on the right track! I know it!* He turned to page 12. The pages in this album, as in most of the earlier ones, were made of thick 3-layered paper, with the back-to-back photographs sandwiched between the inner layer and the outer layer on each side of the page, which had pre-printed fancy borders around each opening, allowing for four photos per page only. It was immediately obvious which photo was being referenced. The date below it was November 29, 1982. *That’s Eli’s birthday! This is no coincidence!* He immediately recognized Hannah’s mother in her hospital bed with a baby in her arms, surround by a younger Nils and several smiling doctors and nurses. But, since the date was the only caption, no one who didn’t know them would know which picture was the correct one. *This has to be the right place!* He thought a moment, *But why so many doctors?* “We have it! Hannah, this is a picture of you, your mother, and father the day you were born!” He turned the album around so they all could see.

“You were cute!” Eli exclaimed.

“My brother was cute; I looked like one of those rubber dolls you squeeze and the eyes pop out,” Hannah retorted. “I’d also like to point out that I’ve never seen this picture before, and believe me, I’ve see them all hundreds of times!”

“Well, that’s no surprise under the circumstances. Now what are we looking for?” He turned the page back and forth; then, on a hunch, he spread the layers of heavy paper carefully and extracted the photo. A small, flat key fell out on the table with a soft ‘ting.’ Elaine picked it up carefully. Rich looked at the picture closely, then flipped it over and examined the back.

“There’s a 10-digit number written here, preceded by several zeros. If I had to guess, I’d have to say it’s a bank account number of some sort.

“And this looks like a safe-deposit box key to me.” Elaine said, examining it carefully.

“Hannah Sandstrøm!” Hannah shouted. ““HS.”

“That’s two for two, Hannah. You’re right of course. Now for the ‘BB CCR’”

“It’s obvious, Rich.” Elaine said, “We’ve had an account there for years. Barclay’s Bank, Charing Cross Road.

§

“Of course, Rich. We’ll tell you anything you wish to know about Hannah’s birth. Frankly, you’ve really piqued our interest with your revelations. I think it’s absolutely astounding that they have identical DNA.” Livia nodded to Nils. “Go ahead, Nils. You’re better at the details than I.”

Nils collected his thoughts for a moment; then leaned forward. “To begin with, we had not been able to have another child after Jason. Livia’s fallopian tubes were blocked by scarring and we were finally told that natural conception was impossible. We had just about given up hope when a private research organization contacted us through our family doctor and offered to pay all costs for a relatively new experimental procedure, called In Vitro Fertilization in return for being able to collect blood and tissues samples from the resulting child for up to 15 years.”

Rich and Elaine looked at each other.

“After all the publicity surrounding the Louise Brown conception a few years before, the first so-called, “Test Tube Baby,” we agreed to do it only if it was kept secret. We didn’t want Hannah’s life complicated by all the publicity. It actually took us three tries and about seven months before we were successful, and the result, such as it is, is sitting right there next to Eli.” He smiled at Hannah. “She came into the world at 3:11AM on Monday, November 29, 1982, by cesarean section, at five pounds, six ounces; a bit of a featherweight. We had thought she was small for her age even now because of it, but Eli’s the same height and weight, which probably indicates it’s genetic.” He looked at Dr. Dawson, questioningly.

“You’re probably right, Nils. They’re too close to the same height and weight for it to be anything else. And speaking of coincidences, do you realize they have the same birthday?”

Livia smiled, “Yes, Rich. Hannah lost no time in telling us as soon as she walked in the door. The difference, I think, is that the doctors picked that date, well within the predicted time period for a natural delivery, for scheduling purposes. And part of the original agreement had called for a cesarean section for safety reasons. It is an amazing coincidence, however.”

Eli put her arm around Hannah. *Every time something new comes out, our connection gets even stronger.* “Hannah, I think you’re right this time,” she whispered. “There’s something magical going on here.”

“I told you so, Eli!” she whispered excitedly.

“There were many anxious weeks at the beginning,” Nils continued; “The experimental procedure was not without risk, and the doctors hovered over her the entire time, taking blood and tissue samples. They even took the umbilical cord for the ‘stem cells;’ whatever those are. They tried to explain it to me, but with little success, I’m afraid. It wasn’t until she was 6 months old that we all breathed a sigh of relief. Even so, the doctors took samples regularly after that, once a year for the next 11 years. The last was just after her 12th birthday, and she was given a clean bill of health. We were told that no more tests would be necessary.” He sat back in his chair.

“Would you like to see our album? We kind of went overboard with the camera for Hannah. Poor Jason didn’t get anywhere near the coverage.” Livia reached over and patted him on the knee.

“And just look at me!” Jason kidded. “See what all that lack of attention did to me? I’m a needy, photo-deprived wreck. And it’s all your fault, Hannah.”

“What do you mean? You’re on the soccer team and you’re in the top five percent of your class!” Hannah protested.

Yeah, but if it wasn’t for you, I’d be in the top one percent.” He broke into a wide grin. “You know I’m kidding right? You’re my favorite little sister!”

“I’m your ONLY little sister!” she glared at him and smacked him on the arm. “Let me get the album, Mom.” She jumped up and headed for the stairs with Eli close behind her.

“Nils, what was the name of the research organization that made this generous offer?” Richard asked.

“It was a Swedish firm. Genterapi Ltd. They were one of the private hospital’s principle benefactors, and the sponsors of major college scholarships in the field of medicine. Our doctor was one of its scholarship recipients – eight years’ worth.”

“Well, it sounds like you two were in the right place at the right time, then.”

“Were there complications during gestation, Livia? Why did they decide against natural childbirth so early?” Elaine asked.

“The doctor felt that, under the circumstances, with the scarring and all, that it would be safer; and they would be better prepared for any complications if the delivery was scheduled.

“Then why deliver in the middle of the night?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure. I always thought it was to avoid any chance of adverse publicity; fewer personnel on duty and all that, but I never thought to ask. We were just so grateful that everything had gone so well.”

Hannah and Eli bounded down the stairs with the album, and they all gathered around the table together.

Hannah and Jason watched as Mom and Dad went through the album for the ten-thousandth time, reciting from force of habit the well-worn comments and niceties; and they, themselves injected their own rehashed comments at the appropriate and predictable places as the pages were turned. “Ohh. Look at that smile!” or “Gee Mom, you really look tired in that picture.”

“Who’s that, Hannah?” Eli pointed at a little boy peeking over the end of the bed, a smiling Nils standing right behind him.

“That’s Jason! He was standing on tiptoe on the bed railing and you could still just barely see his face!” Hannah giggled.

“Jason! You were the cutest little thing!” Eli reached across the table and pinched his cheek, “What on Earth happened after you grew up?”

“Watch it there, Hannah Jr., you’re bruising an already fragile ego.” He put his arm to his head and sighed deeply. “As if the torture of living with one abusive sister weren’t enough, she had to dig up another of you with an even keener rapier wit. Woe is me!” he exclaimed dramatically.

“Boy, you’re good! Shakespeare would be proud – or would he be rolling over in his grave?” Eli teased.

Elaine and Rich hadn’t heard the exchange; they were staring past a little boy’s curiosity-filled face, past his smiling father, past the nurses lined up neatly in a row behind him and directly into the eyes of Gudmund Törnkvist II, who was staring directly back at them from the photo with a half-smile on his face, almost as though he could see them all clustered around the album along with his life’s obsession and her doppelgänger, amusedly asking them, “What took you so long?”

§

The drive home was tense, once Eli and Oskar had been told of Gudmund’s apparent involvement in Hannah’s birth.

“Why didn’t you tell me he was in the picture, Papa?”

“I was afraid you’d react, and then we’d have to come up with something to tell Hannah’s parents.”

“But they should know! You have to tell them!”

“No, Eli, we don’t.” he turned to face her in the back seat. “It would devastate them if they found out that Hannah may not even be their own child. And how do you think Hannah herself will feel? We don’t know enough about what Gudmund has done to safely make any assumptions, but it doesn’t look good. We certainly are not going to tell them anything until after we make the trip to the bank tomorrow.”

Eli hadn’t thought about it, but she knew with a certainty that Papa was right. Hannah loved her family dearly. And just by watching their faces and seeing how proud of her they were, she knew with conviction how much her mom and dad loved her. She realized that this was one secret that, perhaps, she could never tell her, no matter what. “Papa, how horrible! How could he have done this to her? It’s like she was some sort of experiment or something. Didn’t he think about what it would be like for her if she found out?”

“Eli, he loved you. All he could think about was helping you. I don’t understand how creating an identical twin helps you in any way, other than for organ donation, but perhaps we’ll get some more answers once we see what he’s left us at the bank. And remember; this is all speculation at this point. He may have absolutely nothing to do with this”

“I love her, Papa! That’s how he helped me. I love Hannah.” She paused, “Mama? Do you think that I would...I mean...do I love Hannah because she’s me?” She shook her head. “That sounded stupid!”

“She isn’t you, Butterfly. No matter what Gudmund did, she’s her own person with her own beautiful soul. Even Gudmund can’t have tinkered with that. And your bond with Hannah was formed long before you knew any of this. You love each other because you’re ‘kindred spirits,’ for want of a better phrase. Even if Gudmund could see you both in his journeys into the future, he had no real control over your relationship; he could just observe it. It’s real, Eli. It’s not tainted by his obsessions.”

“Do you really think so, Mama?”

“I’m certain of it Eli.”

§

Oskar, Eli, and Elaine waited in the lobby as Rich talked to the bank president. “Glad to finally meet you, Dr. Dawson, although I notice that your family has had its personal account here for years. As you can see, activity on this particular account has increased significantly over the last six months, and monthly cash transfers have increased by over 50% in the same time period, but as you can also see here, the income has been adjusted to maintain the account balance at around £5,000,000.” He pointed to the bottom of the ledger sheet. “Now, what can I do for you today?”

Dawson was still in shock as his suspicions had been confirmed merely by his observing the logo and letterhead on the official letter of authorization he had been handed as soon as he had introduced himself: Wrapped around the stylized representation of the famous double-helix, were the words. “Genterapi Ltd. A Wholly-Owned Subsidiary of Törnkvist Enterprises.” The company name on the account itself was different yet; “Archaeogenetics Inc.”

“I need access to the account’s safety deposit box.”

“Certainly! Frank? Would you escort Dr. Dawson to the vault please?” Dawson picked up his briefcase and followed Frank to the vault. After passing a guard and pausing to unlock two inner doors, Frank waved Dawson into the vault, unlocked the outer box door, removed the box from its niche and placed it on the table. “Will there be anything else, Doctor?”

“No, thank you.” Frank exited as Dawson placed his briefcase on the table next to the box, retrieved the key they had found, and carefully placed it in the lock. He breathed a sigh of relief as it turned smoothly.

There were two neat stacks of dark-blue hard-covered lab notebooks inside, each carefully numbered and dated. There was a folded piece of paper on top of the first stack.

“Dr. Dawson. Please take these with you and study them for as long as you wish. We will contact you at the appropriate time.” The note was unsigned.

He quickly placed the notebooks in his briefcase and locked the box. He nodded to the guard, who motioned to someone out of sight. Frank was back in a matter of seconds.

The bank president watched from his office door as the four of them exited the bank through the heavy bronze-framed doors. He stepped back into his office and made a quick phone call. “This is Henry. They just left.... Yes sir, all four of them. ...Yes. He took the contents with him.”

§

After spending three hours pouring over its contents, Rich put down the first notebook. He couldn’t believe what he had just read. The entire notebook laid out a gameplan for the DNA sequencing of the Vampire parasite, using the dideoxy, or Sanger, method, but by using a system of switches, not unlike the one he and Jack had uncovered in the cure for Elaine and Eli, but less sophisticated, these researchers were planning on isolating and potentially activating or deactivating each and every individual vampiric trait. An unbelievably ambitious undertaking, especially since they must know, as Jack and he had discovered early on, that many of these traits were linked together in unbelievably complex ways. How would they even begin?

A parallel gameplan that he could only infer from random comments throughout the first volume, seemed to make extensive use of stem cells as some sort of building block for reproducing their interim results whenever a promising line was isolated. There was no mention whatsoever of Hannah, or how and why Gudmund had been involved in her birth.

He opened the second volume. He gasped as he saw a high-resolution photograph of Eli lying on a large, stainless-steel table, arms straight, but almost directly over her head, clearly unconscious; probably hibernating, but with both of her fully-formed wings spread out around her. Two men wearing surgical scrubs, masks, and gloves hovered over her. Several small round pieces of paper with numbers on them had been carefully placed on her wings; at several points on the intersection of wing and arm; and at each point where the bone spars branched out from her arms and wrists. Subsequent pages, headed by the corresponding numbers, had segments of DNA sequencing diagrams with areas of the differences between them and those on adjacent pages, highlighted. As much as he hated to, he knew he would have to show this to Eli.

“Eli! Could you come in here a moment?” He turned the book around as Eli hurried into his study.

She gasped as she saw the picture. “Papa! That...that can’t be!” She shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. “I can’t ... couldn’t grow wings while asleep, let alone while hibernating.”

“Apparently you can, Eli. Of course you have no memory of this happening to you?”

“No! How humiliating!” she shuddered, then slipped into his lap, put her arms around him and pressed her cheek against his chest. She was beginning to have second thoughts about Gudmund. *How could he have done this to me? Strange men poking at me and looking at me like I was a piece of meat or something!*

“Think, Eli. Do you have any idea when this could have happened to you?” He was angry. *This man has crossed too many lines in his obsession. If he set this all up, he must have known Eli would eventually see this picture. How could he violate her personal privacy so cavalierly?*

“No, Papa.” She leaned over and looked at the picture more closely. “The Pants! Look at the pants, Papa!”

Dawson recognized them immediately. They were Eli’s special pants; the ones Oskar had liked so much. “When did you get those pants, Eli?”

“It was a year before I ... found Hakan. Right before my last hibernation alone.”

“Around 1979 or so?”

“I think so.”

“Then Gudmund was doing state-of-the-art genetic research. If you were indeed his life’s obsession, why was all the money and interest invested in this huge operation?”

“I don’t know, Papa! I don’t know!”

He put his arms around her and hugged her. “Eli, I’m sure this isn’t what it looks like. Gudmund must have had a good reason for doing this. After all, he’d taken care of you for over 150 years at this point.” He hoped he sounded convincing to her, because he wasn’t convinced himself.

“Yes, Papa. You’re probably right.” *Papa always knows just what to say*, she thought to herself.

§

He put down the second volume and leaned back in his chair. He couldn’t wrap his mind around what he had seen in the last few pages, although the text had inexorably led him in that direction. Several small photographs of a flat, rectangular low-sided glass dish in an incubator, about 4 by 6 inches, in a time-lapse sequence extending over about 4 weeks. Initially, all he could see was a porous translucent glass tube with a small, black spot in the center, clearly a growth cluster of some type, which expanded and changed shape gradually from picture to picture, until...he recognized the shape of a perfectly-formed miniature wing, no more than three inches across and five inches long, growing from the side of the tube. A thin layer of what appeared to be human skin, milky white, had formed simultaneously and wrapped itself around the tube. The juncture of wing and skin looked exactly like the thin line on Eli’s arm when her wings were fully

extended. Gudmund had succeeded in cultivating and growing what appeared to be a fully-developed vampire wing. *My God!* He thought. *The growing of the skin alone is a major biological breakthrough and is worth a fortune in its own right.*

Each volume contained the results of similar experiments. One contained detailed drawings of a vampire fang showing two fine grooves, one on each edge, which Dawson concluded were the channels for delivering the natural anesthetic to the victim's neck at the first bite. The chemical and biological characteristics of the anesthetic were detailed in this volume. There were also high resolution pictures of a fang in place in an unidentifiable open mouth. He was determined that Eli was not going to see these.

Another had chronicled the growth of a 6-inch diameter piece of vampire skin; another, a totally recognizable human eye. Eli's eye. He was certain of it, despite its completely human appearance. The deep blue, with the subtle golden edges that you would miss completely if you weren't looking for them. Just the faintest hint of the vampire in them.

He stopped short when he got near the bottom of the second pile of notebooks. These last three were a bit thicker, and light blue in color. He gasped as he realized that, unlike the others, a single name was embossed in gold on the cover of each of them. 'Hannah.' These were range-dated; the first, beginning in November, 1982; The last, Ending in November, 1994. Hannah's 12th birth month.

He steeled himself, took a deep breath; then opened the first and began to read.

§

Richard and Elaine were huddled together in the study. It was early in the morning and Oskar and Eli were still asleep upstairs. "What should we do Rich? If we tell them, they'll certainly come to the same conclusion we have. Eli will want to tell Hannah and eventually, her parents."

"I don't think she will, Elaine. She'll never allow Hannah to be hurt, even if we tell her about...the most recent experiments. In fact, I'm certain that once she finds out, she'll have nothing to do with anything Gudmund's research might do for her.

"But Rich, we aren't sure what actually happened. Don't you find it odd that nowhere in the Hannah journals does he discuss his cloning methods? Growing spare body parts is one thing; cloning a human being is quite another, and requires a much higher level of sophistication. But, it's almost as though all his work with her DNA began after she was born, not before. It's as though at least one journal were missing from the collection. But they are consecutively dated and numbered, so that's impossible."

"What other explanation could there be? Hannah is a duplicate of Eli, and Gudmund has a direct connection to her method of birth."

"But Hannah is a girl, Rich. She's not an exact duplicate for that reason alone. Something else is going on here. And did you notice that whenever Gudmund's hand-written notes appear in the

last journal, he refers to Hannah as his ‘Water Sprite’? Gudmund is many things, but that’s the kind of reference you would expect from Eli – or Hannah; not Gudmund. He’s too staid for that.”

“But look here!” He handed her the third volume, open so she could clearly see the inside cover. “This is a beautifully-drawn picture of a fairy, or ‘sprite,’ if you wish. Because of the perfect likeness, I thought it was Eli at first glance, but notice the wings. They grow out of her back, like a fairy’s wings, not from her arms. And look at the face and stature. At first I thought it was a young Eli, but no one alive has seen Eli younger than she is now. No, this is a representation of Hannah at about ten years of age; just about the time this third journal was begun. Gudmund’s ‘Water Sprite.’ Why a water sprite? Why a sprite at all? What is it he discovered about Hannah at ten that brought about this new imagery?”

Elaine leaned forward, excitedly. “Rich, I’ll lay odds on the fact that at that point, Gudmund saw something change in Eli’s future. Something unforeseen; something good; something that shook him out of his staidness.”

“You may well be right; in fact I’d bet on it too, but we have to decide now. Should we tell her or not? I vote ‘yes.’”

Reluctantly, Elaine agreed. But something else had occurred to her. “You realize that it was not long after that third journal was completed that Gudmund first initiated contact with Eli, don’t you? With the eggs, I mean.”

“Are you suggesting that Gudmund had something to do with the death of the gentleman that bought Eli’s egg?”

“No, I think that would be crossing a line that even he wouldn’t cross, but he clearly foresaw it. Perhaps it was one of the factors that solidified Eli’s new and brighter future with Hannah, “

“I think we can deduce even more. Remember, when he confronted you in the car, he said he could only risk possibly one visit with her? When he came to visit us, he said there were many safe ways he could see her now. Whatever else changed in his vision of her future may have changed in that short period of time. What could it have been?” Rich was completely baffled. “And this is yet another change in their future, apart from the one when Hannah was ten.”

§

“But Mama, I don’t know if I can face her! I can’t tell her about this, but she’ll know something’s wrong; I know she will!” Eli was distraught.

“You’ve made up your mind about this Eli? You are certain you don’t want what Archaeogenetics may have to offer you? Remember, they’ve gone to a lot of trouble to contact us at this particular time and in this very convoluted manner. Whatever they have to say could be very important.”

“No!! I don’t want anything from them! Look what they did to Hannah. She’s an orphan! She’s adopted and doesn’t even know it! And it’s all his fault! Why couldn’t he just have left her family alone?”

“You do realize that Hannah wouldn’t even exist at all if it weren’t for Gudmund, don’t you?”

Eli’s head was spinning, “Yes, but...” she slumped down in her chair. “I don’t know what to think! It’s too complicated! I love her, but I ... wish he hadn’t done this! It’s too awful to think about.”

“Eli, she’s here in your world, and now that she’s here, it doesn’t matter why. You care about her because of who she is; not because of how she came into the world. Just like Oskar.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oskar loves you because of who you are, not because of how you ultimately came to be in his courtyard on the jungle gym.”

§

Hannah rushed in the door with her small suitcase, ran for the stairs, paused and sheepishly came back to the front door. “Bye, Dad. Thanks for bringing me over. Say ‘Hi’ to Grandma and Grandpa for me.” She waved at the car, “Bye Einstein! Have fun with Bert!”

She blew her mom a kiss, turned and disappeared up the stairs. Nils and Rich could hear the banging of her suitcase against each stair as she hurried up to Eli’s room.

Nils smiled and shook his head. “She’s so excited about almost everything she does. She does virtually everything with an intensity that used to scare us, until we realized what a happy child she was most of the time. We all have to get out of her way when she’s really happy though, or she bowls us over.”

“Yeah, we’ve noticed, Nils. Eli’s a great deal like her.” Rich smiled at him as he remembered Eli’s reaction the day they first found the cure. *It must be in their genes*, he thought to himself.

“Livia and I can’t thank you enough for taking her for the next couple of weeks. Jason is at Soccer Camp and we’re going to take the time to visit the kids’ grandparents in Hastings; sort of a family reunion. And of course, Hannah insisted we take Einstein so he could get acquainted with my mother’s cat, Bert. That should be great fun, at least for Einstein.”

“Any time! One more Eli around the house makes things much more interesting. And it keeps Oskar on his toes.”

“I’m here!” Hannah rushed into Eli’s room, dropped her suitcase in the middle of the floor with a loud thump, and plopped down on the bed next to Eli. “I’ve really missed you Eli. Especially at

night in my bed alone, except for Einstein of course. For some reason, he's been sleeping on my bed lately."

"And I'm sure you had absolutely nothing to do with that change," Eli said jokingly.

"Well, only the first night. But he's been doing it on his own ever since." She said earnestly. "It's like I told you; it's because he's so smart. After that first night, he thought to himself, 'Hannah is lonely, so, even though I know I shouldn't, I'm going to risk sleeping in her bed with her until she feels better.' Einstein only has my best interests at heart, and takes the risk despite the fact that he knows Mom and Dad would disapprove!"

Eli laughed, "You make it all seem so reasonable! But you must be right, because there's no other possible explanation," she added in mock seriousness.

Her sarcasm flew right over Hannah's head. "I knew you'd understand, because we're kindred spirits! I've missed you so, Eli." She hugged her tightly, just as Oskar came into the room.

"Hannah! I thought I heard excessive noise coming from Eli's room, and I thought to myself, 'Either we've had a meteor come through the roof into Eli's room, or Hannah's here.' I thought I'd come in on the off chance that it really was a meteor, but now that I see it's only you..." he turned as if to leave, but he was too late. Hannah leaped off the bed and put her arms around him before he could make his escape.

"I missed you too, Oskar!" she kissed him hard on the cheek, then let go of him quickly. He teetered a moment, then lost his balance and dropped to the floor like a rock. Only then did his face get red.

"Hannah! You got him again!" Eli laughed.

"But...I didn't mean to. I really did miss you, Oskar." she helped him up off the floor. Oskar was grinning from ear to ear.

"Boy, you sure know how to make an entrance!" He took both her hands in his. *We've both missed you too, Hannah.*

"Oskar! You can still touch-talk. How cool is that?"

"Touch-talk? Where did that come from?"

"I thought it up myself. 'Mind Reading' sounds so...pretentious and threatening. You touch-talk. You're too nice to read minds."

"I like it, Oskar. I think she has it exactly right." Eli said. Oskar came over and sat down beside her. She slipped her hand in his. *How can I not tell her? She needs to know, even if it hurts her. Isn't the truth all that matters? She would hate me, her blood sister, if I kept this from her. If she's at all like me she couldn't stand not knowing the truth.*

“I saw that!” Hannah said, “Was that another secret I need to write down?” she took out her notebook.

“Not exactly...” Eli stammered. *She’s too quick. She notices everything.*

Hannah realized immediately that something was not right. They both looked like they had been caught at something. “What’s wrong? Did I say something wrong?”

“No, Hannah. It’s just that...”

Oskar put his finger to his lips and shook his head.

“Did I tell you that Jason’s team has won the district championships? He’s almost impossible to live with now. His head’s so big he can hardly squeeze himself into his room.” Hannah laughed. “But I am proud of him; he deserves his big head.” She smiled at them, hoping she hadn’t irritated them by been too nosy.

“Wow! That’s great, Hannah! I’m hoping to get on a team as soon as we get settled in at school. Mom and Dad are still trying to decide where to send us,” Oskar said, relieved that the subject had been changed.

“But you have to come to my school, Eli. You have to! It would be so much fun.” she sat down on the bed beside them. “We could even switch classes with each other and no one would know the difference. There’s only one other set of identical twins in my school and they’re kind of stuck up. We’d show them!”

“Papa has been trying to convince Mama that we should do that, but she thinks it might be better if we didn’t draw too much attention to our...identicalness.”

“I don’t think anyone else will suspect that you were a fairy, Eli. Your mom worries too much.” She grinned at her. “My mom really likes the idea. She says you’ll be a good influence on me because you’re more grounded, whatever that means. Mom and Dad really, really like you.”

“Really? I like them too.” Eli felt warm inside. The darkness she had lived with for so long was gone now, she realized. If someone liked her now it was real, because they liked her for what she really was. Papa had explained it to her when she puzzled over why her life felt so much better to her now. And Hannah always made her feel better about things anyway.

“Time for dinner, kids.” Elaine poked her head in the door a moment; then headed back downstairs.

Eli felt relieved that they had gotten off so easily, as they all headed out the door. They had to be even more careful with Hannah than she had thought initially.

§

“Oskar, where are you going?” Hannah was puzzled. Oskar had been acting a bit weird all evening, but now she was really concerned. After they changed into their pajamas, he didn’t even come over to Eli’s room until she banged on his door. She was even prepared to take his comments about her fairy PJs calmly, she was so worried. She was sure she had hurt his feelings somehow.

“I’m really tired, Hannah. I think I want to sleep in my own bed tonight, if that’s okay.” He looked at Eli, hesitated a moment, then retreated across the hall to his room and quietly closed the door.

“Eli, did I do something wrong? Oskar hasn’t been himself all evening. It’s as though he’s afraid of me or something. He hasn’t let me near him since I hugged him when I got here. Is he mad at me?”

“No Hannah, he’s fine. I just think he’s really tired.” She looked away, avoiding her eyes. “Let’s go to bed. I’m a bit tired too, and we’re going to get up early tomorrow to go watch the ducks, remember?”

“Okay, Eli.” She climbed into bed next to Eli, rested her head on her arm, and absently stroked Eli’s hair. “Eli, I know something’s wrong. Won’t you tell me? If it’s something I’ve done I simply have to know. I can’t bear the thought of you two being upset with me, especially if I don’t know why.”

“You’ve done nothing wrong, Hannah. I love you, you know. More than anything.” She turned away quickly, but not before Hannah saw her eyes get misty.

“Goodnight, my fairy,” Hannah said softly, as she put her arms around her.

She couldn’t sleep, as hard as she tried. She simply had to know what was going on; she felt as though there was a barrier between them, and she was simply not going to let that happen. As soon as she was sure Eli was asleep, she slipped quietly out of bed, tiptoed across the hall and gently opened Oskar’s door. She moved quietly across the room and sat down on his bed. “Oskar!” she whispered intensely. “Oskar! Wake up!”

“Eli? What’s wrong? Where’s Hannah?” He turned toward her sleepily.

“I’m not Eli; I’m Hannah!” she said softly.

Oskar immediately moved away from her. “What do you want? Are you Okay?” Oskar stammered, rubbing his eyes.

“I want some answers, Oskar, and you’re going to give them to me. I’ll not leave until you do. What’s wrong with you two? You’ve treated me like a leper ever since I got here. It’s not fair! At least let me defend myself.”

“I can’t Hannah, I promised...” Oskar realized he had already said too much, but she had caught him half asleep.

“Aha! I knew it!” Before Oskar could react, she straddled him and took both his hands firmly in hers. “Tell me Oskar!! You can’t not tell me now. It’s like me telling you to not think about a pink elephant. You’re touch-talking to me now and you can’t not tell me everything!”

And he couldn’t. It poured out of him like a flood. The whole thing; the bad with the good; the impossible with the incredible; the family conference and the decision to not tell her about the cloning, all because of their desire to protect her from the truth; all because they cared so much for her. It quite simply overwhelmed her. She leaned down and put her arms around Oskar and pressed her cheek against his. “Thank you, Oskar.”

“Eli!! Come in here!” Oskar shouted.

Eli stumbled into Oskar’s room and flipped on the light. Hannah was still holding Oskar tightly.

“What’s going on?! Hannah, what are you doing?”

“Eli, she read my mind!” Oskar sat up quickly. “She read everything!”

“If you wish to put it that way,” Hannah smiled at him. “I prefer to think that we had a nice talk.”

Eli gasped, “Hannah, I wanted to tell you, but Papa was certain that it would hurt you deeply. He made us promise not to do that.”

“Your Papa is so sweet, Eli. But Oskar hasn’t hurt me at all. Quite simply, you are all mistaken. Gudmund did no such thing. I am my parent’s daughter and Jason’s sister. The rest of your secret is really exciting though! It’s like a mystery and a treasure hunt all at the same time! When do you suppose they’re going to contact you? Have they really made all these wonderful things? And with my genes? Are you going to let them help you get some of your abilities back? Do you think they’ll even offer to help you do that? You realize that will make us even closer yet, don’t you? How exciting!”

But Hannah, how do you know that he didn’t...clone you from my DNA?”

“You’re silly! I just know it, that’s all. I’m as sure of it as I am of anything. It simply didn’t happen that way. It couldn’t have.”

“Why not?” Oskar was a bit irritated at her being so certain without any explanation.

Because my family is MY family, not your family, Eli; no offence. I know it the same way I know that you and I are kindred spirits. I knew it that first night and I was right. I’m never wrong about these things. I think that maybe you and I connect your old family and my new family together again. It’s like some sort of magical circle. Everything came together at exactly the right

time, and your family was begun again in mine. It's almost as though you were born a second time." She thought a moment. "Does Jason look anything like your brother, Arvid?"

Eli shook her head slowly, "No Hannah, he doesn't."

"Well, it was just a thought...but it changes nothing!" she said defiantly. "You're more likely a member of my family than I am a clone of yours." She crossed her arms, as though the argument was settled.

"You almost make me believe you Hannah, but I think you're wrong. And because I think you're wrong I refuse to let this Archaeogenetics outfit do anything for me. Papa isn't going to contact them and we're going to have nothing to do with them. They've done a terrible thing to you and I'll not forgive them for it."

Hannah sighed, "Eli, they've done nothing to me. The in vitro stuff was done by Genterapi, not Archaeogenetics. Our family doctor is a really nice person and would never have allowed them to do such a thing to my parents. Have your papa talk to him if you don't believe me." Hannah was getting a bit frustrated. *Why won't they believe me? It's so obvious they're wrong. And Eli is going to pass up a chance like this because she thinks they hurt me? She can't do that!*

"Eli you have to accept their help. It's such a perfect end to this whole story. It's like a fairy tale. You might be able to get your wings back someday. And your eyes! Your amazing eyes! And your mama too. And you could go flying together again someday, just like before!" she was getting more and more excited the more she thought about it. "And then you would really be my fairy. You wouldn't be a ... vampire, ever again."

Eli smiled in spite of herself. She could play this wonderful game too. "Don't forget, Hannah. The wings they make for me they could make for you too; they're made using your DNA. And the eyes. I bet you'd really like the eyes."

"Then you'll do it? You believe me and you'll do it?"

"No! I know you believe it Hannah, but I just can't! And I'll never have anything to do with people who could do something like this to you. And that's final!"

Hannah sighed. "Well, at least I know it was nothing I did. Can we just get things back to normal again? And are you both ready to admit that it's simply impossible for you to keep a secret from me that I really want to find out?"

Eli laughed, "Should I consider that a challenge?"

"No! Please don't. And do you forgive me, Oskar? I'm sorry I tricked you, but I just had to know."

Oskar now realized how much he really admired Hannah. She was so strong-willed and certain of herself; even more so than Eli. “I know, Hannah. I’m sorry we tried to keep it from you. Eli was certain that you would want to know.”

“Of course she was! We’re blood sisters.” She stretched and yawned. “And remember, Oskar. You’re my blood brother too.”

“We’d better go to bed before Mama comes up and makes us,” Eli whispered. She took Hannah’s hand and started for the door.

Hannah turned and smiled at Oskar, “Oskar? Are you coming?”

He gratefully followed them into Eli’s room. He was a bit tired too, but he didn’t want to miss anything. And, as he was rapidly finding out, you could never be sure what would happen with Hannah around.

§

“Would you like some more tea, Hannah?” Elaine held the pot over her fairy cup.

“Yes, please.” Hannah’s fairy pajamas completed the ensemble, as they all sat around the breakfast table. Elaine had wanted them all to get dressed first, but Papa had settled the argument quickly when he told Eli that he wasn’t going to change the house rules for anyone but the Queen if she should ever happen by for breakfast, so pajamas were quite acceptable.

“I understand the three of you had an important talk last night, Hannah. And the two of them divulged a bit more than we had agreed was appropriate,” Rich said, an amused look on his face. Eli and Oskar fidgeted guiltily.

“Don’t be angry with them, Mr. Dawson. I tricked Oskar while he was asleep. It’s my fault.”

He smiled at her. “I know, Hannah. I just want to assure you we were just trying to protect you from harm. We think of you as part of our family, you know.”

“But you’re all wrong about me, Mr. Dawson!” she blushed and looked down, “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean...”

“You’re not being disrespectful, Hannah. You have a right to your opinion. But I am a bit curious as to how you can be so sure.”

“I can’t really explain it; I’m just sure. I don’t think it would actually bother me all that much if you were right. I know Mom and Dad love me and I love them. It wouldn’t really change anything for me. And I really wouldn’t mind being an Eli clone. It would be kind of mystical.” She smiled at the thought. “And that’s one reason why I’m so sure I’m right. Because it doesn’t matter to me one way or the other, but I’m sure anyway. Does that make any sense?”

Elaine and Rich looked at each other. “Well then, the whole issue becomes moot then, doesn’t it?” *What an amazing child! And her mother worries about her not being well-grounded.*

“What does ‘moot’ mean, Mr. Dawson?”

“In this case, it means unimportant or irrelevant.” He directed this last comment towards Eli.

“No Papa, it’s not ‘moot!’ Because it tells me what terrible people they all are if it’s true. They’re terrible people even if it doesn’t hurt Hannah, because it might’ve hurt her, and they did it anyway.”

“But Eli, this would have been Gudmund’s call, and he could see far enough into the future to see the effect it would have on Hannah. Perhaps he saw that she wouldn’t mind.”

Eli had no answer to this. It hadn’t occurred to her. All she knew was that it felt wrong. “He still had no right to take that risk with her! He’d been wrong with his predictions before! And your mom and dad, Hannah! How are they going to take this?!”

Papa interrupted, “I think it would be best if you don’t say anything about this until we are contacted, Hannah. There is still a small chance that we’re wrong and you’re right on this. Do you think you can do that?” He knew she was wrong, but at least this would buy him a bit of time to figure out how to break it to them without revealing too much information about their own family. It was going to be difficult.

“Sure, Mr. Dawson. Besides, there’ll be nothing to tell them anyway. You’ll see.”

§

The registered letter arrived in the afternoon on the third day of Hannah’s visit. It arrived without fanfare; a tall thin delivery boy in a tired blue uniform on an ancient balloon-tired bicycle with a wicker basket on the front simply walked up the steps and rang their doorbell.

Hannah answered.

“Special delivery for Doctor Richard Dawson.” Hannah reached for the letter, but he snatched it away and held it over his head. “Sorry, he has to sign for it,” he said smugly.

“I know that!” she snapped. “Do I look like a little child to you? Did you think I was going to grab it and run away with it, and you’d have to go back without a signature and get fired and have to look for a new job? If not, you’re being quite rude!”

“What’s wrong, Hannah?” Eli stepped up next to her. “Oh! A letter for us?” she reached for it.

He quickly put it behind his back, “Like I told your SISTER here, Doctor Dawson has to sign for it, or back it goes.”

“Papa! There’s a rude man at the door with a letter for you.” She scowled at him.

They both moved aside as Papa came to the door.

“Doctor Dawson? Doctor Richard Dawson? May I please see some identification?” he leered at the girls as Papa reached for his wallet.

He looked at Papa’s license carefully, then handed him the letter. “Can’t be too careful these days, you know. Sign here, please.” He snuck them both another dirty look. Hannah, indignant, crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out at him. He rolled his eyes and shook his head, just as Papa turned toward the kitchen with the letter. “What a nasty little girl you are.” He hissed.

Hannah stood there red-faced and speechless, her mouth wide open.

“Nice bike!” Eli called out as he headed back down the sidewalk. “I really like your basket! It brings out your more sensitive, feminine side.”

He stopped for a second, then without turning, continued on. “Little brats!” he mumbled to himself.

“What is it Papa? Is it our contact?” Eli slammed the door and quickly followed Hannah and Papa into the kitchen.

It’s from Gudmund’s lawyer, so it may have something to do with the estate.” He saw the look of disappointment on Hannah’s face. “Don’t worry, Hannah, the contact will happen when whoever it is feels ready.”

“I don’t care if it never comes. We won’t answer it, right Papa?”

“If that’s what you want, Eli. But we’ll discuss that possibility later,” Papa opened the letter carefully. He saw immediately that it was written on the Archaeogenetics letterhead. But he was startled to see that the company logo was not only a water sprite, but a miniature of the picture in the third Hannah journal. His heart sank a bit as he realized that this made the case against Hannah’s position even stronger. Hannah’s cloning was apparently the signature creation of the company, and the basis for all their subsequent research. It was probably only a matter of time before the whole thing burst forth in the news. “Good news, Hannah. It is indeed from the mysterious Archaeogenetics, but interestingly enough, sent by Gudmund’s lawyer.”

Hannah grabbed Eli and hugged her tightly. “Now you’ll see!”

“Dr. Dawson,” he began, “This letter has been sent to you as a result of your appearance at the bank and your recovery of the contents of the safe-deposit box. Enclosed is a short note from Mr. Törnkvist and a second sealed envelope, the disposition of which is explained in precise detail in Gudmund’s note. If you have any questions please contact me at your earliest convenience.”

Hannah leaned forward expectantly, and squeezed Eli’s hand.

Papa handed the letter to Elaine, and unfolded the note. “Dr. Dawson, Elaine, Eli, Oskar, and, I’m certain, Hannah; I knew that only after certain events had taken place in your home, would you even be aware of this account’s existence. That meant that not only had Eli met Hannah, but that they had become close friends – one of my preconditions and a vital first step in what will follow.”

“How incredibly exciting!” Hannah exclaimed. I’m a ‘precondition’ for something wonderful that’s going to happen to you, Eli!”

Eli rolled her eyes, “He hasn’t said that Hannah. He said ‘in what will follow.’ That could mean anything.”

“Well, I know what he means, even if you don’t.” she said smugly.

Papa continued reading. “At this point, Eli will naturally refuse help from Archaeogenetics, because she perceives it as an evil. On the surface it will seem as though it’s because she hates the idea of Hannah having been cloned, but it’s much deeper than that. Her revulsion of how she was treated in hibernation, no matter how carefully and respectfully we conducted our research, will be difficult for her to overcome. And her conflicted feelings about her vampirism and the trail of death she’s left behind her, contrasted with the beauty she had found in her abilities as a result of her mother’s influence, makes all our research seem especially dark, particularly since our research has, at the least, taken advantage of Hannah and her DNA. I knew this was going to be a problem. But Hannah is a vital part of the process, which I explain in the enclosed note. You may read, but you must not reveal, the contents of this note to either of them until after she has made her final choice. The road ahead may be difficult and sometimes discouraging for her, and she needs all her resolve to make the journey. She can have no doubts, or she will fail. Hannah, you are a godsend. I can say no more, lest I endanger the future I see so clearly. Never doubt yourself and be strong for Eli.” He put down the letter and picked up the second envelope.

“Hannah, I’m sorry! He’s said that you’ve been cloned. Are you sure you’re going to be okay with it?” Eli took her hand and slid up beside her. Hannah’s Pollyanna-like outlook on life had been put to the test repeatedly since they met, and Eli was afraid that she would eventually lose it entirely.

Hannah had a puzzled look on her face. She put her chin in her hand and thought hard for a moment. “No! He didn’t say that! He said, you hate the idea of my having been cloned. He didn’t actually say that I had been cloned! The careful way he put it is even more proof that I’m right.” She sat back with a satisfied smile on her face.

“Hannah, if the sky turned green and you wanted it to be blue, I actually think you could figure out a way to believe it were still blue!” Eli said, exasperated. But secretly she was relieved that Hannah was still Hannah.

“I know what I know, Eli. That’s all there is to it.” She smiled gently at her.

“This note is also from Gudmund, Eli. I’m going to read it, but I’m afraid I can’t let you in on its contents.” He hesitated a moment. “In fact, if you don’t want me to read it at all, I won’t. I won’t keep a secret from you without your okay.”

She quickly stepped over, sat in his lap, and put her arms around him, “Oh Papa! Of course I want you to read it! And I promise I won’t try to find out what’s in it.” She buried her face in his chest.

He opened the letter and began to read. At one point, he put it down and looked away for a moment, then smiled and picked it up again. Hannah was watching him intently, looking for any clue; any sign.

“Oskar, why don’t you and the girls go for a swim? Your mom and I have things we need to discuss.”

“Okay, Dad. Come on Eli. Hannah?” He headed for the stairs. “Last one in has to clean the leaves out of the pool!” He raced around the first landing and disappeared. Eli started for the stairs after Hannah, then glanced back just in time to catch the shine in Papa’s eyes.

The afternoon went by rapidly. Elaine and Rich sat by the pool watching the kids swim while they carried on a quiet, but intense conversation. After an hour or so, Eli, Oskar, and Hannah relaxed on their air mattresses, holding hands as the ever-changing breeze gently moved them first to one end of the pool, then the other. The sounds of their laughter floated across the pool and small fluffy clouds in the sky cast moving shadows that slowly drifted over them.

Hannah dozed off first, then Oskar quietly followed. Eli lay there, feeling the warmth of the sun on her skin, still holding their hands, and thought about all that she had now. Her first love, her best friend in the whole world, who had rescued her from her horrible life, loved her unconditionally, and had unwittingly made everything she had today possible. She squeezed his hand gently. She turned and looked at Hannah, her sweet Hannah, who had trusted her even when her life was in danger. Misplaced trust, she thought to herself. Hannah had trusted her when she couldn’t even trust herself. Misguided trust. Yet there seemed to be more to it than that. Hannah trusted and loved life itself and had absolute faith that things would always work out for the best. As naïve and simplistic as it sounded, it seemed to give Hannah strength of purpose. It was in her soul, as if she were in tune with some greater truth. Eli envied her; she was even beginning to look up to her. Hannah had given her the gift of humanity, without which she might have made the wrong choice that night.

She turned back, caught Papa looking at her and smiled. He smiled back and nudged Elaine, who gave her a little wave and pointed at her watch, then at the sun. Time to get out before you fry to a crisp, she translated. Eli didn’t need to read her thoughts for that one.

She sat up, and for a brief moment, the devil was in her. Just for a second, she imagined what fun it would be if she flipped the both of them into the water, but she just couldn’t bring herself to do it. They both looked so sweet and innocent lying there asleep.

“Why not? I would have done it to you in a second.” Oskar’s eyes popped open and he grinned at her.

Eli gently pushed Hannah’s mattress toward the side of the pool. “Well...if you insist!” she grabbed his hand tighter, rolled off her mattress into the water and dropped straight to the bottom, dragging Oskar with her. He popped to the surface laughing, climbed out, and immediately headed for Hannah.

“Don’t you dare!” Eli hissed.

“I wouldn’t, Eli,” he assured her, “She’s still sound asleep.” He knelt down and gently shook her mattress. “Hannah? Are you awake?”

Hannah opened her eyes and sat up. “What’s wrong, Oskar?”

“Nothing, Hannah...yet!” He jerked the mattress out from under her and with a soft ‘ploop,’ she simply vanished beneath the surface. “Now we’re even!” he teased, as her head popped up. Without missing a beat, she grabbed his ankle and pulled his leg out over the water until he lost his balance and fell in slow-motion face-first into the pool. She scrambled out of the pool, barely avoiding Oskar as he lunged for her.

“Stop! Please.” Eli yelled at them.

“Why? You started it!” Oskar said as he lifted himself out of the pool.

“I know, but...” she impulsively put her arms around Hannah and gave her a huge hug, then another. Then she calmly stepped over to Oskar, put her arms around him and kissed him, then rested her head on his shoulder.

Both of them gave her a puzzled look, “Why’d you do that?” Oskar asked.

“Just ... because! That’s why.” She threw her towel over her shoulder, turned and went inside without looking back, a satisfied smile on her face.

“I told you this would be an interesting two weeks,” Papa whispered to Elaine.

§

After a big dinner and a couple of TV programs, they all settled into bed together, but as a result of their impromptu afternoon nap, were still wide awake. The full moon shone directly into Eli’s room, bathing them all in its light, just as it had on the night Eli had made her choice.

“Eli, when do you think you and Oskar are going to get married?”

Eli and Oskar looked at each other. Eli knew that this type of question always made him uncomfortable.

“I really don’t know, Hannah. Oskar and I don’t talk about it much.”

“It’s okay Eli.” For some reason he felt as though he could talk to Hannah about these things. He knew she would understand his feelings. “Hannah, I don’t even know how I feel about it. I’m still just a kid; we both are. Right now, the only reason I want to marry her is because I know that we will be grown up someday, and that’s what people do when they’re grown up. All I know is that I want to be with her forever, I love her so.” He put his hand gently over her heart and smiled at her. “Marriage sounds so... old to me. It’s a thing I think mothers and fathers do, not us. But I’ll do whatever Eli wants, whenever she wants it. Because I want her to be happy. She’s so beautiful when she’s happy.” Eli smiled at him and placed her hand over his.

“Oskar, you’re such a sweet boy. That’s the nicest thing I’ve ever heard! Eli, if you don’t marry him, I will!” she grinned at him as he turned red.

“Well, why not, Oskar? We look exactly alike!” she kidded.

“Yes, but you’re not...I mean...” He stammered.

It’s no use, Eli. You’re just going to have to marry him yourself. I tried my best to win his heart.” She giggled.

She flopped over on her back and put her hands behind her head. “Besides, I don’t plan on getting married anyway,” She said somberly.

“What? Why not?!” Eli asked, a puzzled look on her face.

“Because I like my life exactly as it is. I like having you and Oskar as my best friends, and no other boy, or man, is ever going to change that.”

“That’s just silly,” Oskar said.

“Well, that’s the way it is, Oskar. I’ve made my decision.” She said firmly.

“But, wouldn’t you want to have children someday?”

“Perhaps; but I’ll worry about that when I grow up.” She thought for a moment. “What about you, Eli? Have you thought about children? I’d just love to see a couple of cute little Oskars running around your house.”

“I...can’t, Hannah. You know that.”

“But maybe someday they’ll...” Hannah sat up suddenly. “Yes, you can, Eli! I’ll have them for you!” she got out of bed and excitedly paced back and forth. “I read a story about it! I can be your ‘surrogate.’ Our DNA is exactly the same! My kids would be your kids! What a wonderful

idea! Oh Eli, I think it's a wonderful idea! Say you'll let me do this for you! Please?" she knelt down next to the bed and put her arms around her. Eli stared at her with her mouth open.

Oskar's head was spinning. *But that would mean that I would have to...* He was embarrassed. "But...I couldn't...I mean how could we...."

"Silly Oskar! They'd do it kind of like when I was born; you know, 'artificial insemination.' Like they do with race horses and stuff."

Oskar didn't like that image at all. *What would they do, milk me like a cow?* "No! I'm not a race horse! Eli, help!"

Eli just looked at her wide-eyed. Since she had started the estrogen shots, such thoughts had actually begun milling around in her mind; babies and such. "You'd really do that for me? Why? That would be awful for you, having to give your child to me. How could you do that?"

"Because you can't do it and I can! Don't you see? Its perfect! Now all we have to do is convince Oskar! Oskar I'd be honored to have your child for Eli. Can't you see how happy that would make her? And you said you love it when she's happy."

"Stop! I don't want to think about it! I don't want to think about having kids!" The thought of...Hannah, grown up, pregnant with HIS CHILD was mind-boggling to him. It was awful on so many levels. *How totally embarrassing! Hannah? Asking me to... Ugghh!* He put his head in his hands.

"It's okay Oskar. I'd never let Hannah do anything like that unless you really wanted to." Eli paused. "I guess it would be impossible if you didn't want to." She grinned at him.

"Jag vill absolut inte prata om det här längre!" Red-faced, he stumbled out of bed and headed for his room. They heard the door slam behind him.

"What was that?!" Hannah asked anxiously.

"Swedish." Eli grinned, "He said, 'I absolutely do not want to talk about this any more!'"

They looked at each other a moment, then giggled. "We kind of got him, didn't we? Eli, he's so very sweet! And I never would have met him if it weren't for you. I'm so happy I found you that night on the green."

"You didn't find me; I found you." Eli teased.

"No, Einstein found you, remember?" they laughed together, remembering that first night.

Eli felt happier than she had felt in a long time. Sometimes Hannah just took her breath away she was so ...unselfish and giving, Eli thought to herself. Then she thought about poor Oskar, and

how embarrassing this must have been for him. “We can’t just leave Oskar alone over there, can we?”

“No, we WERE a little hard on him.” Hannah got up abruptly, “Let’s go get him!”

They crept across the hall and paused at his closed door. Hannah reached for the knob, but Eli shook her head as she knocked lightly on the door. “Oskar?”

“Go away! Whichever one of you it is, go away!”

Hannah abruptly opened the door and strode purposefully over to his bed with Eli close behind her. “Oskar, I apologize for embarrassing you, but it had to be said. I’ve made my offer and you needn’t decide now, or ever as far as I’m concerned. I wasn’t kidding, but I’m sorry I’ve upset you.” She reached down and pried open one of his tightly-closed eyes, bent down and put her face a few inches from his. “Truce?”

“Okay, okay! Truce! But you’re in my room now, and you have to follow MY rules. You can’t talk about this any more; promise?”

“We promise, Oskar.”

He pulled back the covers and slid back against the wall. Eli quickly climbed in against him and Hannah climbed in facing Eli, with a big grin on her face. Eli kissed her lightly and put her arms around her. “Thank you, Hannah,” she whispered.

§

“You’ve decided you’re going to what?!” Elaine almost dropped her cup. Papa sat back in his chair an amused look on his face.

“It’s settled, except for Oskar,” Hannah said excitedly. “We still have to convince Oskar.”

“You discussed this with Oskar?” she imagined how that must have been for him; under attack from two determined females.

“We tried, but he wasn’t...receptive.”

Elaine turned around toward the counter, so Hannah wouldn’t see her smiling. “And no wonder! You two should have talked to Mr. Dawson and I about this before you bothered Oskar.” She looked up as Eli and Oskar stepped into the kitchen. Oskar, having just caught the gist of the conversation, had already turned around, poised to flee back to the safety of his room.

“Good morning, Eli. Oskar, have a seat,” Papa called out. Oskar paused a moment, then slunk over to his seat, turned his face away from Hannah, and put his head on the table.

“I don’t want to talk about it!”

“And rightly so!” Papa said, pretending to be indignant. “Girls, there’s a time and a place for such discussions and clearly this is neither the time nor the place. Oskar has a right to have his breakfast in peace. We’ll discuss this at a later time.”

Oskar looked relieved. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Now, Eli. We still need to decide what to do about Archaeogenetics, Gudmund’s final letter, and your decision regarding the final step. The phone call.”

“I think you should call, Dad.” Oskar jumped at the opportunity to change the subject.

“Well, I don’t! I’ll not forgive them for what they’ve done to Hannah!”

“They’ve done nothing to me, Eli. And you know what? I agree with Oskar. I think you should call.”

“But why?”

“You can’t tell them what you think of them if you don’t contact them,” she offered. “And besides, you think they took advantage of me. Why don’t you take advantage of them? Listen to what they have to offer, or what they want from you. And then, if you want, tell them where they can put it!!” she paused, then grinned, “But first, maybe you could get them to give me some of those wings.”

Eli looked at her, mouth open. *Why didn’t I think of that? Look at what Hannah is willing to give me and I didn’t even think about what I could give her. Wings! How wonderful that would be! I’ll give her wings!*

“Okay. Papa, make the call. I’ll talk to them. I want Hannah to have wings.”

“Eli, I was just kidding.” Hannah protested.

“But I’m not. If you don’t want wings, or eyes, or anything they have to offer, I won’t let Papa call them.” She felt a desperate need to repay Hannah for everything she had given her. *I have to do this for her! I have nothing else. This is all I have. I owe her so much.*

“I would love them, Eli, but...”

Eli put up her hand. “Enough! That’s all I needed to hear. Papa?”

“First things first, Eli. Are you absolutely sure?”

Eli’s mind was racing. *Wings for Hannah, and for Oskar!! If they can do that, maybe someday I’ll forgive them for what they’ve done. And for Papa and Mama too. How wonderful could that be!* “I’m sure Papa. I’m absolutely sure,” she said calmly.

He looked at her carefully, then turned to Elaine. She nodded, almost imperceptibly.

Papa slowly unfolded the note Gudmund had left, and began to read it to them.

“Dr. Dawson,

“This future is Eli’s to pursue, or not. It is her choice. But by exerting a small measure of control over the sequence of these recent events, I have made it possible for her to attain something I never thought possible until recently. If she chooses this path, my family’s debt to her will finally be repaid. But she needs to make the decision before she reads this letter. She can’t be influenced by my wishes. It has to be because of Hannah, or it won’t work. You understand my gift. Please believe me when I say this.

“Hannah is my water sprite, my *in vitro* miracle. She is a fortuitous accident of chance. A one in a trillion chance. Who knows? Perhaps Hannah is nature’s attempt to rebalance the nightmare of Eli’s life. She is the missing piece in the puzzle that is Eli. She completes her. All I know is that immediately after I contacted Elaine, I saw with crystal clarity how she would effortlessly shed the light on the darkness of Eli’s life. She’s the yin to Eli’s yang. And, most importantly, she is the key to Eli’s final completion; the undoing of everything evil that was done to her by my father. Only good can come of this. If I were certain of nothing else, I’m certain of this. I can rest now, knowing the key to Eli’s fulfillment is finally in her own hands, and drives an inevitable chain of events, beginning with her decision to be cured, and culminating in her total love and trust of her alter ego, whose own inner strength and generosity transcend her own, and make her whole once again.”

Eli gasped, “Papa, is he saying what I think he’s saying?”

“Yes, Eli.” He smiled at her. “Hannah was right. She is most definitely not a clone-- merely a miracle. A mystery we probably could have solved ourselves if we had thought to ask Hannah’s parents for DNA samples, which would have proven conclusively that they are her parents by birth. That simple test would have been the end of it. But for some reason, we didn’t think of it.”

Because we saw Gudmund in the photograph! He realized. Otherwise, I would certainly have done it. That crafty old vampire! He had us all figured out and led us down the garden path of his choosing. And he’s used Eli’s stubbornness to his advantage, almost forcing her to agree to the call, in order to pay Hannah back for her astoundingly unselfish act of offering her womb to her so she could have a child. My God! What an amazing maze he constructed!

Hannah was sitting with her arms folded across her chest and a big grin on her face.

“Hannah? Was there something you wanted to say?” his eyes twinkled.

“No, Mr. Dawson. Mr. Törnkvist merely confirmed what I already knew,” she said calmly.

“Then, what is it that Archaeogenetics is doing, Rich? Why all the subterfuge leading up to the phone call, if cloning in general and cloning Eli is particular wasn’t part of the plan?”

“I’m not sure, Elaine. We just need to stay focused on the fact that Gudmund does everything for Eli first, and everything else will finally make sense.” He turned to Eli, “Are you ready?”

She nodded, and smiled at Hannah.

Rich picked up the phone and dialed the number. After the third ring, a click. Then “Dr. Dawson I presume?”

“Yes. May I ask to whom I am speaking?”

“I’ve been expecting your call, Doctor, for the longest time. You need to get Eli in here as soon as possible. We’ve been ready for her for quite some time now. Times a-wasting, as they say.”

“What? I have no idea what you’re talking about. And we’re not taking Eli anywhere until you explain who you are and what your connection is to Mr. Törnkvist!”

“I’m so sorry, Doctor! I got ahead of myself. I was just so delighted to hear the phone finally ring that I forgot you have no idea what this is about. My name is Jonathan Törnkvist; I’m in charge of the principal research project at Archaeogenetics Inc. I am so relieved that my father’s final effort has reached this point, even though he assured me that it would. We can now see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

“Jonathan Törnkvist? But you...” Rich had to be careful here, “His only son died...some time ago.” He hesitated a moment, then put his finger to his lips and pressed the speaker-phone button. Everyone here had earned the right to hear the conversation, wherever it might lead. “Jonathan, you’re now on speaker-phone. We’re all listening.”

“Relax, Doctor; I know everything. I know what my father was and what Eli and Elaine were until recently. Remember where I work! Congratulations, by the way. Your discovery of the cure trumped us all, as my father predicted. But of course you had the real incentive there, living amongst you, so I’m not surprised. What surprised me was the sophistication of your switch. We’ll have to get together so you can explain it to me in detail and share your process with me, if you are willing.” He paused, remembering what the good Doctor’s actual question had been. “But I digress. My father adopted me when I was ten years old and well on my way towards what you might call ‘a life of no consequence.’ Needless to say I owe him everything. And I’m looking forward to paying the debt, beginning with our dear Eli.” He paused a moment, “And I was specifically instructed to assure Eli that my father and I were the only persons present during her ... examinations. No other members of the research staff ever saw her personally, although they are all aware of her existence. And now, with your permission, and Eli’s of course, we’re going to make her whole again.”

“Make her whole again? Do you actually mean...”

“Yes, Doctor. We’ve spent the last two years growing it, and it’s ready to be implanted anytime. Of course you’ll have to discontinue the estrogen injections right away. They’ll no longer be necessary.”

Rich suddenly felt light-headed, as the significance of what Jonathan had just said sunk in. Eli’s loss and the single remaining obstacle to her being able to forever leave behind the horror of her last 200 years, and especially those first few days, would be gone.

Papa looked directly at Eli and Hannah as he spoke into the phone, “Would you please confirm for me that Hannah was a complete accident? That her DNA was unaffected by any genetic alteration on the part of your research team?”

“Yes, Yes. Of course! Our feeble attempts at cloning failed miserably. Consequently, we redirected all our efforts towards stem cell research related to understanding and possibly curing Vampirism, and finally, controlling it and using it’s greater, shall we say, ‘assets’ to our advantage. Man HAS always wanted to fly, hasn’t he?” he chuckled at his own joke.

“At my father’s insistence, we used Hannah’s umbilical cord stem cells, a theoretical duplicate of Eli’s own, for all our research from the date of her birth forward. Hannah was a curious anomaly; a living, breathing impossibility. But my father was never able to fully accept the fact of her randomness. He used terms like ‘magical’ and ‘water sprite’ to describe Hannah, despite all my efforts to convince him otherwise. Of course, despite his genius, he was a product of an earlier time; one in which deep symbolism, religious superstition and mysticism took precedent over science, so it was somewhat understandable to me. However, to sum it all up, Hannah’s stem cells, plus specific samples taken when she was ten, prepubescent, and a short two years from the beginnings of sexual maturity, allowed us to successfully replicate and begin the growth of what is now Eli’s entire reproductive system. Now then, when would you like to bring Eli in for the implant?”

Hannah interrupted, “You mean you did all this with my DNA and my ... ‘samples?’”

“Yes, Hannah. I hope you’re not offended by all this. My father was obsessed with her happiness, and he knew you would become friends...”

“But it’s perfect!! I simply love it! I won’t need to loan her mine; you’ll just give her a new one!!” She suddenly turned bright red. “I...I’m sorry Mr. Dawson, I didn’t mean to...I’m sorry Oskar, I really am. Sometimes I just don’t know when to shut up!”

They all heard Jonathan laughing in the background. “Hannah, you’re everything my father said you were and more! It will be a great pleasure to finally meet you in person! With your parents of course. There can be no secrets here. And my father assured me...but that’s a different story, for a later time.”

Hannah quietly reached for Eli’s hand. “I told you, Eli. I am my father’s daughter. I knew it then, and you know it now. Now will you and Oskar accept my gift to you? It would mean everything to me.” She grinned at Eli, “And in return, I promise I will accept your wings.”

“Ah, the pretty little wings! I meant to mention those, but got a bit off track. The eyes? Practically ready. An injection is all that will eventually be necessary. The rapid-healing process; soon, but there are still some energy requirements to be met, as with the strength, but the wings...there’s a bit of a problem there. You see, the energy required to grow and use them, then retract them, is huge; a bit less for the claws and talons. The super-efficient digestive system of the vampire, plus the battery-like energy storage capacity in the outer layers of the skin, made all these things possible. But we’re working on it!” Jonathan assured them. “And it shouldn’t take long now, especially with your and Eli’s cooperation. Sorry Hannah.”

“We can wait, Mr. Törnkvist.” Eli said softly. Oskar put his arm around her and lightly kissed her on the cheek as she looked deeply into Hannah’s eyes. She felt so close to her; almost as close as she felt to Oskar.

Oskar suddenly realized what Hannah had REALLY offered Eli before – and him. And, as usual with Hannah, she clearly and innocently, and with great enthusiasm, blurted it out, oblivious to how it might look to others less ‘gifted’ than herself. He felt foolish now; childish and immature. *Thank goodness that will all end in a few years. My brain will finally catch up with my age. And maybe someday it will catch up with Hannah.* He smiled and looked at her, really seeing her for the first time.

Eli gasped. Hannah was suddenly impossibly beautiful to her and she realized that she was seeing her through not only her own eyes, but through Oskar’s as well. She quickly leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. *Hannah, you have to see what you’ve done. You have to know how we both feel about you.*

Hannah’s mouth opened and her eyes got big. “Kindred Spirits,” she whispered. Her voice trembled just a bit. “Kindred Spirits,” she whispered again, even more softly.

Eli wrapped her arms around her and pressed her cheek against hers. Her future stretched out before her with sweet clarity. She and Oskar together, and sweet wonderful Hannah with them forever, with her family and all Hannah’s family. No matter what happened now, she would never be alone again.

THE END